

Pace School Joins forces with University of Pittsburgh, CMU and West Liberty University to Improve Special Education Practices for Students with Disabilities

National statistics tell us that students with Autism or Emotional/Behavioral Disorders are being left behind academically and left out socially. According to a national survey, youth with Emotional Behavior Disorders are three times as likely to be arrested before leaving school. In 2014 only 63 percent of students with disabilities graduated from high school, a graduation rate roughly 20 percent lower than the national average. In 2016, when Pace began re-designing their high school program, the need for innovative program design became clear. Rather than replicate an instructional design that has resulted in terrible outcomes for students in special education, Pace realized the need to conduct research and develop a model that had the potential of better outcomes for their students.

With combined funding totaling \$354,000 from the Benedum, Henry L. Hillman, and Grable foundations, Pace is proud to announce collaboration with the Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pittsburgh, and West Liberty University in the research and design of a new holistic education model, PLAID (Positive Learning and Integrated Design). This innovative model will braid whole child development, social emotional competencies, positive behavioral support, wellness, technology supports for applied learning skills (STEAM), parent engagement and generalization of learning with the intent of proving that when blended together these strategies are more powerful and have greater impact on learning than when used in isolation. James Denova shares, *"We at the Benedum Foundation are very excited about this collaborative project which brings Carnegie Mellon University computer science expertise and West Liberty University's teacher preparation resources to Pace School. Through this partnership, Pace will serve as a laboratory for developing and testing technologies that adapt instruction to unique student learning needs, while at the same time, informing the way teachers need to be prepared for the students and classrooms of the future. Pace students will benefit from the expertise of these two forward-looking institutions, and the personalized learning tools and practices developed at Pace will benefit all students, not just those with special needs."*

Over the course of this school year the University of Pittsburgh, School of Education's Department of Psychology-in-Education will conduct program evaluation research on the pilot version of the PLAID model's impact and outcomes with teachers, students, and family-school-community engagement. Dr. Stephen J. Bagnato, Professor of Psychology & Pediatrics, will serve as the Principal Investigator on the grant, entitled *SPECS for PLAID*. Dr. Bagnato's SPECS research team has extensive experience over a 40-year career of conducting longitudinal research for children and youth at-risk and with disabilities. Dr. Bagnato was awarded the 2001 Chancellor's Distinguished Public Service Award and the 2014 Penn State University Alumni Fellows Award and Excellence in Education Award for his service and research in the fields of psychology and education. Under the direction of Leann DiAndreth-Elkins and Sarah Schimmel, West Liberty University will work with Pace on the creation of professional development related to instructional strategies that support inquiry and project based learning. Lou Karas of West Liberty University in collaboration with Carnegie Mellon CREATE Lab Directors Beatrice Dias and Dror Yaron will guide the integration of technology and makerspace concepts at Pace School. The result of this collaboration will be a regional CREATE incubator with a focus on students with Autism and behavioral needs to provide accessibility to STEAM activities for these students who are frequently excluded from such opportunities.

Pace School has been providing special education services to students for over 50 years. As an Approved Private School and Partial Hospital Program, the school located in Churchill serves children with disabilities Kindergarten through age 21. Over 140 students a year from 45 school districts in Allegheny and surrounding counties attend Pace when their home district is unable to meet their specific and often complex needs.