



## Francesca Aldrich, EdS, NCSP

*Cherry Hill Public Schools, Cherry Hill, NJ*

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### **Describe the site where you work and how you decided on this type of placement.**

I work as a school psychologist at an elementary school in the Cherry Hill School District. Within my district, I am part of the Child Study Team, where I work collaboratively with a Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant (LDTTC) and a social worker. Each of us are placed at a separate elementary school. Together, the three of us evaluate students and determine whether our students qualify for special education services. In addition to that, I serve as the special education case manager at my elementary school. I create IEPs and work closely with the teachers, parents, and related service providers. But most importantly, I aim to build a bridge between the parent, the student, and the teachers.

While working as an intern in the Florence Township School District, I was able to learn from school psychologists who worked at both the elementary and middle school levels. I learned a great deal from both of them and I am so thankful for their guidance and support during my internship. While in Florence, I found myself drawn to the students at the elementary level. There was something almost magical about that school, and in that moment, I knew that I needed to work in an elementary school setting.

### **What is your area of expertise? How have you developed skills in this area?**

At this point in my career, I find it difficult to call myself an expert in any area. These first 2 years have shown me that I have the ability to form strong connections with the students and the parents that I

support. In those connections, there is a level of trust that begins to develop. As a case manager, I have found that trust between a parent and myself is incredibly important. There is still much for me to learn as a school psychologist, but this skill is something that I hope to continue to develop as I continue in this career.

### **Tell us about the book club you started for Black History Month. What was it like to start a new program as an early career professional?**

My book club has been the most wonderful, and most inspiring, thing to have happened to me so far in my career. It all began with a small idea: I wanted to find a new way to celebrate Black History Month in the age of remote learning. As someone who enjoys reading and writing, I always have books on my mind. They have such a special way of teaching empathy and perspective. When reading a book, a person is placed into the mind of a character who thinks differently and lives differently than they do. This allows the person to learn and understand and eventually accept someone who is different.

The teachers at my school had all been working incredibly hard during hybrid learning, so I wanted to create something that was already packaged and ready for them to implement in their classrooms. When selecting my books, I wanted to highlight different aspects of the Black experience. Each book that I selected lent itself to a different theme: self-acceptance, equal rights, segregation through the lens of a child, and the origin of Black History Month. Before reading each book, I introduced the story by connecting it to something personal that happened in my life, and when I finished reading the story, I would introduce a thought-provoking activity.

The response that I received after I shared my first video was overwhelming. Teachers, parents, students, principals, supervisors, and the superintendent all reached out to me saying how much they loved this idea and how important it was for the students in my school to be exposed to these characters and these stories. As I released each video, the positive response continued to grow. By the end of the month, I had students asking me to continue my book club. In that moment, I made the decision to continue to share diverse stories with all the students at my school. I had intended to share four books with my students and by the end of the year, I shared twelve.

### **What specific aspects of NASP membership and involvement have benefited you in your career thus far? Why is membership in NASP important to you?**

I have found that the community aspect of NASP has been very empowering at this point in my career. Each month, I look through the *Communiqué* and I read articles of people who are just like me. They are faced with the same questions and obstacles; in reading how they overcome those hurdles, I learn how to do so when I am faced with a similar situation.

Moments when I felt stressed or overwhelmed by the pandemic, I was able to look through the resources that NASP provided on their website, and I was able to share those resources with parents and students. NASP has helped me continue to support my families in a time where support is paramount.