

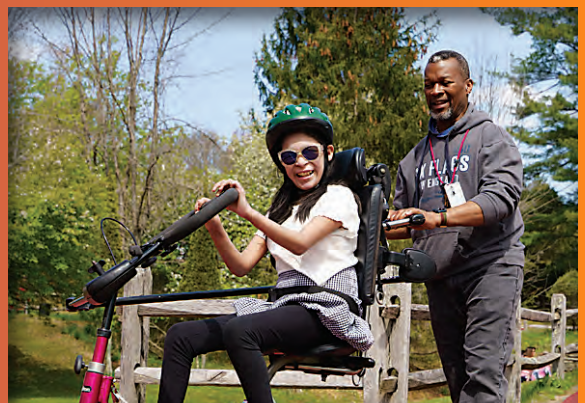
# SCHOOL

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# SCENE

A LOOK AT ACTIVITIES  
AT THE CENTER  
FOR DISCOVERY



# Rethinking Care: A Smarter, More Human Model for Health, Learning, and Life

BY KEITH RICO, LBA, BCBA, LMHC  
CHIEF OF TRAINING AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

What if the outcomes we're seeing in our schools, our healthcare system, and even our workplaces aren't the result of the people not being successful, but of systems that aren't fully aligned with how each of us actually function?

At The Center for Discovery, that question sits at the heart of the SynergE6 Healthspan Model — the foundation for how care, education, wellness, and support are designed across the organization.

The SynergE6 is built on a simple, but often overlooked, idea: human outcomes are not driven by any single variable. They are shaped by interacting biological, behavioral, and environmental systems that must be understood together. When we can align those systems, we don't just manage challenges, we unlock capacity.

**A young boy engaging in energy regulation activities before returning to the classroom ready for learning and instruction.**

At its core, SynergE6 is a healthspan model focused not only on longevity, but on improving quality of life throughout it. The SynergE6 Healthspan Model organizes care and support across six interconnected domains: Evaluation, Environment, Eating and Nutrition, Energy Regulation, Emotional Regulation, and Evidence-Based Education and Treatment.

Evaluation is where everything begins and

serves as the engine that drives the model. It is a continuous and responsive process that evolves alongside the individual. This is not a one-time, singular assessment, but an ongoing process that integrates biological, behavioral, and environmental insight to guide decision-making in a dynamic, real-time way.

From there, Environment becomes the first

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9C



## School Scene

*'A Look at Activities at The Center for Discovery'*

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# Creating Environments Where Students and Staff Thrive

CONIO F. LORETTO III, MS, LCAT, MT-BC, ASSISTANT CHIEF, DISCOVERY SCHOOL OF ART

Taking a walk around any one of The Center for Discovery's school campuses, you might encounter students being led through a yoga class in a garden. You may hear spirited music coming through an open classroom window. You might happen upon a dance class or students working collaboratively to paint a mural. In another space, students use their bodies, faces and voices to become different characters in an acting class. You will certainly see students engaging in exercise programs, be it a vigorous walk or completing a sequenced par course. Experiences like these provide dynamic learning opportunities, but also serve a greater purpose.

Data shows that today's students are experiencing a significant amount of stress, and for students like those who attend school at The Center, this reality is even more pronounced. The Center's SynergE6 Healthspan model is designed to intentionally help students manage and mitigate that stress. That yoga class helps students become grounded in the present moment. Music and art-making provide avenues for creative self-expression, where a variety of emotional experiences can be explored when words aren't always available. Exercise, fitness, and dance allow for the release of energy while building physical stamina and social connectedness. Dramatic arts experiences provide yet another creative outlet where students develop a sense of empathy for others. We know that these experiences impact the brain and body in ways that promote grounding, focus and emotional connectedness, all of which play an important role in reducing stress.

