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# A Place to Belong

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ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE PHILADELPHIA SUBURBS



# A Place to Belong



**T**he moment you step onto the 28-acre campus of Valley Forge Educational Services (VFES) in Malvern, you know you've found a special place. Nestled among lush landscaping and towering trees, the campus has a calming effect ideal for growth and learning. If you continue your journey and walk into one of the buildings on campus, you will meet members of the faculty and staff who extend this engaging environment, emulating warmth and passion for education and a desire to provide the best services available. And if you ask any of the students you meet just what it is they like best about VFES, the bright smile you get in return should be all the answer you need.

Although the organization has seen many changes since its start 50 years ago, the pristine campus has remained as inviting as ever and has continued to support the organization's mis-

sion to prepare children and young adults with special needs to realize their potential as contributing members of the community. "It provides a very different atmosphere than a traditional school," says Grace Fornicola, executive director of VFES. "It's exceptional—absolutely beautiful—and it contributes to the sense of

community we promote here. It has a very positive effect with the students."

VFES offers four programs to students ages 2 to 21 on the campus: The Luma Center for Development and Learning, The Vanguard School, The Vanguard Transition Center and Summer Matters. Location aside, VFES programs are



■ The pristine Valley Forge Educational Services campus has adapted in support of the organization's mission: to prepare children and young adults with special needs to realize their potential as contributing members of the community.



# Valley Forge Educational Services cares for its students' educational, therapeutic and social needs

By Amanda Hamm Hengel



unique in their own ways, offering the support and attention needed by students with special needs. "One overarching theme of the organization is support in social-skills development and developing healthy relationships with peers and adults," says Holly Zipperer, director of Summer Matters. "Our staff has a lot of experience, and is quite accomplished. Our student-to-staff ratio is also low, so students don't get lost in a bigger setting."

The Luma Center is the newest service on campus, providing consultation, evaluation, therapy and group programs to children and young adults who suffer from speech, language, motor or social-skills challenges. The center is so young (it opened in 2009), its director, Nancy Allard, has been able to stay connected with some of its first students. They include a boy who came in for a consultation while he was in pre-school and who over the past four years has benefited from a number of the center's services. "He had a mild learning disability affecting his social interactions," Allard says,

noting he is at the center roughly once a week. "He's outgrown our services now, and he's in a typical classroom in a public school."

Perhaps the most recognizable program at VFES is the Vanguard School, a nonprofit, state-licensed, academic day school for prekindergarten through high school students. The Vanguard School was the original VFES program and, with small class sizes and an emphasis on helping every student succeed, it's no wonder the program has been around as long as it has. "One of the unique services we provide is on-site therapy, including speech, language, occupational and physical therapy," says Tim Krushinski, director of The Vanguard School. "From a therapy point of view, the students have a lot of exposure and they can have therapy almost on a daily basis, whereas in a public school it might be only once or twice a week."

Although The Vanguard School separates itself from public schools in some ways, in many ways it is also similar, so students do not miss out on the "usual" school activities. "We have a homecoming, we have a Halloween parade, [and] we do all the things you would see in a regular—or typical—school," Krushinski adds.

The Vanguard Transition Center is an extension of The Vanguard School, offering students ages 18 to 21 opportunity for post-secondary education, career development and social and life skills development. "We do everything we pos-

enrolled in other schools during the school year. Summer Matters, whose reach extends to six other states, offers another place where students can be successful. "We offer academic programs while also offering programs to enjoy summer life, such as supported recreational and camp opportunities," says Zipperer. "It's really an extended-year program with a variety of formats."

To expand upon its already successful programs, VFES added an integrated, full-day service at The Vanguard School this fall for children with childhood apraxia of speech. Individuals with this disorder have difficulty connecting speech messages from the brain to movements of the mouth, which results in limited and difficult speech ability. Through the new offering, students will not only read and write as they would during a typical school day, but they will also receive speech and language services specifically coordinated to meet their needs. "In trying to meet the needs of families locally and regionally, we conducted a survey and ascertained that there is a great need for these services," explains Fornicola. "There are very few programs that are specially designed for this diagnosis, so it's unique to most of the country."

Parents of children with special needs know how difficult it can be navigating the different academic programs their children may be involved in, along with deciding whether or not

a public school or a school such as Vanguard is the best option for their child. It is a very individual process, and the VFES staff is willing to help parents and students find their way. "There's much less progress when a child has to jump around," says Allard. "For example, I know a child who had navigated public schools, but he had no friends. He was a wallflower, if you will, and he had figured out how to get by. He was here

about a month, and his mom said, 'Not only is he happy, but I don't have to worry about him every single day.'"

There's a lot to be said for feeling like you belong and finding your place. ■



■ Valley Forge Educational Services' programs provide the support and attention needed by students with special needs. Four VFES programs are offered to students ages 2 to 21: The Luma Center for Development and Learning, The Vanguard School, The Vanguard Transition Center and Summer Matters.

sibly can get them in the best program for them," says Krushinski, who is also the director for The Vanguard Transition Center. The center has many success stories involving students who navigated the program and are now working in compensated job positions. "We are striving to have more young adults graduate from VTC with a job in hand," says Fornicola.

Finally, the Summer Matters program is available not only to all of the students involved with the other programs at VFES but also to students

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