

SPRING 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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Why Special Education Students at a Continuation
High School were able to Transition with
Confidence to a Clear Post-High School Path**



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The "Coach Approach" to Social-Emotional Growth: Why Special Education Students at a Continuation High School were able to Transition with Confidence to a Clear Post-High School

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Building a Safe and Supportive Environment

Franland - as my students fondly referred to our classroom - was more than just a physical space. It was a place where students felt seen, heard, supported, and celebrated. If that sounds a bit cliché, it's because we hear those words often. But what do they really mean in practice? What does it take to create an environment where students - especially those who have struggled in traditional settings - can thrive?

For students at our continuation high school, a traditional academic path hadn't worked. Many of my special education students had experienced repeated setbacks, leaving them disconnected from learning and hesitant to engage. It wasn't enough to simply offer academic support to my students; they needed something more - a foundation of trust, emotional security, and connection before they would feel comfortable engaging in the learning process. Only then could they let down their guard and begin the real work of self-discovery and personal growth - both personally and academically, while daring to imagine what a successful and fulfilling life could truly look like.

Trust is built over time through reliability, consistency, authenticity, and a commitment to affirming each person's dignity and worth. Students need to feel safe with both their peers and the adults entrusted with teaching them. This means knowing they won't be ridiculed or dismissed and that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences matter. Respect must be given, boundaries must be upheld, and emotions - both positive and challenging - must be validated.

To embark on that often intimidating journey of self-discovery, growth, and change, students had to feel genuinely safe - physically, emotionally, and psychologically. That meant establishing an environment of trust and respect, involving clear communication, modeling empathy, and fostering inclusivity. It required setting boundaries that respected each individual's needs and experiences while also encouraging vulnerability and openness without fear of judgment. I had an elderly classroom assistant who my students absolutely adored, though she had little tolerance for rough or foul language. Amazingly, my classroom was most often free from swearing thanks to my assistant, Lynne.



Earning everyone's trust, care and respect from her very first day, Lynne became a beloved figure to my teenage, at-risk continuation high school students. With her traditional, grandmotherly warmth and spirit, she was always ready for anything and was deeply committed to going the extra mile for the kids. When our special education director retired, Lynne brought in her quilting materials and taught the students how to quilt, creating a beautiful gift where each student made a square that expressed their heartfelt sentiments for our retiring director. Lynne's authenticity and grounding demeanor imparted a sense of safety and reliability, making every experience feel more secure and enjoyable for the students. Her unwavering support and genuine care left a lasting impact on the students, who treated her with complete respect and appreciation.

Although my personal background, experiences, and engagement in school were vastly different from the students I taught, I was curious about why they felt comfortable enough to consistently show up and engage day after day. I wanted to understand what made them feel so at ease, so I asked them directly. Their responses were simple yet powerful - they told me that no matter how they came in each day, I was always Fran, consistent and authentic. This consistency allowed them to feel safe and confident in our relationship, which fostered a sense of trust and openness. They felt encouraged and appreciated for what they could contribute to the greater school community. This sense of safety, inclusivity and confidence empowered them to create and engage beyond the classroom, helping to build an even more vibrant environment. Their creativity, whether as artists, musicians or creative thinkers, brought energy to the school through celebrations of various holidays. They became so empowered that they even initiated a student council where they took on leadership roles, further contributing to the positive culture of our school.



The Journey to Self-Discovery and Growth

It wasn't until I retired from teaching and earned a certification in Health and Wellness Coaching that I fully understood the process and the science behind what we had intuitively created in Franland. This approach enabled our students to make progress and thrive in ways they hadn't been able to in their previous educational settings. Within our classroom we were able to facilitate students' growth and change.

If we reference the [Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change](#), developed by Dr. James Prochaska, the preconditions and processes behind our students' engagement and growth become clear. We met each student where they were, without judgment. Growth and change were encouraged and supported one small step at a time, grounded in the foundational coaching principles of Appreciative Inquiry, Motivational Interviewing, Neuroscience, Mindfulness, and Positive Psychology.

Beginning with the [Appreciative Inquiry Framework](#), the core idea is that by focusing on the positive aspects of an individual, we can envision and work toward a better future. My students were simply trying to survive from day to day. They had no concept of having a dream for themselves. In Franland, we were able to create that dream and the hope that what they envisioned for themselves was actually attainable, based on their core strengths and capacities, our authenticity, and the appropriate resources and support.



[Motivational Interviewing](#), (MI) a collaborative, goal-oriented counseling approach which fosters individual's motivation to change by resolving ambivalence, played a critical role in guiding my students through their self-discovery process. Using MI's guiding principles of empathic communication, open-ended questions, and active and reflective listening, we guided students through self-doubt, rolled with the inevitable resistance and self-sabotaging behaviors (such as avoiding school) while encouraging them to discover their own intrinsic motivations. A simple axiom from geometry illustrates this point: if the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, why would you choose to avoid

school if your goal is to graduate on time? Rather than dictating a path for them, we guided them to find their own reasons for growth and change, which empowered them to take ownership of their learning and their future. Each student was able to discover their own unique path that would lead them to their version of success and fulfillment.

