

New space a blessing for school serving children with autism

◆ **Birchtree Center:** Thanksgiving dinner is aimed at helping kids prepare for family meals.

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NEWINGTON — Thanksgiving preparations at Birchtree Center for students with autism have not always been easy.

Working in cramped space in their old Portsmouth location, staff hovered over students crammed into a small gymnasium as they attempted to introduce the social customs that come with the holidays.

This year, executive director Christine Guarino is thankful for a lot, but primarily for the center's new space, which allowed the entire Birchtree family to celebrate a Thanksgiving dinner together.

In classrooms and kitchens throughout the expanded center Wednesday, students ranging in age from 4 to 20 prepared green beans and

mashed potatoes, made holiday decorations and helped set tables.

Then, at 1 p.m. for the first time in the center's history, 25 students plus staff sat down and enjoyed the meal together.

The meal is more than a celebration for the students and staff, it is key in helping students prepare for a "typical" Thanksgiving dinner with their families.

Holidays can be a hard time for students with autism, who often have heightened sensitivity to noise, new surroundings and new foods. The social customs of the holiday can also be difficult for students to grasp and the stress can sometimes cause outbursts.

"What ends up happening for some families is they don't go out because they are fearful of the repercussions," Guarino said. "This actually helps a family that a student has had exposure. They are likely to be more accepting."

Guarino told the story of a student who ate a green bean for the first time at a practice

dinner, and astonished his family the next day at Thanksgiving by eating the oft-hated vegetable.

"The challenge for these kids is generalization of skills," Guarino said. "The practice here is going to give them familiarity so when they do it again tomorrow, there is some association through this experience. It helps a great deal."

Before dinner, music teacher Virginia Macdonald led the students in a song about giving thanks. Students said they were grateful for food, music and movie. Fourteen-year-old Dimitra Pesiridis, an avid swimmer, said she is grateful for her goggles.

For Guarino, her gratitude was in watching her students enjoy a holiday meal together comfortably.

"I'm grateful that we've been able to bring the Birchtree family to a place where we can celebrate with each other," Guarino said. "It is very simple and for us all to be able to sit down and partake in this dinner symbolizes that for me."

Vinny Fusco, 11, a student at the Birchtree Center in Newington, stretches after enjoying a Thanksgiving preparation meal on Wednesday. The center serves 27 students with an autism spectrum disorder, and preparing for the holiday can make things easier for the students and families when the actual event arrives.



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