

Spotlight

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In this edition of *In The Spotlight*, we shine a light on the wonderful staff and students who make up our Special Programs & Services Department. We hope you enjoy!

Bastrop Works

Blanketed by the shade of towering trees on Pine Street in Bastrop is **Bastrop Works**, a transition program that assists recent high school graduates with special needs as they move into adulthood. The program is housed in two ordinary-looking, nondescript portable classrooms connected together, but step closer to the door and a visitor quickly learns it's anything but ordinary. Busy chatter, laughter, and frequent applause -- it's clear something special is going on inside! One can also hear the quick steps of feet moving back and forth. The feet may be invisible from the outside, but their determination and intensity are unmistakably those of the woman who leads Bastrop Works, Carmen Chaparro (below). She beams with pride when she tells people about her students.

"We are helping these young adults achieve their own levels of independence so they can become employed and potentially live on their own," Chaparro said.



Bastrop Works currently serves 26 young adults who have graduated from Bastrop, Cedar Creek, Smithville, and LaGrange schools. Job Coach LaDonna Artley (right) says the program operates like a college where classes are selected and designed to meet students' unique learning needs.

"Students take the classes they need that will lead to a sustainable life of independence," Artley describes. "They do that in four areas: lifelong learning, SRL (social, recreational, and leisure), adult living, and employment. As a job coach at Bastrop Works, I am the bridge that helps them get there."

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Students enroll in budgeting classes where they learn about balancing a checkbook, buying groceries, and paying bills. They also learn soft skills they might use as a potential employee, including eye contact, shaking hands, and dressing appropriately. A primary goal of Bastrop Works is to help students gain some type of employment, which essentially falls into four categories:

1. Work-based learning (non-paid work to learn employment skills at a community site)
2. Supported employment (paid employment with support)
3. Competitive employment (paid employment without support)
4. Volunteer experience (non-paid work in a setting that regularly involves people who give their time to the organization)

Chaparro and Artley seek and build partnerships within the Bastrop County business community to secure real world experiences for their adult students so they can learn how to be good employees. Current partners include H-E-B Plus! in Bastrop, LaGrange Public Library, the Bastrop County Animal Shelter, TJ Maxx, and CiCi's Pizza. As Bastrop Works grows, Artley hopes their partnerships with the community will as well.

"I would love for the community to see us as an asset to their organization," Artley said. "We want our students to learn, and they can be good employees. They just need an opportunity."

Twenty-one-year old Shayleigh Staal (right) has been coming to Bastrop Works for the past four years.



"At first, I was nervous, and I didn't know what to expect," said Staal. "But then I thought, I can do this. I've learned about counting money, cooking, working, relationships with other people. I work at the library now. I feel strong. I feel happy. I want to live on my own one day, be independent."

Without Bastrop Works, Staal says she wouldn't have come this far. "I love it. I love all my teachers. They helped me come out of my bubble. I love being here. It has changed my life. It has changed everything," she said.

For Artley, watching stories like Staal's unfold before her eyes is what makes Bastrop Works her dream job. "It's very rewarding - to see the students accomplish the goal of becoming an adult. To see them doing well feels so great!" With dedication, passion, and love from the teachers and job coaches, it's clear that Bastrop Works, works.

"It takes the students, the parents, and the community for all of this to happen," said Chaparro. "When we come together, it's so exciting to see what can be produced. The value of the student's life is so enriched, and you just can't put a price on that."

For more information or to discuss an employment partnership with Bastrop Works, contact Carmen Chaparro at cchaparro@bisdtx.org or call 512-517-1679.



Miranda Fritz, Bastrop Works '13

Miranda Fritz remembers walking into Bastrop Works in 2010 ready to embrace a new experience. She was 18 years old and had just graduated from Smithville High School.

"I was not nervous," Miranda says with a smile. "I knew some of the kids in the program. I was excited!"

During her three years in the program, Miranda says she learned skills that in the beginning were quite difficult. But thanks to the patience and support of Bastrop Works and her teachers, she learned to make a budget, balance a checkbook and pay her bills, shop for groceries and cook for herself. She even learned stress management and how to interview for a job.

"The teachers were super nice. I started feeling like I could do stuff on my own," said Miranda, who graduated from Bastrop Works in 2013. During her last year in the program, Miranda landed her first job at Staples in Bastrop.

"It was so nice. It felt like I was independent," she said.

After spending a year at Staples and ready to graduate Bastrop Works, Miranda felt more confident in her abilities. She wanted to take on a bigger challenge, which she found at Little Sheep Learning Center in Bastrop. For the next five years, she helped take care of infants, babies, and toddlers.

