When hearing about the typical day of a shadow teacher, one cannot help but to be impressed! Accompanying a student throughout the school day to provide support and stability is just one of the many things a shadow teacher does. Whether they work in the Elementary school, Middle School or Academy, all shadow teachers serve a similar role: to help their students adapt to the school environment and to provide strategies that are necessary for growth. Shadow teachers often have been referred to as paraprofessionals, student aides, teacher aides and even student tutors. Here at ACS Athens, however, the term “Shadow Teacher” refers to a skilled educator who works alongside the teacher in the classroom to provide academic, social, behavioral and emotional support to students with learning differences. The ever-increasing number of shadow teachers over the past several years is a clear indication of the vital service that they provide to their students.

There are a large number of factors taken into consideration before a shadow teacher decides what services to provide or the degree of involvement that may be necessary in and out of the classroom. Shadowing a student requires that one understand how a child’s age, grade-level, background and social-emotional development interact with the student’s academic abilities and learning style to determine strategies for success. Often times, the teacher’s character and educational philosophy are a key component. Certain aspects of shadow teaching are uniform across the board: they remain discreetly in the background of the classroom and cooperate with the teachers; they are expected to exercise patience and understanding and anticipate when they are or are not needed. At times they are responsible for documenting the student’s progress. Other times they must work on strengthening areas that their students need improvement. Most importantly, providing students with the necessary tools to develop self-management skills and autonomy enables them to not only thrive in the ACS Athens community, but also, in the outside world.

The two key ingredients for successful shadow teaching are patience and cooperation. Collaboration and open communication channels between members of the child’s support system are key to achieve his/her target goals. Shadow teachers help the students to realize their abilities, uniqueness and potential, while assisting the classroom teacher to do the same. Ultimately, shadow teachers establish the foundation for students to have an equal opportunity to the excellent education that ACS Athens has to offer.

On a day to day basis, the often challenging task of keeping a student focused and engaged, makes it is easy to lose sight of the progress being made. This is why it is important for all shadow teachers to make time to meet with each other and offer support and reassurance. Before the start of the school year, shadow teachers met for an in-service day that was truly special, motivating us all for the upcoming school year in an indescribable way. The motivation and inspiration expressed by the shadow teachers that day, as we celebrated students’ growth, breakthroughs and accomplishments as a team can be found below:

* * *
Shadow Teacher words……

One day before school was officially open, the shadow teachers met to touch base before the school year began and they would be scattered throughout the three ACS Athens schools. As we all gathered in the Atrium at 9:00 a.m. on August 31st, we greeted each other with excitement, warmth, and enthusiasm after a summer apart. Also, among us were some new faces; new faces are always an affirmation that our role is truly beneficial to the ACS Athens community and a reminder that we make a difference in the classroom, but most importantly in the lives of the children we work with. Over the past three years, we have grown within ourselves as well as in numbers, expanding and evolving as a solid team.

The day consisted of various activities that illustrated and defined our role as shadow teachers and our bond as a group. Each activity was effective in “breaking the ice” and focusing our minds on our students and goals for the year. During the activity titled, “Knot a Problem”, teachers split into two groups. Each group stood in a circle and we held hands with two different people who could not be next to us. Then the challenge was to untangle ourselves! When asked occasionally if we wanted to stop, none of us did. In fact, we did not even pay much attention to those questions! We were busy collaborating, cooperating, and working together to achieve a common goal: to untangle ourselves and bring order into our circle. This activity is an accurate metaphor for how we work as a group: we persist and help each other, because ultimately we all have the same goal of helping our students adapt and function effectively in their school environment.

A second activity emphasized our individual role as shadow teachers for our specific students and how this role fits into the ACS Athens community. We were given a handout with a diagram of a cheeseburger, each layer spaced out. We were told that this cheeseburger was our student. Individually we labeled each layer of the cheeseburger according the student’s support system. Afterwards, we got into groups and shared our cheeseburgers. There were so many different cheeseburgers and so many approaches to arranging them. It is safe to say that no two cheeseburgers were the same, indicating the different needs of our students and the different approaches of each shadow teacher. Lastly, each group collaboratively drew its own cheeseburger and labeled each layer according to the consensus of the group and presented it to everyone. It was fascinating to see how each group approached the assignment as a whole, and to note the different components of the student’s support systems that were identified. There was no right or wrong diagram, simply because each approach brought in to focus the flexibility of using numerous methods to work effectively with students. Finally, this activity highlighted the importance of imagination and experimentation with a variety of methods.

At the end of the day, after sharing each other’s thoughts, concerns, and advice, Ms. Chris Perakis put our collective goals into perspective with a simple yet sharp and clear metaphor. She held up a Bic pen and asked how many of us liked this pen. There were a few hands raised. Then she held a second, better looking pen and repeated the question. Even more hands went up. Then she held a third pen, an ACS Athens pen and everybody’s hand went up. She held the Bic pen again and said, “This is OK, this is where the shadow teacher group was about three years ago”. Next, she switched pens and lifted the second pen, “This is good, this is where we were last year” and then, she lifted up the third pen and claimed, “This is great, and this is where I want us to be this year.” The clarity of this simple metaphor sat solidly in our minds. With that being the closing thought of the day, we all left knowing we will be “great” this year both for our students and our team.

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Since this inspirational in-service day, the shadow teachers have picked up the pace and can be found bustling around campus working their magic! Whenever we bump into each other and ask “How’s it going?” we always respond in reference to our students, “Good”, “O.K. a little challenging today; “Busy”; “Great”; “My student is always late!” and so on. Occasionally we have time to give advice and share experiences, while at other times all we can offer is a complementary smile before scurrying off to our respective classrooms.

In our students’ classrooms we remain in the background, communicating with our students through hand gestures, facial expressions, little notes and whispers. We remind them to stay focused and organized, confirm their understanding of the lesson, and always provide them with positive feedback, encouragement, and understanding. The shadow teacher’s presence is an ideal solution for creating equal opportunities for students with certain learning and behavior differences to thrive in their academic environment. We are there to guide them in the right direction and reaffirm their confidence, while clueing in the teachers of the support they need. All the while, we are only in the background, or in the shadows if you will, allowing the student to find his/her own identity, and determining independently what their civic duties to both the school and a society are. Every child has a great and unique potential within him/her. Some of these children have difficulty finding what it is that makes them so special. The shadow teacher, along with the entire ACS Athens family, is there to provide a safety net while they realize their capabilities and true potential, so that they may fully flourish in the world as empowered individuals.