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Archway Meets with Assemblywoman Stanfield to Discuss Extending School Year
Extending special education a year can make a huge difference in life post-graduation.

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ATCO, NEW JERSEY (May 19, 2021) – On Monday, May 17th, 2021 Archway Programs met with Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield to discuss New Jersey Assembly Bill 5366 which would extend special education funding to age 22 and give schools like Archway the opportunity to provide essential services, career training, therapies, and programming to students who have missed out due to remote learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has had quite an impact on kids with multiple disabilities and their families, making this past year extremely difficult for them with interrupted routines, services and therapies. Extending special education by a year would make a huge difference for students and their families, especially those who are turning 21 and haven't been able to learn the skills and receive the vocational training for opportunities post-graduation. This is critical because it prepares students for the rest of their lives whether it is at home, in community, or at work.

Archway Programs, along with sending school districts, parents and families, and school staff all feel that it would be beneficial for students to have another year. Extending special education beyond 21 would help students get back what they lost during the pandemic and better prepare for the future. Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield and Assemblyman Ryan Peters of the New Jersey 8th legislative district introduced a resolution calling on Congress to extend special education funding to age 22. The [New Jersey Assembly Bill 5366](#) requires boards of education to provide special education and related services to students exceeding age of eligibility for special education and related services and urges Congress to fund special education for students on their last year of eligibility to return for another year.

"For the last year, I've talked to dozens of parents who have kids who are aging out of the special education school system. They have pleaded with the state to let their children return for another year to recoup the education and life skills the pandemic robbed them off. We can't let down the people that need us the most. We have to extend their eligibility to 22 years old," said Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield.





Left to right: Archway Lower School Principal Michael Graff, Archway mom Debbie Nichols, Archway Programs CEO George Richards, Executive Director of the Archway Schools Susan Lafferty, and Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield (8th legislative district).

“We have many youngsters who are supposed to age out but missed a whole year of skills that they have learned and they need to recoup some of these skills because they’ve had some regression whether it is therapies or basic daily living skills. During the last year of school for Archway students, we typically put them in touch with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and we set them up for post-grad employment. We identify their interests, know where their strengths are, and work with DVR to place them appropriately. Unfortunately, due to remote learning we were not able to do that this year. For the kids that are aging out, this is critical because the year is almost over,” stated Susan Lafferty, Executive Director of the Archway Schools.

If New Jersey Assembly Bill 5366 passes, this would give schools like Archway Programs the opportunity to work with students to recoup skills they once had, get students back into a structured setting, and work with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to get kids situated for life post-grad. This past school year, remote learning brought its own unique set of challenges to many students and families. Remote learning is not for everyone and it has been especially hard on students with multiple disabilities. Unfortunately many special needs students and young adults with individualized education programs (IEPs) were left behind when schools went remote last year. For students who normally receive in-person therapies and face other unique challenges,



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virtual learning is nearly impossible. This has placed a major strain on special education students and their parents during the pandemic.

“Moving to a hybrid model helped somewhat, but it still doesn’t account for the time lost that school staff would have normally spent preparing students for life post-grad. Special education students have missed out on services and are now behind. Some students have excelled with remote education; however that’s not the case for many of our students. For example, some students have communication devices and haven’t been able to learn everyday communication skills to socially interact with others. That’s not something you can really teach virtually,” said Susan Lafferty, Executive Director Archway’s Education Department.

Not all students graduate and go off to college. For a lot of special education students, it’s essential that they receive individualized programs, therapies, and services to prepare for post-grad placement and help make them a member of the community. At the Archway Schools, students receive individualized instruction, daily living skills support, help identifying interests to explore different careers, encouragement of socialization, career education programming including but not limited to interviewing, ways to greet people, communicating with others; and ultimately how to thrive in-community and after graduation. During the pandemic, special education students were not able to access this type of support due to remote learning.

Archway mother, Debbie Nichols, shares her personal story about her son Kenny missing out on services and therapies due to remote learning.

