Helping autistic students unlock the key
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Jack Allnutt, 12, sat at a kitchen counter in his Gaithersburg home Sunday, determinedly typing out a sentence on an iPad screen, using his right pointer finger to hit each letter.

“nice to meet you too,” he typed with his mother’s hand supporting his shoulder.

Jack has autism, which has left him with limited control of his body and unable to speak.

But with the iPad and an app called “Assistive Express,” the rising sixth-grader shows he has plenty to say.

Jack is one of five nonverbal autistic boys who participated in a pilot program this past school year in which they used tablets and nonelectronic letter boards to help them communicate in the classroom.

The Montgomery County Public Schools students — who have dubbed themselves “The Real Boys” — were able to participate in general education classes at Burning Tree and Carderock Springs elementary schools in Bethesda using the tools that allow them to type out what they want to say with physical support from another person. The technique, which has faced controversy, is called facilitated communication.

As the boys move up to middle school this month, they will continue to use the tablets and boards in the next part of the two-year pilot.

For Jack, typing to communicate — which he had done before the pilot — has dramatically changed his ability to express himself at home and at school.

“When i could not type i waas so alone iin my autism .typing allows actual thought for me to show i have a brain.” he typed on the iPad.

The Autism Communication and Technology Pilot, sparked by the boys’ parents, marks a joint effort between the county school system and the Montgomery County Innovation Program.

Dan Hoffman, the county’s chief innovation officer, said that before the program, the students were learning in a special education environment.

“It was never intended for them to get an academic diploma,” Hoffman said.

Gwendolyn Mason, director of special education services for the county school system, said the pilot sought to determine if the communication technique would enable the five students to demonstrate their knowledge, intelligence and abilities in a general education classroom environment.
Before they took it into their classes, the five boys had used tablets and letter boards at home and with each other. Their parents, who had seen their sons use typing to communicate successfully, approached school board member Rebecca Smidrowski and other school officials to see if the technique could be transferred to the classroom.

While the families say they have seen it help their children, research conducted in the 1990s on facilitated communication does not support the method, Mason said.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and the American Psychological Association are among the groups that don’t support it, she said.

“We really needed to see for ourselves whether or not this was something that in fact would benefit a select group of students who are nonverbal and have no other means for communicating,” she said.

One controversial point of the research, she said, was that it was unclear whether the facilitators supporting the person as they typed were influencing what was being said.

Mason said the goal is for the students to type independently.

Hoffman said that, to see if the method was effective, the pilot provided devices to the students and trained the teachers and aides who would work with them.

Experts in facilitated communication from Syracuse University consulted with those in the program as well, he said.

The pilot purposefully started out with a small group of students, he said.

“First we need to make sure it works before we invest what is a significant amount of resources,” Hoffman said. “It is a very resource-intensive approach.”

Smidrowski said she observed the students typing after being approached by some of their parents about their success with it at home.

“I was just amazed,” she said. “I was blown away by how much these kids seemed to know and what they could do.”

Among the student achievement gaps the school system faces, she said, a major gap exists between special education students and their peers.

“This is something that can potentially really help that,” she said.
Hoffman and Chrisandra Richardson, associate superintendent for special education and student services for the school system, gave a presentation on the program to the Montgomery County Council’s Education Committee on July 28.

Craig Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, County Council president and chairman of its Education Committee, said then that more data need to be collected but that if the program proves successful, he supports trying to add money to enable more students to join.

Amanda Dillon taught Jack in her fifth-grade class’s math, science and social studies lessons at Burning Tree Elementary last year.

Dillon said she would develop questions specifically for Jack that would help her gauge whether he had learned the main objectives of a lesson.

Jack also had the help of a facilitator who would help modify the instruction for him and would discuss his performance with her, she said.

Dillon — who also taught another pilot student in her math class — said the other students were eager to work with Jack and his program peer.

“The other kids loved communicating with them and talking with them,” she said.

The communication strategy requires a lot of effort from teachers, paraeducators, administrators and parents, Dillon said, but she thinks it could potentially be expanded to other students.

In the pilot’s second year, Mason said, she would like to discuss and study the possibility of expanding.

Hoffman said it’s not yet known how to identify students who might make good candidates to participate in the program should it expand. Currently under discussion, he said, is a possible after-school program that would help expose students and their families to the communication method to allow them to test it out.

Amy and Bob Allnutt, Jack’s parents, said Sunday that they tried “everything under the sun” to help Jack communicate, from using a binder full of pictures to modified sign language to speech therapy, before Jack’s “breakthrough” in 2012 that started him typing.

Amy said that, after thinking he might be impaired, they suddenly recognized Jack’s intelligence, though Jack continued in the same education program through the 2012-13 school year.

“It was very hard for him ... and us, because we knew, ‘Holy crap, this kid is really smart,’ and he was like ‘Finally, they know I’m really smart,’” she said.
“... as an individual dedicated to learning i really wanted to be taught just how my peers learned.” Jack typed.

Amy said she saw the communication method change Jack’s life, as well as those of the other boys in the pilot.

“Their whole lives were opened up finally,” she said.

Bob said his son’s success with the typing method stems from the hard work he, Amy and Jack have put into it.

“It’s just a tool,” he said of the iPad. “It’s not a magic wand.”

Jack said he thinks The Real Boys have proven their ability to learn through their typing.

“... autism as a fact is difficult but saying autistics may never be worthy of a real education is an abombinnation. autism deserves mighty chance,” he typed.

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