

Social Worker Conference: A Staff Reflection

Attending the School Social Worker Conference was an incredibly meaningful and energizing experience. One of my biggest takeaways was the importance of intentionally incorporating more play and fun into the work we do. It reinforced how powerful it can be when educators give themselves permission to be playful - both for their own well-being and in building stronger, more connected relationships with students.

Another key theme throughout the conference was mindset. I was reminded how shifting perspective can have a profound impact, not only on how we approach challenges, but also on how we show up for kids and colleagues each day and support one another. The experience also strongly validated the Choose Love work, the learning from recent coaching sessions and Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI). So many of the themes aligned, reinforcing the importance of influence, self-care, showing courage, and building meaningful connections. It was powerful to see how these ideas are being reflected and practiced more broadly in the field and how strongly it is encouraged for student success.

It was also incredibly valuable to learn from other school social workers from around the country, hearing about their experiences, connecting with them, and gaining new ideas and resources to bring back to our school. The conference felt very validating of the work we do every day. It also gave me a deeper appreciation for our team of three, especially knowing that many school social workers are supporting multiple schools across their districts each week. Beyond the conference itself, it was also such a great opportunity for team bonding.

Gina Wheeler, MSW
School Social Worker

Learning



 School Social Work
Association of America

Molding Young Artists

This month in the art room our students have been working with clay!

During the ceramics unit, students learn hand building techniques such as pinch pots, coil pots, and slab work. Once they have learned these techniques they build a variety of creative projects. Seen here are their pinch pot animals. These were made by taking two pinch pots and flipping them upside down to create a body and head.

These works were made by several students from a variety of classrooms.



Robyn Allen
Art & Music Teacher

Student Art



Pediatric Feeding Disorder Month

Pediatric feeding disorder (PFD) is “impaired oral intake that is not age-appropriate and is associated with medical, nutritional, feeding skill and/or psychosocial dysfunction” (Goday et al., 2019) . PFD impacts 1 in 37 children. It is more prevalent in children with developmental disabilities, affecting up to 89% of children in this group.

A child with PFD must feel comfortable in their environment, in their experience with food and have a way to “escape” the experience if it becomes overwhelming.

The key to helping a child with PFD is to allow them to become more comfortable around food without the expectation of eating that food. As their anxiety lessens, the food becomes less feared and their confidence and willingness to experience that food will improve.

Tips for working with a child who has PFD:

- Offer ways to experience foods without the expectation of eating (e.g., serving others, cutting fruits or vegetables, using cookie cutters or other kitchen tools)
- Encourage the child to look at, touch, smell, or lick foods
- Expose the child to different food-based smells
- Continue to put connection and safety above everything - regulation comes before eating
- Follow a child-centered approach that lets the child make choices about food exploration, without external pressures of consumption
- Avoid the expectation of eating that food; allow the child to come to that on their own

We often need to remember that expanding the diet for these children is a marathon rather than a hundred-yard dash. Sustainable change takes time to develop.

Lesley Robie, RDN, CNSC
Registered Dietitian

Nutrition

When eating is hard, scary, or hurts...

IT'S NOT PICKY EATING

An initiative of feeding matters

itsnotpickyeating.org

@itsnotpickyeating

Eating is not a pleasure for some children.
It may be hard, scary or hurt.

This is hard for many of us who view eating
as a pleasure to understand.

Success for each child's journey in the
treatment of their PFD is different.

Community Dinner

This year's Spring Fling Community Dinner was nothing short of a heartfelt success. The evening brought together families, staff, and community members in a warm and welcoming atmosphere, filled with connection, appreciation, and shared purpose.

One of the most meaningful highlights of the night was hearing directly from guardians and families about the impact of our work. Many took the time to express their gratitude, sharing how much they value the care and support their children receive. These conversations were deeply moving and on more than one occasion, the kindness and sincerity brought tears - a powerful reminder of why this work matters so much.

Moments like these don't happen by chance. They are the result of the collective efforts of our entire community. From the planning and preparation to the daily dedication shown across campus, it is this shared commitment that makes events like the Spring Fling so special and impactful.

It was truly a great night, one that reflected the strength, compassion, and connection that define our community.

Nicole Desharnais, MA
Board Liaison & Communication Specialist

Happenings



Clinical

Growing Together

As May brings longer days and a sense of renewal, it offers families a chance to reflect on growth and new beginnings. For parents of children in residential placement, this season can be a reminder that progress isn't always linear, but it is always possible. From a therapeutic perspective, connection remains at the heart of that progress. Even with physical distance, emotional bonds can be strengthened through consistent communication, curiosity about your child's experiences, and validation of their feelings. Small, intentional moments like scheduled calls, letters, or shared activities during visits help reinforce a relationship that is steady, supportive, and evolving.

