

Sunset Elementary School Celebrates Autism Awareness Month



April is Autism Awareness month and Sunset Elementary School has used this as an opportunity to teach students, staff, and parents from the school community all about Autism, differences, and inclusion. We kicked off the month by celebrating "Light it up Blue Day" on April 2nd. This is a worldwide Autism Awareness movement, lead by Autism Speaks. The students at the school wore as much blue as they could find in their closets to "shine a light on Autism." It was incredibly comforting to look out on the playground and find a sea of blue shirts, pants, and shoes running around on the playground. Looking out on the yard, you could see inclusion in action with the kids playing games with children of all play levels and communication styles. Everyone was wearing blue and they all knew why. That day, the teachers all lead a mini lesson about differences and Autism. Each grade level had a lesson that was created to apply to their age and grade level. Some classes created differences charts and talked with their classes about what makes each person special. Other classes watched videos called "What is Autism" and "Autism and Me" and had a discussion about what it means to have Autism. Still other classes wrote poems about themselves and what makes them unique from their classmates.

After their lesson, every student in the school designed a puzzle piece for the "Puzzle Piece Project." Puzzle pieces have served as a symbol for Autism in the global media. The classes discussed how the puzzle pieces are each unique and beautiful in their own way, but they eventually fit together as a whole. We related this concept to the way each student adds something special to the school and we all fit together as a whole community. The puzzles hang in the main hallway, along with an informational poster about the project.

Throughout the month, the school will have a "Tech Lab", where children can explore and learn about a variety of AAC devices, a recess club that will work together to make games more inclusive and make materials with visuals so kids can read the rules more easily, sensory simulations to feel what it is like to have a sensory processing disorder, presentations by individuals with Autism, and many mini lessons from the special education team.

The Sunset School community has worked very hard to create a loving and collaborative learning environment that is inclusive and successful for all types of students. The general education and special education faculty have all dedicated themselves to this project and the students are all seeing the benefits. Teachers say they notice children being more patient, asking honest questions, showing more interest in people's differences, and including more children in their social interactions.