Students at The Center are encouraged to engage

with these opportunities with autonomy, which in and of itself reduces stress and impacts overall well-being. That is to say, students have choice and freedom in their school day, taking as active a role as possible in any given experience. Adaptive equipment and technology help to make this possible. Garden beds are raised up high so those with limited mobility can reach the soil. Uniquely crafted tools help students with everything from caring for animals to playing a musical instrument by drawing on their strengths and individuality. The Center's campuses are also designed to promote reduced stress, with outdoor paths for exerting energy found alongside quiet, reflective spaces where a student can reset and re-engage. Communication supports are embedded within all of these settings to ensure a student can engage with not just the environment, but also their classmates and peers.

While social-emotional learning is a natural outcome of these experiences, The Center also utilizes a variety of curricula and strategies that explicitly provide students with tools for identifying and managing their emotions. Students learn to respond appropriately to any situation and call upon taught coping strategies as needed. The Zones of Regulation curriculum plays a key role in this instruction, helping students name their emotions and guiding them toward successful outcomes. Students leverage tools to help them determine the "size of the problem" in order to match "the size of the reaction." Mindfulness techniques are also integrated throughout the school day, with students practicing strategies such as deep breathing and countdown techniques in potentially stressful situations. The complexity of our world today, alongside the complexity of the students in our care, makes this instruction key to successful learning that leads to an enriching, meaningful life.

As staff guide students throughout the school day and join them in these experiences, the staff themselves become secondary beneficiaries of these positive outcomes. The Center takes a proactive approach to employee wellness, recognizing the importance of supporting staff to avoid burnout and emotional exhaustion. In addition to The Center's benefits package and employee assistance programs, we offer a number of opportunities directly geared toward stress management. Employees have access to a gym for cardio and weight training. Meditation and yoga classes are offered, and staff gather to participate in recreational sports. Opportunities are also available for employees



**Above: A student using art as a powerful form of self-expression and creativity.**

**Below: A student taking time to connect with nature during a calming visit with the goats.**



to engage in campus gardens or organic farming. The Center's Sound Healing Program is experienced by both staff and students, where the rich acoustics of resonant instruments, such as gongs and crystal bowls create a meditative environment that promotes deep relaxation. We recognize the role of co-regulation between staff and students - essentially, emotionally regulated staff directly influence emotionally regulated students, contributing to a calm environment that supports optimal learning and growth.

At The Center for Discovery, supporting the well-being of students and staff is not separate work, but part of a shared and interconnected environment where everyone benefits. We know that when stress is addressed proactively through intentional design, meaningful experiences, good nutrition and strong supports, our school becomes a place where both students and staff can learn, connect and thrive.



**A student experiencing the powerful impact of music therapy to support emotional regulation and engagement**



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# Nature as Classroom

JENNA DENESEWICH, HORTICULTURE SPECIALIST

**A**t The Center for Discovery, learning often begins far beyond the walls of a traditional classroom. Across campus, gardens, trails, wildlife, and outdoor workspaces offer students opportunities to learn through movement, sensory experiences, exploration, and purpose-driven activities.

What may appear to be simple gardening tasks are, in reality, deeply layered learning experiences that support communication, emotional regulation, independence, problem-solving, and confidence.

Each season brings new opportunities for students to engage with the world around them. In the colder months, before spring arrives, students begin indoors by planting seeds that will later become vegetables, flowers, and native plants throughout campus. From tomatoes to sunflowers, students participate in every step of the process, eagerly filling pots with soil, planting seeds, watering seedlings, and observing growth over time.

For many students, these moments become powerful opportunities for engagement and discovery. A student who struggles to remain focused during traditional instructional activities may spend extended periods carefully watering seedlings. Another who has limited verbal communication may use icons, gestures, or communication devices to identify plants or request tools. Students who often experience anxiety or dysregulation frequently demonstrate calmness and sustained attention while outdoors, immersed in purposeful activity.

