

## Answering a Need with Speed

When schools closed, Jersey City speech pathologists launched a website in two weeks to bring services to thousands of kids



Thanks to the efforts of teachers Tiffany Smolansky (left) and Colleen Kenny, the Jersey City School District was one of three recipients of the NJSBA School Leader Awards.

When the governor ordered schools to close on March 13, two young speech language pathologists in the Jersey City school district — Tiffany Smolansky, 37, and Colleen Kenny, 32 — realized they were facing a crisis.

“When we closed down, we thought we’d be back in a week or two,” said Smolansky. “Everyone just sort of left the building. We didn’t have our materials, we didn’t have our test kits, we didn’t have the things that we normally need to provide services for our kids.”

How could they do their jobs if they couldn’t see their students’ faces? How could they help them form sounds and words? Smolansky and Kenny brainstormed and came up with what seemed the perfect solution: Build a website! Populate it with videos, links, lessons and information. The idea seemed easy, but isolated at home, they quickly realized that launching a website was not as easy as it seemed.

Their supervisor, Danielle Gitlin, explained what happened next.

“During this whole process, they literally were working 24/7, on their own time and at night, because they really

wanted to make sure that the parents had resources. Their biggest concern they said to me was, ‘We need to make sure our kids are okay.’”

Though they were later reimbursed, the teachers paid the initial costs of the website start-up out of their own pockets, Gitlin said. The website, [www.jcboespeech.com](http://www.jcboespeech.com), was launched for \$264 using the Wix.com website builder, just two weeks after schools were closed.

“I’ve been here for some 22 years now, and it is great to have these amazing staff members who come up with these ideas,” Gitlin said. “And we have an associate superintendent (Dr. Gerard Crisonino), who lets us run with it. I can bring a great idea to Dr. Crisonino, and as long as it’s for the children and the parents, he lets us run with it.”

For their efforts, the Jersey City School District was honored as one of three recipients of the NJSBA’s School Leader Awards. This year’s awards showcased creative and effective programs New Jersey schools used to meet the challenges

of remote learning created by the COVID-19 school closure. The 35 entries were judged on the level of innovation, and how well the programs met students’ needs in a remote learning environment.

As they worked to populate the fledgling website with videos, lessons and information, Smolansky and Kenny turned to the free resources and videos offered by many non-profit groups. One video, by the National Stuttering Association, informed students and parents that many famous people had overcome stuttering to be successful. James Earl Jones, for example, had a terrible stutter before he became Darth Vader.

It was the district’s speech and language consultant, Kathleen DeGregorio, who suggested that the districts’ speech language pathologists could make their own videos to bolster the content.

Along the way, Dr. Crisonino said, all involved learned that the website was helping them form a closer bond with the parents of the students receiving therapy.

“The problem has always been that what the therapist and what the teachers do during the school day sometimes doesn’t translate to what’s going on at home,” Dr. Crisonino said. “It’s not reinforced.”

“What this website has allowed,” he said, “is to actually bring the parent into the system,” to incorporate the parent into the learning strategies aimed at achieving progress for their child.

“That’s the beauty of it,” he said. Smolansky and Kenny said they intend to keep updating the website even after children return, in person, to school when the pandemic finally ends.

### Jersey City Speech Website

Approximate monthly visits to date: 643

Approximate daily visits to date: 21

Approximate number of special education students in Jersey City: 4,200

Approximate number of special education students receiving speech therapy: 1,600

Total number of speech-language pathologists in Jersey City: 40

SOURCE: JERSEY CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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