Honestly, if these are questions you are asking, then I truly believe we have programming that can help support these goals, whether that is through in-person workshops OR our distance learning options. We love what we do. We are knowledgeable and passionate about these kids. And our goal is to empower them to be the best they can be, with your help.

So, if you haven’t signed up for an IOB workshop in awhile and want to talk about what might be the best step “back in,” please reach out to us. We miss you.

If you regularly attend our programming and need more guidance on how IOB can help support your loved one on their own journey, reach out to us. We have been guiding families since we started back in 2012 and are getting better at it every day.

And we aren’t going anywhere. We are here and so excited for what tomorrow will bring!

What’s next?

That is a hard thing to figure out these days.

Fatigue, inertia, exhaustion. These are common themes we are hearing from so many of the families we support. Knowing what to plan for, how much to take on, and finding the energy to say “YES” is harder than ever.

And yet there is also a sense of hope—of things being better than they were but just not quite back to normal. Which makes choosing the next right thing seem daunting.

At Islands, we really do listen to the challenges families are facing as we plan for our current and future programming. For some, returning to in-person programming is it! For others, the convenience of virtual programming has been eye-opening. So how do you figure out what is the best option for you and your loved one?

Here are a few things to ponder…

• What does my son or daughter get excited about?
• What tasks can I hand off to them so that they can start “owning” their learning experiences?
• How can I leverage who my child is (with their unique passions and strengths) while helping them build those all important relationship skills - being kind, listening respectfully to others, all while building their own self confidence and self advocacy skills?

Margaret Fairbanks
Chief Education Officer

Islands of Brilliance is proud to announce that Co-founder and Chief Education Officer Margaret Fairbanks has been appointed to Governor Tony Evers’ Council on Autism. In her role as Parent Representative, she will be a voice for families—sharing our collective challenges and experiences in order to help shape policy to better serve the autistic community.
Rather than expect students to adapt to the environment, we create the ideal environment.

Navigating your child’s needs and the solutions that help them can be challenging and, at times, overwhelming. We understand the many questions on your mind, and very likely, have answered most of them over the years.

You don’t need to navigate this on your own—that’s why we designed the Concierge Approach. Just as we’ve seen students thrive when they work one-on-one with mentors, we’ve seen parents and caregivers breathe a sigh of relief when we help guide them to the right solutions for their child.

IOB works closely with parents to ensure we understand your student’s areas of interests, passions, learning styles, communication, strengths, and challenges. We want to know as much as possible about each student so we can provide the best learning experience.

We then take those answers and explore the Program Pyramid—IOB’s student-centered solution that provides a mix of opportunities spanning different skill sets, needs, and objectives. The IOB Education Team will determine which programs are best suited for your student that will help them build the technical and social skills needed to thrive, whether it be in the workplace or actively engaged in the community.

At IOB, it’s all about the students—they are at the center of everything we do. And our Concierge Approach was designed with them in mind.

### The Concierge Approach: How it Works

**STEP 1: Complete the Connect Form**
Head to islandsofbrilliance.com/programming, click on the “Connect with us” link, and fill in and submit the Connect Form. Once completed, a member of our Education Team will contact you to develop a full understanding of your child’s strengths, needs, and interests. We may also want to discover the learning objectives that have been identified for your child at school as well as your vision for their future.

**STEP 2: Find the right fit**
By leveraging our multi-layer programming opportunities—AKA The Program Pyramid—we are able to provide a learning path recommendation that is in alignment with your child’s individual needs, goals, and desires. Whether that plan focuses on IEP goals or simply finds a “happy place” for a student, different program options exist to meet objectives.

**STEP 3: Prepping your student**
Getting your student ready to go on day #1 is mission critical for future success. Whether that be conducting virtual staff introductions, walking through technical applications, jumping on a Zoom call to answer any student questions, or creating a social story that helps a student learn more about walking into an unfamiliar situation, IOB will work with parents to identify any preparation needed to ensure their student is ready.

**STEP 4: Ready. Set. Enroll!**
Program registration is easy. Head over to Eventbrite to enroll your child at islandsofbrilliance.eventbrite.com. If applicable, now is also the time to work with your child’s case manager to determine if programming can be covered. Questions? Please reach out to connect@islandsofbrilliance.org and we’ll provide speedy assistance.

**STEP 5: Watch your child grow!**
It’s program time! Students will find a place that is familiar, welcoming, and lets them think and create in an outcome-focused environment. We hope they get excited to participate and are proud to share their accomplishments. And for parents, we hope you’re just as excited too!
Student stories remind us of what’s possible. And why we love what we do.

