



SHINE A LIGHT ON AUTISM

#AUTISM AWARENESS

The AZCSP Zip

Arizona Charter Schools Program

April 2021



Dr. Mark Francis writes...

April is National Autism Awareness Month.

Below is an interview with Diana Diaz, Founder and Director of [Arizona Autism](#). Diana has a personal family experience with autism that helped motivate her to create her school. Like many of us, she partnered with cutting-edge leaders and researchers in the field to deliver the best possible education and services for her students that were not available in other schools. [CLICK HERE](#) to discover the history of the school.

Like you, she has had many trials, tribulations, and outright roadblocks from organizations that should be helping, not hindering. From personal experience, I know that is often the story of a charter school founder when opening and sustaining a vision and mission. Fidelity to our mission is tested constantly from within and without.

To that end, AZCSP adapted the Harvard Instructional Rounds as a way that fellow school founders and leaders could network and observe problems of practice in their schools in a non-judgmental environment. AZ Autism has participated in Instructional Rounds (IR) multiple times. Even though their mission is highly focused on disabled students, Diana will be the first to tell you that she greatly benefited from the IR process.

US Department of Education (ED) Monitoring of AZCSP Update

Like you, we all have people and organizations to whom we report and are accountable. WestED contractors will visit AZCSP virtually, May 17-21, 2021. Their monitoring handbook is 33 pages; the number of indicator measures is equally long. (And you thought we were nosey!) The monitors say that the process is not an evaluation, a gotcha, or a witch hunt. Based on two previous ED monitoring experiences, I agree. It's an opportunity to review our practice in-depth and look at areas needing improvement. I hope you see working with AZCSP staff in the same light.

ESSER III

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III) provides the largest federal infusion of funds to Arizona schools – EVER! These funds are targeted to Title I schools like AZCSP subrecipients. Non-Title I charter schools will receive some portion of the funds. ADE provided an information session that was recorded. It is available here: [Here is the recording.](#)

Beware: Center for the Reinvention of Public Education reports that "sensational amounts" of new funds will surely attract scrutiny and with it could come negative narratives about the competency of charter schools. "Big spending can create big liabilities. [Charter] leaders in particular, who normally consider themselves experts in instruction, not procurement or finance, need to think hard about what they do and play out the long-term implications of short-term spending decisions.

"Like new lottery winners, leaders of districts and schools will have lots of new friends, as well as old ones who feel entitled. Carefully thought-through actions now can lead to real benefits for children and avoid regrets for educators."

Arizona Autism Charter School in the Spotlight.

As told to David Fox by Diana Diaz-Harrison.

AZCSP: What inspired you to open a charter school for students on the autism spectrum?

Diana: When my first child, Sammy, was born I had the same vision that most parents have for their children. I'd find the best school, he would excel, he would love school, and he'd follow the trajectory that comes from good schools.

That all changed when he was diagnosed with autism. I discovered that he needed something different than what a typical school could provide. It's hard being told that there's no cure for autism. Add to that the challenge of not knowing when Sammy was little where on the spectrum he was. The focus of my life shifted to finding the right resources, organizations, and clinical models.

I learned about the charter school movement and the ability to develop a school with its niche. I began to pitch the idea to other people. There were no takers. So, I had to be the one to make it happen.

AZCSP: How did you navigate the path after receiving the news that your son was on the autism spectrum?

There is a grieving process, and parents go through it differently, but I quickly got out of that mode and into solution mode. I connected with the [Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center \(SARRC\)](#) and found it was the place that had the best practices. I immersed myself in that.

AZCSP: The puzzle piece logo associated with autism organizations has caused some controversy over the years—why did you choose to include it as the basis for the AZACS logo?

The logo is more of a symbol of pride. There's a mystery to kids with autism, and it takes many people to come together to help these human beings shine, to extract their unique abilities, and to embrace their neurodiversity, to put the whole picture together. I tell the students that autism is their superpower. They're just kids, but they have these gifts that are there because they have a unique brain. The world needs people who think differently.

AZCSP: A great deal of effort and resources have been poured into assisting neurodiverse students fit into the world of everyone else, and little has been applied to assisting neurotypical people to better understand those who are perceived as being different. What changes would you like to see?

Many of the detractors for AZACS said that our students should not be placed together because they need to be with their neurotypical kids. And that might be the parents' choice, but if kids haven't had success with that model, then the choice to come to AZACS is available. We give our students lots of opportunities to socialize in the neurotypical world.

