

# children's PRESSLINE

## Options limited for autistic students in NYC

By ELIZABETH NEGRON

Every youth needs a springboard for a good education. Sometimes getting there, though, is the hard part.

"We have on average every year eight spots open to incoming applicants, and on average 150 to 200 applications for those positions," says Josh Griffith, the Learning Spring Elementary School's (LSS) assistant head of school. "As a staff, we look at the children that we think we can most help with our specific program. We also talk to the parents about what we think and how they'd do in our program."

Why is getting in so hard? LSS is a private school for high-functioning children on the autistic spectrum and is partially supported by the city's Board of Education, which makes it free for most families.

The school has about 60 students, with eight to nine students in a classroom and one teacher and two assistants in each room. This low staff-to-stu-

dent ratio provides much more direction than in a general education classroom.

Children with autism "need more support socially," says Jennifer Wagner, an early childhood evaluator previously with LSS. "They don't know how to, if they're in a typical school, act with typical children because their social skills are poor."

Because of these different needs, parents of autistic children—one child out of every 150 in the U.S. being autistic—often look to schools like LSS that are outside the general education setting. A challenge for these parents is finding a school or program that is able to meet their child's needs, as these are limited for the almost 6,000 autistic students enrolled in New York City public schools. Even when they find their ideal school, parents often discover the admission process for specialized schools can be a long, selective and often times expensive one.

When private schools like LSS aren't an option, inclusion schools offer another alternative for helping students with autism. These schools pair special-needs children with paraprofessionals and combine them with general education students in classes. Although inclusion schools are not specifically tailored to children with autism, the teachers are often more trained to work with special-needs children.

The benefit of inclusion schools, according to Dania Cheddie, principal of P.S. M226, an inclusion school in Manhattan, is that they give special-needs children the opportunity to interact and learn with normally developing students while helping both groups work on their social skills and friendships.

"Not everyone in society really understands autism, and they don't know how to respond to or interact with autistic children," Cheddie says.

Adam Thometz, 17, says that as a young boy he had a hard time dealing with being different from his classmates in mainstream classes.

"I was one of the 'special ed' students," says Adam, who was diagnosed with autism about 15 years ago. "I got teased in elementary school and middle school. It lowered my self-esteem."

Adam's enrollment in New York City Lab School, an inclusion school, was one of the first places that his father says he was understood. "We tried a number of doctors and medical people and even psychologists, and I guess even psychiatrists, and none of them seemed to know how to deal with Adam's difficulties," says Kurt Thometz. "Education was, to my mind, the therapy."

Biliah Munford, 14, an autistic student, says it was his family life that changed after he was enrolled at an inclusion school. "[Now that I go to P.S. M226] my

family knows what the right thing to do is," he says. "Before I went to this school, my family would always give me beatings [to discipline me]. But now, after I came to this school and had a very nice teacher, she stopped all of the beatings."

So although there is definitely a demand for more full-fledged schools tailored to students with autism, inclusion programs in mainstream schools appear to be one of the best alternatives for the thousands of New York City students in public schools.

Ivan Guzman, 14, an autistic student who also attends P.S. M226, says, "[I like] having a class family because you can build your friendships. I belong here. That's why my parents chose this school."

**Additional reporting by Marco Felice 12; Gabe Frankel, 13; Myles Miller, 15; Divya Sampath, 12 and Rachael Schwartz, 12**

## 'Cornrows': the storyteller

By NANA CAMILLE YARBROUGH

Special to the AmNews

More than five thousands ago, African people drew hundreds of pictures of themselves on the cave walls of the Tassili Plateau in Northeast Africa.

One of the drawings is of a mother seated on what looks like a piece of fur. She holds an infant, and on her head is the braided hairstyle we call "cornrows."

Through the language of art, those ancient people told their family story. They created over a thousand spoken languages and wrote them on cave walls, on Pyramid walls, carved them into stone and wood.

They wove them into and stamped and dyed them onto cloth fabric. They played their languages on drums, flutes, horns and stringed instruments. Societies braided language symbols into their

hair.

When our ancestors were enslaved and brought here, they could not bring the temple walls, the papyri paper with

beautifully woven, stamped and dyed fabric. They were not allowed to bring their drums, flutes, balaphones, horns and stringed instruments. But,

hair, the style we today call cornrows. They were not called cornrows then. We were forced to stop speaking our languages and forced to stop telling our family story, forced to stop braiding the more complex braided, stringed and twisted styles. After a while, we forgot our languages and the names of the different hair symbols.

So we created a new name. Part of the crops we farmed was the corn crop. The rows of corn and the folds of the leaves on the ears of corn mirrored the rows and folds of our braids, thus the name cornrows.

Cornrows survived the horror of our enslavement, the middle passage, years of ridicule during and after slavery, but made a comeback as part of the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s and '70s. The style of cornrows is part of a symbolic language our ancestors used to tell our family story:

*Not to know your family story is bad*

*Not to want to know it worse*  
*For to pass on ignorance to your family*

*Is like passing on a curse*

*And*

*It will curse your father*

*Curse your mother*

*Curse your sister*

*Curse your brother*

*And*

*Every time you come together one with the other*

*It will be there in-between*

*To separate and instigate*

*That's why all the people of the world*

*Tell their family story*

*That's how they pass on their legacy*

The style cornrows is part of our family legacy. Thirty years ago, I wrote "Cornrows," my first book for children. On February 27 at 6 p.m., we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the publication of the book. Dr. Brenda Greene, drummers and special guests help tell the rest of the "Cornrows" family story at the President's Conference Center at Medgar Evers College, 1650 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY. For more information, call (718) 756-8501.

