

# Autism Model School: Background



## History

Over 25 years ago, nine parents from very different backgrounds started talking. A dietician, a neurobiology researcher, a metallurgical engineer, an environmental consultant, and a teacher were among this group. What they shared in common was far more powerful than any differences.

They each had a child with autism. And their children were struggling. Although well-meaning, the local public schools in those days did not know how to support students who had such diverse and intensive needs.

These parents knew there was a better way. Other programs across the country, such as those found at university clinics, were proving it. They were using carefully planned one-on-one lessons combined with the principles of behavior science to help autistic learners make significant progress.

But how could such an approach be made accessible to families impacted by autism in Toledo?

Provisionally, at around this time, the Ohio Department of Education was looking to offer more educational options through a Community Schools Pilot Program. The group of parents jumped at this opportunity.

After tireless efforts to pull together a broad range of stakeholder support, they submitted their application to launch the first publicly funded charter school focused on serving autistic youth in our state. The proposal was accepted.

On September 8th, 1998, the founders' vision gave way to reality. The Autism Model School held its first day of classes in a leased office space for just over two dozen students in grades K to 3.

The school's founding—and the rapid growth that followed—is a testament to the bold action taken by mothers and fathers who dreamt of a better way. Not just for their own children, but for the growing numbers of youth diagnosed with autism in Northwest Ohio.

## Purpose

The school's mission is to develop the full potential of individuals with autism through evidence-based programming in a nurturing learning environment. A highly-individualized and multi-faceted approach is used to meet the unique needs of each student. An emphasis is placed on building strong partnerships with parents and the community to help students reach their educational goals.

## Accomplishments

Our program's most meaningful accomplishments are not always the easiest to express. They are seen in small individual victories that happen every day. A student who is nonverbal learning to ask for something they want by handing a picture to their teacher. A child who was bullied at their former school making a new friend. A teenager with profound autism using directions displayed on a tablet to make a recipe.

Success is also measured in the appreciative words of parents. In a June 2024 survey families were asked how they'd describe the Autism Model School to others.

Here are some direct quotes:

- "Life changing and a true blessing."
- "Amazing, beyond helpful, best thing that has ever happened to my child."
- "Diverse and adaptable, a safe haven for children with different deficits, a loving, caring environment."

Demand for services is another validation of what the school has accomplished. Our office receives frequent calls from surrounding school districts leaders seeking advice on how to support autistic youth. The school's director and other leaders have shared our approach at multiple conferences, including at the international level. They've also consulted with local schools who've added their own autism-focused classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

From the early days of the school, there has been an enrollment waiting list. Over the last several years, this ranged from 50 to 60 students. The list has ballooned to nearly 100 individuals in recent months. This speaks to the positive word-of-mouth reputation of the school in our community. But it also shows a growing need in our region for quality K-12 programming for students with autism and other developmental disabilities.

Academic achievement is best captured through individual stories. Consider the case of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student who's reading scores were equivalent to a 4<sup>th</sup> grader.<sup>2</sup> After just one year of attending the school, she achieved a 10<sup>th</sup> grade equivalent reading score. This placed her in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile for growth, meaning she showed more improvement than 99% of her same-aged peers.

Year-over-year academic results demonstrate similar progress for a subset of our learners.<sup>3</sup> In the fall of 2022, about one-third of students took the NWEA Map Growth Assessment. These students took the same test in the fall of 2023. For math, 87% of students improved their scores. 79% scored higher in language, and 72% did better in reading.

Additional organizational accomplishments include:

- the establishment of an e-commerce job lab tailored to learners with autism<sup>4</sup>
- the publication of a formal study documenting the success of our Direct Instruction reading curriculum<sup>5</sup>
- the creation of a custom software application to raise student independence in completing job and life skills<sup>6</sup>
- the formation of a partnership with researchers at Bowling Green State University to conduct a series of evaluations on the effectiveness of our programming<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Discovery Academy's Autism Wing is one example.

<sup>2</sup> As measured by the NWEA Map Growth Assessment

<sup>3</sup> This example pertains to students whose programming includes a greater emphasis on core academic subjects, as opposed to individuals whose plans call for alternative instruction in areas such as life skills and job readiness.

<sup>4</sup> Learn more: [amstoledo.org/partners](http://amstoledo.org/partners)

<sup>5</sup> Visit [amstoledo.org/DI](http://amstoledo.org/DI) for more details.

<sup>6</sup> IDAPT was developed with support from multiple funders; see [amstoledo.org/IDAPT](http://amstoledo.org/IDAPT)

<sup>7</sup> Data collection for the first evaluation was completed in July of 2024.