When we started, there were 12-year-old students here who had never been to a birthday party. That's lonely. Being among neurotypical students hadn't helped. Here, they interact with friends. They feel safer, happier, and less stressed in this smaller more protected environment. And they're learning.

AZCSP: What's the best thing a teacher in a mainstream classroom can do for a student in their class who is on the autism spectrum?

When working with neurodiverse kids, it's hard not to make assumptions. If a kid is not looking or appears not to be paying attention, it doesn't mean they're not. Don't underestimate these students. Make a social connection with them and find out what makes them tick. Then you can use that as a reinforcer to reach them with their academics.

AZCSP: It won't be long before AZACS has its first graduating seniors! What's it going to be like for you to stand at the podium and hand them their diplomas as they cross the stage? Will there be tears?

I'm very close to our first students. They have grown with us, and they will be the students in that graduating class. It's been amazing to see them evolve as people; to be contributors, to show us who they are, and be comfortable in who they are. I am humbled that I've gotten the opportunity to kind of shepherd this class through and that the community has supported me to build the school so that this can happen. Tears? Oh yeah. I am not much of a crier, but when it comes to my kids, I am.

AZCSP: How do you want to be remembered?

I want to be remembered as the person who showed the world what kids on the autism spectrum can do. I don't necessarily want to be remembered for me. I want to be remembered for all of the amazing people that the school will graduate. This one went on to open this business; this other student from AZACS became a science teacher or made a new discovery in the IT world. I'd like to be remembered as the person who created the space for that to happen. That's how I want to be remembered.



Diana Diaz-Harrison
Lead Founder & Executive Director

Looking Ahead

Save the Date

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT LEADERSHIP CONSULTATION
Guest: Lorah Neville*
APRIL 19 & MAY 3 | 3:30 - 4:30

Formative Assessment

04/01/2021 FA #6.
CASA Academy

04/07/2021 FA #6.
Maryvale Preparatory Academy

04/08/2021 FA #5.
Empower

04/13/2021 FA #6.
Kaleidoscope

04/13/2021 FA #6.
Heritage

04/14/2021 FA #6.
Providence High School

04/16/2021 FA #6.
A+

04/16/2021 FA #5.
Vista College Prep

04/21/2021 FA #6.
AMS Glendale & Peoria

04/23/2021 FA #6.
Somerset

[CLICK HERE to join the](#)

FA Café

Monday 3:30-4:30pm

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Mask Use in Schools Continues

Governor Ducey issued Executive Order 2021-06, rescinding county and municipal mask mandates and business restrictions established in prior Executive Orders.

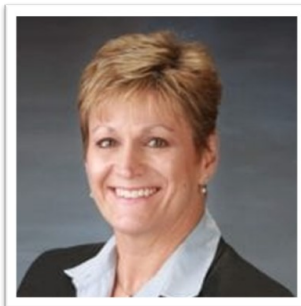
However, per the Arizona Department of Health Services, the AZDHS Emergency Measure requiring mask use in K-12 schools remains in effect.

Please continue to enforce the mask mandate in your charter school(s) as required by the Emergency Measure.

Masks must be worn on school campuses, on school buses, and during school-associated activities by all students, faculty, staff, contractors, and visitors.

*Who is Lorah Neville?

A Short Bio



AZCSP is excited to share its Office Hours – FA Café time ([April 19 & May 3](#)) with Lorah Neville, who serves as a professional developer with Learning Sciences International.

Lorah earned her MA in Educational Leadership and has experience as a K-12 Director of Curriculum and K-8 Superintendent at Union Elementary School District in Tolleson, AZ.

She has worked with both district and charter schools in planning and facilitating change efforts K-12.

Lorah has experience as an adjunct faculty member at Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University, working with international visiting principals and pre-service teaching students.

When asked about her recipe for school leader success, she replied, "Everyone wants to know the secret sauce. It's being in classrooms. Even as a superintendent, you need to be present."

Lorah will share best practices to implement and sustain systems of instructional improvement at scale.

In a conversation with AZCSP, she emphasized that attention to school culture is key when improving student achievement. Also, when it comes to working with teachers, she added, "Support always proceeds accountability."

While Lorah will anchor the discussion to implementing formative assessment teaching strategies in your school, there will be additional opportunities to ask questions about your specific instructional challenges.

[CLICK HERE for more excellent information about Autism and services and programs that assist families, educators, and community leaders.](#)