

## METRO & STATE

### With school buildings shut down, LifeTown takes program for students with disabilities on-the-go

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

In Ohio and throughout the U.S., advocates have expressed concerns about how learning from a distance during the coronavirus pandemic could impact students with disabilities. Local programs that serve students with disabilities, such as LifeTown Columbus, are trying to find ways to adapt.

When Ohio's school buildings abruptly shuttered in March to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, Lynette Ferrell's heart ached for her 11-year-old son.

Kingston Ferrell, a fifth-grader at Fairmoor Elementary School on the East Side, was robbed of his final trip to LifeTown Columbus, she said.

The educational program teaches students with disabilities the skills needed to navigate everyday life with fun, interactive activities. Students who visit the 5,000-square-foot town in New Albany withdraw money from its bank for use at storefronts — a movie theater, salon, art studio, doctor's office and more.

"Every day, he'd ask when he could go," said Ferrell, 41. "I told him people are sick, so they can't accept visitors right now."

So last week, LifeTown went to Kingston.

Volunteers from Chabad Columbus built tiny cardboard storefronts and lined them on the sidewalk in the Ferrell family's Near East Side front yard.

"Our job is to level the playing field for these kids as they journey toward independence," said Rabbi Areyah Kaltmann, executive director of the Jewish congregation, which operates LifeTown. "We will not let the coronavirus stop us from doing that. We'll just have to work harder."

Kingston, who has autism, spent the morning of May 22 creating colorful sand art in a jar and painting a wooden snake. He also bought a juice box and a DVD of cartoons using money he had withdrawn from the bank.

The experience included educational activities related to COVID-19, such as a demonstration of how soap removes germs from hands. In this case, "germs" were specks of black pepper.

Ferrell recalled the moment when she reached out to Kaltmann on Facebook for help and he offered to arrange a visit. "I cried," she said.

Inspired by Kingston, Kaltmann's group hopes to take "LifeTown on the Go!" to children throughout central Ohio. Volunteers have been stuffing bags with activities and snacks at the miniature town, which hasn't welcomed children since March due to the pandemic.



Rochel Kaltmann left, of Chabad Columbus, which runs LifeTown Columbus and its new, mobile "LifeTown on the Go!" operation, offers Karissa Pleasant, 18, and her siblings items to buy with LifeTown currency. "LifeTown to Go!" set up outside the family's South Linden home last week. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH]

In Ohio and throughout the U.S., advocates have voiced concerns about how learning from a distance during the pandemic might disproportionately affect students with disabilities, especially those who lack the technology needed to access online materials. Most schools have pivoted to online teaching while their buildings are closed.

Even if children with special needs are logging on, they might face more challenges with virtual learning if they have behavioral, social or attention issues, said Kristin Hildebrant, senior attorney with Disability Rights Ohio.

Online, it's difficult to provide the personalized services that students need and are entitled to, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The federal law requires that schools identify and evaluate students with disabilities and provide those who qualify with individualized educational plans.

"Remote learning is never ideal, but it's particularly difficult for students with disabilities," Hildebrant said. "They're really dependent on that personal interaction."

Like LifeTown, other programs are trying to find ways to adapt.

Project SEARCH, a program that helps students with disabilities transition from high school into the workforce, has had to pull teens from internship sites, especially hospitals, which are restricting visitors.

That includes four OhioHealth hospitals in central Ohio.

This school year, the program serves about 300 Ohio students at 36 job sites.

Although students are still participating in online lessons, instructors are helping families teach job skills at home, too. Sometimes, tasks such as creating a daily routine, setting the table or organizing the pantry, and working to improve efficiency, can mimic responsibilities that kids have on a job.

"I think our teachers have done an amazing job adapting," said Erin Riehle, founder and senior director of the program, which started in Cincinnati. "Does it replace being at school? No, but they're trying their best."

Kari Pleasant, 41, said online schooling hasn't been easy for her daughter, but the senior at Beechcroft High School worked hard and is graduating on time.

Her daughter has autism and relies on routines to stay on track. One of those routines was regular visits to LifeTown.

Last week, 18-year-old Karissa Pleasant was surprised to find a miniature LifeTown when she opened the front door of her South Linden home. It even included CiCi, a tortoise from the town's pet store.

Karissa bought a snack from the deli and two bottles of nail polish from the salon.

Because school buildings closed, Karissa has missed her teachers and friends, she said, but she understands why she can't go back.

"Stay safe, stay home, stay healthy," she said.

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Karissa Pleasant, right, ponders which item to buy from Rochel Kaltmann. The 18-year-old, who has autism, is graduating from Beechcroft High on time. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH]



Kingston Ferrell is happy buying a juice box at LifeTown on the Go!, which set up outside his Near East Side home last week. The 11-year-old has autism. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH]