



GREEN

ATE



Garden  
Academy

2020-2021 School Year  
Impact Report





# LETTER FROM GARDEN ACADEMY'S LEADERSHIP

*Dear Friends,*

As we reflect on this past school year, the word *perseverance* quickly comes to mind. As COVID-19 changed the way much of the world operated, everyone in our Garden Academy community—from our students, to parents, to staff, to our partners at local businesses—persevered to make the most of this year. We are so grateful for the many ways our entire community showed up for our students; thank you.

Wonderful things continue to happen at Garden Academy. We returned to full-time, in-person instruction for all of our students in October 2020. We held our annual “Trunk-or-Treat” Halloween celebration which is a highly anticipated school event for our whole community. Our older students got back to work thanks to a number of our WBL partners who lent a helping hand and provided us with the supplies necessary to keep their vocational skills sharp. We resumed essential feeding, hygiene, and medical tolerance programs. We celebrated students’ wins every single day and also celebrated our first ever graduation ceremony.

With such a full year, we decided that it would be a great time to launch our inaugural impact report. We wanted to highlight the adaptability and resilience of our community, and we hope you enjoy reading our year in review and learning more about all the great things our school community has accomplished in a year that has been unlike any other.

*Warmly,*

Dr. Laura Grow  
Executive Director

Michael D’Aquanni  
Board President

Jeff Chesebro  
Board Treasurer

Pat Miller  
Board Secretary

Cynthia Flanagan  
Board Member

Kym Lesch  
Parent Board Member

Brett Yordy  
Parent Board Member



At Garden Academy, our mission remains the same, even as COVID-19 changed so much about the world around us—**improve the lives of individuals with autism through high-quality, behavior analytic education.** We work each day to equip our students with the skills necessary to lead more independent lives and to be included in the community.

When COVID-19 caused schools to shut down across New Jersey, our staff used innovative strategies to individualize virtual instruction for all of our students. On September 1, 2020, we once again opened our doors for in-person instruction.

**We are proud that Garden Academy was one of the very first schools in the state of New Jersey to welcome students to in-school instruction.**

Since then, we've been busy doing all of the things that make our program so unique: teaching our students to communicate their wants and needs, running feeding and medical tolerance programs, teaching essential self-help skills, and helping our students develop important vocational skills.

**All year long, we've been helping our students meet and exceed their goals**—helping students like Alex who learned to build furniture for younger classmates to use.

**33**  
Lives changed  
while enrolled at  
Garden Academy



**BUILDING  
BRIGHT FUTURES**





# CELEBRATIONS & SUCCESSES

**As in any year, our students worked hard and blew us away with their many successes!** As we reflect on this past year, we wanted to highlight our students' accomplishments during the 2020-21 school year.

- A student in Classroom A was able to move away from being on a puree-only diet and can now independently eat a number of foods across various food groups!
- A student in Classroom A2 mastered all of her letters and letter sounds this year!
- A student in Classroom B learned how to trace lines and shapes.
- A student in Classroom C learned how to sort silverware, apply deoderant, and wash his face!
- A student in Classroom D now works at Dunkin' 4 days a week!
- A student in Classroom E learned how to pick up litter outside.
- A student in Classroom A learned how to use an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device



to communicate the things he wants and needs!

- 2 students in Classroom A2 learned how to ask for the bathroom when they need it!
- A student in Classroom B can now engage in conversation with his teachers and peers.



- A student in Classroom C learned how to ask for help when she sees a simulated dangerous item.
- A student in Classroom D learned how to tolerate a mock needle for one minute as part of his medical tolerance program.



- A student in Classroom E volunteers in the community four days a week!



100

Nuts and bolts that a student in Classroom D can sort and count for one of his job sites, DeSesa Engineering.

50

Pizza boxes that a student in Classroom D can fold as part of work based learning.

17

New sight words that a student in Classroom A learned to read this year!

4

Days a week that a student in Classroom E is working at local businesses in the community.

45

Minutes that student in Classroom E can shred documents as part of work based learning.

Earlier this year, we shared about Tommy's triumphs in building independence and vocational skills. Since then, Tommy had another great accomplishment he achieved just weeks before he walked across the stage at his graduation.

Right after we published Tommy's story, staff at Garden Academy arranged for a mobile blood draw unit to come to the school for interested families whose students participated in medical tolerance programs. Tommy worked hard all year on tolerating mock blood draws at school with his classroom staff, and this was an opportunity to put his hard work to the test.

