


herlife spotlight

NEW HORIZON ACADEMY

By Elizabeth Rosenberger
Photos by



Devoted to having each student recognize their strengths and take pride in developing their specific gifts.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN SAID,

“No man stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child.” If this is true, [New Horizon Academy](#), a private middle and high school in Boca Raton, stands head and shoulders above the education system in Florida. They are reaching out to children who have been ignored by the system and bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase, **“NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND.”**

*M*att Marcus,
President of
New Horizon

Academy says although their students come from eclectic backgrounds, they have a common thread. "They do better in a small school," Matt says. "They are all good kids, regular kids. They just do better in an environment where they get more attention. Some of our students just don't like school and get lost in overcrowded classrooms. Some have learning disabilities and processing disorders; some have ADD or ADHD and can't focus in a large classroom; we have a few with Asperger's; some are not a good social fit with larger schools. For example, we had a girl who was with us because she was awkward and had poor social skills and was not accepted elsewhere. She was accepted here, though, because we create the environment where all are welcome. I am fond of saying that we have 40 students and 40 stories. All of our kids are here because things were not working out for them in larger schools – that is what they have in common. They are very accepting of each other because they all have their stories."



How important is the size of the school? What are the large schools' obligations to the student? Matt says, "In mainstream education, larger schools simply cannot reach out to individual students. They have 50 minutes to teach 25 kids a subject, so they have to teach to the group and hope they reach the majority of students. They have to teach to the mainstream student; that's their job. Unfortunately in every class of 25 there are one or two who just don't fit. Larger schools treat those kids as a bother. We treat them as family." Matt continues, "Kids with different needs are treated as distractions by their public school teachers. I like to draw a diagram of a classroom. I put the teacher's desk and draw 25 circles in rows; the circles represent student desks. I put x's in a few circles to describe the kid with different needs. This one may have ADD and gets lost; this one may have dyslexia and cannot keep up with the reading.

Perhaps this one struggles socially for whatever reason. These (three) kids are outliers; they are distractions. The teacher's job is to reach the other 22 kids."

For Matt, the solution is simple. "I draw a smaller box and put the teacher's desk and nine circles. I say, 'This is a New Horizon classroom. We usually have five or six kids in this room; we cannot have any more than nine – they wouldn't fit. In this classroom there are no outliers – what brings them together here is that they were all outliers

somewhere else. Larger schools treat them as distractions because they have to. We treat them as students."

Surprisingly, Matt is not critical of the Florida school system. "I think the Florida education system is doing the best it can with what it has. A motivated student who does not face academic or social hurdles can get a good education in a public school. The problem is that the public schools cannot address the needs of the kids who are not as motivated or as capable as others. We address those needs."

What does the state do to help students who benefit from alternative education? "What a lot of people don't know is that the Florida education system makes money available to help kids like ours get a private school education," says Matt. The McKay Scholarship program makes money available to students who have IEPs or 504 plans. McKay is online at www.floridaschoolchoice.org. "The amounts vary from around \$5500 per year to over \$14,000 per year," Matt says. "The student has

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a right to that money; they can use it for private schools."

What should parents look for when considering an alternative school? Matt has a few recommendations. "First," he says, "make sure they are accredited by a well-recognized group. Being accredited means that an independent group says the school is doing a good job. Second, look at the staff. Are they dedicated to alternative education? Do they truly care about the kids? Are they good at what they do? Third, make sure it feels good when you visit. Listen to your gut. We always point out our accreditations and brag about our staff, but what really sells people on our school is that we care. It's obvious. We want their kids to succeed as much as they do." ■

New Horizon Academy is located at 2555 N.W. Boca Raton Boulevard. For more information, visit www.GoNHA.com or call the school at 561.750.8111.

