

Arizona Autism Charter School

MEETING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH
AUTISM AND OTHER RELATED DISABILITIES

By Katherine Bateman

Arizona Autism Charter School (AZACS), a public charter school for K-12 students, opened in 2014 to provide individualized education for students with autism and other disabilities alongside typically developing peers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders moved quickly to adapt instruction to online and hybrid models, coordinate comprehensive services, and maintain supports.

KEY LESSONS:

1

A mission-driven mindset in service delivery created an environment for educators and staff to fully commit to providing the best education possible during a pandemic, regardless of what it took to do so.

2

Smaller class sizes allowed for effective, individualized instruction that met the needs of students of all abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3

Presenting curriculum and material in multiple modalities, including the opportunity for students to continue remote instruction online after buildings reopened, was effective for students of all abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4

Multidisciplinary/integrated service offerings (i.e., speech, OT, PT, behavioral support for BCBA's, etc.) increased access to meaningful supports for students of all abilities, providing families with comprehensive services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

School building closures highlighted the importance of designing instruction to flexibly meet the unique needs of each student. The school’s responsive approach helped teams identify effective new practices during disruptions in educational and therapeutic services. Over the last one-and-a-half years, educators have worked collaboratively to do the best they could during a time of unknown circumstance. Some of the practices that emerged during this time have continued through changes in the modality of delivery of education from in person to remote or hybrid.

AZACS embraces flexibility and responsiveness, which has served it well—and has proven critical to meeting the needs of individual students during the pandemic. Interviews with staff and families showed how educators were able to create individualized supports for students through nimble, out-of-the-box thinking and implementation.

Serving Students with Autism in a Pandemic

AZACS is the first tuition-free, autism-focused public charter school in Arizona. It was developed by a group of parents and autism educators in response to what felt like a lack of schools equipped with the knowledge and expertise to ably serve students with autism and other related disabilities. Diana Diaz, lead founder and executive director of AZACS, is a parent of a child with autism. She sought to create a school that would not only meet her son’s needs but also be a place where he wanted to be and where he could develop meaningful friendships with his peers.

It was a common need among families of children with autism, many of whom report feeling like traditional public school systems fail to meet their needs for education and community support.

“So many families have already gone down that road [of public school] and, really, when they come here, they sometimes make friends for the very first time,” Diaz-Harrison said.

As with all schools across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic created disruptions and uncertainty in the delivery of education services at AZACS. Thrust into an unknown world of remote education, including the broad range of therapies and related services included in students’ individualized education plans, the staff and leadership at AZACS quickly realized they had to be creative in how they reached and provided meaningful support. AZACS committed to a fluid, evidence-based education model, constantly collecting data and making data-based decisions to provide the best education possible. This willingness to change plans at the drop of a dime was critical, because educators wasted less time trying to find the best way to serve students and families. The ongoing data collection ensured that the practices and support that emerged in our interviews with staff and families at AZACS that not only were effective but sustainable. We believe that not only are these factors that lead to the success of AZACS and are considerations for other schools to increase their quality and quantity of meaningful services for students with disabilities, but they also address historic inequities for students with disabilities that have grown dramatically as a result of the pandemic.

A Mission-Driven Mindset

Serving students with autism and other disabilities often involves trial by error, with educators constantly adjusting plans and strategies to support students based on what works and what doesn’t. When educators operate under the mindset that student failure is instructional failure, this mindset creates the ongoing expectation that when one teaching strategy is not successful, educators are committed to stop, pivot, and try something new, constantly seeking to find the most effective teaching strategies for each individual student.

While this mission-driven mindset is present for most educators serving students with disabilities across all settings and is not a new concept as a result of the pandemic, it was critical during school shutdowns and disruptions in education services and contributed substantially to the success at AZACS during the pandemic. Educators and staff worked tirelessly to find effective teaching strategies in a remote setting, constantly adapting instruction until they found supports that worked for each student during a stressful time. Teachers and educators were flexible, willing to change course, and focused on whether students were learning.

Small Class Sizes

Prior to the pandemic, AZACS implemented small class sizes of 10 to 12 students in all grade levels. This created more opportunities for students to access needed supports. When AZACS moved to remote learning, these small class sizes were advantageous for teachers and related service staff. In comparison to reports of online instruction in traditional public school systems serving up to 35 students in one online classroom, delivery of education was reported to be more effective.

“AZACS is a free, public charter school. And so the kiddos come here from anywhere. We have neurotypical kiddos that come here, parents sometimes bring the kids because they know it’s a smaller class setting. There’s not 35 kids in a classroom, there is 10 or eight or 11 or 12.” – Program manager at AZACS

Small class sizes result in increased attention and support to students and decreased opportunities for students to “fall through the cracks.” One program manager cited small groups and the close-knit environments that developed due to small class sizes as being the key to successfully altering and modifying instruction: “Working together in such a small environment was helpful, I don’t know what it looks like for a larger school.”

