

Learning to learn

With 50 students, 30 teachers and a unique approach to teaching, the Wolf School embraces children who don't fit other places

BY SCOTT PICKERING

spickering@eastbaynewspapers.com

Paula Farley stands before her class. Eight students are seated in desks, facing her. She explains their next task — writing letters to peers at the Paul Cuffee School in Providence.

While she's talking, many of the sixth-graders have questions.

"Emily, awesome quiet hand," she says to a girl with her hand raised.

A minute later, to another girl in the room, Ms. Farley says, "Ariana, nice quiet hand."

After Ariana is done talking, Ms. Farley says, "Beautifully said. I couldn't say it better myself."

Ms. Farley is not repeating herself, nor is she spreading faint praise. She's teaching inside the Wolf School, a K-to-8 school with its own language, its own culture and a totally unique approach to teaching children who were failing many other places.

With eight students, this is a large classroom for the Wolf School. Ms. Farley has a teaching assistant and a speech therapist in the room with her. She's been teaching there so long she doesn't recognize the irony when she says they will be breaking into "small groups" to work on their letters.

As she announces the pairings — "Francisco and Tom will be with me at the back table" — Tom raises his hand.

"Yes, Tom, nice quiet hand," she says.

"Paula," he says [students call their teachers by their first names]. "You know Tom and I have problems working together." Tom asks for a one-on-one to discuss this with his teacher. When she's done instructing and the room comes alive with students moving to their work areas, Tom moves to a far corner of the room to wait for her. Within a few minutes, she's over there, leaning in, listening to Tom.



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

Grade 4 teaching assistant Lindsey Brisson helps student Bryana B. with her laptop (and her hair). Bryana often uses headphones in class to filter out extra noise and help her focus.

Tall and thin, with blond hair, he tells Ms. Farley quietly about his problems working with "Fran."

Francisco, meanwhile, sits at the back table with a laptop, getting started on his letter. Francisco is shorter than Tom, heavyset, with glasses. The Tom/Paula conversation is loud enough that Francisco can hear it. Without looking up, his head bent over the keyboard, Francisco says, "Tom, I know you can do it, buddy."

Two minutes later, his conversation with Ms. Farley is complete, and Tom is ready to work. He sits down near Francisco, who looks up and says, "I knew you could do it, buddy. I had faith in you."

It's a singular moment in a single classroom on an ordinary day in September. It's nothing special.

Yet it is everything special.

In another school, Tom and Francisco might not be friends. In another school, Tom and Francisco might not even have friends. They

would be prime targets for bullies. In this school, there are no bullies.

Welcome to the Wolf School.

Their son couldn't learn

Founded in 1999 by parents who were frustrated when their son struggled in traditional educational systems, the Wolf School has always been different. The first class had three students and two teachers. It takes its name from the student who inspired it — Otto WolfWallerstein.

His parents, Andy and Mary Wallerstein, started the school when their son was 7 years old. They watched him and the school grow together, adding classrooms and students, buying a permanent home in the Rumford section of East Providence, and honing the philosophy that guides the school today.

Otto is now a grown man doing well in life, and the school that bears his name is doing well, too.

Wolf has 50 students spread from Kindergarten to Grade 8. They could handle a few more students, but this is close to their ideal size.

They inhabit a former East Providence elementary school that sits snugly in a residential neighborhood. A single brick building blends the old and the new, including a state-of-the-art gym and "sensory room" (more on that later), a prominent turtle tank, a gorgeous flower garden and a cute playground.

They have nearly enough desks and laptops for every student. Staff turnover is minimal. Leadership is strong.

The most difficult task for Wolf is finding students — the right students. Wolf officially calls them "complex learners." Unofficially, these are students with an array of challenges that are magnified within traditional classrooms.

Wolf School students have difficulties in the areas of language,

Inside

See our special Guide to Private Schools, with information about every private school in our region.

PAGES 2-10

sensory processing and social skills. Many of them struggle socially. They don't know how to talk to their peers. They miss social cues. They don't make eye contact or understand personal space. They struggle to find friends. Navigating the complexities of a traditional school — with crowded halls, screaming cafeterias, playground bullies, frenzied gym classes and 24 to a classroom — can be a nightmare.

