

CUSTOM EDUCATION

Special schools for special needs

Private schools offer intensive programs for children with learning disabilities

LAURA RAMSAY

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When Frasier Beeny was in kindergarten, his teacher mom, Kelly MacDonald, quickly realized that he was struggling with the learning environment.

His teachers at a public elementary school in Markham, Ont., attributed his inability to repeat phrases from books, or to copy letters, to the fact that he was a December baby (meaning he was a bit younger than classmates), but his mother felt there were deeper problems.

Ms. MacDonald tried to home school Frasier in Grade 1, but remembers that after five days of "A-A-A, at the end of the week he still didn't even recognize the letter."

It's estimated that, like Frasier, about 10 per cent of school-age children in Canada experience learning difficulties that force them to struggle to focus their attention and keep up with the classroom.



Arrowsmith School pupil Frasier Beeny reads to his mother, Kelly MacDonald, at their home in Toronto. (JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)

Ms. MacDonald was determined to help her bright little boy, who "could play chess at age four and assemble things we'd bought at IKEA" but at age six still couldn't identify letters. She didn't want to wait for the school system to acknowledge his problems (Ontario public schools don't begin testing for learning disabilities until Grade 3), and worried that, in any case, the teachers weren't able to address them.

So she paid \$1,500 for a private learning assessment; after being told that Frasier was "very bright in some areas and really bad in others," and feeling that there was no point in keeping him in public school doing hours of lessons he couldn't process, she looked to private schools for help.

She and Frasier, now 9, found it at the Arrowsmith School, an independent school for children with learning disabilities. Founded in Toronto in 1978 by Barbara Arrowsmith Young, it now has affiliates across Canada and the United States.

The Arrowsmith Program uses intensive therapy to correct cognitive difficulties; it uses targeted exercises to stimulate specific parts of the brain to teach it to overcome identified deficits.

Ms. Young says the program grew out of neuroscience, not education. Students do specific cognitive development skills for at least half their school day. Once they develop the necessary cognitive ability and are able to retain concepts, they work on catching up with curriculum.

About 60 pupils attending the flagship school in Toronto, paying about \$19,000 a year for full-time studies. Most of the students have multiple learning disabilities and attend the school for an average of three years. By that time, most are able to return to a regular classroom without need of special-education assistance, Ms. Young says, although they may need to catch up with curriculum work.

It costs about \$4,000 to train a teacher in the Arrowsmith Program, which Ms. Young would love to see offered in public schools. "It is very doable in

the public system."

In fact, the program has been used by the Toronto Catholic School Board for the past 10 years to help pupils identified as learning disabled by Ontario's Identification, Placement and Review Committee process. (Students in the Catholic school system do not pay for the program.)

Ms. MacDonald says she was attracted to the idea that Arrowsmith School could correct Frasier's learning problems; it was "the only place I found that was doing anything other than compensating" for Frasier's learning difficulties.

Her concerns about children slipping unaided through the public system resonate with Angeline Sarabura, who founded the Gregory School for Exceptional Learning in Ancaster, Ont., seven years ago. Her son, now 13, is mildly intellectually disabled but did not qualify for an educational assistant in his public school, and the school refused her request to have him repeat Grade 1 despite not being academically ready for Grade 2.

Of the 18 pupils at the Gregory School, seven have autism and most of the others have developmental delays or learning disabilities. Its emphasis is on academics and uses two types of instruction not commonly used in public systems.

One is "discrete trial teaching intervention," the approach used in applied behavioural analysis (ABA) that is effective with autistic children. The other method is direct instruction, which uses a sequentially structured curriculum and scripted lessons. "A lot of public school teachers frown on this as a bad thing because they don't think they can be creative. But this works," Ms. Sarabura says.

Tuition runs about \$17,700 annually at the Gregory School; pupils who require one-on-one assistance may pay up to \$50,000 annually. Ms. Sarabura says parents are desperate for help. "Most of the parents here who have tried the regular system were frustrated by it. It's the parents who are seeking this out."

Ms. Young says parents often realize early on that something isn't right with

their child and are less inclined than in the past to wait for the school system to confirm their fears before seeking help.

"We are getting a lot more students out of Grade 2 or 3, which is wonderful ... the earlier we can get the student the better," because the problems can be addressed before the child becomes demoralized.

In addition to the financial cost, many families make other sacrifices to send their special needs child to private school. Two families moved to Ancaster from Toronto so their children could attend the Gregory School, for example. In Frasier Beeny's case, Ms. MacDonald quit her job and the family (which includes Frasier's father and Frasier's younger brother) moved from Markham to Toronto to make it easier for him to attend Arrowsmith.

She says that after two years at Arrowsmith, Frasier has "morphed from a boy who was withdrawn and depressed" by his inability to keep up with his classmates "to a boy who has developed a sense of humour, who laughs all the time," a quality that will help to ease his return to a regular school next year.

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