



Talent Pool

Pathfinder program strengthens swimming skills

BY EDDIE PHILLIPPS

Who doesn't like a dip in the pool? Students at The Pathfinder School in Bethel Park are certainly no exception.

A fixture of the Bethel Park community for decades, Pathfinder is one of three schools for exceptional children operated by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU) and offers a variety of programs for children with special needs.

Thanks to the indoor swimming pool, Pathfinder's popular aquatics program offers a unique experience. Supervised by certified staff, students with limited mobility suddenly find themselves gliding through the water, seemingly unencumbered by gravity's pull.

Kody, an 11th-grader at Pathfinder, sums up his favorite part.

"All of it," he says, without needing to think it over.

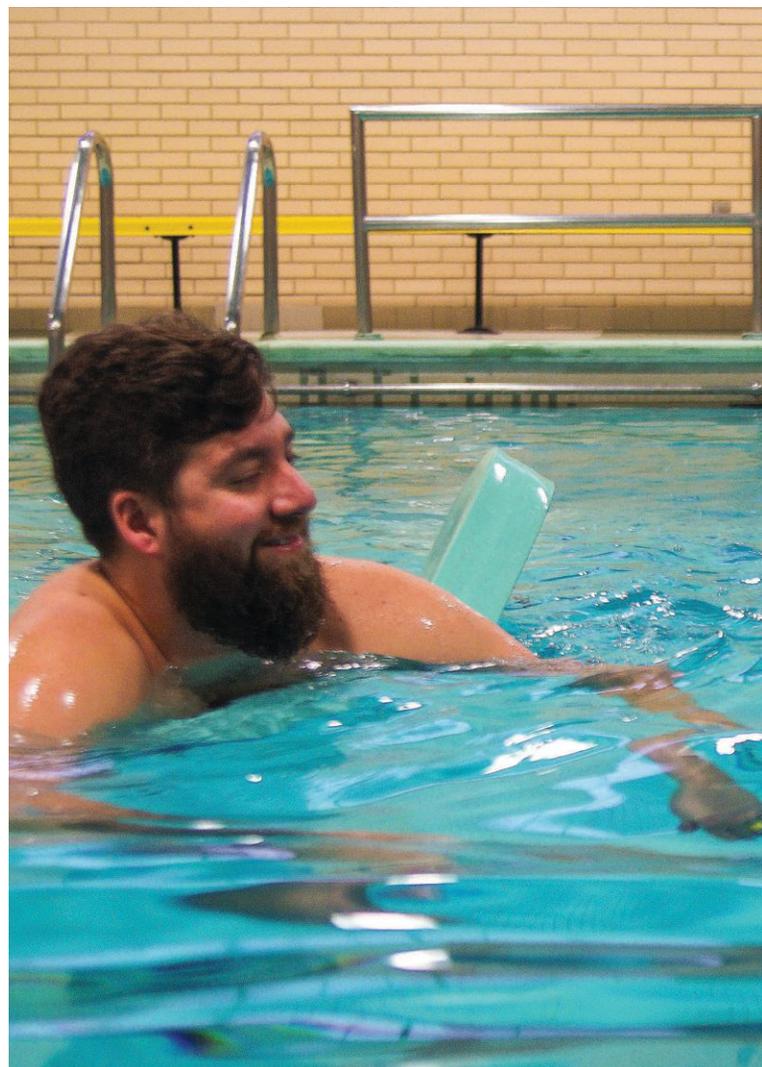
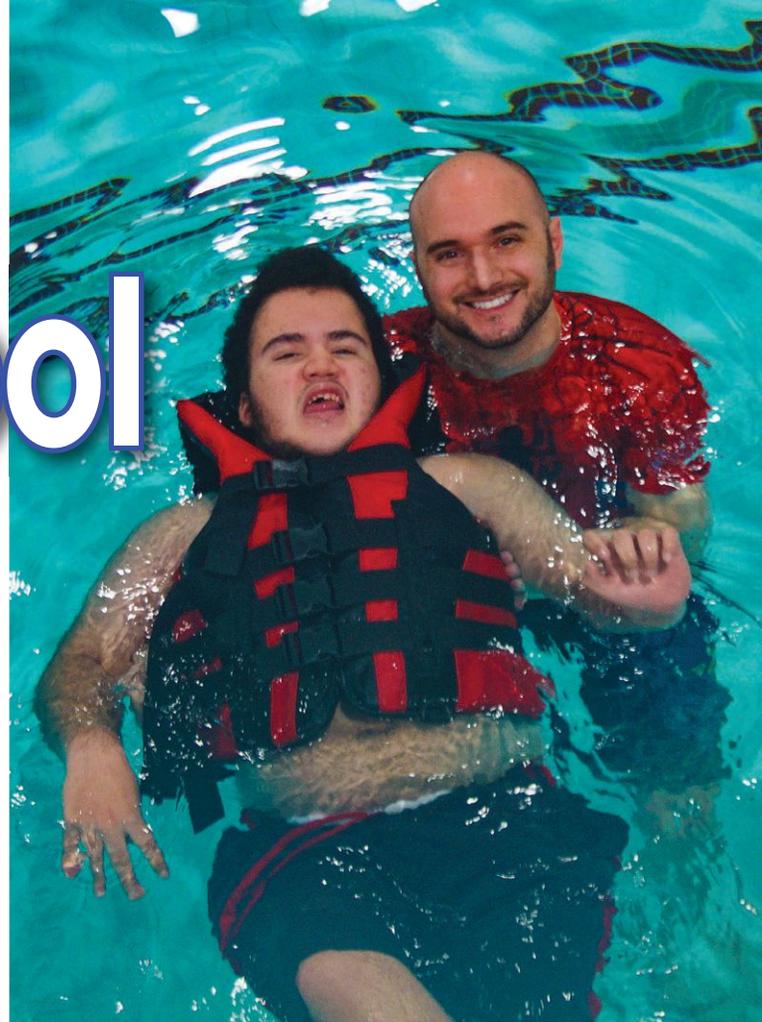
Students can get lost in the feeling of floating in the water, which is heated to a therapeutic 90 degrees to help loosen muscles and ensure that students are comfortable. Once the swimmers are submerged in the clear blue water, the natural buoyancy relieves stress and pressure on the joints and muscles. In a splash, a student can go from limited mobility to the new sensation of moving their body weight with their own strength.

