During the 2010-11 academic year, Ivymount School’s Multiple Learning Needs (MLN) Lower School program added a classroom to better meet the needs of more intellectually capable students on the autism spectrum. The classroom paired a more challenging academic curriculum aligned with the Maryland State Curriculum and designed for students performing at or near grade level, with an intensive social learning curriculum, executive function supports, and evidence-based instructional practices designed to support student learning. The implementation of so many new curriculum components at one time placed significant demands upon instructional staff, while raising expectations for student performance. The purpose of this document was to evaluate overall program success in terms of both student outcomes and staff perceptions of curriculum effectiveness.

Based on the six students’ test scores, as well as pre- and post-interviews with families and instructional staff regarding students’ progress in a variety of nonacademic domains, findings indicated that:

- each student progressed 0.5 grade levels using the Saxon Math curriculum;
- each student progressed approximately 0.33 grade levels using a Balanced Literacy framework;
- students demonstrated growth in behavior regulation, task behavior and completion, and compliance with adult directives and school rules as measured by the Student Functional Assessment (SFA); and
- all students demonstrated growth in social skills, emotional awareness/regulation, and problem solving; and most demonstrated growth in self-advocacy, behavior, flexibility, and organizational skills, as measured by pre- and post-interviews with families and instructional staff.

Based on interviews with key instructional staff and administrators, findings regarding curriculum effectiveness indicate that:

- Administrators and instructional staff are generally very satisfied with the various curricula currently in place, feel that they are a “good fit” for students in this classroom, and report that students are making significant progress in both academic and nonacademic domains.
- Students appear to be generalizing social cognition and executive function concepts and vocabulary to both home and school contexts, yet continue to face challenges in terms of applying these concepts when frustrated or upset.
Lack of time to adequately address all components of the curriculum remains an ongoing challenge.
Regular support from content/curriculum experts plays a critical role in the success of the classroom.

Program recommendations included the following:

- Develop a more structured framework for teaching the executive function curriculum, and ensure that all instructional staff members are familiar with and have bought into the underlying concepts.
- Provide more intensive comprehension instruction and/or adopt a supplementary reading comprehension curriculum.
- Continue to support adaptation of the social cognition curriculum for use by students in the classroom.
- Acquire a wider range of grade-level science and social studies materials/resources for use in the classroom.
- Increase communication with families about non-academic curriculum, so that parents can reinforce lessons at home.

Recommendations for staff training and support included provision of the following:

- student-specific support;
- regular observations followed by immediate follow-up discussion or on-the-spot training;
- additional support staff and/or support staff hours;
- training in specific areas such as executive function supports;
- formal trainings on curricula for the entire classroom team (including assistant teachers, related service providers and one-to-one aides);
- differentiation of trainings based on roles; and
- additional training for new staff starting after the first of the year.