“My son Kenny turned 21 in April and attends the Archway Schools. He’s been attending Archway for a couple years and he loves coming to school because it’s structured – he does the same routine, he knows what he’s going to do, and he has loving therapist and teachers that work with him daily. Over the past two years, I have noticed a tremendous change and improvement. Being home for the majority of this school year took that away from him. Since he hasn’t been here due to remote learning, I have seen a decrease in physical therapy and although we received some in-home services during the pandemic, it doesn’t compare to being at school, getting the peer interaction, and therapies that he gets when he’s at Archway. Kenny is blind so he did not do well with virtual learning and he has really missed so much. He’s autistic, blind, has cerebral palsy, and has self-injurious behaviors which tend to come out when there’s a lot of changes and when he is not in a structured setting. Being at school and getting that in-person instruction, therapies, getting to interact and socialize with other students, and participate in music therapy which he loves make such a big difference in my son’s life. He hasn’t been able to get any of that this past year. He needs this time back to get back on track before he ages out and graduates from Archway,” said Debbie Nichols, mother of Archway Lower School student Kenny Nichols.



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Left to right: Archway Lower School Physical Therapist Cheryl Finn, Archway student Kenny Nichols, and Archway Lower School Teacher Katie Wertheim.

Typically in twelfth grade before students graduate, Archway Schools work with DVR to identify interests, strengths, and prepare students for placement after graduation however that wasn't possible this past school year. Archway believes that every individual should have access to fulfilling and competitive employment opportunities. This not only provides individuals with a sense of purpose, but it also promotes community inclusion and understanding.

“Another year for my son would make a huge impact in his growth, his development and improvement for life post-graduation. I hope that this bill passes because my son really needs it, we need it, and there are so many other kids that need it too. It's not just my kid; there are so many other kids and families that are affected,” said Nichols.



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On Thursday, May 20th, 2021 the Assembly is voting on the [New Jersey Assembly Bill 5366](#) and then Governor Murphy has to sign it to make it possible for students like Kenny who are aging out of the system, an opportunity to attend school another year to re-gain skills, and get the services, therapies, and programming needed to thrive after graduation.

The Archway Schools are New Jersey Department of Education Approved Private Schools for Students with Disabilities (APSSD), serving special needs students' ages three to twenty-one years old, located in South Jersey in Atco (Lower School), Evesham (Upper School), and Camden (Cooper's Poynt). Using a successful model unique to each school, children are provided with a safe, structured and compassionate atmosphere as Archway staff discovers and builds on each child's strengths and helps the kids overcome barriers by teaching coping and social skills. This includes providing students with the skills needed to successfully transition from school to adult life. Students learn skills that will gain them "real world" employment through Archway's Career Education Program, which enables them to overcome their challenges and learn in the classroom and on-the-job, skills necessary to transition from school-to-work and offers a number of vocational and career training opportunities to its students in both the Upper and Lower Schools. Students are given the opportunity to gain this experience by participating in on-campus, off-campus job samplings, cooperative education, sheltered workshops, classroom instruction and job placement. It also gives students who cannot be placed into a vocational/trade school an option, providing work-readiness skills, increased social and independent skills gained in a work environment.

For more information on Archway Programs, visit www.archwayprograms.org.

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About Archway Programs

Since 1965, Archway Programs has been meeting the individualized needs of thousands of families throughout the state of New Jersey. Archway Programs is a diverse, non-profit, human services organization which includes approved private schools for students with disabilities in addition to several model programs providing unmatched services. Built on a solid foundation of core values, providing safety, possessing compassion and promoting individuality, Archway Programs strives to improve the life of every individual served. Our goal is to ensure that each individual's needs are met and customized services are provided and partnered with passionate, committed and talented professionals in a safe environment. Over 450 individuals are currently employed by Archway Programs and this dedicated and talented staff provides services to over 1,800 children and adults requiring individualized care. Please visit www.archwayprograms.org for more information.



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