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SPECIAL-NEEDS KIDS AND THE FOREIGN SERVICE: DISPELLING THE MYTHS

CORRECTING MISCONCEPTIONS CAN HELP FS PARENTS OF
SPECIAL-NEEDS KIDS GET OFF TO A GOOD START.

By PAMELA WARD

Having a child with special learning, physical or psychological needs is a challenging and frustrating, but potentially rewarding, experience for any family. All of these emotions are multiplied exponentially when a family is internationally mobile. It is not only necessary for the employee parent to find an appropriate position every few years, but also to identify locations where the educational and medical needs of all family members can be addressed.

Until recently, it was not possible to consider a career in the Foreign Service if the family included a special-needs child. That has changed, but there remain concerns about the complexity of choosing assignments that provide needed educational and medical resources, especially when the time to identify appropriate bids is limited. Within the Department of State, a number of offices and a myriad of professionals stand ready to assist and support families from civilian foreign affairs agencies headed overseas.

Often, however, just the question of where to start can seem overwhelming. And, unfortunately, there is a lot of misinformation that can lead families in the wrong direction. To help give families with special-needs children a head start, let me dispel some of the common misconceptions held by internationally mobile parents.

Misconception 1: The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requirements apply to all American or international

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schools, no matter where they are.

Until the late 1950s, children and young people with physical or mental disabilities were simply allowed to fall by the wayside in regular schools. Or, if the disability was severe, they were placed in schools or institutions where care was custodial at best. The activist spirit of the 1960s and the efforts of disabled veterans returning from Vietnam turned all this around. Federal laws were enacted requiring that in the U.S. those with challenges have physical access to buildings, jobs and transportation, and that an appropriate and free public education in the least restrictive environment be available to all children of school age.

But this legislation has never applied to private schools anywhere, and definitely not to public or private educational authorities outside of the United States. Most of the schools our children attend overseas are independent institutions with boards of directors that set policy. Even though many of these schools get grants, albeit relatively small ones, through the Office of Overseas Schools and other divisions in the Department of State, they are not obligated to adhere to IDEA or any of the other U.S. federal mandates on special needs.

That said, there are numerous programs and initiatives designed to encourage the schools that serve our families to provide services. These programs include special grants for the salaries of specialists; summer workshops for faculty and administrators; consultants for in-service training; the development of targeted training materials, such as the publications *Transitioning Overseas with a Special-Needs Child*, *Making the Difference: Differentiation in International Schools*; and more. The Office of Overseas Schools puts out a list, updated yearly, of several hundred schools around the world that provide special services.

Misconception 2: None of the various offices in Washington involved with identifying special needs and evaluating services at Foreign Service posts talk to

each other.

There are several offices in the Department of State staffed by professionals with a mandate to assist families with special-needs children, and they all have each other on speed dial. Families who know or suspect that their child has special needs must first contact the Employee Consultation Service, which is part of the Medical Division. Families abroad should contact their Regional Medical Officer. A highly experienced social worker will be assigned to continuing coordination of the case including assessment, educational planning and clearances.

If the child has been in special education programs in the U.S. and has a current Individual Education Plan (describing the specific program to be offered), the next move is identifying posts where the specified accommodations are available. If the child needs to be evaluated, ECS will organize the assessment to produce the IEP for the

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child here or abroad. ECS then works with the Office of Allowances to authorize the funding of the accommodations specified in the IEP.

Keep in mind that the governing regulation for the special-needs education allowance states clearly that only those educational services identified as actually "required" for the child in the IEP or equivalent document are reimbursable.

If the employee parent is due to be assigned overseas, the search for appropriate educational and medical services should begin early. The employee should work with his or her Career Development Officer to generate a short list of assignment possibilities. Parents can then follow up with ECS and the Office of Overseas Schools to determine which posts have schools that can provide the specified accommodations.

The Overseas Briefing Center at the Foreign Service Institute and the FS Special Needs Listserv are also good sources of information. If boarding school is a possibility, the Education and Youth Officer in the Family Liaison Office is an excellent referral resource. All of these offices have user-friendly Web sites and can also be contacted by phone, e-mail or in person.

Once the research is complete, the final step for the parents is to contact

The information gathered is available at any time from the office or from the REO responsible for that area. REOs can be contacted by e-mail, even when they are on the road. ECS also has extensive information on resources at various posts. And the Overseas Briefing Center, part of the Transition Center at the Foreign Service Institute, has a range of materials, including some with comments from individuals serving at posts in *Personal Post Insights*.