Seeing students grow and succeed reminds us what’s possible and why we love what we do. Being able to share these wonderful stories gives the IOB community a chance to celebrate together.

Noah Wells, Age 23
Wauwatosa, WI

Noah didn’t have sketchbooks filled with doodles or drawings. Art really wasn’t his “thing.” Instead, what interested him most about Islands of Brilliance back in 2018 was the community, a chance for connection, and an opportunity to find his people.

IOB Director of Integrated Learning, Amy Mason, fondly reflected on Noah’s first Foundation workshop. “He was quiet. But he was always smiling and nodding when talking and collaborating with his mentor. He loved music -- that was really the hook for him. He leaned into his passions and learned the software to help express his love for music in new ways. Now he’s always excited to share his creativity and so much more with the friends he’s made.”

“I like engaging with people in the community and posting drawings to see people’s reactions. But I really enjoy providing encouragement and support,” Noah said when IOB recently spoke to him and his mother, Barbara.

But he really isn’t giving himself the credit he deserves. Noah is a true connector. A true friend.

He’s an active participant in both Brilliant Breakfast Club and Doodle Lounge. On Discord—an online sharing and social platform for the IOB community—Noah is the first one to start the conversation. Whether it’s recommending new songs for his peers to listen to (he loves classic rock...especially The Who!) or simply asking how someone’s day was, Noah makes his peers feel welcomed and heard.

Starting in January, Noah will be joining Digital Academy (DA). The time, hard work, and passion for art that he’s developed over the years has prepared him to take on this new opportunity.

“My excited to work together on a team with my peers, to stay focused, and to provide encouragement to others,” Noah proudly stated when asked what he’s looking forward to about DA.

Barbara is excited for this new chapter in Noah’s IOB career as well. She believes IOB has grown into an extension of their family. They get the advantage of what Noah is experiencing and learning because it carries over into their every day life. She loves how Noah is still getting support as he gets older. But what she really loves is how the IOB community makes Noah feel.

“I love to hear the laughter from the other room when he’s in the Doodle Lounge. He wouldn’t miss that time for the world.”

Noah’s IOB Resume: Future Digital Academy Student
Foundation Photoshop and Illustrator, Blender 3D
BBC, Doodle Lounge, Natterdays, Smactivities

islandsofbrilliance.org
Sandbox Programming

Our most frequent and accessible options, Sandbox Programs provide a safe, supportive, and collaborative environment for the student to learn, create, and connect.

Doodle Lounge

Whether it’s pencil and paper or full-scale Photoshop, Doodle Lounge allows participants to meet daily to draw, create, and share artwork via Zoom. Give your child a safe, supported environment to explore their creativity and interests alongside other students on the spectrum and our Doodle Guides. Participants can drop in to create, connect, and collaborate together. Students are encouraged to use whatever materials and technology are available to them. Join us all month long with your monthly subscription.

Monday–Thursday, 3:30–4:20 p.m. CST, Ages 8+ | $100 per month

Natterdays

“Natter” means to talk casually; to chatter. And we know our students love to do just that especially when it comes to their favorite things! Natterdays captures that energy and enthusiasm into a 50-minute workshop where they have the chance to integrate their interests into a unique storytelling workshop alongside their peers.

Guided by a master storyteller, students take turns and collaborate with one another to develop a one-of-a-kind tale. Conversations take place in a safe, supported environment and are overseen by licensed special education professionals and facilitated by subject matter experts from around the community.

Select Fridays, 3:30–4:20 p.m. CST, Ages 8+ | $25 per session

Smactivities

Smactivities—or more formally, Subject Matter Activities—are 50-minute topic-based live video chat sessions that offer students on the spectrum the chance to dig into a particular topic while engaging in STEaM-based projects and activities under the guidance of special educational professionals.

What kind of topics? Think superheroes, sidekicks, or even outer space!

Each session, IOB will provide inspiration for students to then create a design or character that corresponds to the specific subject. The best part? They get the chance to create alongside their peers and add their own unique spin to their project. Visit Eventbrite for specific workshop details and supply suggestions.

Select Fridays, 3:30–4:20 p.m. CST, Ages 8+ | $25 per session

Foundation Programming

1:1 mentorship, technical software instruction, and guidance on social and emotional development are the hallmarks of our Foundation Programming, which requires specific hardware and software for participation.

