‘A Sense of Belonging’: START Celebrates 15 Years

By Kaitlin Shawgo, Writer/Editor at the Center for Educational Networking

During START’s Spring Leadership Day in early May, representatives from each Regional Collaborative Network (RCN) unexpectedly swarmed to the podium before lunch.

This was not in the schedule.

As they lined up at the front of the banquet hall, the representatives announced that they wanted to thank START for 15 years of service—but in the form of The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon’s “Thank You Notes.” Those unfamiliar with the “Thank You Notes” segment quickly learned that Fallon’s gratitude is a little more amusing than sincere:

“Thank you for creating START, but when do we stop?”

After the laughter died down and the representatives gave their sincere thanks, START Autism Education and Intervention Specialist Kelly Dunlap shared her gratitude for the RCNs.

“I am completely honored to participate with all of you,” she said. “And we have fun along the way.”

START celebrated 15 years of service during its annual conference and bi-annual leadership day May 2–3 at the Kellogg Center in East Lansing. Nearly 500 people attended the conference, the largest group in START’s history, and about 250 people attended the leadership day.

In 2001, Amy Matthews said, “START began as a 14-month program aimed at helping educators learn how to effectively support Michigan students who have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). At that time, we didn’t know what it would become.”

Today, the project is an Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Grant Funded Initiative. Representatives from 17 RCNs across the state attend trainings to learn evidence-based practices they can take back to their districts. Thousands of students participate in 600 peer-to-peer programs around Michigan, learning responsibility and leadership skills in the process.

“When START was a little seed, we saw a lot of potential in this initiative,” said Teri Chapman, director of the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special
Education, as she welcomed attendees to the conference. “I’m very excited and happy to see that growth.”

Conference and leadership day attendees listened to a variety of speakers, including Stephen Shore and Anthony Ianni, who spoke about their own experiences on the spectrum; Dan Habib, who has delved into the world of inclusion with his son, Samuel; and Alyson Beytien, who shared her experience as a parent of three sons with ASD. Project Unify representatives Dan Ekone and Anne Rogers also talked about how unified sports—which include students with and without disabilities—can enhance schools’ peer-to-peer efforts.

Students spoke on panel presentations, including Drew Choma’s 16-person team from Haslett, and Williamston High School’s InvenTeam, which created a device that helps students with ASD access their lockers.

**Presenters Focus on Inclusion, Employment**

This year’s conference focused on student inclusion in school, the community, and the workplace.

Stephen Shore, a professor at Adelphi University, shared his personal journey with ASD, including being misdiagnosed when he was a child. He also talked about how he used “special interests” in a range of subjects to help him navigate the perplexing world of soft skills and social cues to land his first job.

Although he struggled with learning social norms, Shore said he eventually found a job by demonstrating his knowledge of bicycles to a bike repair shop owner as a young adult. This allowed him to show the shop owner what he knew in a way that made him feel comfortable.

“Rather than looking at the closed doors of disability, look at the open doors of ability,” said Shore.

Dan Habib, a documentary filmmaker for the University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability, spoke about his experiences with his son Samuel, who has cerebral palsy. When Samuel was first diagnosed, Habib and his wife worried about everything he wouldn’t be able to do. But because Samuel had a strong sense of self and a sunny outlook, they decided to create a positive vision for their son. The one thing they wanted was for Samuel to feel like he belonged.

Today, Samuel is a tenth-grader and a strong self-advocate. For years, he has met with friends and family members to talk about how he will accomplish certain activities or meet specific goals. He participates in unified sports with his peers, is on the yearbook team, and even leads his own individualized education program (IEP) team meetings.
He plans to attend college. Habib credits Samuel’s friends and other peers as a key to his success.

“Peer support and collaboration is becoming more and more important,” said Habib. “We give his paraprofessionals the license to understand they don’t need to be right next to him all the time.”

Alyson Beytien became an autism consultant after becoming a mother to three sons with ASD. She shared relatable stories about her experiences, including one about a doctor who told her that her oldest son would never speak and that she should put him in an institution.

Beytien outlined five ways to help students with ASD succeed: assuming competence, using visuals and a communication system, being aware of sensory needs, modeling and friendship, and having fun.