Thanks to the expertly trained staff members, Pathfinder has jumped into this popular physical education offering.

A CLASS BY ITSELF

As unique as the program is compared to the rest of the school day, it is still a class; and like any class, there is a curriculum to follow and a standard to which students are held. Pathfinder utilizes the American Red Cross Learn to Swim Program, a standardized curriculum consisting of six levels. Instructors assess the skills of each student and once skills are mastered, the students advance to more challenging techniques.

Some students advance quickly. Others may need more time. No matter if a student can swim on their own or need the full support of a staff member, the benefits are there:





- Improved endurance
- Enhanced arm and leg strength
- Ease of motion to practice techniques

Results are achieved through various exercises.

Students can swim laps, flutter kick while hanging onto a board or walk while surrounded by a floating apparatus. Most of them use swimming to work on fitness, arm strength, leg strength and overall endurance. These exercise-based activities can include rubber physical therapy bands or walking in the shallow end. Lessons can be modified depending on the ability of each student.

For Pathfinder students, swim class is double the fun. That's because classes are two periods in length. Students swim for a full hour, with about 15 minutes designated for changing in and out of their swim attire. Physical support students swim on a one-on-one basis with both the teacher and aid. The class uses a rotational system to ensure each student gets between 30 to 40 minutes to swim.

A REWARDING EXPERIENCE

Pathfinder's aquatic classes are filled with rewards, especially those designed to motivate students and maintain a steady level of behavior. At the end of each class, when all swimming work is complete, the students can engage in a group activity like water polo, water badminton, a game of sharks and minnows or other fun activities.

"It's so rewarding to work with these students because of how excited they are to come to the pool," says Pathfinder aquatics class teacher Chris Garofalo. "The pool may be the most preferred place within the school, and when the kids are motivated and ready to learn, it makes things a lot easier."

THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE JOB

A unique program calls for staff with specific credentials. Garofalo has a bachelor's degree in health and physical education, and a master's degree in special education. He is a certified water safety instructor and lifeguard, and holds Red Cross certifications in CPR and first aid.

Adam Ryan is an aid in Garofalo's aquatic classroom and assists students with their swimming work. Ryan is a former competitive swimmer, a certified pool operator and also coaches youth swimmers for a local aquatic club. He has obtained certifications in CPR, first aid, athlete protection, safe sport and fundamentals of coaching.

The individualized aquatics program is just one of the many student services that makes The Pathfinder School unique.

"Nothing is better than seeing a student learn a swimming skill that they have been having difficulty with, and then complete that skill independently," Garofalo says. "You know you've made a difference."