



# hms school news

HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy • Founded 1882 • Philadelphia, Pennsylvania • FALL 2011

## Executive Director's Message

By Diane L. Gallagher, PhD

Our size and mission allow us the luxury to specialize in educating a small subset among all children with special education needs—those with the most



complicated and pervasive needs. Because their needs are complex and significant, our students require interventions that take into account subtle distinctions in observation and intervention. To be most effective, these interventions must be fully coordinated and implemented by a comprehensive team.

As we develop IEPs each year, we appreciate the confidence of those school districts that entrust their students to us and understand how our single-minded focus and

expertise can help these children. By keeping the districts regularly informed of each student's success and status, we expect to continue to strengthen our full team approach.

We are in the midst of major institutional changes as we work to support our strategic plan. We are building new relationships and implementing innovative strategies to help us meet our major goals of full enrollment, funding capacity to provide all necessary services to our students, and increased awareness of HMS among families who need our services.

To this end, we have created a new leadership role for a director of admissions, now filled by Peter McGuinness. Peter brings to HMS over 20 years of experience in admissions and outreach, program advocacy for children and adults with disabilities, and knowledge of various public and private systems of support. Working closely with our marketing and development team, Peter will focus on developing relationships regionally and nationally, with school districts and organizations that provide care for the same children whom we serve.

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## It Takes a Team to Build an IEP

A strong IEP (Individualized Education Program) plan forms the foundation for a child's school success, yet too often barriers such as unclear communication result in a weak IEP. At HMS, great thought and planning go into building a seamless IEP process that supports the development of a fully individualized IEP for each student. At the heart of this process is utilization of a team approach, in which each team member plays a vital role.

The IEP team draws from the breadth of HMS's professionals and para-professionals, including therapists, teachers and administrators. Equally important to the team are those individuals from outside of the school, most notably the parents and when appropriate, the child. Representatives of the home school district, supports coordinators and other professionals involved in the child's care complete the team. It is not unusual to see more than a dozen people sitting around the conference room table fleshing out an IEP. If a person works with the child, his or her expertise is considered essential to the creation of that IEP.

"We commit 100 percent to this process," says Christina Coia, HMS's director of education. "We have the ability, resources, manpower and time to implement a fully customized IEP for each student. Along the way, no one is ancillary; we engage the child's home district as fully as they are able in the process and appreciate their support and input."

With so many people involved, scheduling the IEP

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## Parents' Corner: Our IEP Experience at HMS

By Marilyn Long



Sending our eight-year-old daughter Amanda away to a residential school was such a stressful decision for our family to make, but when we visited HMS for the first time, we knew it was a special place. Eleven years later, we still feel the same way and can't believe that we are only two years away from having to say goodbye to our *HMS family*.

What makes the IEP process so unique at HMS is that it feels like a family affair. All of us—Amanda's entire HMS team and her family—work toward the same goals: to expand her abilities, to tap into her unique strengths and to make sure that she is as prepared as possible for the next phase of her life. Ultimately, it is about making sure that she is safe, healthy and happy.

Amanda, who is a triplet, started her education in our public school system. It was important to us to keep the triplets together in school, despite their differences. We partnered with our local school district to try to provide the services that Amanda

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## Welcome James E. Gowen, II President, Board of Trustees

At the Annual Meeting of the board of trustees in December 2010, James E. Gowen, II assumed leadership of that group. An ancestor of Mr. Gowen was among the co-founders of our school, and the Gowen family has been engaged in its governance ever since. Mr. Gowen joined our board of trustees in 1996. Here you will find an interview with Mr. Gowen about his ideas for and relationship with HMS.



**Q** *Your family has a long-standing history with HMS. Please tell us about it.*

**A** My great grandfather, Francis Innes Gowen, founded the school with three others in 1882, and served on its board from that time until 1926. He served as president of the board from 1905 until his tenure on the board ended. At that time, the school focused on the unmet needs of children with a range of physically disabling conditions. The most prevalent was polio. In the years since many other family members have also served as board members, presidents and volunteers.

**Q** *What inspired you to take on the responsibility of board presidency?*

**A** Witnessing what the teaching, therapeutic and nursing staff, together with our students, accomplish daily here serves as motivation for those of us who volunteer only part of our time. Watching these miracles and their impact on the students' and their families' lives inspired me to take on more responsibility to help HMS grow and adapt to continue to fill the vital needs of students with cerebral palsy.