They struggle. They fall behind.

See **WOLF** Page 3



ACCEPT • THE • CHALLENGE

Open House • Saturday, October 26 • 10:00 a.m.–noon

THE Providence Country Day SCHOOL 660 Waterman Ave. E. Providence, RI | 401.438.5170 | www.providencecountryday.org

The Wolf culture, built block by block

Through language and tactics, the Wolf School creates a vibe totally its own. Here's how:

LANGUAGE: The school has its own dialogue. In every classroom, in hallways, in the gym, you hear the same terms over and over and over.

■ "Quiet hand": raising your hand to speak in class

■ "Whole body listening": showing that you are engaged and open to listening

■ "Strategies": each student's unique tactics to deal with their own stresses or weaknesses

■ "Expected/Unexpected": part of Michelle Garcia Winner's 'Social Thinking' curriculum that permeates the school, this describes actions that are appropriate or not appropriate for the time and place.

POSITIVE MODELING: Teachers don't spend a lot of time correcting students who show poor behavior; they endlessly praise those who are. Example: In a physical education class, teacher Mike LaRose had about 10 students seated around him on the gym floor. One was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. Instead of scolding the one, he said, "I see a lot of great examples of whole body listening."

RESPECT: The teachers show their students tremendous respect. Example: In a second-grade classroom, teacher Marci Haines was working on a math problem at a table with two students. As Jack was trying to process 12-6 (and get-



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

Teachers and students applaud their peers during the weekly all-school assembly at the Wolf School. Sixth-graders had just finished reading poems about themselves. For more on the upbeat, uplifting assembly, plus a gallery of photos, go to eastbayri.com.

ting pretty close to the answer), Mattie started talking. Ms. Haines turned to him and said, "Mattie, I'm going to ask you to freeze, because Jack W. is in the middle of thinking. Is that okay?" Without speaking, Jack gave her a thumbs up. "Thank you," she said. The respect goes further. A minute later, Mattie said to his teacher, "Jack is doing a really good job."

SCHEDULES: Each classroom has its own fixed and structured schedule. Blocks of time run to the minute, and teachers use timers to let students know when they are starting and stopping each block. Many of these students need that sort of predictability and rhythm.

OPENNESS: Everyone has challenges, and no one is afraid to talk about them. All these students are

here for a reason, and Wolf teaches them why. They talk openly about each student's needs and why they struggle to learn. The students learn to recognize their own challenges, and most importantly, how to self-regulate and self-correct. Ariana Hoegen learned to ask for help (instead of flipping over desks). She also learned to sing (she loves singing) when the stress-

es become too much.

TEAMWORK: Each grade has a head teacher and at least one teaching assistant for every four to eight students. In addition, speech and occupational therapists spend hours per day in every classroom. At any moment, there may be four professionals and eight students in a room, and the space moves like an orchestra. Teachers and learning specialists shift from student to student, table to desk to computer station to whiteboard, in a continuous educational dance.

TEACHER/STUDENT RATIO: It's absurdly high. This school with 50 students has 30 teachers or learning specialists. A 2:1 teacher/student ratio is common.

PLANNING: The staff plan constantly. Each team meets for at least an hour and 20 minutes each week (it's built into their schedules), and they talk and e-mail throughout the day, evenings, nights and weekends.

FUN: A week before this school year started, faculty and staff boarded a yellow school bus for a mystery field trip. Head of School Anna Johnson sent them bowling for a team-building exercise. "Pizza Fridays" are wildly popular, when parents organize, order and distribute pizzas room to room on a rolling cart. Students take field trips regularly. They go grocery shopping together (helping develop life skills). Several classrooms go therapeutic horseback riding weekly.

What would you do if your child couldn't learn?

"Rather than my child always struggling to fit into a school, this school strives to fit my child."

-A Wolf School Parent

OPEN HOUSE
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2013
1:00 to 3:00 PM

the Wolf School

We are a nationally recognized private special education school for children with complex learning profiles. Our expert, caring team of professionals, state of the art sensory arena, small class size and unique Immersion Model provide students with an optimal environment for academic and social success.

