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Just as important: A secondary education odyssey

BY HEATHER GRAVES STAFF WRITER

BROWN COUNTY - The transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school are milestones for students - new buildings, new kids, new classes, new routines.

For special education students and their families these transitions can require copious planning and are oftentimes filled with uncertainty.

A later start

Green Bay parent Katie Erickson said she has always been an advocate for her children - both of whom are autistic.

But, she said it hasn't been without struggle.

"I don't think it is ever easy," she said. "And not necessarily because the district is bad, that is not what I am saying. They just don't truly understand what it's like to be on the other side of that table."

Erickson said no parent



Kira Mevis, a freshman at Bay Port High School, has Rett syndrome, a rare genetic disorder affecting brain development in girls. Mevis' mom, Patty, helped create an All About Me book for her teachers to understand her daughter's strengths and struggles.

Anastasia Geigel Photo

can ever truly be prepared for the journey.

Her oldest son, an eight-

grader at Leonardo da Vinci School for Gifted Learners in Green Bay, re-

ceived an Individualized Education Plan when he was in kindergarten.

He has a 2-E label, or twice-exceptional, which means he is gifted and has



a disability, which she said comes with challenges.

"The challenge with my oldest son is he has a 117 IQ (and) his vocabulary is in the superior range," she said. "I think the only reason we actually didn't have to fight harder (to get him an IEP), was because he was chucking chairs. He is chucking chairs and pushing bookcases over. He was completely overstimulated in the environment."

Her younger son, who is in fifth grade at Kennedy Elementary in Green Bay, received a 504 Plan in 2020.

"I pushed the issue in January 2020," she said. "That is when I said, 'He needs to be evaluated. This is my formal request, start your timer right now. They

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County supervisors reject redistricting maps, ask for more

BY HEATHER GRAVES STAFF WRITER

BROWN COUNTY - It's back to the drawing board for Brown County's redistricting maps.

Following a public hearing Sept. 15, supervisors quickly rejected all six maps created by the Citizens Drafting Ad Hoc Committee - a subcommittee made up of citizens tasked

with creating new county district maps based on the 2020 Census.

Vice Chair Tom Sieber made a motion to approve the committee's recommended map, which called for an increase to 27 supervisors, to "support the work of the committee."

Sieber said the committee, which has met six times since December 2020, was created for citizens to cre-

ate the maps with "supervisors completely removed from the map-drawing process."

"This is the first time in the history of Brown County that citizens drew districts for citizens, and I think that is a monumental occasion," he said. "I understand there are some technical issues with the

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After rejecting all maps from the Citizens Drafting Ad Hoc Committee, District 17 Supervisor John Van Dyck, right, made a motion for the creation of two maps based on specific criteria. District 24 Supervisor Richard Schadowald is also pictured.

Heather Graves Photo



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said ‘Yep, we think he is a kid with a disability, but we don’t feel like he needs specialized education.’ So in March or April 2020, we got his 504, as a third grader, after having issues since 4K.”

As an information and assistance specialist at the Aging & Disability Resource Center of Brown County, Erickson is familiar with the special education system, which she said helped her move through the process with her sons.

“I think that if I didn’t do the job that I do, and have the people around me that I do, it would (have been) an even bigger nightmare,” she said.

Erickson said one of the struggles she and other parents like her face with students who have less visible disabilities is others misunderstanding disabilities as misbehavior.

“I think it is very challenging if you don’t feel like you can push back, especially with kids that fall into the category like mine,

where it can be looked at as behaviorally,” she said. “I think the behavior kids are more likely to see reprimand, instead of exploring, if they have a disability.”

Erickson is proactive and plans ahead as much as she can to ensure her sons get the help they need each school year.

“Every year, I have a full profile on my kids’ strengths, weaknesses, what they do well, what they need help with and I make copies and make sure every teacher touching my child has one,” she said.

But she acknowledges it isn’t something all parents are able to do.

“I think we as a community need to do a better job at educating,” Erickson said. “Like I said, I have just kind of fallen into the resources. And being my children have autism, I have an obsessive trait of now I need to find out everything that I need to do to make this child as successful as possible, but we don’t all have those abilities to do that.”



Christopher Schmitz, an eighth-grader at Parkview Middle School in Ashwaubenon, was adopted by his family at age 4. He is on the autism spectrum, and his family credits the school district with being receptive to his needs.

Anastasia Geigel Photo

As for district outreach, Erickson said while the effort is there, but there seems to be a disconnect between individual schools and the district.

“I think the individual schools do a good job meeting the kids where they are at and recognizing all their strengths,” she said. “The district could improve on providing more consistent messaging for staff and parents, and ensure that important communication is filtering down to all schools... There should be continuity and uniformity between them. I feel like at times the schools are very individualized, which I don’t think is always beneficial because the messages aren’t getting shared.”

Unexpected journey

Welcoming Christopher into their family through adoption at age 4, Ashwaubenon parents Al and Julie Schmitz embarked on a journey they never anticipated.

“I think the No. 1 obstacle that we had was it is very

isolating to be a parent of a special needs student,” Julie Schmitz said. “I had no idea the amount of programs available in Ashwaubenon and Green Bay for students with special needs. When you don’t need them, you don’t know about them.”

She said when they began fostering Christopher in late April 2012, he was already in the Birth to Three Program.

“He transferred from his home district to Ashwaubenon with an IEP and that has just continued on,” she said.

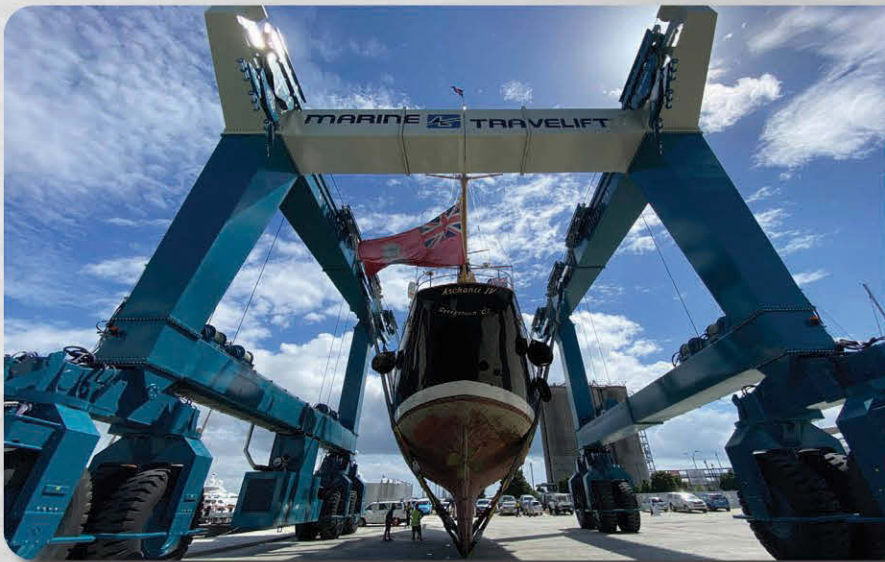
Schmitz said it was an easy transition for his family.

As a teacher herself, Schmitz said she is familiar with the vocabulary, but not all families have that knowledge.

“I understand how with some people this is a very scary bit of information they are getting,” she said. “We were at a very difficult point here in our parenting journey, too. I called Cormier

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