## Programs and Services

All of the school's programs are anchored to interventions that are evidence-based and rooted in the principles of behavior science.<sup>8</sup> The aim of instruction is to support each student's pursuit of a meaningful and happy life.

The development of a student's educational plan begins with their input (when possible) and feedback from parents. If there are particular skills that a family feels should be prioritized, the team works to include them in the child's program.<sup>9</sup>

A broad range of assessments help to further pinpoint the needs of each student. The NWEA Map Growth Assessment (reading, math, language), Autism Curriculum Encyclopedia (core life skills), and the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (oral language) are three examples.

### I. Direct Instruction

Direct Instruction (DI) serves as the backbone of academic programming at the Autism Model School. Courses are provided in areas such as language and communication, reading: decoding, reading: comprehension, writing, spelling, and math concepts.

Students are given individual placement tests in each academic subject to determine their precise instructional needs. Based on these results, students are placed into small learning groups of two to five similarly-aged students.

One standout feature of DI is choral response. A teacher will read a question from a scripted lesson and signal for students to respond. The entire group will then say the answer aloud at the same time. This style of teaching keeps everyone engaged. It also highlights the drawbacks of having students raise their hands and getting called on by a teacher—where an outgoing student may overshadow others who are more hesitant.

Decades of research on how students learn and the best ways to teach have led to the development of DI—this includes the school's own study referenced earlier.

The National Institute for Direct Instruction defines the philosophy of DI as follows<sup>10</sup>:

- All children can be taught.
- All children can improve academically and in terms of self-image.
- All teachers can succeed if provide with adequate training and materials.
- Low performers and disadvantaged learners must be taught at a faster rate than typically occurs if they are to catch up to their higher-performing peers.
- All details of instruction must be controlled to minimize the chance of students' misinterpreting the information being taught and to maximize the reinforcing effect of instruction.

### II. Transition Program

Moving on from school life to the adult world can be a daunting leap for many autistic young adults. Being prepared through an individually-tailored transition plan can help a person navigate this challenging time.

The school has developed a range of programs to support students wishing to pursue goals in post-secondary education, employment, and independent living.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Applied Behavior Analysis with a focus on positive reinforcement has been shown to solve or reduce problems of social relevance.

<sup>9</sup> This is known as the Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning process in special education.

<sup>10</sup> Visit [nifid.org](http://nifid.org) for more details.

Here are some highlights:

- Practical Assessment Exploration System (PAES) Lab—a series of hands-on activities simulating work experiences in different industries (e.g. construction, customer service, production).
- Aut-To-Be Partners—our own custom-built e-commerce lab where students gain experience prepping orders for a functioning online store hosted through an Amazon Seller’s account.
- Work Experiences—both on- and off-campus work opportunities with partners such as Humane Ohio.
- Daily Living Activities—instruction designed to help with the development of skills in a broad range of daily living areas such as personal hygiene, meal preparation, fitness routines, money management, public transportation, safety awareness, and shopping in the community.

### **III. Computer-Based Instruction**

Computer-aided instruction has been identified as an evidence-based practice by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders. The school offers several options in this area, including:

- Headsprout Reading—an early reading program which takes non-readers to a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading level.
- TeachTown Basics—an application targeting learning domains such as language arts, math, and social skills.
- Edmentum—a standards-based online program for a range of core subjects and electives, such as AI, creative writing, and environmental science.

## **People**

No description of the Autism Model School would be complete without mentioning the team of people who serve the students in our care, especially the frontline staff members. Classrooms are led by teachers and classroom aides who gain expertise in delivering the individualized programming talked about above.<sup>11</sup> Because classes are capped at seven students, we’re able to provide a 1-to-2 staff-to-youth ratio—this is unheard of in traditional public school settings.

A collection of dedicated clinicians provide teaching staff with guidance, consultation, and, when needed, direct student support. We call this supervisory group the Clinical Management Team. Members have advanced degrees in areas such as Special Education, Applied Behavior Analysis, Speech Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, and Job Training Coordination.

Van drivers, administrators—who often support classrooms when teachers take lunch breaks—, volunteers, and board members—most of whom are parents of a child with autism—round out our amazing team.

A few years back our longtime director and founder, Mary Walters, retired after an amazing career. Joel Vidovic stepped into Mary’s role in July of 2021. Joel is a charismatic and passionate leader with decades of experience supporting individuals with autism as they pursue greater learning and quality of life.

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<sup>11</sup> Teachers are “licensed intervention specialists,” and classroom aides are “certified paraprofessionals.”