Virtual Foundation - Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator

The program that started it all—Foundation workshops are the backbone of IOB’s schedule. Over the course of five working sessions, students have the opportunity to explore the basics of Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator as they work and collaborate one-on-one with a professional design mentor (via Zoom). The best part? They’re able to bring their own passions and interests to use as their design inspiration. The final day culminates with an in-class presentation and celebration of their work. All participants will receive a 18” x 24” printed poster of their creation.

Weekly workshops run using the Zoom platform on the following dates:

WEDNESDAYS
February 16 – March 16: 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST
April 13 – May 11: 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST
Ages 8+ | $400 per session

SATURDAYS
January 8 – February 5: 10:00–11:15 a.m. CST
February 19 – March 19: 10:00–11:15 a.m. CST
April 16 – May 14: 10:00–11:15 a.m. CST
Ages 8+ | $400 per session

Spring Break 2022 or Bust!

Whether you’re sticking around town or heading somewhere warm while school is out, IOB is excited to bring back our popular virtual Foundation Workshops during Spring Break! No SPF needed.

Choose from one of the following week-long workshops:

M–F, March 21 – 25: Noon–1:15 p.m. or 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST
M–F, March 28 – April 1: Noon–1:15 p.m. or 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST
Ages 8+ | $400 per session

For additional information on workshop schedules and to register, visit: islandsofbrilliance.eventbrite.com

Need some technology assistance before a program begins? We can help make sure everything is set up correctly and your student is ready to go! Please reach out to connect@islandsofbrilliance.org. Help is on the way!
**Virtual Foundation - Blender 3D Modeling**

Now your child's creativity can go beyond two dimensions with an introduction to 3D modeling using Blender, a free web-based software. Students will work one-on-one with a mentor online via Zoom over the course of 7+ hours to learn the basics of the craft used in many industries, including gaming, architecture, movie production, engineering, and commercial advertising. Week one (tech week) will provide an introduction to their mentor and an overview of the technical aspects of Blender software. The remaining classes will feature software instruction, collaboration, and creation alongside their mentor. The final week culminates with an in-class presentation and celebration of their work.

**Weekly workshops run using the Zoom platform on the following dates:**

**THURSDAYS**  
January 6 – February 3: 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST  
February 17 – March 17: 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST  
April 14 – May 12: 4:45–6:00 p.m. CST  
Ages 10+ | $400 per session

Example of a recent IOB student project from a Blender 3D Modeling Workshop.

**Foundations Programming, Cont’d.**

**In-person Foundation Programming!**

IOB’s traditional Saturday 1:1 Mentor workshops return beginning in February at the Lubar Entrepreneurship Center! Spaces are limited, so sign up early!

The workshop that started it all is back in person! Over the course of five working sessions, students have the opportunity to explore the basics of Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator as they work and collaborate one-on-one with a professional design mentor. The best part? They’re able to bring their own passions and interests to use as their design inspiration. The final day culminates with an in-class presentation and celebration of their work. All participants will receive a 18” x 24” printed poster of their creation.

Saturdays, February 19 – March 19: 10:30–11:45 a.m.  
Meets at UWM’s Lubar Entrepreneurship Center, 2100 E. Kenwood Blvd, Milwaukee WI  
Ages 8+ | $400 per session

Saturdays, April 16 – May 14: 10:30–11:45 a.m.  
Meets at UWM’s Lubar Entrepreneurship Center, 2100 E. Kenwood Blvd, Milwaukee WI  
Ages 8+ | $400 per session

**ISLANDS OF BRILLIANCE HEALTH POLICY**

As an organization serving autistic individuals, Islands of Brilliance is focused on providing the safest environment for our students, mentors, and staff during the time of the pandemic and beyond. We recognize that our population of students may have factors that contribute to increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and for having increased COVID-19 related issues. Therefore, all students participating in our in-person programming must:

- Show proof of COVID-19 vaccination
- OR provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of each workshop session

**UW-MILWAUKEE MASKING POLICY**

All sessions will be held in the Innovation Lab at UWM’s Lubar Entrepreneurship Center, 2100 E. Kenwood Blvd, Milwaukee WI. We will be adhering to UW-Milwaukee’s health policy, which currently requires a mask for all individuals entering the building. If there are changes to the policy, we will update registrants via email.

For additional information on workshop schedules and to register, visit: islandsofbrilliance.eventbrite.com
Digital Academy
The most rigorous IOB program, Digital Academy provides apprentice-style instruction in a product-based learning environment.

