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Supporting exceptional children and families toward a successful future.

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SPAULDING
ACADEMY & FAMILY SERVICES

FALL 2026 NEWSLETTER

FALL 2026



OCEAN CLASSROOM

Shark Week Takes Over the Innovation Room

Recently, our students transformed into researchers, videographers and film producers while studying sharks. Inspired by National Geographic's Shark Week, teachers Bridget Desjardins and Emily Thurston combined classrooms to study everything shark-related. Brendan Donahue, Digital Learning Assistant and Lead Tech Integrator, brought the project into the school's Innovation Room, a space with 3D printers, a filming studio and even codable drones.

Over three weeks, students researched their assigned species, sculpted realistic shark teeth out of Model Magic clay and drafted scripts before filming with the room's studio lights and green screen. Brendan then edited the clips, leaving in production errors for students to catch and fix, so they could see the work behind production, not just the final product.

The finished video, complete with a blooper reel, was shown to every classroom the next morning, and the young stars got high-fives all day!

For Brendan, the biggest takeaway wasn't the shark facts, it was watching the students support each other. "There was a student in the pairing who was really good at reading. He could remember his lines really quickly. He was able to act as a mentor to his peer that had a hard time," he said. "I think that's a big piece of compassion and understanding, tenets taught with Choose Love."



NORTHFIELD

A New Space for Our Day Students at Shaker Rd.

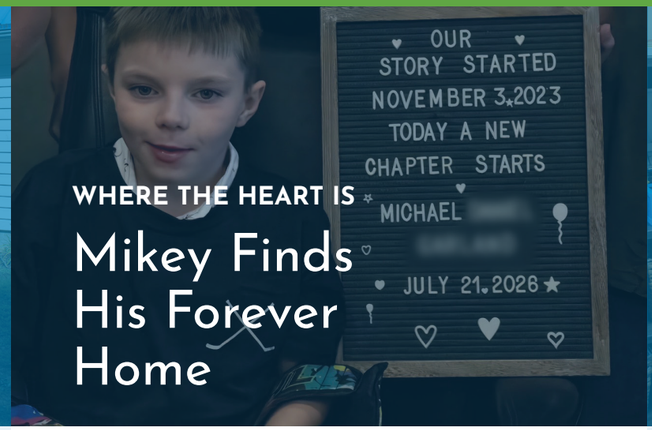
Spaulding is home to roughly 20 students who live in the cottages and attend public school during the day. Until recently, they spent holidays and school vacations wherever space was available on campus, often shuffled between cottages.

Last year, our Community-Based Program staff moved from Shaker Road to a new building in Northfield. The empty space gave Salena Durette, Daytime Program Manager, an idea: What if Day Program students had a place of their own?

She brought the idea straight to leadership. "I said it'd be nice to have a gathering place for us to learn, play and grow. Everyone else on campus has their own home base," Salena said. "They said, 'Oh my gosh, I love that idea.' Within two days, I got a response back saying, 'This is a go. Let's get started now.'"

Just a few months later, the Shaker Road space officially opened its doors on September 23. It includes a kitchen, sensory room, library, arts and crafts room, living room and a large outdoor area with a porch, giving Day Program students plenty of room to spread out and make it their own.





WHERE THE HEART IS

Mikey Finds His Forever Home

The first night Mikey came to live with Becky and Joel, he took off running down the hallway and wouldn't come back when called. Two and a half years later, he stood in a packed courtroom, surrounded by Spaulding staff, case managers, teachers and friends, and officially became part of the family for good.

You may remember Mikey from the story we shared last year, when he "found his voice" and transformed over 11 short months living with Becky and Joel as their foster child. What was meant to be a weekend placement grew into a longer stay as Becky recognized his growth and believed her family's support, alongside Spaulding's, could make a difference in his life.

The idea of adoption came when Mikey's guardian ad litem asked whether they'd considered it. "We decided at that point, if it came to that, we wanted Mikey to be a part of our family," Becky said. Becky and Joel asked if he wanted to share their last name and stay forever. He excitedly agreed and now loves anything that bears his new family's last name or initial.

When Becky first met Mikey, he wouldn't make eye contact, didn't respond to his name and couldn't recognize faces. Now he speaks in full sentences, cracks jokes and easily recognizes voices and faces. "It's night and day," Becky said. Becky credits Spaulding's team with being there through it all. "We won't let them go away," she said. Her advice to other foster families: Meet the kid where they are. "Give those kids a chance to grow," she said. "They've got so much love to give."



AUTPLAY THERAPY

Meeting the Diverse Needs of Our Students

As part of our ongoing efforts to support our neurodivergent students, we are excited to begin incorporating AutPlay-informed strategies into our school-based individual sessions and groups. AutPlay is a neurodiversity-affirming framework that recognizes play as an important way children and adolescents communicate, connect, explore emotions and develop skills.

The framework can be tailored to each student's needs and isn't confined to one age or diagnosis, making it especially valuable for nonverbal students or those with behavioral needs unsuited to traditional talk therapy. In sessions, students play in whatever way feels natural to them, building with toys, acting out a favorite story or simply exploring the room, while the therapist follows their lead rather than directing. Those techniques are then shared with paraprofessionals, teachers and parents so students can build the same trusting, communicative play patterns across school and home.

Cardella Sutcliffe, School Social Worker and Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker, will be the first AutPlay-certified staff member on Spaulding's campus. She recently traveled to Missouri for her in-person training and hopes to be certified by the end of October 2026.

Cardella said the approach builds confidence and autonomy, since students make real choices during sessions in ways they often don't get elsewhere. It also builds decision-making skills and imagination, teaches language for identifying and expressing feelings, and strengthens relationships.