

Creating an Autism Friendly Classroom – Year 1

The purpose of the project is to create more Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) -friendly classrooms. Not only will these classrooms benefit those with ASD, but students with other differences. This can also increase inclusion and reduce the need for pull-out accommodations and services, which can be stigmatizing. For instance, a student leaving class to go to a “Chill Out” area after becoming overwhelmed might feel embarrassed. The student also misses out on academic and social opportunities by not being in class. As they transition out of high school, this strategy can be considered less socially acceptable in higher ed and work settings. The idea is to integrate these accommodations and strategies into the daily learning process where they’re used proactively and become a strategy for all students rather than a select few.

The first step was assessing the classroom targeted for this project and developing a model of an ASD-friendly classroom. Both effective and problematic areas were identified and an improvement plan developed. The plan included increasing visual supports, rearranging the classroom layout, and supporting sensory-needs. For the classroom layout, functional furniture pieces replaced much of the traditional pieces. All class chairs with armrests were replaced with tables that seat two students each and special “wobble” chairs replaced some of the traditional chairs. Of the remaining chairs, sensory wedges were placed on some and all had fidget bands placed around the front legs of the chairs. To reduce use of fluorescent lights, several were covered with a special fabric reducing glare and small lamps were also brought in. A “Chill Out” area was created in a corner of the room with canopy-style tenting overhead with a soft chair, fidgets, a dry erase board, and other items to promote calming without the student needing to leave the classroom. Various fidgets were also placed throughout the room for students to use while working. Visual supports, such as Now/Next cards, are being created to help students know what to expect during class time. Customized organizational and communication strategies are being used where the student helps with developing it which promotes ownership and increased chances it will be used, rather than a one size fits all strategy, such as the traditional school journal.

These changes were slowly introduced allowing students time to adapt. One of the interesting findings was the positive effect of the wobble chairs. Many of the students prefer them to the regular chairs and there’s been a noted increase in focus and attention and less interruptions of students needing to leave their seats. With the addition of integrating the sensory items into the classroom during teacher instruction, rather than something used as a reward or a pull-out service, this creates an additional cascading effect where students are able to better maintain their focus, increase academic output, and decrease behavioral situations. More changes will be implemented next school year with the hope that these practices can be adapted schoolwide.