The environment itself becomes part of the teaching process. Adaptive tools and individualized supports ensure that every student can participate meaningfully. Raised garden beds allow students who use wheelchairs to independently access planting activities. Modified gardening tools, lap trays, kneeling pads, and adaptive grips help students with physical challenges fully engage in the work.

As spring transitions into summer, students move outdoors to the Healing Gardens where learning expands in remarkable ways. Students dig, plant,

weed, water, harvest, and care for living things each day. They watch seedlings mature into flowering plants and vegetables, gaining a concrete understanding of growth, responsibility, and cause and effect.

The rewards are immediate and meaningful. Students harvest strawberries they helped grow, create bouquets from flowers they tended, and feed lettuce from the garden to classroom pets. These experiences create pride, ownership, and a sense of contribution. Students see firsthand that their effort matters and that their care produces something meaningful for others.

Outdoor learning also strengthens students' connection to the broader environment. Observation and identification activities encourage curiosity about wildlife, insects, and native plants.

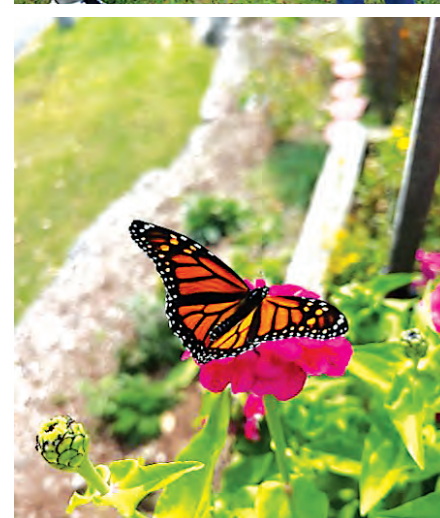
This year, students participated in growing native plants from seed through a stratification process, allowing them to experience the full cycle of plant development. As these plants mature, they will become part of the campus landscape, accompanied by identification markers that help students and visitors continue learning long after the planting is complete.

At its heart, nature-based learning at The Center for Discovery is about far more than gardening. It is about helping students build relationships with the world around them and discover their own capabilities within it.

Through nature, students are not simply observing life around them, they are becoming active participants in it.

## Counterclockwise from top left:

- **Sorting fall leaf colors activity**
- **A student weeding in the garden**
- **Monarch Caterpillar feeding on Common Milkweed**
- **Watering the plants to help them grow**
- **A student working on transplanting**
- **Identifying plants along a walk**
- **Monarch Butterfly on Zinnia flower**
- **Hanging flowers to dry, for dried bouquets**





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# Supporting Teachers, Inspiring Growth

NANCY HENDRICKSON, MS ED, CURRICULUM DIRECTOR, EDUCATION



**Kat works one-on-one with her student during a book study lesson. By applying strategies learned through the New Teacher Cohort and Instructional Coaching sessions, Kat has helped her students demonstrate extraordinary growth.**

**A**t The Center for Discovery, supporting students with highly complex medical, behavioral, and educational needs requires far more than traditional teaching methods. Teachers must be creative, collaborative, flexible, and continually growing in their understanding of how students with diverse learning profiles form meaning and memory.

While SynergE6 Healthspan Model serves as The Center's overarching interdisciplinary framework for supporting students, the Education Department recognized the need for a complementary structure focused specifically on teaching practices and educator development. This led to the creation of the I.N.S.P.I.R.E. Instructional Vision — an approach designed to strengthen collaboration, instructional skills, classroom design, and professional growth.

The Instructional Vision is built around seven key areas:

**Individualized Evidence-Based Instruction** supports teachers in applying current research, technology, and evidence-based strategies to highly individualized learning plans.

**Novel & Fun** encourages educators to make learning engaging, motivating, and meaningful through creative instruction, project-based learning, STEM activities, dramatic arts, and hands-on experiences.