My student, Danny, comes to mind when I think of students taking a unique path. Although Danny struggled with traditional coursework and found it impossible to thrive in conventional educational settings, he had natural mechanical ability that set him apart. When it came time to graduate, Danny had an opportunity to pursue his passion. He had a fascination for guns, which as you might imagine, led to grave concerns from everyone, including our local sheriff. However, with their support and everyone's blessings, Danny entered and completed a program to become a gunsmith as a star student, and today he is gainfully employed as an armorer in the entertainment industry.

What the Research Says

Neuroscience tells us that when students feel emotionally safe, their brains are more receptive to learning. Stress and trauma can trigger the brain's fight-or-flight response, making it difficult to absorb new information. By fostering a calm and supportive environment, we helped students remain in a state of cognitive openness, where they could engage more fully in their education.

The process of mindfulness and self-awareness - the ability to recognize thoughts and emotions in the present moment, became the foundation for regulating their discomfort and making informed choices about behavior. Neuroscience shows that mindfulness strengthens the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for decision-making and emotional regulation. When my students learned to pause and observe their emotions without immediately reacting, they developed greater control over their responses and actions. More positive actions led to better outcomes!



As students gained insight into their emotions and learned to regulate them, they developed resilience - the ability to navigate setbacks and challenges without being overwhelmed by them. This resilience was key to their success, both in school and beyond. Resilience is not just about bouncing back from challenges but also about developing the ability to process emotions and seek support. In our program, students learned that resilience grows when they acknowledge their emotions and share their experiences in a supportive environment. Craig, one of our students, exemplified this when he was finally able to open up about his early painful family experiences. Initially hesitant and fearful of what emotions might surface, he witnessed his peers model vulnerability by sharing their own struggles, which helped him see the power of expressing emotions. By taking that step himself, Craig not only strengthened his own resilience but also deepened his connections with others, reinforcing that resilience is built through honesty, community, and emotional awareness.

Several years after graduation, Craig stopped by to visit, holding a dozen red roses in hand. He thanked my assistant and me for showing him that he could manage the life that was dealt to him as a young child - that he was worthy and capable. He had just successfully negotiated a raise in his position as a master welder and was beaming with pride from ear to ear. Seeing him stand tall in his accomplishments was a powerful reminder of how resilience, when nurtured, can change the trajectory of a life.



Positive Psychology was instrumental in this process. Instead of focusing solely on problems, we helped students identify and activate their strengths. Research in Positive Psychology demonstrates that when individuals focus on their strengths, they build confidence, experience greater motivation, and achieve higher levels of well-being. By recognizing their competencies and personal strengths, students build confidence and a clearer sense of direction for their future. Understanding their capabilities, values and passions gave them the foundation they needed to step into adulthood with purpose and self-assurance, in anticipation of a bright and fulfilling future.

The **PERMAH** model in the context of Positive Psychology - **P**ositive Emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, **A**chievement, and **H**ealth - was embedded into everything that happened in Franland. Students were encouraged to cultivate **Positive Emotions** through laughter, gratitude and simple fun experiences. **Engagement** was enhanced by providing opportunities for students to immerse themselves in activities that aligned with their strengths and passions, creating a sense of curiosity and flow. **Relationships** were strengthened through discussions and sharing experiences through collaborative activities, ensuring a supportive and connected community. **Meaning** was cultivated by helping students connect their learning to personal values and long-term aspirations. **Achievement** was celebrated in both small and large ways, reinforcing a growth mindset. Finally, **Health** - both mental and physical - was prioritized through mindfulness, self-care strategies, and discussions on overall well-being.

A Collective Effort for Student Success

This culture of safety and support extended beyond my classroom. It was strengthened by the commitment of administration and support staff, who played a crucial role in fostering a positive, supportive school environment. Our founding principal was keenly attuned to the needs of our unique student population, and found ways to support them. We offered programs and resources tailored to their specific challenges, including group counseling, peer support groups, and school-based individual counseling.

We tried to instill a sense of hope and optimism in our students, knowing that many felt they were missing out by attending our alternative school. By reframing “fewer options” as simply “different opportunities,” most were able to shift their perspective and embrace new possibilities. One powerful example comes to mind. Rather than missing out on traditional grad night and prom, our graduating seniors collaborated with faculty to create a deeply personal senior dinner and prom. This special event brought together staff, parents, and students to celebrate each graduate, making the experience truly meaningful.



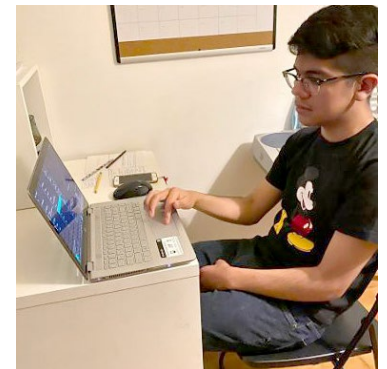
We focused on providing a compassionate, nonpunitive approach to behavior, while setting firm but caring boundaries that encouraged growth and accountability. Of course, there were naysayers - there always are. But at the end of the day, we all shared the same goal: to support our students and their families in achieving positive life outcomes.