The most rigorous IOB program for students over age 14, Digital Academy (DA) provides apprentice-style instruction in a product-based learning environment. Students collaborate with their peers as well as industry professionals who serve as mentors, and learn Design Thinking processes that leverage their design and technical skills to build and integrate a community-based project.

DA’s main emphasis is on developing soft skills, including self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management skills which accompany the technical product-based learning approach. Students also have the opportunity to build confidence, add to their resume, and establish meaningful community and professional connections.

Students must first participate in at least one Foundation Workshop and meet certain prerequisites before being considered and enrolled in Digital Academy.

NEW in 2022: Two DA cohorts! Returning students will jump right into a new project while new students will have the chance to go through a helpful onboarding process that will set them up for future DA success.

Community Support Programs
Life can be hard to navigate, whether you’re living with autism or someone who loves them, that’s why we offer two programs for adults that provide support and guidance for the journey.

Brilliant Breakfast Club
Older students are invited to hang with us—either in-person or virtually! Grab your favorite tea or coffee beverage for a virtual meet-up on Friday mornings! And on the second Wednesday of the month, we’ll get together in-person for breakfast and an activity. These live chats are tailored for young adults 18+ interested in a social experience and peer discussion designed to foster pathways toward independence. Discussion will touch on daily living skills including health and nutrition, finances, job searches, community engagement, and more. Facilitated by special education professionals and interns, participants have the opportunity to meet with their peers and grow together by building a community of mutual support.

Virtual: Fridays, 10:00–11:00 a.m. CST, Ages 18+ | $150 per month
In-Person: Second Wednesday of the month, 9:00 a.m.-Noon CST, Ages 18+ | $125

LIGHTHOUSE

Do you sometimes feel like you’re on an Island? Do you take comfort in hearing from parents facing similar challenges? Parents and caregivers are invited to join this weekly one-hour moderated video chat session that provides connection, conversation, and community support in a safe, respectful environment. Discussion topics vary weekly. Come to contribute or just listen in!

Wednesdays, 8:30–9:30 p.m. CST, parents & caregivers | Free

For additional information on workshop schedules and to register, visit: islandsofbrilliance.eventbrite.com
Islands Of Brilliance Team

Islands of Brilliance has a small, but mighty team that is passionate about our mission and dedicated to providing families with the highest-quality distance learning experience available.

Mark Fairbanks
Co-founder, Executive Director

Margaret Fairbanks
Co-founder, Chief Education Officer

Jess Shafe
Director of Special Education

Matt Juzenas
Director of Educational Content

Michelle Pape
Director of Development

Amy Mason
Director of Integrated Learning

Charlie Fairbanks
Creative Technologist

Natalie Derr
Creative Technologist

Kim Gerdes
Marketing Coordinator

Kadijha Jones
Program Coordinator

Stephanie Phillips
Special Education Coordinator

Astrid Merritt
Student Artist in Residence (UWM)

Amy Mason
Director of Integrated Learning

Kadijha Jones
Program Coordinator

Stephanie Phillips
Special Education Coordinator

Astrid Merritt
Student Artist in Residence (UWM)

Katelyn Wagner
OT in Residence (Mount Mary University)

Community Support & Funding Options

Islands of Brilliance offers student-centered workshops and programs in a safe, secure online environment. In many cases, federal, state, and county funding, including IRIS self-directed and Waiver funds, can be used to pay for programming.

Funding approval can be contingent upon location and is case specific (workshop curriculum must align with the goals outlined in the participant's individual plan). Families MUST consult with their case manager to confirm funding eligibility and approval prior to participation. Authorizations are required for programming using waiver funds.

For questions related to community support and funding, please email connect@islandsofbrilliance.org.

Watch the IOB Documentary: Brilliant Voices

IOB Director of Special Education Jess Shafe has embarked on a project to document our student voices to find out why Islands of Brilliance works so well for them. In Episode 1: People Like Me, she talks to four students about their experience and how it has impacted their lives, learning, and growth.

Hold the camera on your smartphone up to the QR code, and you will be taken to the 9:00 minute movie on YouTube!

Follow us @iobmke on all channels:
A Brilliant Approach to Education: Seeing and Celebrating Students For Who They Are.

Written by Jess Shafe, Director of Special Education

“Sit down, be quiet, keep your body still, take out this book, read these pages, talk with your partner, and be prepared to share!”

These are pretty common expectations one would hear in the traditional school setting. Teachers have a set curriculum that all students must access, interact with and “hopefuly” be successful at. As a special education teacher, I tried to meet students where they were at, modify and provide accommodations as best I could with the resources I had available. However, “success” was not always achieved and more often than not a “fingers crossed” mentality was the go-to approach for intervention.

