



▲ Students in Corsicana ISD's Penguin Project rehearse for a special production of "Annie, Jr."

CORSICANA ISD

Penguin Project empowers children with special needs through theater

by Autumn Rhea Carpenter

In 2019, Kim Day, a parent of a child with special needs and a life skills teacher in Corsicana ISD (CISD) received an introductory letter announcing the Penguin Project — a performance program that connects disabled children and teenagers (in grades four through 12) with non-disabled kids as mentors. The letter guided her to Facebook, where she learned about the theater program designed to change the lives of children with special needs. By December, her son Deven had auditioned for "Annie, Jr." and landed the roles of Bundles McCloskey, the dogcatcher and the sound effects artist. His confidence skyrocketed.

The Penguin Project is named for the unique characteristics of penguins, which are extremely playful and curious and work well together but could be considered "disabled" because they can't fly. Like students with special needs, penguins have adapted

to the challenges of their environment and have not allowed their unique circumstances to interfere with their lives.

Andy Morgan founded the Penguin Project in 2004 to combine his professional expertise with his passion for theater and give children with disabilities an opportunity to experience the performing arts. It's now a national program with 43 established chapters across the country that produce shows in community theaters.

The "Annie, Jr." cast consists of 60 students, including peer mentors, with a team of helpers including a director, production manager, mentor/artist director, assistant director, parent coordinator, music director, choreographers, technical director, costume director, health coordinator and marketing assistant.

Corsicana ISD

County: Navarro

ESC region: 12

Superintendent:
Dr. Diane Frost

2019 enrollment: 5,996

Number of schools: 9



▲ The goal of the Penguin Project is to connect special needs students with their peers and give them an opportunity to participate in theater arts.

The cast includes a variety of special needs students who present unique challenges including physical disabilities, hearing impairments, nonverbal disabilities, Down's syndrome and a variety of social and emotional behavioral concerns.

"The idea is to find a place for students to be included and to be successful. The main characters in the play were selected based on the audition process and their desire to participate," says Cran Dodds, head of the Corsicana High School (CHS) theater department.

Students rehearsed one day a week through February 2020 for one hour and 15 minutes with the last 10 minutes of each rehearsal dedicated to snacks and social time. All students learned choreography and music and the main characters learned where to stand on stage and practice their lines.

The Penguin Project has proven to be a confidence booster, according to Day.

"I have witnessed so much growth with my child and the others involved. When we began practice, many students were very shy or had trouble following along or standing up front on stage," she says. "As the practices continued, the students began coming out of their shells, projecting their voices more, and you could see the joy in their eyes when they performed. Deven has a significant speech impairment, and his speaking role has definitely helped him gain confidence in his speaking and reading skills. He also really loves the dance numbers and has done very well remembering the steps."

"These students have shown us their strengths, talents, personalities and determination, in spite of labels and stereotypes," Day adds. "They have worked so hard learning their parts and it shows on stage and in the classroom. The Penguin Project has been such a blessing to

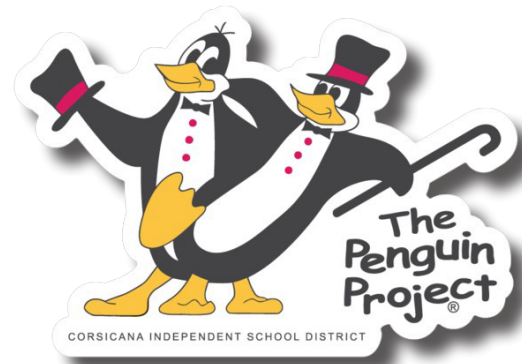
our schools and community, and I hope it continues for years to come."

The cast was about to begin practicing three to four times a week when COVID-19 hit and everything closed.

"After rehearsing twice a week for a couple of months, their true, wonderful personalities began to shine," says Jessica Pfohl, CISD Penguin Project choreographer and deaf education teacher. "The choreography gave them all moments to be the star, and when their moments arrived, they lit up the room. What was even better was seeing the rest of the cast congratulate their fellow cast members on nailing their 'star moments'."

Mentorship is an important component of the Penguin Project. The students interested in mentoring (non-special needs students) participated in a daylong boot camp led by the CISD special education department. Mentors learned the expectations for the Penguin Project and strategies for interacting with special needs students, including how to be a good mentor and friend.

"Mentors were paired with members of the cast based on gender, age and similar vocal tone," Dodds says. "The mentor's role is to assist their castmate with lines, props and music. The mentor stands two feet behind the special needs student





▲ Penguin Project participants in Corsicana work together to prepare their production of “Annie, Jr.”

and is dressed in black with an apron and accessories to match their character’s part. The person playing the role of Annie would wear a red dress. Her mentor could wear a red apron with accents that match the lead’s costume, but not distract from the lead herself. Mentors are trained to be ready in a moment’s notice to say the cast member’s lines or play the part.”

Many children with special needs have a limited social network, and the Penguin Project helps to enhance it.

“The mentors and actors definitely formed a friendship, and even in the new school year, I have seen some of our actors and mentors mingling in the hallways at CHS,” Pfohl says. “I remember one mentor couldn’t wait to take a shirt that had a unicorn on it to Penguin practice because the actor she was paired with loved unicorns. She knew it would make her happy, and that’s what I saw a lot among our mentors and actors, simply wanting to brighten each other’s day.”

Any school district interested in successfully implementing the Penguin Project should first seek support starting at the top of the educational organization.

“The CISD board of trustees and Dr. Diane Frost, superintendent of schools, dedicated the fiscal and human resources needed to have a successful start,” says Associate Superintendent Elmer Avallaneda. “Additionally, the Penguin Project district leader must create a team of individuals, from across the district, that can clearly articulate the vision as an effort to create buy-in and excitement. My hope for the Penguin Project is that it will promote respect for differences and interaction among students with and without disabilities.”

Additionally, members of the Penguin Project leadership team scheduled time with principals and department leaders, then visited

all nine CISD campuses to discuss the project plans and how teachers and staff could get involved. Convocation 2019 also featured an introductory Penguin Project video with the superintendent, while participants handed out stickers to draw interest.

Team leaders created an introductory letter announcing the project and sent it to families of special needs students. They used social media to solicit volunteers and mentors who were then guided to an online interest form. According to Dodds, these contacts helped in forming committees and scheduling information sessions for everyone who was interested.

The project has received immense support from across the district.

“We will be seeking sponsors for the show to build this program and continue offering this unique experience for all those involved,” Dodds says. “The culinary department at CHS has prepared the snacks for our practices and the construction technology classes have built some wooden penguins to help us promote the show. There are many ways to involve others in this experience.”

Due to COVID-19, the first production of The Penguin Project’s “Annie, Jr.” has been rescheduled to April 2021.

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