Learn more at www.thewolfschool.org

WOLF: Students who struggle elsewhere find a home here

From Page 1

They get ostracized. They go home angry and crying. Their parents can't understand them. They fail.

The Wolf School welcomes these kids, but not because they fail. They welcome students who have the potential to succeed. The most severe cases cannot attend Wolf. They would be too disruptive to the classrooms. The right student is capable of learning, with average to above average cognitive abilities, but struggling in the traditional school setting.

"These kids struggle to make friends. They don't get invited to birthday parties," said Interim Head of School Anna Johnson. "If they don't have friends, if they don't have self-esteem, if they don't have confidence, they can't learn."

Classrooms in motion

Wolf classrooms can be in constant motion, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unexpectedly. The Kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms have six students combined this year. During a language block one morning, kindergarten head teacher Leah Valentine sat at a table with two students. Using large cards with individual letters, she placed the cards on the table to form three-letter words and challenged two boys to say the words.

A few feet away, a third boy followed a computer program that taught him letters. In the classroom next door, Grade 1 head teacher Lisa Jones worked one-on-one with a boy at a white board. Nearby, behind a colorful partition, teaching assistant Maureen Quinn sat at a table with two boys. They had read the popular book "Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus," and she was asking them questions.

"What's something else the pigeon cannot do?" she asked.

Owen said, "Don't let the pigeon watch TV." Chase said, "Don't let the pigeon go to the fire station" [they had just returned from a class field trip to an East Providence fire station].

"These ideas are amazing!" Ms. Quinn said.

Moments later, Ms. Jones was in the hallway with first-grader Kinan. On the floor, in the middle of the hallway, she had placed one-foot pads, each containing one of the five vowels. As she said a one-syllable word, she asked Kinan to jump to the appropriate vowel.

"Champ," she said.

Kinan looked up, gathered himself and leaped two spots to 'A.'

"Shut."

He turned around and jumped to 'U.'

"Oh my goodness, you're like a cheetah, jumping so far," she said.

This exercise is not uniquely Wolf School, but the setting is. The hallways are quiet. The building is quiet. Kinan can leap through the hallway, practicing his vowels for 10 minutes, and not interrupt anyone, nor be interrupted.

It is deliberately quiet. Because their students have sensory processing issues, they like it that way.

"Some of our students can't eat lunch in a cafeteria because it's sensory overload," said the interim head of school, Ms. Johnson. "So we don't have a cafeteria. We don't



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

Grade 6 teacher Paula Farley works closely with Francisco on a writing assignment. They were drafting letters to students at the Paul Cuffee School in Providence.

have an auditorium. Our gym is specially designed for sound reduction."

The sensory room

Off the gym is Wolf's "sensory room." A casual observer might call it a playroom; it's a playroom with a purpose.

On a recent morning, four first-grade boys were in the sensory room. Occupational therapist Andrea Horgan rotated them through four stations — a bench swing, a tire swing, a hammock and a seat swing. There's also a 10-foot-high rock wall. The movements are not random.

As Ms. Horgan explained, some kids are naturally sluggish, with low motors, especially in the morning. In Wolf lingo, these kids are normally in the "yellow zone." Other kids are often overstimulated, with high motors, the types you see literally bouncing off the walls. In Wolf lingo, these kids are normally in the "red zone."

In order to learn, Wolf wants these boys in the "green zone." The sensory room helps get them there. The sensory room apparatus target the vestibular and proprioceptive senses — in common language, they help the "yellow" kids rev up to green, and the "red" kids throttle down to green. It helps them get ready to learn.

This concept permeates the school. Students who need sensory feedback may sit at a chair with "thera bands" across the legs. They're basically large rubber bands that the students can press their legs or feet against throughout the day.

Other students who have trouble sitting still may sit on an inflated rubber pad, so they shift and squirm and move without actually getting out of their seats.

Students with oral needs are allowed to chew gum or suck on candies throughout the day.