**When the time came for Tommy to get his blood drawn, he was able to get it done like a champ!** With his team by his side and his favorite music on, he barely flinched as the nurse took his blood. We are so incredibly proud of Tommy and can't wait to see what he does next. What a way to end his Garden Academy career!

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Students successfully getting their blood drawn, thanks to the help of medical tolerance programs at Garden Academy.



# STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: TOMMY





# PLANNING OUR RETURN TO SCHOOL

**Creating an all-virtual program for children with autism required a fair amount of two things: imagination and technology.** When we

received the news of COVID-19 closing schools, our team sprung into action to develop individualized plans for each of our students during the time schools would be closed. Over the course of our 6 months in virtual instruction, we further adapted to this new way of educating students by supplying all of our staff and families with dedicated Chromebooks and iPads. We provided several staff and families who did not have access to high-speed

internet with WiFi hotspots that allowed for video conferencing, as well as a portable camera to help staff conduct virtual sessions in locations that were more difficult to bring computers to, such as hygiene programs.

When we returned to school, our need for technology continued as we contemplated how to best socially distance in our snug building. We purchased 55 walkie talkies to allow for communication between classrooms while maintaining our pods. Our use of technology during COVID-19 has allowed us to keep our students and staff safe and healthy while in school, and that's absolutely priceless.

43

Chromebooks  
purchased for  
virtual instruction.

35

iPads purchased for  
virtual instruction.

55

Walkie-talkies  
purchased to better  
communicate in the  
building.



**We are proud that Garden Academy was among some of the first schools in New Jersey to return to in-person instruction in September 2020.** After welcoming our students back, our next priority was re-introducing essential programs that were on hold such as feeding, hygiene, and medical tolerance. These programs play a big role in our students living independent and healthy lives, so our team created a plan of action to get these programs back into place safely.

Equipped with electrostatic foggers, disinfectant wipes, and lots of personal protective equipment, our team created personalized plans to support each students' unique needs to bring these programs back into practice. Since then, we've seen success after success in these areas, **including a student who previously ate a puree-only diet now eating foods from every food group!**

**35**  
Cookie decorating kits donated (Thanks Mayor Paris!)

**60**  
Art and Music classes during the 2020-21 school year

Although COVID-19 brought its setbacks, we ensured that our students had fun throughout the year too. We held a masked, outdoor "Trunk or Treat" with our students and their immediate families to celebrate Halloween and safely gather with each other. On Saint Patrick's Day, we received a generous donation of fun cookie decorating kits from West Orange Mayor Robert Parisi to give all of our students a chance to show off their culinary skills and enjoy a sweet treat. And in April, we held a "Go the Distance for Autism" themed field day in which our students enjoyed floor scooter races, bubble blowing, and chalk art.

**Despite the challenges of the year, our students worked hard (and played hard, too!)**



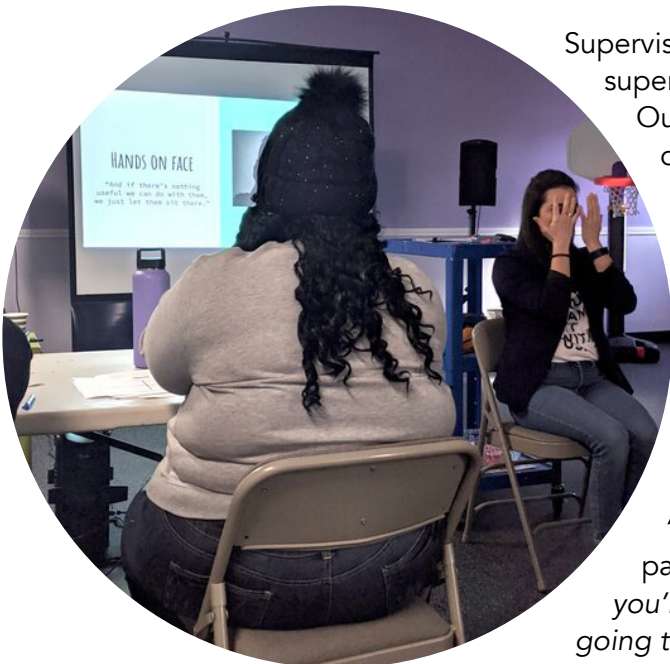
**OUR RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION**





# OUR SUPERVISION PROGRAM

**One aspect of our mission is to train qualified, skilled professional in the field of behavior analysis.** One way our Clinical Leadership team trains professionals is through Garden Academy's comprehensive supervision program for staff who are seeking their Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) certification. Our supervision process goes beyond training staff in the principles of behavior analysis to include training on decision making, problem solving, and managerial and interpersonal skills.



