

March 21, 2014 12:00PM

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Students teaching students at Dennis-Yarmouth

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At Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, peer mentoring and tutoring are not new initiatives. What is new this semester is adaptive visual arts, a collaborative course with art teacher Angela Persechino.

Half of the 20 participants, the “student teachers,” are traditional students who are considering careers in art, special education, adaptive therapy and/or counseling. The rest, the “students,” all have special needs, including some who are medically fragile.

Persechino, who has a background in working with special needs students, created the course, structuring it to accomplish a variety of goals in each 90-minute class, which meets on alternate days. The student teachers, who work in teams of two, come for the first half-hour, during which each team presents the day’s goals and objectives and outlines the procedure they will use to instruct the students.

“They are learning to create adaptive, individualized lesson plans within Massachusetts Frameworks standards for art and special education,” says Persechino, noting that the course requires close collaboration among the teams. The curriculum includes drawing, painting, printmaking, ceramics and a bit of photography, providing the special needs students with the same visual arts opportunities that are available to traditional students.

“This is about integrating students and teaching new skills to each of the populations within the class,” Persechino notes. The student teachers are learning to adapt, to do hand over hand teaching and to provide and respond to verbal and physical prompts. “We treat this responsibility as if it were a real teaching job. If a team member is out sick, he or she is responsible for finding a classmate willing to fill in for the class.”

Offered for the first time this semester, the course is the result of a challenge to bring more of the visual arts to special needs students. “It’s hard work, but I’m loving it,” Persechino says. “The growth that’s happening with all the participants is amazing to watch.”

Senior Bree Jopson, who plans to study communication disorders in college, said the class has taught her patience. “I’m learning to communicate with a different population and to be a better person,” she says.

“In AVA, I’m supposed to be a student teacher, but they are the ones who are teaching me. I’m learning to think outside the box and to make adaptive changes so every student can be successful.” Jopson plans to apply her experiences in this course to her everyday life and draw on them as she works toward a career working with children with severe disabilities or as a speech pathologist.

Cassie Thomas, also graduating this year, looks forward to a career in music and expressive therapy, focusing on children with special needs or with severe diseases. “This semester I have learned how to think about every person’s individual needs,” says the senior. “I can’t wait to apply everything I have learned in college.”

Junior Hannah Davies, who is considering a career in art therapy, says she has learned to collaborate and to adapt skills to fit different abilities and needs.

Kim Powers, the lead teacher in the district’s medically fragile program, says she’s grateful for this opportunity for her students to interact with others in a new setting. “My students and their aides look forward to art class, from which the students benefit greatly on many levels,” says Powers, noting the importance of the social component. “Relationships are formed, and as a result, my students are recognized and greeted in the hallways, the cafeteria, the gym and at out-of-school events. The art they produce is amazing, and they are so proud to show it off. We love it so much, we hope this course is offered forever!”

Special needs teacher Abir Zaineh has noticed a marked improvement in her students’ confidence since starting this class. “Expectations and challenges are high, yet the students make effective and meaningful progress,” she says. “The focus is on student growth, interpersonal relationships, following directions and functional skills. This class allows a transfer and generalization of skills into another setting. Art serves as a fantastic medium because nonverbal students learn a new way to express themselves.”

Guidance director Dale Fornoff said students are already signing up to take this course next fall. “While it’s open to all high school students, we encourage those who are interested in teaching, special education and occupational or physical therapy to take this class,” she says. “It is truly a growing experience for



PHOTO/ COURTESY PHOTO/KIM POWERS

D-Y senior Bree Jopson of South Dennis, left, helps eighth-grader Molly Medeiros of Yarmouth Port apply paint to her brush in the Adaptive Visual Arts classroom.

both populations of students, with the traditional students embracing the responsibility and exercising thoughtful consideration in assisting students with special needs.”

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