

# suburban life



**+** Also  
Inside:  
Schools,  
beating cancer,  
and more

**The Vanguard School's**  
Director of Education  
details the comprehensive  
education and customized  
opportunities that prepare  
students with special  
needs to "conquer  
whatever comes next."

page 74





# The Full Experience

Lisa Wood,  
Director of Education at  
The Vanguard School

The Vanguard School's comprehensive education includes customized opportunities that prepare students with special needs to “conquer whatever comes next.”

**W**hen it comes to the developmental milestones in a young person's life, school is a linchpin. Far beyond academics, school provides important social-emotional activities such as field trips, dances, and extracurriculars that foster student growth. Not every child receives such a well-rounded experience, however, particularly when that student has special needs.

The Vanguard School, a program of Valley Forge Educational Services (VFES), operates under the belief that every child should benefit from every available opportunity, regardless of his or her abilities. More to the point, the school strives to ensure that every student receives “the full experience,” according to Lisa Wood, M.Ed., Director of Education for The Vanguard School.



Located in Malvern, The Vanguard School is a Pennsylvania-licensed and approved private school that serves students ages 4 to 21 years of age who require a high degree of individualized attention and intervention. This includes those with autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities, and speech-language deficits, and students who have social-emotional, executive functioning, and behavioral difficulties. VFES aims to prepare children and adults with special needs to realize their potential as contributing members of society. The 28-acre campus is home to 260 students, representing 56 school districts throughout Southeastern Pennsylvania and the state of Delaware.

“The goal is that these kids don’t leave here feeling that they missed out on anything,” says Wood. “They develop friendships and hang out with their friends. They participate in musicals, talent shows, and field trips—including a senior trip to Walt Disney World. We have homecoming and prom, including a prom court with a king and queen. We also have student council and art shows. Why shouldn’t students with special needs be afforded every experience that they would have gotten at a typical school?”

In her 25 years of experience in education, Wood has not seen another educational program as comprehensive or as inclusive as Vanguard’s. In fact, when she stepped on campus for her first interview a little more than three years ago, she immediately knew she had found a home.

“I got this vibe that this was a place where the community truly cares,” she recalls. “As I left my first interview, I immediately called my husband and said, ‘I have to work here.’”

Of course, academics remain an essential part of the school experience. Because students in the special education community learn differently, teachers and staff work together to suit learning opportunities according to each student’s ability, interests, and Individualized Education Program (IEP). Subjects such as reading, language arts, math, and science are all important, as are music, art, physical education, and technology. Like every child in school, Vanguard students work toward their postgraduate goals.

“Vanguard might end at 21, but life doesn’t,” Wood says. “We’re preparing students to conquer whatever comes next.”

Some students might be preparing for college, while others expect to progress to a vocational-technical school to learn a trade. Still others might go directly into a

career. If it’s the latter, students have the opportunity to leave campus and receive on-the-job training with community partners through Vanguard’s Community-Based Vocational Training program.

In addition, the on-campus Work Orientation Readiness Center (WORC) provides training in vocational skills; students may perform meaningful office projects across campus, such as copying, binding, data entry, and mailing. Wood says campus staff can submit work orders for students to complete, thereby helping them acquire valuable work skills they can apply outside of school.

Students also have the opportunity to spend time in the Daily Living Center (DLC), an apartment-style facility where students learn how to wash and fold clothes, cook meals, make beds, and clean. “After school is completed, students require other life skills, too,” says Wood. “The DLC is another way that we’re looking to truly prepare Van-

**“The goal is that these kids don’t leave here feeling that they missed out on anything. ... Why shouldn’t students with special needs be afforded every experience that they would have gotten at a typical school?”**

—LISA WOOD, THE VANGUARD SCHOOL

guard students for the future. Whatever the student’s path may be, Vanguard is customizing the experience to prepare the student. We absolutely recognize the importance of skills like reading, writing, and math, but we’re looking to educate the whole child so we’re looking at every single component that they may need to be successful when they graduate from here.”

After the students have completed all the requirements of their senior year, they have the option of staying at The Vanguard School by attending the Vanguard Transition Center.

Wood adds that school staff organize community-based trips that are aligned with experiences students will need to master in order to succeed in their post-Vanguard lives.

“Our goal is to help students develop those real-life skills that will allow them to be as independent as possible,” she says. “Something as simple as placing an order at a restaurant or knowing how to pay for something when you get to the register might be an overwhelming experience for someone who has never done it before.”

Wood adds, “as with any school, the end goal is to have students successfully

complete our program—which, of course, isn’t easy when students have come to love Vanguard as a second home.”

Fortunately, the school has an incredibly active alumni community, with abundant opportunities for students to stay in touch with one another and even return to the campus for special events.

“That connection is not lost just because you graduate,” Wood says. “Alumni stay in



close touch with one another—and with staff. I think that speaks volumes to the dedication and the love that staff has for students.”

Wood credits the staff for making Vanguard such a uniquely beloved place.

“It’s a beautiful campus, and we do many wonderful things,” she says. “But at the end of the day, the reason the school is so phenomenal is because of the people who work here. Their commitment to the students does not start at 8 a.m. and end at 3 p.m. It extends into evenings, weekends, and breaks. In all of the different places I’ve been in my career, I’ve never seen a more passionate commitment than I have here at Vanguard.” ■



**THE VANGUARD SCHOOL  
A PROGRAM OF VALLEY  
FORGE EDUCATIONAL SERVICES**

1777 North Valley Road | Malvern, PA 19355  
(610) 296-6725 | [vfes.net/vanguard](http://vfes.net/vanguard)