May is also an ideal time to encourage and reinforce new coping skills. As your child practices emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and communication strategies, your recognition of their efforts is invaluable. Noticing and naming growth, whether it's expressing feelings more openly or using a coping strategy, builds confidence and motivation. Modeling these same skills in your own routine can further strengthen your connection and create continuity between treatment and home.

Finally, maintaining family routines can provide a sense of stability during times of transition. As you prepare for reunification or increased time together, consider simple, consistent practices like shared meals, regular check-ins, or designated family time. Flexible structure helps create a sense of safety while meeting everyone's needs. By focusing on connection, skill-building, and routine, you're helping lay a strong foundation for lasting growth.



Liz Lowrey, M.S. CMHC
Behavioral Health Clinician

Building Readiness to Learn

Behavioral

Within the DIXON LIFE Assessment, the Foundational Domain focuses on the earliest skills that prepare students for learning and interaction. This includes students developing awareness of their environment, building tolerance for others in their space, showing early interest in people or activities, and beginning to use simple forms of communication. These essential "starting point" skills help students become available for learning before more structured academic or daily living instruction can take place.

The Foundational Domain also emphasizes regulation and comfort within the environment. Many of our students are still learning how to feel safe, manage sensory input, and respond to the presence of others. Skills such as sitting near peers, transitioning between activities with support, and engaging in brief shared interactions are all meaningful steps forward at this stage.

As students strengthen these foundational abilities, they begin to engage more consistently with people, activities, and routines. You may notice increased curiosity, longer periods of participation, and more intentional communication. Our team supports this growth through strong relationship-building, predictable routines, and sensory-informed, individualized strategies—helping each student feel safe, regulated, and ready to learn.



Nicole Hilliker
Behavior Specialist

Navigating Change

Placing a child in residential treatment can be a lot for parents to navigate; however, it's important to remember that children who remain in the home are also navigating a significant transition when a sibling enters residential treatment. They may experience a mix of emotions such as confusion, worry, jealousy, guilt, or even relief, and often don't yet have the language to express these feelings. As a parent, creating a space where these emotions are welcomed and normalized is key. Offering simple, honest, and developmentally appropriate explanations can help reduce uncertainty. Phrases such as, "Your sibling is getting extra help to learn how to handle big feelings," or "This is a place where they can stay safe and practice new skills," can provide reassurance without overwhelming details. It's also helpful to reinforce that the situation is not the fault of anyone in the family, especially the child at home.

In addition to open communication, maintaining consistency and connection with the child at home is essential. Keeping routines predictable and carving out one-on-one time can help them feel secure and valued during a time when family dynamics may feel uncertain. When questions arise, you might say, "It's okay to miss them and feel upset," or "You can always ask me anything, and I'll be honest with you." Encouraging ongoing connection with their sibling, through letters, drawings, or supervised calls when appropriate can also help preserve that bond. Creating a consistent schedule for visits that the sibling(s) at home can be a part of is another great way to help support feelings of inclusion and connection. Most importantly, continue to check in regularly and remind your child that their feelings matter and that your family is working together toward healing and growth.

Liz Lowrey, M.S. CMHC
Behavioral Health Clinician

Permanency

"A family isn't a 'look' or a page out of a storybook. It doesn't mean a house with a yard, a white-picket-fence, 2.5 kids and a pet. Family is a feeling. Family is magic. Family is a team. Family is a feeling of pride, compassion, shared duties, and love. A whole lotta love. Family is my safe place. My home. My world. My comfort... I hope you'll always feel like home."

-Shelley

Sensory Party

This year's Sensory Party was a joyful and engaging experience for everyone involved. The space was set with calming music and a scenic video, creating a relaxing atmosphere where students and staff could comfortably explore a variety of sensory activities.

Multiple stations offered something for everyone, including water play, shaving cream, fidgets, bubbles, moon sand, rice and beans, playdough, and sand art—plus a table full of snacks. Each station was thoughtfully designed to support a wide range of sensory needs, allowing individuals to engage in ways that felt most enjoyable and meaningful to them.

The clear crowd favorite was the shaving cream station, where laughter quickly took over as both staff and students joined in the fun—many ending up playfully covered in it by the end. The bubble station was another big hit, with participants challenging themselves to create the biggest bubbles and see who could catch them.

The dining hall added to the fun with lemonade, fruit salad, and chips—simple favorites that everyone appreciated. Overall, the event was filled with laughter, creativity, and connection. It was a blast to watch everyone explore their senses and make lasting memories together.

Nicole Desharnais, MA
Board Liaison & Communications Specialist

Residential

