

PARAMUS

North Jersey school named one of the most innovative 'in the world' by Apple

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PARAMUS — Bleshman Regional Day School has been named an Apple Distinguished School, earmarking it as a center for the company's technology vision and as one of the most "innovative schools in the world."

The Bergen County Special Services School District is now one of 888 schools in 37 countries that have earned the distinguished honor.

"It's so awesome for us to be included when you think it's less than 1,000 schools across the world," Principal Gail Coe said. "I think it's just kudos to our students and staff for what they do."

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The title allows Bleshman to collaborate with other selected schools and attend training offered by Apple.

The school has 107 students with disabilities, ages 3 to 21, and uses technology in multiple platforms to help them reach their full potential, Coe said.

The district applied to be an Apple Distinguished School to form connections and to see how other schools are creatively using technology to enhance their programs.

"If this connection assists one student in improving their ability to access curriculum or to become more independent within their community, then the program has been a success," Coe said.

Two years ago, representatives from Apple visited the school to tour its new "smart apartment" learning space. The apartment replicates the entire home environment, from bedroom to living room and kitchen, with modifications to meet the needs of the students.

"It's to make the students be more independent with hopes that they practice in the apartment, and it translates to home," Coe said. "Apple came to see it. It's really amazing how technology can truly help this population."

The school also has a 1-to-1 iPad ratio for every student that offers touch technology and gives some students a voice.

The apartment becomes a "unique" learning space because lights can be turned on or dimmed by a touch-screen or voice activations with the iPads, which also have voice activation and a gaze tool that tracks eye movement and can help students communicate.

Classrooms also have touch smart boards, and the school has a STEAM lab, where basic coding or robotics is taught. Instructors teach students to use a 3D printer to make customized items for themselves, including utensils. The school also has a sensory room with smart plugs.

"We found that we can incorporate technology with our students, and it opens up so many different avenues for them," Coe said. "Our whole vision is to have our students reach their potential within their communities, whether it's at school, shopping or at home."

More: In NJ, people with disabilities face 'excruciatingly long' wait for group home funding

As part of the application process, Bleshman had to submit three short videos addressing three criteria: "Inspire, Imagine and Impact."

The school will have access to the Apple program until 2026, when it will again be eligible to reapply for the distinguished designation.

"Our future goal is to find out what technology we aren't aware of yet," Coe said. "We are already on top of cutting-edge things, but we are happy to be a part of the program and see what else is coming and how it can benefit our students."