At the end of the conference day, Ellen Gehl, a Capitol Region Autism Network (CRAN) RCN representative and speech language pathologist at Ingham Intermediate School District (ISD), said she enjoyed the conference speakers.

“I laughed, I cried, I learned a lot,” she said, laughing. “I just enjoyed hearing the perspective of an adult on the spectrum, and then hearing from parents. It was a good mix.”

The next day, Former Michigan State University basketball player and motivational speaker Anthony Ianni gave a presentation. Ianni, who talks to students around the country about the dangers of bullying, said he was bullied as a child because he has ASD.

However, Ianni told the audience, teachers and Coach Tom Izzo taught him a few keys to success: motivation, hard work, and drawing support from family.

“Every single day, I woke up and had the mindset of, ‘Who’s going to doubt me today?’ I didn’t mind being doubted every day of my life,” he said. “The more people doubted me, the more motivated I became. Things were never handed to me.”

After lunch, Drew Choma and his team of supports took the stage to talk about how Choma’s school supports helped him transition into a flourishing member of his community.

“Everything we’re doing today is built on the tools and everything we learned from START,” said Mike Caine, a former special education director who is on Choma’s team. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here.”

Three parent mentors from Michigan Alliance for Families, also an IDEA Grant Funded Initiative, attended the leadership day. START and Michigan Alliance plan to work more closely to bring together educators and families across the state.

“We come from the parent side. We tell parents, for example, to make sure to ask educators for evidence-based practices for their child. START trains those educators on evidence-based practices,” said Tamyra Cornwall, a parent mentor for the Eastern
Upper Peninsula and Northeast Michigan. “Even more collaborative work would be fabulous.”

**START Staff Reflect on 15 Years**

During the celebration, ASD Education and Intervention Specialist Kelly Dunlap reflected on her time working with START. She and Maureen Ziegler, also an ASD Education and Intervention Specialist, have traveled across the state to conduct hundreds of trainings over the past 15 years.

Because Dunlap and Ziegler talk to a wide variety of educators, they can easily observe when different districts have similar problems. If one district finds a creative solution to a problem, Dunlap and Ziegler are able to take the solution to other districts facing the same issue.

“One of the things we’ve found in 15 years of training is that peoples’ challenges—among families, individuals with ASD, and school staff—are the same,” said Dunlap. “Sometimes, people may feel like they’re in isolation and no one could possibly be experiencing the same thing. And yet what we find is that their challenges are very similar.”

Ziegler talked about all of the students who, like Choma, have a great support system and are doing well in school or their community. Every so often, she has the chance to visit those students and see how they’re doing.

“It’s amazing that great stuff is happening day in and day out, and we only see one day of it,” she said.

One of Ziegler’s favorite START moments came early in the grant project’s history, when a student who was nonverbal sat on a panel with his peers during a START event. When the student received a question, he wrote down his answers and his friends read them out loud.

“His team showed him so much dignity and respect,” said Ziegler.

At the end of the conference day, Dunlap reflected on achievements she’s most proud of, including creating RCNs across the state, holding intensive trainings, and, most of all, helping educators connect and share ideas.

“There’s a sense of belonging,” she said. “People want to stay in the game, even though it can be challenging.”

**Quotes (RCN Representatives, Parent Mentors Share Thoughts)**

During the conference and leadership day, a handful of RCN representatives shared noteworthy achievements from the past 15 years and what they hope to see in the next 15 years.

- **Joanne Cwiklinski**  
  *Position:* ASD and physically or otherwise health impaired (POHI) consultant  
  *RCN:* Lakeside
Cwiklinski has noticed more willingness in the medical community to evaluate children for ASD. In the future, she knows a lot of her work will focus on helping students find employment or other opportunities after they leave school.

“These students are growing up,” she said. “We’ve started to explore more of what’s there for students when they leave school.”

- **Carrie Rabbitt**
  
  *Position:* ASD and behavioral consultant  
  *RCN:* Southwest Michigan Autism Resource Team (SMART)  
  *Years with START:* 14
  
  Thanks to START trainings, Rabbitt is seeing the use of evidence-based practices grow among general education teachers in her ISD.

  “START has given us a lot more direction,” she said. “It has a name and reputation that people trust, and people know the work is steeped in research and evidence-based practices.”

