

## Some new schooling taking place on allergic reactions

By Katie Wagner, Staff Writer

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MONTGOMERY — Angela Perone had a close call two and a half years ago.

Ms. Perone's son, who was 2 years old at the time, suffered from a life-threatening allergy attack that she couldn't get under control.

"He just progressively kept getting worse," Ms. Perone said. "It was a third EpiPen injection that saved his life."

She added, "I quit my job the next day that was part of a career I'd had for 15 years. At that point I just decided I needed to work on providing a safe environment for students with food allergies."

Ms. Perone joined the Allergy and Asthma Support Group of Central New Jersey, later forming a subcommittee of the group called the Food Allergy Committee for Education and Safety (FACES) with other mothers.

Ms. Perone and Helen Lee are carrying out the mission of FACES by educating Montgomery School District employees on the severity of allergies their students may have and on the symptoms of anaphylactic attacks, which are life-threatening allergic reactions. Ms. Lee's son, Noah, 5, is allergic to peanuts as well as walnuts, pistachios and other nuts that grow on trees.

The two women have already given talks to faculty and staff at Orchard Hill Elementary School and Village Elementary School, as well as school district bus drivers. They intend to make their next stop at the lower middle school and eventually speak to faculty and staff from the upper middle school and high school.

They are also helping the school district comply with state legislation enacted in March which seeks to increase protections for children with special sensitivities or allergies during school by increasing the number of school employees who can be trained to administer epinephrine in emergency situations.

Epinephrine is a drug commonly administered through an auto-injector called an EpiPen. It is used to treat anaphylactic shock and in some cases asthma attacks. When the drug is released into the blood stream it signals the heart to pump harder, causing the airways in the lungs to open.

Prior to March, each child with allergy or health conditions could only receive an epinephrine injection from one designated school district employee other than a school nurse. The new legislation allows all school district employees who undergo training in EpiPen administration from a school district nurse to administer the drug to any student suffering from an anaphylactic attack when a school district nurse is not present, as long as a parent of the student has provided written consent.

The legislation also asks schools to establish a policy for the emergency administration of epinephrine.

While Princeton Regional School District already had such emergency procedures in place before the legislation was passed, the law has prompted the West-Windsor Plainsboro School District to take its first look at creating a policy that would take into account all the different allergies and needs of its students.

Neither school district, however, has been as actively responding to the legislation as the Montgomery School District.



Helen Lee of Montgomery and her son, Noah, age 5.

Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

Ms. Perone and Ms. Lee's allergy talks have inspired several bus drivers and other Montgomery School District employees to volunteer to become trained in epinephrine administration, according to the district's supervisor of health and physical education, Mary Mulligan.

To further reduce health risks for students with allergies and asthma other members of FACES have been reviewing cleaning procedures with Montgomery School District janitors and cafeteria employees in order to reduce exposure to substances that cause reactions.

The district is also taking steps to improve transportation to and from school for at-risk students.

Recently, the district began providing transportation with a trained administrator of epinephrine to some children at the request of a parent. The district is also responding to those parents that don't want their children to be separated from their local bus route, Ms. Mulligan said.

"All of our bus drivers have received a list of the children on their buses and there are signs that include the symptoms of anaphylaxis on each bus," Ms. Mulligan said. "With a short period of time, we're going to have more drivers trained in EpiPen administration and approve the carrying of epinephrine in the front of backpacks for more children who are not allowed to self-administer epinephrine."

She added, "We're creating zones within each of our schools and it's our goal to make sure we have a stock of EpiPens in classrooms located in each zone as well as an EpiPen delegate (a school employee trained to administer epinephrine)."

Ms. Perone, who also serves as community outreach chair for the Allergy and Asthma Support Group of Central New Jersey, said what makes the Montgomery School District unique compared to other school districts in the area that she has worked with is its districtwide perspective.

"There are some individual schools like Princeton's Riverside Elementary School who have been making strides to improve policies and procedures to provide a safer environment with students with allergies for years," Ms. Perone said. "What happened with Montgomery was they needed to review their procedures and they needed to make changes to comply with the law."

The West Windsor-Plainsboro School District is waiting for the state Department of Education to release guidelines based on the legislation before making any significant changes in the way the schools deal with allergic reactions, according to Thomas Smith, the district's assistant superintendent for pupil services and planning.

"At this point we haven't made any districtwide changes," Mr. Smith said. "We're responding more on a school by school basis and it's specific to the individual students' needs. Our nurses are talking to the parents of students with allergies and our nurses are working with the teachers of specific students."

Mr. Smith added that a lack of a standardized format or universal certification program for EpiPen administration has prevented the district from asking its nurses to train more faculty to respond to anaphylactic attacks.

The school district is also waiting for advice from its attorney on how to handle the doctors' notes it has been receiving from various students in the district that request a student's allergic reaction be treated with Benadryl before epinephrine.

"Our nursing coordinator has been communicating with her state networks about this for a while," Mr. Smith said.

Superintendent of Princeton Regional School District Judy Wilson said the law gives the district latitude that allows it to expand the core of faculty and staff who can respond to students' needs.

She added that staff and faculty have responded to the need for EpiPen administrators.

"We have many, many staff members who know how to use EpiPens and we certainly think of it in terms of our nurses and coaches," Ms. Wilson said. "We always know that somebody is trained in all of our buildings and on our field trips."

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