

STUDENT TEACHING IN A SPECIAL EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

July 2, 2022

A portrait of Em Jensen, a young woman with dark hair, glasses, and a colorful headband, smiling. She is wearing a white top and a necklace.

The logo for the Pennsylvania Association of Educators (PAEA), featuring a stylized 'e' and 'a' in blue and red.

Student Teaching in a Special Education Environment

A photograph of the PAEA building, a large, classical-style structure with columns and red banners hanging from the facade. To the right of the building, there is a list of topics: PAEA BLOG, COMMUNITY, ADVOCACY, LEARNING, RESEARCH, KNOWLEDGE, and VIBRANCY.

Em Jensen, Pre-Service Division Director

Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), University of the Arts
Martin Luther School, STEAM Teacher

Em Jensen is the Pre-Service Division Director of PAEA. Em Jensen recently accepted a position at Martin Luther School as the STEAM Teacher. For all things related to Pre-Service educators, reach out to preservice@paea.org.

Student Teaching in a Special Education Environment

I began the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at the University of the Arts in the fall of 2020. Upon entering, I knew I wanted to take the opportunity to experience as many different populations of students as possible. Prior to attending the program, I spent three years teaching after-school art in one Philadelphia neighborhood.



It was there I found my initial voice as an educator, grew meaningful relationships with my students and their families, and practiced making important decisions that still to this day cushion the backbone of my pedagogy. However, through serving the learning needs of this very specific population of students, in a system of so much support and privilege, I was truly within a comfort zone. I knew I needed to break out of this comfort zone in order to really grow to be a well-rounded art teacher.

To do this, I took the opportunity to fulfill my required observation hours in as many different learning environments as possible. I spent time observing both urban and suburban schools in both remote and in-person settings. Yet, I wanted to experience even more- I was looking to really explore the world of education in a way that would ignite a productive discomfort within me. In the fall semester of 2021, I took on an internship position at HMS School for

Children with Cerebral Palsy.



There, I was exposed to a whole new world of what modification can look like to set every student up for success. At the same time as my internship, I was also fulfilling observation hours at Martin Luther School, a school for students who require added behavioral and emotional support.

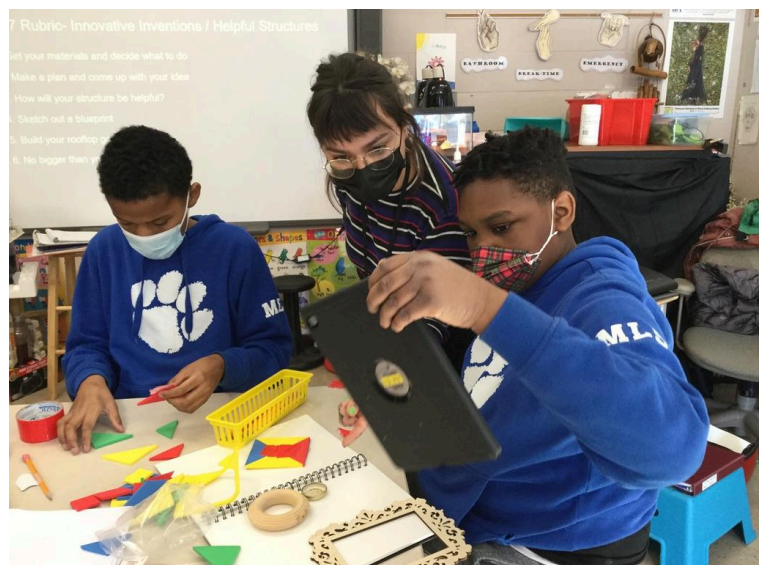
I was fascinated with both the differences and similarities that occurred in these two special education environments that served drastically contrasting populations of students. While physical accommodations may have looked very different, there was incredible crossover when it came to the mental fortitude and positive demeanors of my cooperating teachers, Ed Contaldi and Margo Wunder, at both schools. I identified that it was this mental strength I was seeking to grow within myself and it was at that point I knew I wanted to do my student teaching in a special education environment.



As a student teacher at Martin Luther School, I spent my days exercising my ability to be a consistent and positive force for my special population of students.

We know consistency is important as an educator, but within an environment that holds such an important emphasis on behavior management, that reality is bolded

and underlined. What I found was that truly being consistent meant not only with the students but also with myself. Student teaching can be intimidating. The feeling of being on stage and constantly supervised can mess with your ability to perform genuinely. It can also lead to the unfortunate habit of being hard on yourself in an unproductive way. Overthinking a decision you made while you are learning is unfair to yourself. At a school like MLS, or any school for that matter, a student has a “bad” day and you deal with it the way you always would- that is a good consistent teacher. Additionally, you always make sure to give them a fresh start the next time- so why wouldn’t you do that for yourself? Student teaching in a special education environment truly taught me what it meant to be a consistent educator, and that constructive yet kind consistency does not apply solely to the students. The way you follow through with yourself is just as important. As of now, I am proud to announce that I am accepting a full-time position at Martin Luther



School for the upcoming school year as a STEAM Teacher and couldn't be happier to continue my career in Special Education.