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Exceeding expectations

Student with Down syndrome impresses with her progress

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A typical day for Windsor Knolls Middle School eighth-grader Hannah Carbaugh includes volunteering in the front office, attending Mr. Storch's science class and some one-on-one tutoring with instructional assistant Mrs. Peake.

But Hannah is not your typical eighth-grader.

Hannah has Down syndrome. Three years ago, she would not have been able to sit in the science class because of her habitual humming. Instructional assistant Mary Peake would have had to attend all Hannah's classes with her, walking her to each one.

Now, Hannah can attend classes such as physical education and theater arts independently, while Peake sits in on the more academic courses to occasionally reinforce a point the teacher is making.

"She's just a pleasure to have in class," science teacher Shannon Storch said Monday. "She's always smiling."

Hannah still hums sometimes, but she knows the habit could keep her out of the classroom.

And she likes being with her classmates.

"It was annoying," she said. "I can stop if I want to."

Fitting in

Hannah started at Windsor Knolls three years ago, just as budget cuts ended the school's Learning for Life program, a class for students with disabilities that provides them with functional life skills.

When Hannah left Kemptown Elementary School, her parents had to decide whether to keep her with her peers at Windsor Knolls or have her attend Oakdale Middle School, which has a Learning for Life program.

Hannah's mother, Karen, said she and her husband were afraid their daughter would lose progress if she were grouped with students who had similar disabilities.

"The feeling that she fits in, I think that's huge for her," Karen Carbaugh said.

Without a structured program in place, Windsor Knolls' special education department chairwoman, Michelle Brooks, went about creating a personalized program for Hannah.

Three years later, Hannah has made remarkable progress, Peake said.

Hannah started at Windsor Knolls below first grade academically, but she now tests between second- and fourth-grade level, while being able to grasp material she hears at the eighth-grade level.

"She can auditorily understand, but the actual physical action of reading is difficult," Brooks said.

Building a program

After meeting with Hannah's parents the summer before she started at Windsor Knolls, Brooks and Peake began crafting what they describe as an ever-evolving program focused on life skills and social interaction.

When Hannah came to the school, she could count to 10 but could not add or subtract.

To build those math skills, Peake brought in grocery sales fliers, and together they made a shopping list and calculated the cost.

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Photo by Sam Yu

Windsor Knolls Middle School eighth-grader Hannah Carbaugh puts attendance folders into mailboxes for teachers recently as part of front office volunteer work. Hannah has Down syndrome and is set to attend Urbana High School next year.

To help her with critical thinking, Brooks had Hannah volunteer in the cafeteria and then in the front office.

Hannah would set up drinks and chips along the cafeteria line and wrap up to 200 freshly baked cookies before students arrived.

"She always knew what she had to do," cafeteria manager Taina Schweitzer said. "She was a great asset."

In the office, Hannah helps raise the flags every day, sorts attendance folders and never forgets to feed the fish in the front office fish tank.

"She's a big help," front office secretary Janine Nightingale said. "Sometimes I take it for granted."

Throughout her three years, Hannah has also been tutored by fellow students to improve her reading, writing and social skills.

Brooks attributes much of Hannah's growth to her social interaction with staff and students.

Carbaugh sees how independent her daughter has become at home. A few years ago, she had to drag Hannah to the dentist or doctor's office, but not anymore, she said.

"When it comes to everyday life stuff, she's great."

Moving on to high school

Like any eighth-grader, Hannah is torn between excitement and anxiety.

"I'm a little nervous about going to high school," she said.

Hannah looks forward to competing on Urbana's unified sports team, she said. Her mother said they have also asked about the cheerleading squad.

Carbaugh expects her daughter to be fine at the high school level, she said, but she is not sold on Hannah waking up at 6:30 every morning.

Hannah will no longer be at Windsor Knolls next year, but the special education department is already implementing a program similar to hers with another student who has Down syndrome.

"As long as students need it, we'll make it work," Brooks said.

Hannah came to Windsor Knolls as a shy sixth-grader, but she is not shy about identifying her two favorite teachers: Brooks and Peake.

"I'm going to miss them a lot," she said.

Asked what she'll miss most, Hannah turned and smiled at Brooks.

"I'm going to miss her smile," the student said with a laugh, "but you're always in my heart."

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