All that said, sometimes things change quickly. A therapist may move away or a school may eliminate a program. That is the reason for the requirement that a family make real-time contact with the school before an assignment is confirmed.

Misconception 4: If a school abroad can meet a child's educational needs, it will also be able to provide other services such as

the school directly to make sure it has space available and still offers the services required. In many cases, the school may want detailed test reports to be e-mailed or faxed to assure a good fit.

Misconception 3: All the information available in Washington is outdated.

All of the offices mentioned above have good sources of information on schools and services and are working continually to improve the quantity and accessibility of that information. The Office of Overseas Schools is staffed with five experienced international educators, who serve as Regional Education Officers and spend much of the year traveling abroad and visiting schools. In addition to the OS-assisted schools, they visit other schools used by U.S. families and any facility that might provide a quality special-needs program.

The office also collects information from schools directly through questionnaires and through Community Liaison Office coordinators. At times, OS sends consultants to a certain country or region to evaluate the special needs resources.

speech therapy or occupational therapy.

Parents accustomed to the one-stop-shopping of U.S. public school systems are often dismayed to find that international schools — even large schools with special education programs — do not provide services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy or psychological testing and counseling. Sometimes it is because these services are not typically found in an educational setting in the host country or because the number of students requiring these specialized services is too small to make it cost-effective. Parents may need to work with the Regional Medical Officer, the Community Liaison Officer or other embassy personnel to identify local service providers.

Misconception 5: All students with the same diagnosis should be able to be served at the same school or post.

Most parents with special-needs children are aware that there is a wide degree of variation within the same diagnostic category. The autism spectrum, for example, ranges from girls with Rett Syndrome, who are non-ver-

bal and often must use wheelchairs, to highly gifted young people with Asperger's Syndrome, and everything in between. A learning disability may be auditory or visual, mild or severe. Determining a good fit requires an IEP for that particular child, with the required accommodations spelled out very clearly and in detail. Word-of-mouth that a certain community worked for a child with the same diagnosis as your son or daughter is not good enough.

Misconception 6: Gifted services are handled just like any other special-needs case.

Young people with intellectual gifts and talents are not covered in the U.S. by the same federal legislation as students who are challenged. But many American school systems do provide services for students identified as intellectually gifted. If a pupil has been identified as gifted by his or her school or a special program in the U.S. and is subsequently enrolled in an overseas school without such a program, a Supplementary Instruction amount for enrichment activities is available to augment the at-post education allowance.

If an international school or parent believes that a student may be gifted and in need of services, an assessment by a major university can be arranged through the Office of Overseas Schools. The Regional Education Officer will assist families with arrangements.

Misconception 7: Boarding options are limited for special-needs students.

There are many excellent boarding schools that provide every level of academic and psychological support available in the United States and abroad. The Education and Youth Officer in the Family Liaison Office is the primary resource for boarding school information for all students, including those with special needs.

Some college preparatory schools have structured study-skills options that may provide enough support for a student with a mild learning disability

or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Other schools and therapeutic programs are specifically dedicated to the education and treatment of young people with more severe challenges, such as Pervasive Developmental Delay or serious psychiatric conditions.

If a student needs a highly specialized placement or one on short notice, the Education and Youth Officer may refer the family to one of several specialized consultants in the Washington area or around the world. Organizations such as the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs or The Association of Boarding Schools have excellent Web sites and may be helpful, as well.

A Support Network of Professionals

The Transition Center at the Foreign Service Institute held a full-day workshop for parents on May 29 that included representatives of all the offices charged with supporting families with special needs children. The Family Liaison Office continues to advocate for assignment and allowance policies that give families maximum flexibility. The Office of Allowances works closely with FLO, Overseas Schools and the Office of the Legal Adviser in revisiting the legislative and regulatory guidelines and assisting families and posts with the technical and financial aspects of special education accommodations.

The Office of Overseas Schools sponsors several summer workshops for teachers and administrators specifically focused on serving special-needs students and continually develops materials, consults with schools and researches options around the world. The Employee Consultation Service reviews every case yearly to be sure that each child is moving toward maximizing his or her potential.

This network of professionals and the informal information-sharing among parents in our community will continue to make the path smoother for special-needs families. ■

Resources

Department of State Internet

Office of Overseas Schools —
www.state.gov/m/a/os/

Family Liaison Office —
www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/

Overseas Briefing Center —
www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/c6954.htm

Department of State Intranet

Employee Consultation Service —
<http://medical.state.gov>

Office of Allowances —
<http://aoprals.a.state.gov/>

Other

National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP) —
www.natsap.org

The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS) — www.schools.com/