

Advocating for special needs

Program teaches how to transition from grade school to adulthood

by Kayla Culver

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Lakeville resident and elementary school teacher Kim Baker is advocating for children and adults with disabilities.

Baker currently has three children with disabilities or disorders, including autism, bipolar disorder, nonverbal learning disability and ADHD, within the Lakeville Area School District.

She decided to participate in the Partners in Policymaking program, which offers a year-long class focused on giving parents, family members and those with disabilities the tools they need to become independent.

“As a parent of kids with special needs, I understand the process of the teacher but I need to make sure I know everything about the entire process,” Baker said.

The course is limited to 40 Minnesota residents per session. A panel of partners, graduates and representatives of the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities select the participants.

“The program is based on the belief that systems change is best brought about through the effort of those most affected by them, and we seek to arm these individuals with the tools needed to be successful in the public policy area,” Executive Director of the Governor’s Council Dr. Colleen Wieck said in a press release.

As a teacher in the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan School District, Baker added she wasn’t aware of what happens after her students turn 18 and wanted to fill the gaps with all the information she was missing.

Baker spent the year working on gaining that information by taking the course and said it changed her perspective completely.

See Baker. 22A

The course ran from September 2017 to May 2018. Participants met one weekend a month on Fridays from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Saturdays from 8 p.m. to 4 p.m.

“You’re giving up your entire weekend but the time commitment is minimal compared to what you get out of the course,” Baker said.

One aspect of the course that stood out to Baker was hearing from people who were trying to learn to advocate for themselves better discuss the experiences they went through. Finding housing, transportation and learning social skills were among the issues the self advocates faced.

Baker said she realized how important learning social skills is to her children and others with disabilities in order to become productive members of society.

“When you’re in an elementary environment, that’s not something you often think about because that’s so far down the road from us. Once you take the class your perspective changes because you realize everything you do impacts their social skills,” she said.

When you’re an adult,

Baker added, everything you do is an interaction, from your job interviews to the way you pay your bills. There are many things to do when they’re younger in order to help them succeed as an adult.

“Academics are important but so are these other things such as social and emotional learning as well as the social skills piece of that,” she said.

Baker is also a parent member of the Lakeville Special Education Advisory Committee, which is a group made up of teachers, parents and specialists who work with children with special needs within the district. The group uses its time and resources to discuss what’s going on within the district and opportunities to help students succeed.

The Special Education Advisory Committee is a resource for parents with special needs, Baker said. Those involved can help explain special education processes to new parents and provide ears to listen.

“Going through the class and listening to the self advocates changed everything. It wasn’t just about my children anymore or my students. It’s about how we need to impact change for the entire disability community,” Baker said.

Kayla Culver can be reached at kayla.culver@ecm-inc.com.

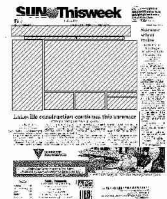




Photo submitted

Kim Baker with her family. Baker completed a year-long course focused on understanding those with disabilities and how to transition her children from grade school to adulthood.