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Mentoring program underway

Special education students are given a chance to learn how to become mentors for two weeks.

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A new summer mentoring program designed to help Philadelphia special education high school students become mentors was launched last week.

Entitled "My Corps Summer," the program is a partnership between the University-affiliated Pennsylvania Service Learning Alliance and youthAbility -- a program of the Jewish Education and Vocation Services.

The program was created in order to reach out to special education students, make them aware of volunteer opportunities and give them exposure to a national corps program.

"Our main program goal is to really inform special education students and their parents and their teachers that national service is a valuable transition experience," co-director of My Corps Summer and PSLA special education initiatives learning coordinator Sarah John said.

For two weeks, the special education students -- who have either learning or physical disabilities -- will participate in a six-week long National School and Community Corps program that provides day camps for elementary age children.

Twelve special education students will serve as junior counselors by assisting with camp activities such as arts and crafts, group projects, reading and writing.

"[The junior counselors] are being trained as they go and they're learning as they go," Marino said.

The volunteers are split between two program sites -- Duckrey Elementary School and Morrison Elementary School -- where they will be supervised by a My Corps Summer staff member and one teacher who is familiar with special education students.

"We are there to help teach them the different skills that they need to be a mentor, to oversee and observe," co-director of My Corps Summer and youthAbility recruiter Megan Marino said.

Sixth grade science teacher Mary Ellen Funk, who works with the junior counselors at the Duckrey site, encourages the special education students to take their job one day at a time.

"I am trying to work on their life skills with them as well as with them such as assertiveness, speaking skills and to take initiative to see if the [younger] kids need help," Funk said.

So far, the junior counselors have received mixed reviews.

"They're alright. [One of them] should be a teacher working here and the one that's in a wheelchair should be a teacher too because the kids like her," said an 11-year-old camp attendee. "But I think the other two should just stay at home because they don't work with us. They just sit down and talk."

Despite the varying performances of the junior counselors, this program will help all of them decide whether they would like to continue working as a counselor. Some have already made up their minds.

"I want to be a camp counselor. Maybe I will join the NSCC. It's fun helping the kids out," an 18-year-old junior counselor from North Philadelphia said.

However, other special education students are still indecisive about their future, although they still want to take advantage of being in the program.

"I might join AmeriCorps for a year," a 17-year-old Central High School special education student said. "This is a great opportunity for neighborhood [elementary school] kids. It's a chance to interact with the friends they made during the school year and a chance to learn and play at the same time."

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