"The kids liked it when I would dance. We laughed a lot together," Miranda said.

She found her calling in connecting with other children who also had special needs. They related and understood each other. "The kids immediately gravitated toward her. They trusted her and felt safe," said Holly Fritz, Miranda's mother (at right, below).

Her five years of experience working at the daycare helped secure her a position with STARS in Bastrop ISD, a licensed program that provides after school and summertime enrichment and childcare for elementary age students. She looked after students, chaperoned field trips, and assisted the site coordinator. She said her time at STARS allowed her to continue working with children and learn more about what she wanted to do in the future. She is taking some time now to figure out her next steps.

Today, as a 28-year old young woman, she proudly holds on to her confidence and independence. Though she still lives at home, she plans and prepares family meals and has her own debit card, two facts of life she once didn't think she'd be able to do. She credits Bastrop Works for where she is today.

Mom Holly says the teachers and job coaches should be recognized for their hard work.

"They are cheerleaders, champions! They continue to check on the students even after they graduate, and they really care. I think they do an amazing job creating a positive atmosphere for the young people there trying to build on their strengths and go above and beyond for the students. I really respect that," she said.



Campus Behavior Support

“Support through understanding.”



(Above, Megan Gaffney and Lisa Maresh)

This is the unique motto of the teachers and staff in Bastrop ISD’s Campus Behavior Support (CBS) program, which helps students who have behavioral challenges and supports classroom teachers in addressing those challenges effectively during the school day.

“We are very lucky to have CBS; other districts do not have it, and it truly is a labor of love,” said Lisa Maresh, district behavior specialist. “Before CBS, we had a few people who were doing what’s called Focus, but we recognized that some kids just needed more. Just like some students need more help in reading or math, we also have students who need more help in developing behavior that’s socially acceptable.”

CBS helps a variety of students, whether they have ADHD or perhaps a temporary trauma such as the loss of a parent or their home. Either way, the student acts out and creates disruptions in the classroom or school. CBS staff works initially with the teacher to develop effective classroom strategies, and if that initial step doesn’t produce the desired results, the student is recommended for specialized services to address the negative behavior.

“One of the common misconceptions about CBS is that we are the behavior people and in charge of all the behavior on a campus -- we’re not,” said Maresh. “We’re in charge of a specific group of kids, and we have specially trained staff on each campus with a caseload of approximately 10 to 30 students.”

Megan Gaffney, a behavior interventionist for three campuses in Cedar Creek, explained it this way. “Once a student is on our caseload, it becomes a process in working with them. They need to be trained to say the right things when they are angry, and there’s a curriculum for that. Like learning anything new, it takes time and practice.”

Behavior interventionist at Emile Elementary, JoAmber Sifuentes, agrees and adds, “A lot of the students on our caseload have home lives that most adults would never see in their lifetime. They go through things that we would never have to, and so they’re feeling all these emotions they don’t know how to deal with. Teaching them, helping them through those emotions and modeling for them how to act in a way that’s appropriate and safe -- that’s what we do.”

Because of the unique and often difficult situations these students are in, the interventions provided by the CBS caseworkers are therapy based and data driven.

Behavior interventionists form relationships with their students, learn their triggers, and help teachers understand and recognize those triggers as well. A student having trouble going to lunch may have a CBS caseworker



(Above, Gaffney and Maresh, Jackie Waneck, JoAmber Sifuentes, and Principal Windy Burnett)

break down the 14 steps it takes to get to lunch -- leaving the classroom, walking down the hall, sitting at the lunch table, opening food, and eating it appropriately. When behavior doesn't improve and consequences are needed, CBS staff do issue them, but they are consequences that relate to the negative behavior. A student caught roaming the halls when he or she should be in class will be kept after school for every minute of class missed, for example.

"You can not punish skills into a child," explained Maresh. "We have to find all different kinds of back doors. We have to come at this kid in ways that they'll accept, that will actually change behavior."

One critical component of CBS is early intervention. If staff can identify a student in need of services early on, the more potential the student has to be successful. Emile Elementary Principal Windy Burnett sees the value in catching kids early. "I've watched students grow over time and learn strategies to self regulate. I see students I had in first grade who are now in fourth grade, and they're completely different kids."

Direct classroom integration is also key because it's difficult to teach a student social skills in isolation. That's why CBS staff goes routinely into the classrooms to be with their students.

"How can we get this right? How can we do this? It's more positive. I roll up my sleeves. I get it in there and get it done," Sifuentes said.