**Q** *What is your vision for HMS under your leadership?*

**A** My vision is to broaden our reach, so that more children with cerebral palsy can benefit from the skills, educational, therapeutic and medical expertise, and love that reside in this building. We have the ability to transform lives, built through decades working on the forefront of intervention for children with cerebral palsy. By marketing ourselves outside of our region and sharing our knowledge of Best Practices to others in our field, we can make a difference for many more children.

**Q** *What do you see as the strengths of HMS?*

**A** We provide unparalleled care and specialized education and therapy to meet the individual needs of each student in a warm environment in which families can feel comfortable and students feel secure and experience joy. Local schools simply cannot offer the unmatched level of integration between education and therapy, life skills and medical support necessary for these children. We can, and we do so in a way that leaves our chil-

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## IEP/From page 1

meeting can be a challenge. The time must be convenient, so no one feels rushed.

When necessary, participants can access the meeting by phone or Skype

Just as there is appropriate etiquette for the theater, at HMS there is expected IEP etiquette. The interpersonal aspects of the meeting are considered as important as the educational planning. If handled with warmth, honesty and respect, the IEP meeting will build the foundation for a positive collaboration among the school, the family and the school district. The staff is coached in the communication skills and tactics that will lead to a positive dialogue.

Many parents come to their first IEP meeting with a preconception of what it will feel or sound like. Their past IEP experiences may have been negative, focusing on what differentiates their child from a typical child, and what their child can't do. As a result, they've felt unheard and defensive.

"Our meetings are celebrations of what our students can do," says Coia. "What makes our meetings unique is that our team members all believe in capitalizing on the abilities of students. We share an expectation of competence of the students and of nurturance toward them. These meetings

are never about what students can't do, but what they can do right now and how we can bring them to the next step."

Counter to popular belief, an IEP meeting is not simply a time for parents to sign off on a preordained document. The purpose of the meeting is to generate an interactive dialogue to define the child's goals, consider

HMS's Executive Director Diane Gallagher. "Each team member adds expertise in a discrete area, building on the observations and reports of others. Team members respect the insight of their peers in different disciplines about how the student will most benefit from the interventions."



*The entire team gathers for Rebekah Stanley's IEP meeting.*

**If handled with warmth, honesty and respect, the IEP meeting will build the foundation for a positive collaboration among the school, the family and the school district.**

what has worked and what has not, and to determine the materials and techniques to help the child meet these goals.

Although the IEP is never written prior to the meeting, HMS's staff members are expected to enter the room prepared to share their findings, observations and suggestions. "A lot of time and discussion goes into preparing for IEP meetings," says

With the support of his school district, Doug Wheaton enrolled his son Samuel, now age 20, at HMS nearly 10 years ago. Remembering his first time at HMS, Mr. Wheaton shares, "We walked in and saw kids with talking devices and pictures on their trays and kids in power wheelchairs, and immediately identified goals we felt Sam could achieve. Right away, that gave us hope and replaced the feeling of despair we'd carried around for so long."

Sam's home school district of Millville, NJ supports HMS's team approach. Dr. Terrence Tracy, a psychologist with the District, attends Sam's IEP meeting each year.

"The team members from HMS have already discussed the goals they think we should try to accomplish and they present these in a roundtable discussion," says Mr. Wheaton. "The nice thing about this relationship is that Dr. Tracy recognizes the expertise HMS has to offer and appreciates the team's professionalism. Sitting around this table with our school district, Sam's

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needed while keeping her with her siblings.

For the first couple of school years, when socialization was the primary focus, this worked. When Amanda reached second grade, the curriculum became more rigorous and we all felt frustrated by the challenges this presented.

We are fortunate that we were in consensus with our local school district that they could not provide the appropriate services for Amanda. In a collaborative fashion, we all determined that HMS was the best school to meet Amanda's needs. Rather than bow out, our school district's director of special education became an integral member of Amanda's educational team and thus, a member of this extended family.

Fast forward to our next IEP meeting. The entire team is waiting in the room — HMS administrators, school district administrators, nurses, therapists and teachers. In we walk and everyone gets up to offer hugs and kisses, catch up on how each other's families are doing and then, get down to business. Each September, this geniality sets the tone for the rest of the IEP meeting.

