

School District Works to Empower Students

By Mary Jane Pitt, News of the Highlands, January 4, 2019

The Pupil Personnel Office of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery Central School District has embarked on a year-long program to allow students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to be a part of the process that figures out the best way for them to learn.

The program, called Student-Directed IEPs, is in its pilot year in the HF-FMCS D, and is only for some seventh through 11th grade students. Eventually, PPS Director Beth Hordines said at last week's Board of Education, they'd like to see it expanded to all special education students in the upper grades, and possibly even started at a slightly younger level.

The project involves teachers -- there were six at the meeting, Cecilia Taylor, Ken Kirshner, Kelly Doering, Sue Shields-Pla, Nicole Glennon and Bridget Smith -- serving as 'case managers' for two to four students each. They will meet with their students five times over the school year (two meetings have already happened) and do everything from learn about what their disability is, focus on what their strengths and weaknesses are, talk about strategies to help them learn, and do some post-high school transition planning. The students, the teachers said, are able to choose how involved they are in the IEP process.

Traditionally, teams of teachers, school staff and parents attend the IEP meetings and devise the learning plan for students who have learning disabilities.

The program also involves working with the parents of the students to provide additional resources.

"Overall," Smith said, "we want to teach them to help themselves, and to help them reduce some of their anxiety by taking ownership of the process of learning with an IEP."

She added that the ultimate goal is to prepare the students for "whatever they are doing after graduation".

Board members were impressed with not only the presentation by Hordines and the special education teachers, but also the program as a whole.

"I can see where this will really help our students as they go off to college or into the workforce and have to be able to advocate for themselves," Board President Anne Lawless said. Board members Gabe added it will be very interesting to see how the students in the program develop over the several years ahead.

The teachers were asked if they'd had any negative reactions from the students or parents in the program; the most significant question parents had, Smith said, was would participating in the program take away from their academic time, and the answer was no. The students are working with the teachers during the time they were with them anyway, most said.

"We can certainly see your enthusiasm," Board Member Faith Aprilante said.

Board Member Gus Koutsourades commended Hordines and the teachers for taking on the project.