Supervision at Garden Academy consists of two parts: individual supervision from a BCBA supervisor and group supervision.

Our individual supervision consists of observations, the implementation of clinical tasks, and regular one-to-one meetings to discuss feedback. Group supervision allows our participants to conduct article reviews and case presentations, all furthering their behavior analytic skills.

**6**  
Bright professionals participating in our BCBA Supervision program.

*"It's challenging," says a former staff member who participated in supervision, "that's what makes it interesting... you're putting work in, and the work that you're putting in is only going to make you a better future BCBA."*



109.5

Continuing Education  
Units (CEUs) earned by  
our staff this year.

**The research published by our leadership team and staff members has a direct impact on the instruction we provide each day at Garden Academy.** In this past school year, three staff members—Dr. Laura Grow, Dr. Danielle Gureghian, and Samantha Breeman, BCBA—published research comparing various educational interventions to assess which one was the most effective for learners with autism. This essential research in turn informs the way our sessions at school are structured to allow our students to learn efficiently, with fewer errors, and with less challenging behavior to make school the most positive and effective learning environment possible. Their research was also shared to the broader autism and behavior analysis community through publication and conference presentations, helping people with autism locally, nationally, and internationally.

Another topic of research published by Garden Academy staff Taylor Custer, BCBA involved promoting conversational skills among adults with autism. This research helped to inform social skills programs with our older learners, allowing them to not only practice positive social skills with their teachers and peers, but in the community at their Work-Based Learning job sites.

To read more about the research published by Garden Academy staff members, [check out our list of recent staff publications on our website.](#)

**We also had the pleasure of celebrating a number of staff accomplishments during this school year.** These hardworking individuals have taken steps to become better practitioners in the field of autism education and we are so grateful for their dedication. Congratulations to Allison Neaman, who completed her coursework to receive her Supervision Certificate, Jenna Van Eps, who became a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, as well as Chris Perez and Ethan Scholl who both became Certified Teachers for Students with Disabilities.

3

New research studies  
accepted for publication  
by our staff this year.



**TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION  
OF BEHAVIOR ANALYSTS**





# TAKING A STEP INTO THE FUTURE

Garden Academy celebrated its first two graduating classes during a ceremony on Sunday, May 13, 2021. As our graduates walked across the stage, we were reminded of our purpose—to prepare our students' for their adult lives so that they may begin their next chapter with the greatest degree of independence possible. As we reflected on Matthew, Kyle, Alex, and Tommy's accomplishments through their years at Garden Academy, we could not be more proud of the young men they have become. **Congratulations to our graduates!**



**92%**  
of students aged 16 and up participating in Work Based Learning at school





Dr. Laura Grow  
Executive Director



Dr. Danielle Gureghian  
Clinical Director



Emily Mahon  
Principal

Staff Leadership



Michael D'Aquanni  
Board President



Jeff Chesebro  
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Pat Miller  
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Board Member



Kym Lesch  
Parent Board Member



Brett Yordy  
Parent Board Member

# LEADERSHIP

Garden Academy's leadership team is a dedicated group of professionals with diverse experience. The Staff Leadership team is responsible for implementing the strategic direction of the organization and overseeing the daily operations of the school. The Garden Academy Board of Directors is responsible for overseeing the strategic direction of the organization. Their guidance is absolutely invaluable and we are grateful for their insight. Thank you!





# OUR SPONSORS

We are incredibly grateful for the generosity of our sponsors! Our sponsors have a direct impact on our program and allow us to create a better, more enriching Garden Academy for our students. These businesses are true allies and advocates for the autism community and we are so glad to partner with them. **Thank you!**



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Sussan | Greenwald & Wesler



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ATTORNEY AT LAW



# Thank You!





22

Registrations for the Autism New Jersey Annual Conference for parents and staff

30

Family Care Packages

8

Work-Based Learning job sites

52

Participants in our 2021 Go the Distance event



1st

Graduation Ceremony

60%

of our donations coming from individual donors giving between \$1-\$100. All of our donors make a difference!



1st

Respite Night for families

4

Garden Academy graduates in our first ever ceremony



5

Conferences attended by Garden Academy staff members

105K

Raised by our generous donors

# OUR DONORS' IMPACT

Your generous donations helped enrich our program this past school year! In the 2020-21 school year, we provided care packages to our students and families during the height of COVID-19, held our annual "Trunk or Treat" event for Halloween, sent parents and staff members conferences to further their education about autism, and held Respite Night and a Graduation Ceremony for our first two graduating classes.





# SHOOT FOR THE STARS



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