HMS makes the creation of the IEP a collaborative and inclusive experience. As parents, we are considered an integral part of the team with equal

weight in the decisions made regarding Amanda's program. Our beliefs and feelings are met with respect and taken seriously. For the past several years, Amanda has been included in her IEP meeting, which has been so exciting for us and for her.

Throughout the meeting, we learn volumes about what Amanda is like at school, how she interacts with her peers and teachers, what motivates her and what she doesn't like. The conversation confirms to us that Amanda's team really knows who she is and what makes her *tick*, as does the way they individualize her program to leverage the things that motivate her.

The tone of the meeting is positive, highlighting Amanda's strengths and unique abilities, rather than focusing

on her disabilities. We spend an ample amount of time telling stories about Amanda's experiences, both at school and at home, and it is not uncommon for the group to be laughing out loud at times and wiping away tears during others. The level of caring and personal commitment that the team exhibits is amazing.

I know that our experience at HMS is not a unique one; it is the norm. The people who work at this school are dedicated professionals who truly care about their work and every child. We are blessed to have them in our lives, caring for our special angel.

**The tone of the meeting is positive, highlighting Amanda's strengths and unique abilities, rather than focusing on her disabilities.**

**James Gowen**/From page 2

dren happy and fulfilled and prepares them for life beyond HMS.

**Q** *What specific skills, qualities and expertise do you bring to your new role with HMS?*

**A** Through my work analyzing publicly traded companies and meeting countless management teams, I have gained insight into what makes certain companies succeed in the long run, despite constant changes in the marketplace. I have already begun to suggest business strategies that can benefit this beloved non-profit institution without detracting from the warmth so palpable within our walls. I hope some of these tools and perspectives might help push HMS further along its current path of excellence, on the tail of years of effort from those who have so ably come before me ... notably past presidents Anne Wilmerding, Nancy Harris and my father, Francis Gowen.

**Q** *What are the greatest challenges faced by HMS in the coming year? In the coming decade?*

**A** The greatest immediate challenge we face is enrollment, with a larger than normal graduating class this year that we hope to replace this coming fall (just as we replaced last year's largest ever graduating class). Our longer-term challenges are endemic of our reliance on the Pennsylvania Department of Education for much of our tuition, and our need to continue to adapt to the fiscal challenges faced at the Department and at the State level. We must remain on solid financial footing to be able to adapt, grow and react.

**Q** *Any last comments?*

**A** I look forward to supporting our executive director, Diane Gallagher, in her daily efforts to continue to attract and retain talented, motivated, educated and, most importantly, caring team members in a competitive marketplace, while also attracting students whose families entrust their care to us, and who will allow us to transform their lives in very positive ways.

## Summer Can Reap Huge Growth for ESY Students

Going away to summer camp is a time-honored rite of passage for the O'Connell children, of Sterling, VA. This summer Anahoe O'Connell, age nine, made his first summer foray, but his "camp" experience was far different than his siblings'. Anahoe enrolled in HMS's Extended School Year (ESY) program.

According to HMS Director of Education Christina Coia, ESY provides opportunities for students to maintain and often master skills for which they require repeated practice and engagement — skills that could easily be lost during summer vacation. The landmark *Armstrong v. Kline* legal decision in 1979 mandated evaluation of students with severe disabilities for Extended School Year "to maximize self-sufficiency." HMS recognized the need for summer programming to maintain skills well before that decision was rendered.

"My two main goals for Anahoe are to communicate and to use a motorized wheelchair," says his mother, Ashana O'Connell. "Last year, Anahoe's progress came to a standstill. I knew I had to do something before it was too late, so I called HMS to ask if they would evaluate him. Within five minutes of walking through the door I had a feeling that I had not had in a long time—hope. Hope that

I had finally found a place just for Anahoe. A place where Anahoe was not made to fit in to be like other kids, because everyone there was just like him, and my daughter and I were the ones who were different."

are not enrolled in HMS's school-year program, the extended evaluation can provide intervention and recommendations which the child's home school district can carry out, with or without further collaboration with HMS. For Anahoe, it provided the basis for developing his ESY program.

"After the evaluation, I took a leap of faith," says Mrs. O'Connell, "and we had the best possible outcome. HMS found a place to put a switch so Anahoe could start augmentative communication. At home we had been told this was impossible."

"ESY takes on the model of summer fun while learning and experiencing," explains Coia. The ESY team creates a camp-like environment where students can continue to work toward their goals during the summer months. Each year, HMS offers two ESY sessions. The first accommodates residential and day students. The second is for day students only.