**Structure & Routine** focuses on helping teachers develop classroom systems, schedules, and visual supports that create predictability and regulation



**New Teacher Vanessa celebrates the 100th day of school with one of her students. Through the New Teacher Cohort, Vanessa learned strategies for teaching academic concepts through engaging, motivating lessons.**

for students.

Partnerships emphasizes collaboration between teachers, direct support professionals, clinicians, leadership teams, and families to ensure consistency and strong communication.

Informal & Formal Assessment guides teachers in measuring meaningful progress using both formal data and everyday observations to shape instruction.

Regulations: Paperwork & Compliance helps educators navigate the extensive state and federal requirements connected to special education, including goal writing, progress monitoring, and compliance expectations.

Environment encourages teachers to thoughtfully design classroom spaces that support accessibility, communication, regulation, sensory needs, and independence.

The I.N.S.P.I.R.E. Instructional Vision is woven throughout teacher training and mentorship opportunities. After completing orientation, new teachers participate in a year-long New Teacher Cohort focused on instructional strategies, classroom organization, evidence-based practices, and the unique responsibilities involved in educating students with complex needs. Senior teachers and instructional coaches provide ongoing mentorship and support, helping educators build confidence and strengthen their classroom practices over time.

Rachel Collymore, a teacher with seven years of



**Senior Teacher Diana celebrates her student's accomplishments during the school's annual graduation parade. Seeing students' growth throughout the year is one of the most rewarding parts of teaching.**

experience who joined The Center last summer, shared:

"After seven years of teaching, the cohort provided a valuable space to refine my practice, exchange ideas, and stay inspired. It reinforced the importance of collaboration at every stage of an educator's career."

The Center for Discovery believes strongly in growing talent from within. Many current teachers began their careers as Teacher Associates, Education Support staff, or Teachers-in-Training before advancing into teaching and leadership positions. Tuition assistance is available for staff pursuing degrees while continuing to work within the agency which is an incredible benefit to our staff!

Chelsea Martin's career path reflects this commitment to professional growth. She started as a summer Teacher Associate while attending college and eventually advanced into multiple educational leadership roles, including an Instructional Coach. Reflecting on her experience, she shared:

"Without the encouragement and support of my past and current mentors, and leadership at the Center, I may never have recognized my own potential to grow, both professionally and personally."

By investing deeply in both whole-child understanding and educator growth, The Center for Discovery continues to create an environment where students and staff alike are empowered to learn, grow, and thrive.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2C

point of action. The spaces where we live, learn, and work either support success or undermine it. Research continues to show that environmental factors – like sensory input and access to natural spaces – can significantly influence well-being and functional outcomes. When environments are designed intentionally, people don't have to fight to function, they can focus on progress.

Eating and Nutrition follows as a foundational driver of both physical and cognitive performance. Nutrition is not treated as a separate consideration, but as fuel for the systems that support attention, regulation, health, and learning.

Energy Regulation, through sleep, movement, and daily rhythms, builds on that foundation. Research consistently demonstrates the relationship between physical activity, sleep quality, and daily functioning. This is not about doing more, but about structuring our days so that energy is predictable, sustainable, and available when it matters most.

Emotional Regulation then becomes more accessible and more teachable. The ability to recognize, process, and respond to emotions is deeply influenced by environment, physiology, and overall regulation. Rather than viewing dysregulation as something to suppress, the SynergE6 views it as meaningful information that helps guides supports and skill development over time.

Finally, Evidence-Based Education and Treatment ensures that care continues to evolve alongside re-

search and lived experience. Existing evidence-based practices are integrated with ongoing data collection, real-world implementation, and continuous refinement. Data matters at every step, but so does context. What makes this model powerful is how it translates into everyday life for students, families, staff, and partners. It creates learning environments where regulation, engagement, and skill development work together rather than compete with one another. It replaces fragmented evaluations and recommendations with a clear, cohesive roadmap for wellness that reflects the reality of daily life. It reframes wellness by addressing the unspoken drivers of burnout – energy, environments, and expectations – rather than just working to simply manage symptoms. It helps do all of this while creating a shared language that allows healthcare providers, educators, organizations, and people to coordinate around a unified, human-centered approach instead of working in silos.

