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# Update

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## Philanthropy Bulletin

### COMMUNITY FOUNDATION RECEIVES GENEROUS ENDOWMENT FOR CROYDEN AVENUE SCHOOL

Like most kids, 10-year-old Mason Strakalaitis enjoys being able to order his own meal when his family eats out. The difference is that Mason, who has Down syndrome and is speech-impaired, uses a voice-generating computer to tell the server what he wants. The menus from his favorite restaurants are loaded onto the computer; Mason simply points to the items he wants, and the computer speaks his order for him.

Although Mason can talk, his speech is unintelligible to anyone outside his family and his teachers at Croyden Avenue School, which serves more than 200 cognitively and physically impaired students from the county's nine school districts. The alternative communication device that Mason has been using for the past two years allows him to express his desires, share his thoughts, connect with people in a deeper fashion and feel good about himself. "His overall language skills, his behavior and his demeanor have all improved dramatically," reports his mother, Nancy Strakalaitis, a research microbiologist with Pfizer.

Thanks to an anonymous donor, more special-needs students like Mason will have access to assistive technology and other types of adaptive equipment to help them communicate, learn and thrive. The generous



Students at Croyden Avenue School benefit from many forms of assistive technology, such as the special computer program being used by the child pictured here. The program "reads" a story to him and plays music when he clicks the pages.

donor recently gave \$1 million to the Kalamazoo Community Foundation to establish the Croyden Avenue School Student Support Fund, specifically designated to benefit the school for as long as it exists. This type of endowed fund, called a Designated Fund, becomes a permanent investment in the nonprofit organization designated by the donor. This means that not only

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Mason's classmates but countless future Croyden Avenue School students will benefit from the fund.

"Each of our students has unique needs and abilities," says Principal Angela Telfer. "This opens a whole world to us of making the most appropriate technology available to every student."

Croyden Avenue School serves students—ages 2 to 26—with cognitive impairments, multiple impairments and autism spectrum disorders. Some students are medically fragile and require nursing support. Many use walkers and wheelchairs. Most have communication difficulties and use speech-output devices similar to Mason's.

Dee Sinicki, Mason's teacher at Croyden Avenue School, explains that the mission is to optimize communication and independence so that the students can function effectively in the outside world, now and after they graduate. This includes intensive training on augmentative and alternative communication devices like Mason's, which is loaded with icons and words to represent just about anything he would like to say. Mason uses his fingers or a pointer to indicate what he wants to express. For instance, he can touch a picture of a playground to make his computer say, "I want to go outside." Students with limited mobility can use hands-free options such as head sticks or head tracking controls. There are devices that respond to a raised shoulder, a puff of air or the blink of an eye.

"Without such a device, a child might have something to say or the answer to a problem in class, but not be able

to express it," says Sinicki. And, as teachers and parents know, improving the ability to communicate improves behavior. "This assistive technology gives them control over their environment and the ability to make choices, which is just what every child and young adult wants," says Telfer.



A Croyden Avenue School student uses a speech output communication device like Mason Strakalaitis'.

Other types of adaptive equipment used at the school include a variety of walkers and wheelchairs, mats that make it easier for some students to sit up, hand-pedaled bicycles, beeping monitors on doors and stairs for visually impaired students, and lights on ringing telephones and doorbells for those who are hearing impaired.

"Now each classroom will have their own equipment and we won't have to share," says Sinicki,

whose "wish list" includes an ultraviolet sensory room, which can calm agitated children, and a "musical water bed," which helps with gross motor skills by playing music when the student makes it move.

With the endowment fund, Telfer hopes that students who leave the school at age 26 will now be able to take their specialized devices with them. "We hear too many sad stories of students struggling to get their adaptive equipment paid for after they leave here. All of a sudden they can't communicate," she says.

"Special education isn't easy, and it's expensive," says Strakalaitis. "Many people don't understand that. We are thrilled that someone cared enough to create this endowment. Croyden Avenue School and its talented staff deserve to have nice things happen to them." ■