Families and school districts, particularly those from outside the Philadelphia region, often enroll students in the first ESY session as a transition to a proposed school year placement at HMS.



*Top: Alanna McKnight relishes a ride on the Afterburner from teacher Kevin Rafferty. Bottom: Evan Hood explores the feel of plants as part of a collaboration with the Grumblethorpe Camp program.*

During Anahoe's evaluation the team took an in-depth look at his abilities and challenges, working together to discover his potential and develop a plan to help him achieve it. For students like Anahoe, who

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school and our family, there is no animosity; this is a team of like-minded individuals working towards the same goals for Sam. Often, we are looking at the same end goal, but they see a different way to reach it than I do, and their way is based on their expertise and experience.”

“A specialized program is needed in the continuum of options, particularly for children with complex special needs,” says Dr. Tracey. “From the first meeting I attended on forward, HMS’s approach has been completely collaborative. This allows me to openly communicate with both the school and the parent about the best interest of the student.”

**“I don’t feel like I have to teach them about Sam. I feel like I’m always learning from them. This is what all parents of children with special needs should feel.”**

Each IEP meeting includes an introductory rundown of the roles and responsibilities of each person in the room. Yet during the meeting, the floor is open, even when input does not stem from one’s area of specialty.

“We employ the ‘jump in’ model,” jests Coia.

“An IEP meeting is not a report review. Everyone gets equal time to speak, and

the meeting should be interactive. If you have a comment to make when someone is speaking, we want to hear it then and turn it into a discussion. Often if a parent has to wait to ask a question, their point gets lost.”

Despite the immense amount of work that goes into an IEP’s initial development, it is a living document which will evolve as the strategies are tried and the team ascertains what is and isn’t working.

Likewise, there shouldn’t be significant surprises to the parents or the school district at the IEP meeting, because, as part of the team, they are kept apprised of significant changes throughout the year.

“I feel welcome at HMS anytime,” says Mr. Wheaton, “and they are always responsive to my questions. The school asks for my feedback on a regular basis, and I trust their expertise. I don’t feel like I have to teach them about Sam. I feel like I’m always learning from them. This is what all parents of children with special needs should feel.”

## The ISP: A Plan for Residential Students

While everyone in the special needs community has heard of an IEP, many are unfamiliar with its sister document, the ISP, or Individual Service Plan. Every child who resides at HMS receives an ISP, as required by the state Department of Public Welfare, which certifies our residence. More importantly, it’s good practice.

The ISP focuses on those services related to the student’s residential care, such as Activities of Daily Living, nursing care, medical treatment, recreational services and leisure activities. Regular communication between the family and the student is built into the ISP, as well, often through weekly use of Skype.

“It’s important that the ISP be consistent with the IEP,” explains HMS’s Director of Residential Services Dee Avegnon, who leads the ISP team. “After-school hours are instrumental in helping students reach their goals, but there’s a careful balance we strive for that is between therapeutic and overwhelming. Our residential program is our students’ home away from home. While the IEP must be structured and precise, the ISP can be more flexible, to ensure that the residential portion of the day doesn’t feel like a continuation of school. We leave room for fun and relaxation.”

The ISP team is predominantly the same as the IEP team, except that it includes evening and overnight staff who also bring input. The parents and the child, when old enough, are integral parts of this team.

“It’s very much a team approach,” says Avegnon. “We build continuous communication with the parents into the ISP. For instance, when there is a particular concern, we will write into the ISP that we will speak with the parents a certain number of times each week and as needed.”

ISPs are reviewed every six months—with the mid-year meeting often by phone for the convenience of the family—however the team has the flexibility to reconvene sooner to make necessary changes. “It’s important that we act quickly if something isn’t working, rather than wait the entire six months,” concludes Avegnon.

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This gives students and families the chance to test the waters, slowly getting used to the idea of a residential school. ESY provides these students and their families with their first experience of a nurturing, knowledgeable and leisure filled stay away from home.

This summer, the learning at HMS was built around the theme, “Surfin’ Safari.” Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant Millie Connelly worked with the ESY team to develop activities that supported the students’ goals and objectives, with an added dose of fun. The result was eight multi-sensory stations that made HMS feel more like an amusement park than a school.