The promise of the SynergE6 is not that it simplifies complexity – but that it respects it. In doing so, it allows us to recognize something we often miss: a way to build systems that actually work for the people inside of them.

When we stop asking people to adapt to non-functional systems and start designing systems that adapt, we don't just improve outcomes – we redefine what's possible.

To learn more about The SynergE6 Healthspan Model and to find out why What Happens Here Matters Everywhere, visit us at <https://www.thecenterfordiscovery.org>.



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For more information, contact the ATLAS team at The Center for Discovery to learn how we can support your district's needs. Send an email to Keith Rico, Chief of Training and Program Development, at [krico@tcf.org](mailto:krico@tcf.org).



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**Working together to complete pieces of a collaborative Creator's Club community project.**

# Building Possibility: Inside the Creator's Club

**JAMES PALADINO MS CCC-SLP,  
SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST**

If you heard the clanging of hammers on wood and the stir of communication in the halls of The Center for Discovery's Learning Center, you could be fooled into thinking that a construction crew was at work. Instead, a team of students, assistants, special education teachers, speech-language therapists, and occupational therapists are fabricating a string art installation to represent their home away from home. This interdisciplinary group, known as the Creator's Club, aims to motivate students with complex needs to tackle maker projects and to adapt any task to meet any student's needs or disability.

Speech-Language Pathologist James Paladino and Special Education Teacher Roger Quick co-founded the Creator's Club in 2025 to create a community center for staff and students where collaborative thinking produced a culture of creativity and learning opportunities for everyone on campus. They met with Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Music Therapists, Horticulturists, Engineers, talented Teacher's Assistants, and Videographers to develop projects and events that fold the curriculum into creative projects. The imagination and professional knowledge of the entire Center for Discovery, and even some outside of it, supports every single session.

At the heart of the Creator's Club is the belief that every student can participate in hands-on creative projects when given the right tools and support. Using adaptive technology, students with even the most complex conditions are able to safely and meaningfully engage in maker activities, including woodworking projects. One example includes the use of a wired power drill connected to an "Environmental Control Unit" (ECU) and a

proximity switch that responds when a student intentionally moves their head in front of it. When positioned correctly, the system allows the student to activate the power tool for a period of time. Meanwhile, an Occupational Therapist may assist another student in physically drilling into the wood to support fine motor development. Every project is deeply collaborative. The Teacher Assistant needs to ensure the switch is ready, the Occupational Therapist assists a student drilling the hole, while the Speech-Language Pathologist assists another student to say "ready, set, go!" utilizing an augmentative communication device to start the action. For every possible step of a project, we plan adaptations

for autism, visual impairments, physical challenges, wheelchair mobility, and hearing loss. This requires near-constant flexibility and preparation, and we best serve The Center's students by living up to our promise of providing them access to a world of creative possibility.

Our guiding principle is community betterment. Every project that the Creator's Club takes on must improve a classroom, a campus, a gathering space, or even just one single student's day by supporting engagement in their special interests. This takes many forms: creating props for the school musical, planning to construct outdoor garden furniture, composing a song, building an instrument, or even

making a short film. Each creative effort provides our students room for growth and our staff opportunities to share their hobbies and unique skills. The songs, objects, films, and other creations our students produce in the Creator's Club create a visual testament to the culture of integration we strive to maintain at The Center.

The Creator's Club's initial collaborators include teachers Raven Redner and Liemor Inga, alongside occupational therapist Karen Smyth. We have also drawn inspiration from outside organizations, such as Adaptive Design Hudson Valley, who work tirelessly to create free adaptations for disabled individuals.

Roger, co-founder of the Creator's Club, supporting a student as he cuts materials for his project.



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