



## *Curriculum Corner*



From left Skye Sardanopoli, Principal, Lakeview School;  
Grace Johnson, Director of Special Services;  
Dr. Sandra Cullis, Assistant Superintendent;  
and  
Dr. Steven Forte, Chief Education Officer  
Denville Township Schools

### ***"Building Strong Foundations: How Our District's Preschool Special Education Program Sets the Stage for Lifelong Learning"***

#### **Our Programs**

The Denville Preschool program offers three progressive levels of supportive learning environments designed to meet the diverse needs of students. At the most individualized level, students receive one-on-one support, allowing for highly targeted instruction that builds foundational skills and fosters early growth. As students develop, they may transition to a more structured small-group setting, benefiting from increased peer interaction while still receiving significant adult guidance. The least restrictive environment includes a class of 12 students supported by one teacher and one instructional aide, where children can practice their skills in a collaborative setting while maintaining access to support as needed. "These programs are intentionally designed to build upon one another, and students are able to move between them as their abilities and independence progress, ensuring a personalized pathway to success." Dr. Sandra Cullis, Assistant Superintendent of Schools highlighted.

Heather McCauley, Preschool Inclusion Teacher, is thrilled with the way tiered program options allow students to progress throughout their time in the preschool: “The ability of the students to start in the ABA program and then progress to my program. . . .We have so many options when a student is ready for the next one. That is one thing that makes the Denville program so good. There are so many opportunities to watch the students grow.”

### Key Elements for Success

The greatest strength of our preschool program is our exceptional staff. Their dedication, warmth, and professionalism create a nurturing environment where young learners thrive. Every team member—from teachers to support staff—brings passion, creativity, and deep expertise in early childhood education. They go above and beyond to foster curiosity, build foundational skills, and support each child’s individual growth. Their ability to connect with families and build strong relationships ensures a seamless transition into school life. Dr. Steven Forte, Superintendent of Schools, sees the success of the preschool program as a direct reflection of the tireless commitment and the genuine care the staff show every single day. “As Superintendent, I’m always deeply moved by the way our staff cares for every student—something especially evident during our annual Moving Up ceremonies each June.”

The School Principal, Skye Sardanopoli, is equally proud of the program: “As the Principal of Lakeview Elementary School, it has been an honor to witness the incredible work of our educators and the inspiring growth of our youngest learners. At this foundational stage, I have seen students take some of their very first steps, literally and figuratively, as they learn to walk, communicate, and develop a true love for school and for learning. None of this happens in isolation; it is the result of a dynamic partnership between our dedicated team of educators, educational leaders, specialists, support staff, and families who work together to ensure every child thrives.”

The emphasis on each individual student is a key factor in student progress. As the ABA Preschool Teacher, Francesca Palatella relayed: “There is a strong bond and we get to know each student so well.” Heather McCauley added “Seeing the progress from the beginning of the year until the end of the year, we are so proud of their independence and academic growth.”



Denville’s four preschool teachers work continuously as a team with each other and with other staff, including Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists, a Physical Therapist, Behaviorist and Child Study Team members. They also ensure ongoing partnerships with families. Monthly newsletters, mystery readers, and daily communication logs all help maintain home-school communication and collaboration. The teachers also attend after school activities for their students, such as sports programs. Pictures and videos from school help enhance communication with families. Lauren Julich, Preschool

Disabilities Teacher, was excited that she was able to share a video with the parents when a student learned to walk at school. “Our Principal, Mrs. Sardanopoli was there and she was able to capture it on video as the student ran down the hallway.”

### **Preschool Outcomes:**

We are fortunate to get to know students at an early age through our preschool program. We strive to capitalize on this opportunity to prepare our students for kindergarten and beyond. Heather McCauley witnessed this advantage in kindergarten preparation when she assessed the reading readiness skills of her students at the end of the school year: “Every student that was entering kindergarten could identify every letter, every sound . . . They were segmenting and sounding out words.”

In Denville, we meet each student at their individual level with the ultimate goal of helping the students be successful in the least restrictive environment. Director of Special Services, Grace Johnson, shared “We have the opportunity to see our students grow and progress as they enter our K-8 program. Students make individual gains and move ahead. We see students becoming more independent and no longer needing the special education services, or the same level of support. Early intervention in preschool is a true benefit and helps our students reach their potential.”

“What makes these programs so remarkable is not only the progress students achieve in preschool, but also the long-term impact we see as they continue through our schools.” Skye Sardanopoli agreed. “Watching children who began their journey in our preschool classrooms receive their recognition at Fifth Grade graduation is always such a special moment for me as a Principal. It is a reminder that when we invest in children early, we give them the strongest possible foundation for a lifetime of learning and success.”