Hardest Part of Teaching in Public Education
I’m often asked, “What is the hardest part about being a special education teacher?” My answer is always—seeing what a student needs but not being able to make it happen due to the constraints of public education. It’s a sad reality but one that the majority of teachers (special or not) experience.

This reality is one that keeps you up at night. You dream of changing the system. Of tearing down the walls of public education and rebuilding anew with walls that adapt and change to the students who enter. With walls that empower teachers to alter the environment to meet the needs of their students. Or perhaps to have no walls at all and to reimagine how education can be delivered and achieved altogether. While I was not able to reconstruct the model, Mark and Margaret Fairbanks were, through their creation of Islands of Brilliance (IOB).

The Lens Shift
Walking through the virtual doors of Islands was like walking out of a room filled with smog and breathing fresh air for the first time in ten years. The smog had felt all the more thick because I knew I was breathing it but I thought that that air was the only option. Then I experienced Islands and learned how very wrong I was.

IOB has been able to achieve what I only dreamt of as a teacher in public education. They’ve seen the disparities, the inadequacies, and the obstacles. And instead of bowing down to these limits and continuing to try to fit students of all shapes into square holes, they have been able to utilize student creativity as an intervention and vehicle to genuine success.

I’m going to be honest, as much as I thought I was an advocate for the autistic community and as educated and aware as I thought I was, I was still a participant within that system and found myself trying to fit students into holes they really had no reason to be in, other than for the system’s goal of one size fits all. But at IOB you don’t need to do that. Students drive the experience, their interests and creativity are the agents which take them to success. At Islands, the definition of success looks different for each student, there is no ‘correct’ end point, and much of the student growth lies outside of their design skills. Students are thriving and developing in the often hidden or overlooked skills of self-confidence, communication, positive interactions with peers and supporting adults, improved self worth, and overall engagement with a task because they were able to tap into what makes them tick and interact with it in a constructive and supported way. Their interests and strengths are celebrated amidst this beautiful intersection of creativity and education.

Square Peg, Square Hole
Traditional schools can often feel like a conveyor belt of students, with the goal of getting them in and out as quickly (and with as little modification to the organization) as possible. With the ‘biggest bang for your buck’ being the underlying priority. While many students fall through the cracks of such a system, the neurodiverse suffer the most in my opinion. Their skills and strengths are often overlooked and their unique needs are often met with ignorance or intolerance. Outwardly they may appear to ‘fit the mold’ but inside they see the world differently, interact with the environment uniquely and learn in beautifully individual ways. All of these qualities should be celebrated and used as catalysts for learning. However most traditional schools miss the mark—but not Islands of Brilliance. Islands sees students for who they are and meets them where they're at.

Rather than expect students to adapt to the environment, Islands creates the ideal environment. From the moment you are introduced to IOB, you can tell it’s unique. There is an innate flexibility and fluidness to the way IOB operates that resists the complacency of status quo and a “one size fits all” approach. That flexibility is what drives the student-staff relationship–never approaching two students the same and never expecting students to be anything other than who they are.

Unlike other organizations where participants must adhere to preset expectations, are told to follow certain procedures and often shamed when they do not conform, students at IOB are met with genuine interest and asked “where do you want to go?” If a student is a ‘square peg’, Islands creates an environment for square pegs.

You only need to witness one of their programs to see the impact that approach has on its community. To see these students thriving, smiling, communicating and celebrating their successes on a daily basis with their peers, leaves no doubt in my mind that Islands of Brilliance has unlocked a powerful model for supporting and growing ALL students.

Did you know the IOB Education Team writes a monthly blog post? The Notebook is filled with information and resources regarding topics surrounding autism, special education, occupational therapy, parenting, and more. In case you missed them, we’re highlighting a few recent posts we think you’ll find informative and relatable.

Interested in checking them out? Head to islandsofbrilliance.org/category/the-notebook to learn more.
Islands of Brilliance Sandbox @: Coming to a city near you in 2022!

IOB is packing up our supplies and hitting the road!

We think we have something pretty special here at IOB and want to spread the magic with more students around the state of Wisconsin.

Our goal is to introduce autistic students and their families to IOB, provide in-person version of our virtual programming, and connect them to a future resource and intervention that can become a regular part of their child’s routine.

Dates and locations are still being finalized. Stay tuned as updates and announcements are shared. We can’t wait to see where the road takes us!