Creating this kind of environment is always a work in progress. There's no perfect formula and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. But when students feel safe, valued, and empowered, they begin to believe in themselves. And when they believe in themselves, they can chart a future they never thought possible. Understanding the process and the science makes replicating a safe, supportive environment where students can thrive replicable!

Bringing the "Coach Approach" to Every Classroom

Every student deserves to be part of a learning environment that fosters self-discovery, emotional resilience, and personal growth. But I also know that not every teacher has the time, training, or resources to create curriculum and impart the tools and strategies for personal development and resilience to their students.

That's why I created **Autonome** (pronounced "*autonomy*" with an emphasis on "ME") - a digital, plug-and-play curriculum designed to bring the "Coach Approach" for personal development to any classroom, anywhere. Autonome provides a structured, easy-to-implement framework that requires no prior expertise or prep time from teachers. It's designed to guide both educators and students on a shared journey of emotional growth, personal development and well-being, allowing teachers to learn alongside their students as facilitators, rather than experts. By embedding professional development directly into the program, facilitators share the journey of learning, personal growth and wellbeing alongside their students.



The Autonome platform is structured in a way that makes implementation seamless and facilitation a breeze - whether a teacher has extensive experience with social emotional skills development and wellbeing or is completely new to the approach. The program offers multiple models for implementation, so schools and educators can integrate it in a way that best fits their needs - whether as part of an advisory period, integrated into special education programs, modularized for a college career or wellness center, embedded within academic subjects or after school programming.

At its core, Autonome empowers students to take an active role in their personal growth and wellbeing. Through thoughtfully sequenced thematic lessons, Autonome is designed to help students develop intrapersonal skills followed by interpersonal skills.

- ✓ Build self-awareness and mindfulness skills
- ✓ Recognize and regulate emotions
- ✓ Develop resilience and coping strategies
- ✓ Discover their strengths, values, and passions
- ✓ Foster meaningful relationships and effective communication skills
- ✓ Set goals and create a vision for their future

Autonome provides structured opportunities for student voice, empowering them to take an active role in discussions, sharing perspectives and experiences, positioning them as leaders in shaping a healthier school climate and ultimately, a healthier, more inclusive world. These learning experiences help bridge the gap between educators and students.



Beyond Social Emotional Growth

Research from the [Yale Child Study Center](#) shows that curriculum focused around the five areas of social emotional learning competency as outlined by [CASEL](#), promotes a myriad of positive outcomes in school and beyond. Autonomie’s curriculum is designed to support positive outcomes in academic achievement, career and life readiness. Research shows that when students feel safe, heard, and valued, they are more engaged in their learning, leading to improved academic performance.

The first iteration of the Autonomie program was specifically designed to support the transition of mild to moderate special needs students from high school to the next step in their journey, whether that be employment, vocational training, or further education. It was successfully implemented in a “Transition” class focused on equipping students with the essential durable skills that are essential for success in the workplace - such as communication, problem-solving, self-advocacy, critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration and overall workplace etiquette - that complement the technical skills required for their specific job roles. Autonomie, as the curriculum is now known, ensured that students not only developed confidence in their abilities but also cultivated the skillset and the mindset needed to navigate work environments successfully.



The updated digital version of Autonomie has evolved into a robust, comprehensive platform that can be universally implemented for any and every student population. It has expanded to include skills that support school success, college and workforce readiness, and overall health and well-being, preparing students for long-term success in both their careers and personal lives.

A Vision for the Future

I am thrilled to share that teachers and students in our partner schools are already reporting incredibly positive results and outcomes. Teachers appreciate the ease of facilitation and the embedded professional development, which allows them to implement the program on the spot without the need for onboarding or lesson preparation. Everything they need is right on the screen, ready to go!

Even more exciting, students are sharing powerful feedback during our visitations, telling us that they are managing frustrations more effectively by implementing the simple strategies they’ve learned. They report feeling more confident in communicating their feelings assertively and even express a desire for their parents to learn these same skills alongside them. It’s inspiring to see firsthand how Autonomie is already making a powerful impact on the lives of these young people.

My dream is simple: to give as many teens and young adults as possible the tools they need to thrive - academically, emotionally, and socially. Too many students graduate high school without a clear sense of who they are, where they are going, or how to navigate life’s inevitable challenges. Autonomie is my way of ensuring that every student, regardless of background or learning environment, has access to the same life-changing journey my students experienced in Franland.

When we create emotionally safe spaces in our schools, we open doors for students to become their best selves. And when we give teachers the tools to guide them on that journey, we transform education into something truly meaningful. I am truly excited to see this vision becoming a reality!

[*Click here to listen to what school partners are saying!*](#)



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Fran Kenton is the creator and founder of Autonome, a social-emotional learning/wellbeing platform for teens and young adults. A lifelong educator, Fran has served middle and high school students, both general and special education, as a teacher and a counselor. Fran is a Certified Health and Wellness Coach. Drawing from her extensive experience, Fran developed Autonome to support students’ social and emotional growth.   



Watch Fran’s Worthy Incubator on “SEL for Adolescents”! [YouTube Video 55:28]

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