

Special Travelers: Teaching to Learn vs. Teaching to Live

A new company based in the Washington, DC area is boldly taking aim at the way special education is provided to youngsters with disabilities.

Special Travelers, LLC, provides special education-related services in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, as well as travel support to families throughout the East Coast. The company's goal is to aid in helping kids with special needs bridge the gap between learning in the classroom and living in the real world.

The firm's founder, Meghan Mulvenna, began volunteering in the field of special education at the age of 16, in a recreational program through the Arc in New Jersey. Before moving into the classrooms to teach, she worked extensively as a respite provider in homes of children with special needs. It was through these real life scenarios that she came to fully understand the purpose of special education: to empower individuals with disabilities to become more independent participants of the world around them.

After nearly 20 years of working in educational systems as a teacher, consultant, coordinator and educational director, Mulvenna sees a critical need to return to what she refers to as "the quality of life supports" which she initially set out to provide to families. She examines the disconnect that she believes is prevalent throughout the traditional system of special education in the United States.

"We teach children the mechanics of communication, but do not offer them the rich contexts in which to communicate," she tells *Children & Youth Funding Report*. "We painstakingly demand they know how to behave, and then give them a seat on the sidelines to watch others perform. We impart enormous amounts of information to youth with special needs, though we rarely invite them into situations for them to access it or share it with others."

It is time, she suggests, for this approach to change. Financially supported adult services are reaching an all-time high in this country. With respect to autism alone, the cost of supporting this population is estimated to be \$126 billion per year, a figure that has more than tripled since 2006, according to Autism Speaks, the world's leading autism science and advocacy group. The Autism Society estimates that 60% of that amount is directed to adult services.

Is it possible this figure could be reduced by shifting focus on how we prepare children and adolescents for the real world? Mulvenna believes it can. "Traditional classrooms are important," she explains. "They provide students with the foundation of content and practice for paying attention. Still, we have a duty to provide them with the opportunities and support to apply what they have learned. By extending the concept of learning into the natural environment of an individual's home and community, we can enable them to become engaged, independent participants in society."

The role of Special Travelers is truly unique. This unusual service provider picks up where traditional special education leaves off. The company's services include accompanying children and youths with disabilities on family vacations, events and day trips; facilitating common community-based scenarios such as shopping at a grocery store or eating in restaurants; and creating effective home-based

systems for improving daily routines, leisure activities and basic responsibilities. Because Special Travelers is dedicated to the individual needs of people with special needs and their families, specific services are tailored accordingly.

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