And then there are the "movement breaks." Wolf schedules them

throughout the day. In the seventh-grade classroom one day, head teacher Maureen Gagne had all nine students stand up and find an open spot in the classroom. For about 10 minutes, she lead them through a series of squats, pushups, lunges and other exercises.

For students who struggle sitting for 20 minutes at a time, the exercises set the table for a new academic block. As soon as they were done, and the heavy breathing stopped, students chose a color and tried describing their feelings about that color.

Relentless planning

Administratively, nothing happens by chance at Wolf. Faculty spend a remarkable amount of time planning their days. They

devote time to not only subject and content of lessons, but more importantly, to teacher/student pairings, student groupings, lunch seat assignments, movement breaks and more.

They know which child mixes well, or not so well, with another child. They know which one is working above their grade level, and which one is below their level. They orchestrate all movements throughout the day and keep pace with timers and strict schedules.

"There's a lot of planning time, really for each child," said Grade 4 head teacher Amy Taft. A veteran of the Newport public schools, she came to Wolf three and a half years ago and is now an enthusiastic convert to the Wolf model.

Yes, it can be a very difficult job, she said, between the planning, the

demanding classrooms and the constant communication between teachers, administrators and parents. "The communication here is intense," she said, but added, "You don't work here if you don't love it."

Asked why she loves it, she said, "It's such a supportive, child-based atmosphere ... You literally see kids grow, minute by minute, in front of you. It's amazing."

Getting ready to leave

The veteran students have grown the most. That's the Wolf goal — get these children ready to succeed in more traditional schools, and in life, by the time they leave.

Ask Wolf eighth-graders about their school and the responses sound like they come from the school's marketing department. But they don't. They're off the cuff, from middle school students in the middle of a Thursday morning.

"Wolf really changed my life," PJ said. "The teachers here all care about you. They want you to succeed. You get so much attention."

Anthony, who is in just his second year at Wolf, had a rough time in his previous school. "Over there, people don't help you ... The kids were being really mean to me. Here, they help you."

Noah said, "My learning has improved ... mostly because my parents and teachers pay so much attention to me."

Anna Johnson, who was promoted to interim head of school earlier this year, was the second teacher hired at Wolf 14 years ago. She lives and breathes this school, and she's seen scores of students leave Wolf armed with strategies for success. The academics are critically important, she said, but the social skills and the confidence these children attain, are priceless.

"These are kids who were melting down in the principal's office in other schools," she said. "And they honestly come skipping into school here in the morning. They're just amazing kids. I'm so proud of them."

The model student

Bullies targeted Ariana Hoegen when she was a third-grader.

"There were three girls ganging up on me," she said. "They were being really mean and calling me mean names and stuff ... I went home sad every day." Her parents enrolled her in the Wolf School in the fourth grade.

"On the first day, I was really scared," Ariana said. "But once I came here, I felt so welcomed. All the kids were greeting me and saying hi to me, and so were all the teachers."

Open dialogue is a trademark of the Wolf School. The teachers talk to the students about why they struggle. And they teach them "strategies" to overcome those

struggles.

"Everyone learns differently," said Ariana, now a sixth-grader. "I learn visually and verbally."

Ariana has a "strategy binder," full of her own strategies for success. They seem to be working.

Though she entered the school struggling in many ways (she would occasionally flip over a desk or slam a classroom door), Ariana is an outspoken model student these days. She's reading at grade level and says her life is better.

"I'm doing way better," she said. "They taught me how to make friends ... It takes at least a year to learn the strategies and how to use them. It's helped me so much, but it's also helped my sisters and my parents."

Now Ariana tries helping others. At a soccer game recently, she met a girl a little younger than her who struggles with language. "I told her all about my school. I told her we can help her," Ariana said.

Small classes, big tuitions

It costs a lot of money, relatively speaking, to run classrooms with a 2:1, 3:1 or 4:1 ratio of teachers to students. That's why Wolf School tuition surpasses many private universities. Yet the school is not a home for the richest of the rich. About a third of the students are on IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) with their hometown public school districts. Recognizing that they can't provide a suitable environment for these students, the districts pay some or all the tuition. Another quarter of the money comes from financial aid — which the Wolf School and its board of trustees help raise annually.