- **Ellen Gehl**
  
  *Position:* Speech language pathologist  
  *RCN:* Capitol Region Autism Network (CRAN)  
  *Years with START:* 15
  
  Gehl has proudly watched peer support programs grow in Ingham County—by next June, every district in the county will have a peer-to-peer program in place.

  “It’s been really exciting because it has made such a difference for our kids,” she said. “The kids on the spectrum are getting so much more time in general education and getting so much more out of it.”

- **Mindy Irwin, Kim Miller, Megan Lowe**
  
  *Position:* Speech language pathologist (Irwin), ASD teacher consultants (Miller and Lowe)
  
  *RCN:* Great Lakes Bay  
  *Years with START:* 12 (Lowe and Irwin), 2 (Miller)

  Miller said Stephen Shore’s message of looking at students’ strengths instead of deficits resonated with her. Irwin agreed.

  “That’s what I try to emphasize with families—it’s not that there’s something ‘wrong’ with your child,” said Irwin, who helps educate families as part of her job. “It’s that your child learns differently and thinks differently, and that’s okay.”
Lowe noted that conference topics also centered on socialization and independence skills.

“The need for understanding for those working with our students—it is not all about the academic output,” said Lowe. “It’s being successful in social situations as well. That’s really what I see as a continuing focus.”

- **Mary Peet**
  - *Position*: ASD program consultant
  - *RCN*: Livingston Educational Autism Network (LEAN)
  - *Years with START*: 10
  - Peer-to-peer programs have been Livingston’s biggest achievement, said Peet—the ISD now has a peer-to-peer program in every building. She added that START provides a common ground.
  - “We’ve learned to work collaboratively with our team—it’s not just one person supporting,” she said. “START has gotten everyone on the same page.”

- **Scott Bont**
  - *Position*: School social worker
  - *RCN*: Kent County Autism Network (Kent CAN)
  - *Years with START*: 10
  - Bont served as a START trainer for about six years, and is now also a LINK peer-to-peer teacher within Kent ISD. He is excited to see what the first LINK Summit will look like in summer 2017. Students from across Michigan will attend the summit and talk about how peer support programs have impacted them.
  - “It’s amazing to see what happens when you give kids a little information on how to support other kids,” said Bont. “They continue to surprise me.”

- **Carrie Carr**
  - *Position*: Autism consultant
  - *RCN*: Upper Peninsula Autism Network (UPAN)
  - *Years with START*: 6
  - Carr wants to continue facilitating good outcomes for postsecondary students. Her region has done an excellent job with students in kindergarten through grade 12, but now the focus will be on students’ transition period.
  - “I can’t even imagine where we’ll be 15 years from now,” she said. “I don’t think anyone anticipated what we’d end up doing for kids and families with ASD.”

- **Amy Chorley**
  - *Position*: ASD teacher consultant
Chorley provides awareness and acceptance in her role as a teacher consultant, and she helps families develop a vision for their child. In the future, she sees a growing need for more robust supports to help students with ASD integrate into their community.

- **Gail Trudell**
  
  *Position*: Special education supervisor  
  
  *RCN*: Southern Michigan Autism Collaborative (SMAC)  
  
  *Years with START*: 8  
  
  "I want to see more students in the general education setting" in the next fifteen years, she said. "I hope that happens before I retire."

- **Laura Flis**
  
  *Position*: Autism consultant  
  
  *RCN*: Wayne  
  
  *Years with START*: 12  
  
  In the coming years, Flis wants to see teachers who are more prepared to teach students who have ASD—she would like to see more teaching opportunities and internships while teachers are still in school.

  In the past 15 years, Flis has been proud that Wayne RESA has developed its coaching capacity for teaching evidence based practices to fellow educators.

  "Through mini intensive trainings, we were able to get a coach in every district, and in many buildings," she said.

- **Celeste Gentile**
  
  *Position*: Teacher consultant  
  
  *RCN*: Washtenaw Interagency Network for Autism (WIN4Autism)  
  
  *Years with START*: 10  
  
  Gentile is proud that her ISD has created formal and informal peer-to-peer opportunities, built capacity around educating students, and built partnerships with local businesses that are eager to hire students with disabilities.

  "I’m tremendously grateful to START staff for continuing to share their knowledge with us so we can filter it throughout the county," she said.