

# Report on Private Schools

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Changing the world, one extra-curricular activity at a time. P3

Who can afford to send their kids to private school? Maybe you. P5

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### Help for troubled kids

Zara Parker, left, a counsellor with Venture Academy, spends time with 15-year-old student Sarah high above Okanagan Lake in B.C. At Venture, students live in parent/counsellor homes. Story, P2.

## 'We're here to ensure these kids ... have a chance to graduate'

Success is not necessarily measured in high grade averages at schools for children with developmental or behavioural problems, **DENISE DEVEAU** finds

At the Mediated Learning Academy in Coquitlam, B.C., the day's curriculum includes occupational and speech language therapy sessions for children with developmental needs. In Meaford, Ontario, a small group of teenage girls with behavioural problems that have kept them out of the conventional school system embark on a trek to Algonquin as part of their therapeutic learning experience. And a young child at the Arrowsmith School in Toronto studies Punjabi language symbols on a computer screen as part of a memory exercise that helps stimulate her learning functions.

These are examples of a handful of private schools across Canada whose raison d'être is to provide educational, therapeutic and resource services for children with special needs.

The numbers of these private schools are low. They are even lower for those brave few that take on troubled adolescents or severely developmentally challenged children whose chances of academic survival in the outside world are remote at best.

According to information officer Christine Larocque of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada in Ottawa, even though 10 per cent of the Canadian population has been diagnosed as learning disabled, she speculates there are only 15 to 25 private schools in the country that specialize in this area. "You are talking about a select group of kids with very specific problems that require the right qualifications to teach them."

Dr. Shirley Bryntwick, director of professional services for the Chisholm Educational Centre in Oakville, Ont., a private school for children with learning disabilities, says there are some practical reasons why resources are so limited. "This

type of teaching is very labour-intensive and requires special training.

"Also, a lot of private schools don't want to work with children who aren't scholars. They want kids who are motivated and can take the curriculum and run with it. It's easier to have a school filled with high-achieving kids."

While private schools boast low student-to-staff ratios, those that support learning disabled or behavioural problem children often speak in terms of staff-to-student ratios. Timothy Moore, head of the Landmark East School in Wolfville, N.S., an international school for students with learning disabilities, notes, "When you combine teaching and non-teaching staff, you're looking at a three-to-one staff-to-pupil ratio. These children have a need for intensive remediation."

In many cases, learning-disabled children can prove to be surprisingly accomplished if the proper teaching methods are put into place, says Annette Goodman, director of admissions for Arrowsmith School in Toronto. "Many learning-disabled kids are average to above-average intelligence. However, most schools tend to work around or compensate for the disability."

"We believe the key is to stimulate the weak cognitive areas so they can compete in a full academic curriculum."

Depending on the child in question and the severity of the disability, success is not necessarily measured in high grade averages. For some, it's a matter of simply getting to a level beyond their current capabilities.

Ingrid Jeffrey is executive director of the Mediated Learning Academy, one of the few schools that work with children with severe disabilities, including Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, fetal alcohol

syndrome and more. She explains, "We really work to try and get each child to the highest possible level they can achieve."

As Mr. Moore points out, "For many of these children it takes time for their academic and emotional growth. They need close intervention and support."

For those working with troubled teens, it's a different challenge. As Bob Shaw, co-founder of the Rocklyn Academy in Meaford, Ont. — the country's only all-girl "therapeutic school" — the issue is not rooted in learning difficulties. In fact, he speculates that the opposite holds true for the teenage girls at the school.

"These girls are typically viewed as problems and seen in a negative light. But they are all highly sensitive, intuitive, creative and intelligent — all the things that make great leaders."

Rocklyn focuses its efforts on shoring up academics with a structured environment that teaches acceptable boundaries, nurtures

leadership skills, provides a smart nutrition regimen, and offers round-the-clock medical and therapeutic support. "We put these girls back in charge of their lives. In fact, most of our students graduate as Ontario Scholars."

The Venture Academy in Kelowna, B.C., is a unique residential program that also works with troubled teens. As agency director Gordon Hay explains, the youth are placed in parent/counsellor homes while they learn to participate in community and academic activities. Each student has a support network of five to six professionals including physicians, psychologists, behavioural health specialists and drug counsellors.

"Parents come to us because they couldn't get access to government programs; their kids have been expelled from schools; and boarding schools simply won't take them," Mr. Hay says.

Of course, for this level of intervention and support, services do not come cheap, although some subsidized programs are more affordable than others. Costs range from a \$12,000 annual fee for day programs for learning disabled children, to as high as \$6,000 a month for boarding-school programs for children requiring extremely intensive therapeutic support.

In addition, given the intensity of the support required, space is limited. Registration for some programs is capped at a mere dozen, while others may have the resources to handle 100 at best — although most directors say they wish that wasn't the case. "It's too bad we can't take on more," Mr. Hay says.

For those committed to this educational area, specialized programs can be the key to unlocking a wealth of potential that would otherwise go to waste.

"The kids that come to us would more than likely be lost or may not graduate high school," Dr. Bryntwick says.

"We're here to ensure these kids are going to have a chance to graduate and go further."

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**"This type of teaching is very labour-intensive and requires special training. Also, a lot of private schools don't want to work with children who aren't scholars. They want kids who are motivated and can take the curriculum and run with it. It's easier to have a school filled with high-achieving kids."**

DR. SHIRLEY BRYNTWICK OF THE CHISHOLM EDUCATIONAL CENTRE IN OAKVILLE, ONT.