“This format allowed the teachers and therapists a lot of flexibility to individualize each child’s ESY program, working at those stations that supported that child’s plan,” explains Connelly. “In addition, each child was pulled out at various times for individual therapy sessions.”

Teamwork and communication form the core of both the year-round program and ESY. Therapists and teachers draw upon each other’s unique base of knowledge and expertise to collaborate to modify equipment or programming to best fit each student’s needs.

Surrounded by projected water park scenes, thrill seekers rode the waves upon an air mattress rigged to simulate a boat ride, as air whooshed in and out of it. A second boating station generated tactile stimulation as children rowed across a sea of balls on an inflatable boat.

“HMS Beach” was the place for language arts and exercise. Students could chill while “sunbathing” in a beach chair or enjoying a ride on the Afterburner — a bike that at-



*Top: Michael Kelly enjoying music therapy.  
Bottom: Teacher Nicole Vanartsdalen helps  
Ashley Overton cool off in the suspension pool.*

taches to a wheelchair to allow staff to pedal students around.

In the sensorium, students experienced

water play in a suspension pool, and then relaxed during therapeutic spa services, such as a massage. Worn out from all of the work masquerading as play, hungry students learned how to make their own icy summer-time treat.

An African safari set the stage for artistic endeavors. HMS’s music therapist and teachers invited students “Under the Tent” to feel and listen to offerings from a box of surprises from the forest. Students accessed the jungle sounds with switches that allowed them autonomy. Art specialist Eiko Fan helped develop a new, multi-sensory craft project each week, like making rain sticks out of beans and rice and creating masks.

“The kids had a great time this summer,” raves Connelly. “They experienced the joy and excitement of summer camp. They were offered fun, interactive experiences and had the chance to make lots of choices about what they wanted to do. For the students it was a break from the school year, filled with new experiences; for the staff, it was an opportunity to continue to help students meet their goals in new and different ways.” All of these activities provided a high level of motivation for communication.

“The weeks my son was at HMS, I didn’t worry,” says Mrs. O’Connell. “Instead I felt like there was a lot I could learn from the HMS staff. My son’s desire to use the switch and ability to learn to use it appropriately showed us how important this experience was for him, and that we really haven’t yet tapped his potential. At our closing interview, HMS did a summation of how we move forward by talking to us about the steps they had put in place and suggested steps for a continued progression. This is the first time ever that someone has helped us plot a road for Anahoe that seeks to reach our communication goal and fully tap his potential.”



4400 Baltimore Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19104

## HMS School News | Spring 2011

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James E. Gowen, II | *President of the Board of Trustees*

Diane Gallagher Ph.D. | *Executive Director*

4400 Baltimore Ave.  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
215/222-2566; fax 215/222-1889  
[www.hmsschool.org](http://www.hmsschool.org)

HMS School is nonsectarian, admitting/serving students from any locality without regard to race, color, religion, disability [except as limited by PDE program approvals], ancestry, national origin, age [within school ages] or gender.

The Mission of HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy is to educate, nurture, and care for children and youth with motor impairments who may also have other disabilities resulting from brain injury with the goal of assisting each individual in achieving his or her maximum potential. HMS School aims to facilitate independence and improve the quality of life for its students in a safe and secure environment so they can lead fulfilling, stimulating lives in their present and future environments.

### Director's Message/From page 1

In this last year, we have also welcomed James E. Gowen, II as president of our board of trustees. Mr. Gowen's ancestors helped found this institution in 1882, and since then, his family has maintained strong leadership in and steadfast commitment to our school and our mission.

The similarities between planning institutional growth and the development of an IEP are striking. Both require intense planning, a clear vision of what we want to accomplish, flexibility to embrace change, intimate knowledge of where we are, and comfort with the missteps that cannot be avoided.

Just as we employ a team approach to help our students accomplish their goals, we call upon our entire community to support our growth as an organization. Everyone who cares about our students and has a hand in their education, from administrators and board members to families to our students' home school districts, has a stake in our success and is entitled to a sense of achievement when we thrive.

### Your Support Makes a Difference!

Please consider a gift to HMS School through your organization's United Way campaign by designating HMS as the recipient. HMS is #00240 on the donor choice form for the United Way of Southeastern PA and is listed on the UW website, [www.uwsepa.org](http://www.uwsepa.org). HMS is also eligible to receive United Way funds from other regions. Your gift will help us to continue valuable creative arts programs and other special projects that enhance students' development. ***Thank you for your generous support.***