My Co-op Experience at
Kennedy Day School
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About Kennedy Day School

The Kennedy Day School is a special education school for students ages 3-22 operating out of the Franciscan Hospital for Children in Brighton, MA.

Students are sent there from various school district across Eastern Massachusetts when their local public schools cannot suit all of their needs.

KDS offers a wide-array of services, including physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech/language pathology, music, adaptive PE, and vocational programs.

Classes generally have 5 or 6 students and 2 or 3 staff members, so the children receive a lot of individualized attention.
Who We Serve

KDS serves students from Boston, Framingham, Waltham, Everett, Newton, Lynn, and more.

Most students at KDS have a combination of physical and cognitive disabilities. Many are nonverbal and use alternative modes of communication (signing, eye-gaze, switches, etc.).

My class had five students, all between the ages of 11-15.
A Typical Day:

8:20 am – Busses arrive. TA’s bring students inside.
8:30 am – Toileting and snack time.
9:00 am – Some students go off to individual therapies or vocational work. The remaining students read this week’s News 2 You article.
9:30 am - 10:30 am – Lessons on the SmartBoard about topics like space, environmentalism, rainforests, etc.
10:30 am – Speech or Psych group, depending on the day
11:00 am – Toileting
11:30 am – Students may read a story, practice handwriting, or do MCAS work
12:15 pm – Lunch
1 pm – Music or Adaptive Physical Education
1:30 pm – Leisure time. We may listen to music, read a story, or play a card game.
2:00 pm – Toileting, afternoon feedings, write notes home
2:30 pm - Dismissal
I got to do some really cool things I’d never done before, like see the Alvin Ailey Dance Company and compete in a school-wide baseball tournament.

…Our class won!
Skills I Learned

Hard Skills:
- How to do gastronomy- and jejunostomy-tube feedings
- How to do one- and two-person lifts, and use a Hoyer lift
- How to operate voice-output switches
- How to use various standers and gait-trainers

Soft Skills:
- **Patience** – With this population, activities take longer than normal, and that’s ok.
- **Creativity** – I had to be creative in how I explained topics, so that they could be interesting and educational while still understandable.
- **Adaptability** – There is always a way to make something fit with the child’s needs, as long as you are adaptable and open-minded.
Policy: the Ins and Outs of Special Ed

This co-op really helped me understand the “bigger picture” of special education, and made me aware of all the different parties that are involved (our school, the student’s home district, the Department of Education, and the family). I learned how these parties interact, and who has jurisdiction over which issues.

I also learned about the bureaucratic side of teaching, including crafting Individualized Education Plans and writing quarterly reports.

One policy area that I found frustrating was standardized testing. Because we are still a public institution, all our students had to complete MCAS-alt in lieu of traditional standardized testing. This was a length, cumbersome, and ultimately useless process that distracted from their individual goals and made us meet grade-level goals that were ultimately irrelevant to this population.
Challenges, Success, and Surprises

The biggest challenge, of course, was just getting to know each student and learn their preferences, abilities, and means of communicating. For the first few weeks I had to ask the other staff for a lot of help explaining and interpreting what the child meant, but after I got to know them it was easy!

Some of the most rewarding moments were when a concept we had been working on for weeks finally stuck. For example, I would periodically try to teach one student new signs, and whenever he spontaneously produced it himself, I felt very proud of him.

The biggest surprise was communicative each student could be, once you learned how they expressed themselves. Of course, this should have been obvious, but since many of them communicate in subtle ways, like raising their eyebrows or looking up, it was easy to miss during my first few days.
My Long-Term Plans

I had a fantastic experience here, and it’s definitely made me more confident that this is what I want to do as a career. When I accepted this co-op, I was considering another position working in CBAT, which is an entirely different population. However, now I feel confident that I want to work with children with disabilities, and I’m even considering getting a Masters in Special Education once I finish my undergraduate studies.
All photos are from the Franciscan Hospital for Children’s website or Facebook page.

http://franciscanhospital.org/education/kennedy-day-school/