Parents who have children in the CBS program believe it has improved their children's quality of life. "For my son, it gave him people he could connect with when he was having difficulty. Without the support of the CBS program, I believe he wouldn't be where he is now," said one parent.

In addition to working with students, CBS staff also consults with teachers and school administrators. They train staff on trauma, classroom management, and restorative practices. Jackie Waneck, the district's Director of Special Programs and Services said it takes a combined effort of parents, school administrators, teachers, and CBS staff to truly make the program work for students.



"We have kids who see the potential in other kids who struggle, and they support them. We have principals, assistant principals and teachers who do the same. They see that what our behavior coaches do on a daily basis is super creative and takes a lot of hard work and energy. Without that acceptance and an understanding that some kids need extra support to be successful long term, I don't think our CBS program would be as successful as it is. It's truly a community effort."

(Left, CBS paraprofessional Alfred Schmitz using the strategy of kneeling to a child's level to address a behavior concern)



Regional Day School Program for the Deaf

"About 2 to 3 out of every 1,000 children in the United States are born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears."

(National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders)



According to the Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC), even a mild or unilateral hearing loss can impact a child's language development, literacy, and access to the general education curriculum. In some cases, a child's least restrictive environment is their home campus, but in other cases, a child is best served through the Regional Day School Program for the Deaf (RDSPD). Bastrop ISD is a cluster site for the Region 13 RDSPD and serves children from the school districts of Bastrop, Del Valle, Elgin, Lexington, and Smithville. The only other cluster site in Region 13 is Hays CISD in Kyle, Texas.

The RDSPD in Bastrop ISD provides services for school-age children at three separate campuses: Mina Elementary, Bastrop Intermediate School, and Bastrop Middle School. Twelve teachers are responsible for the success of our students there.

"We have a very dedicated and passionate group of teachers and signing staff who go above and beyond every day," said supervisor Leslie Organ (left). "It blows my mind the breakthroughs they have been able to accomplish with their students."

The school was established to ensure all eligible students with hearing loss are provided a free and appropriate public education and to minimize the impact of hearing loss on a child's academic performance and education. Organ goes on to say, "Early intervention is key. We have to give kids as much access to sign language and oral communication as possible to help them be successful."

Melissa Acuna (right), a fourth grader from Del Valle, rides a bus to Mina Elementary every day. She participates in homeroom and some general education classes. Fourth grade teacher Sarah Klaus knows sign language and is able to communicate with her. Melissa also meets with an auditory impairment teacher, Heather Washington (next page), on a daily basis. They gather in a smaller classroom, where they focus on oral communication skills. Melissa wears an amplification device that connects to a hearing aid, while Washington wears a small speaker around her neck akin to a piece of jewelry that connects to a Bluetooth device. As Washington speaks, the sound of her voice gets louder in the amplification device connected to Melissa's hearing aid, slowly increasing Melissa's ability to hear. More importantly, Ms. Washington uses both sign language and oral speech, allowing Melissa to see the signs, hear her voice, and develop oral communication skills.



"This helps me a lot. It's helped me be able to talk better. I still sign, but with this device, I've been able to hear how words sound and start to learn how words sound, so I can learn to read lips too," said Melissa. With a smile that lights up the room, she exclaims, "I love all my teachers!"

Currently 17 students are in the Regional Day School Program for the Deaf in Bastrop ISD. As the program evolves with new technology, the staff is committed to its core structure of a total communication approach. Students meet with a speech

language pathologist and take oral communications classes. They are encouraged to speak while signing to assist in building vocabulary, grammar, auditory feedback, and verbal skills. Teachers also are encouraged to use sign language and verbal communication at the same time to enhance language learning for their students.

“By ensuring the students are able to fully understand the teachers, whether through sign language or an amplifier, students have access, and that’s the key word,” said Organ. “They have access to the specifically designed instruction to fit their needs. That’s how we will help them succeed -- by identifying their needs and seeing what will work for them.”

To learn more about the Regional Day School Program for the Deaf in Bastrop ISD, contact supervisor Leslie Organ at lorgan@bisdtx.org. To learn more about Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, visit [Region 13 ESC](#).



AUTHORS WANTED



The December edition of *In The Spotlight* will feature BISD students & staff who are published authors!

IS THAT YOU? DO YOU KNOW A COLLEAGUE OR STUDENT WHO HAS HAD A BOOK, BOOK CHAPTER, OR ARTICLE PUBLISHED?

We want to spotlight YOU!
Contact us! news@bisdtx.org



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