

# Giving Nonverbal Students A Voice At CLL

Most educators agree that advances in technology have enhanced instruction and therapeutic intervention for students with disabilities.

Among the advances is the use of Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) with nonverbal students. At ESCNJ schools, AAC strategies range from identifying facial expressions and gestures, to pictures and writing, along with electronic speech generating devices such as the iPad with Proloquo2go, and Touch Chat programs. The ultimate goal is to help nonverbal students express their needs, interact with others, and participate more fully in classroom instruction and school activities.

Two years ago, at the Center for Lifelong Learning (CLL), where over half of the 200 students are non-verbal, an AAC Interaction Group was formed to strengthen the current program. During the first year, the AAC Interaction Group helped many AAC users interact more during a cooperative art project, in addition to participating in school activities like the CLL spelling bee. The exposure of seeing peers from other classes use AAC devices greatly enhanced the motivation of many to use their devices more frequently.

Another positive outcome will be featured in May, when nonverbal students will have several speaking roles in CLL's presentations of *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King*.

"The ESCNJ Board of Directors was clearly thrilled to learn of this achievement," said Superintendent Mark J. Finkelstein.

Mr. Finkelstein made his comment following the presentation of *Giving Voice to Voiceless Students*, a self-produced documentary by CLL Speech Language Specialist Terese Manalansan MA, CC-SLP. The documentary included a segment with nonverbal and verbal students rehearsing for the plays, and can be viewed by visiting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBMs1DCbYh4>.

Ms. Manalansan is encouraged with the progress, noting that nonverbal students have increased their communication and interaction with their verbal peers because of increased exposure to AAC by all students.

"The improved communication has had an impact on non-verbal and verbal students in terms of socializing and forming friendships," she said.

"Strengthening interaction between nonverbal and verbal students was one of the AAC Interaction Group goals this year, and it has definitely improved," said CLL Principal Mary Beth Conley.

Practice for both plays began early in the school year. The nonverbal students were cast based on their therapist's recommendations. Scripts were modified to meet the linguistic capabilities of the nonverbal students as recommended by their therapists.

The next step was prerecording the dialogue in the nonverbal student's communication systems, and rehearsing regularly so students became familiar with their roles, and learned more about collaborating with each other.



Center for Lifelong Learning non-verbal students have speaking roles in upcoming productions of *"The Little Mermaid"* and *"The Lion King."*



The plays, at CLL, are at 1:00 p.m. on May 19 (*The Little Mermaid*), and 1:00 p.m. on May 26 (*The Lion King*.) Preschool and elementary school students are performing in *The Little Mermaid*, and middle and high school students are in *The Lion King*.

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