One parent of a student with autism reflected on the services and supports provided at AZACS during the pandemic. While it was a chaotic and difficult time, the individualized instruction and small classes helped AZACS meet their child’s needs.

“This past year has been amazing in comparison to what we’ve been through. . . . She was always bunched in with all different age groups. So I don’t feel her specific needs were ever really met. Her maturity level has really increased over the past year because she’s been with her own age group. That’s been a big plus. Just in so many ways, she is so much better off.”

Multiple Modalities

The understanding and celebration that all students learn differently is at the core of the mission of AZACS. While delivering instruction that meets the needs of multiple learners is not new to the field, AZACS has a clear understanding of its importance. Teachers and educators work together to create, adapt, and deliver curriculum that meets the learning styles of numerous learners.

One of the driving forces behind families coming to this unique school is the attention to and focus on creating an education that is accessible to each student. Accommodations and modifications are implemented with relative ease at AZACS, as all educators, both in general and special education, teach with the belief that if a learner is not able to access instruction, the educator will pivot and change their approach until the learner is successful. At AZACS, education delivery is fluid, and that belief is at the core of creating an education that meets the needs of students whether they have a disability or not.

During school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear to the AZACS team that some students thrived in a virtual environment. Educators reported in interviews that a population of students really enjoyed the remote learning model and remained engaged and were actively participating and learning. Capitalizing on this new knowledge and experience implementing this type of instruction, the AZACS team applied for credentials to offer a new remote learning option for students even after school buildings reopened. AZACS responded to their discoveries amid a global health crisis and moved forward to expand its educational offerings to meet the needs of students who were successful in the virtual classroom.

“We wouldn’t really have pursued that had it not been for the pandemic. We already have 60 students enrolled that were online during the pandemic and it’s really worked for their families, so they’re choosing to stay online.”

Multidisciplinary and Integrated Service Delivery Model

AZACS was developed with the belief that every student should be educated according to how they learn. To do that, expertise from multiple disciplines is often needed to address the comprehensive needs of each unique student. In many school settings, access to these services are not housed under the same roof. For example, it is common practice that related services staff, such as speech and language pathologists, work with students at multiple schools. And in addition to those services, families often access additional therapies outside the school setting.

By contrast, AZACS provides all multidisciplinary services in the same building. It provides each student with a coordinated, comprehensive education program that includes onsite expertise from different disciplines. This integrated service delivery model is collaborative and incorporates support services such as behavior, speech, occupational, and physical therapy.

“The fact that we have so many different practices and different perspectives on looking at a kiddo and how to service their needs,” one behavior analyst said. “That’s one of the big things that I find here. Because again, in the clinic setting, you really don’t have that stuff. But here in this setting, they’re here, you have academic specialists, you have hearing, you have OT, you have speech, so really good resources.”

Conclusions

The practices in place at AZACS to support students with autism and other disabilities helped maintain continuity and critical supports during a global health crisis that caused education services to come to a halt around the world. In addition, the commitment of leadership and staff to flexibly meet the needs of students and families based on what data identified was working was not only effective but also sustainable. These good practices lead the way for this school to continue to create effective educational experiences for all students.

“I think it takes very special people to do what they’re doing. I mean, they’re very dedicated. I don’t know how with, like I said, with their own families and their own worries and fears over this year that they were able to spread themselves. So they were there for everyone, their own and ours and got through the school year with such a positive attitude.” – Parent of child enrolled at AZACS

Educators approached the delivery of instruction from a special-education lens, unlike the majority of public schools across the country. That meant ensuring services met the unique needs of each student, whether they had a diagnosis of autism, another intellectual or developmental disability, or were typically developing. AZACS planned for the margins in its approach to instruction and provided individualized support to students as needed. Students

of all abilities, including those not eligible for special-education services, were able to access the support they needed to be successful in their educational journey during an overwhelming and chaotic time.

A shared mindset and common goal of effectively educating students of all abilities provided educators with the freedom and ability to identify when something was not working and pivot to something new at the drop of a hat. With the core belief that all students can learn, the job of educators is to find the most effective teaching strategies and supports for each student, no matter what. This formed the core approach to delivering education services during the pandemic at AZACS. This flexibility in service delivery allowed educators to quickly engage their students and provide meaningful, effective educational experiences in remote and hybrid learning environments.

The lessons learned from pandemic responses in schools like AZACS offer enduring lessons about fluid and effective practices that meet the needs of all students. Providing educational and therapeutic services to students with differing abilities during a global health crisis was a journey into the unknown for educators and professionals around the country. The central importance of putting student success first, using data to determine what works, and pivoting quickly to focus on just those practices that promote learning and provide critical services are important strategies for success—at AZACS and elsewhere.

These lessons can serve as a model and impetus for change for the benefit of all students. As a field, we know too much and owe too much to our students with autism. For them, and for other students with disabilities and challenges, we must progress beyond the status quo.



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