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A 'NO TEASING' ATMOSPHERE FOR LEARNING NEWTON PRIVATE SCHOOL AIMS TO HELP STUDENTS SURMOUNT DISABILITIES

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NEWTON -- Fifteen-year-old Adam Cades is in his first year at the Learning Prep School here, and speaks with a quiet eloquence that belies the reason he has come. In public school, says Cades, who lives in Holliston, "I didn't like the way the kids were. They harassed me because I wasn't as smart as them."

He is very clear that he intends to stay and graduate from Learning Prep. Calling the school "pretty cool," Cades says, "There's no dislikes here, no teasing. Perhaps more importantly, Cades looks forward to going to school every day. The other students, he says, "come from the same place you do."

That place is the constant struggle with learning and language disabilities that intimidate and prevent some students from being able to function properly in a regular classroom setting. The private Learning Prep School provides a non-threatening setting for students ages 7 to 21. Most of the 220 students who have been referred from public schools in 100 communities from Cape Cod and Rhode Island to Lawrence need more one-to-one teaching instruction than they can receive in a regular school. Most of the communities subsidize the \$17,300 annual tuition, which includes speech therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health counseling. The school receives no private funding.

The school was founded in 1970 by Nancy Rosoff, a clinical audiologist and teacher of the deaf. "I became so frustrated by telling parents what was wrong with their children and having no place to refer them to," she says. Learning Prep children "have a breakdown in the acquisition of language, so they can't acquire the skills they need to organize expressions or write them in the proper grammatical form."

Rosoff, who serves as director, adds that these students have difficulty "if they get too much information too quickly," for example, taking three or four directions at the same time. "So the order in which you present things has a great deal to do with whether they'll learn," she says.

Special education provided in resources rooms in public schools must serve a wide range of students with different skill levels, and those teachers can only work with students in "short bursts of time," says Rosoff. "There is no integrated curriculum that takes into consideration who they are and how they learn."

Students are evaluated before entering the school and are grouped in different classes based on that academic level, as well as their learning style. She says that teachers can present material to the group as a unit. "What happens in a classroom rises and falls on what information a teacher can get across." The largest class has nine students, but most classes have between five and six.

The majority of students at the Learning Prep School have language problems that affect their ability to learn, although some are cancer survivors. For many students the problem is processing information, not a lack of intelligence. "Language affects everything you do, but not your brain," says Carolynn Banks, principal of the high school. "There's a break in connection in messages brought to the brain." There are 18 different reading levels among the 104 high school students, Banks says, the lowest group reading at the second-grade level, and the highest reading between the ninth- and 10th-grade levels. The lowest math group is learning to make change for \$1, and the most advanced is doing second-level algebra, she says.

The difference in learning style is based upon whether the student is an auditory or visual learner, Banks says. The auditory learner needs to be taught with more verbal emphasis, while the visual learner talks rapidly and gets frustrated easily, and needs a slower introduction to words and sentences. For both, adds Rosoff, a lot of repetition is needed.

At the high school on a recent day, students sit huddled over computers, trying to concentrate on the screen, while some must also contend with computerized babies they have been charged with caring for. The babies are programmed at regular intervals to cry, and won't stop until their "parent" uses a special key to comfort them and turn them off. The babies also contain a printout that indicates how often they have been fed, changed, and whether they have been handled roughly.

This is just another of the daily life challenges at the school, where a great deal of emphasis is also placed on teaching social skills and preparation for the workplace. On this day, the juniors and seniors, including those with the computerized, lifelike babies -- part of the Health and Student Issues curriculum, are heading to a Holiday Inn in East Boston for a Massport job fair. The five-year high school curriculum includes a work/study program, where juniors and seniors work one week and attend school the next. The school joins with about 20 businesses to place students locally in their first year of the program so officials can monitor their progress. The "middlers" grade (after sophomore year) prepare students for careers, including what are employers' expectations, proper behavior, and attendance.

"I learn easier 'cause there's smaller classes and they break things down for you," says Colleen Colon, 19, of Boston, of her five years at the school. Colon was heading to the job fair with her "daughter" Collisha, a combination of her name and her partner's. A rather weary Colon says Collisha woke up three times during the night. As far as having a real baby, "I think I'd rather wait until I have patience."

Between 10 percent and 20 percent of each graduating class go on to college, but 99 percent of those students attend programs for the learning disabled, according to Banks, because they still need language intervention.

The school follows Newton Public Schools curriculum, but the difference is in the teaching approach. "We care more that kids know why things happened that brought us here today, rather than all the facts of history," says Banks. Teachers focus on what students can learn from events of the past, which are then broken down to help explain what happened in a context, she says.

All students have reading and languages arts classes twice a day, four days a week. On the fifth day, high school students work with a speech and language therapist in a group on communication, "giving them additional strategies to learn how to get their thoughts organized in a sequential fashion for better oral and written expression," says Banks. The younger grades have a minimum of two periods of individual or group therapy with the speech and language therapist to focus on weaknesses and develop their skills.

As part of reading, students are taught to highlight words or sentences, and then write down facts to "harness their thoughts," says Banks. They also learn how to compare information. Another strategy is "story mapping," where students have help framing their thoughts and learn how to look for characterizations in books and forecast what might happen.

The school has a strict "respect policy" and students caught teasing others are given detention and have to write a letter of apology. If there is a second incident, parents are called. "The reason is, we beg our kids in the classrooms to raise their hand and say 'I don't get what you're saying,' and if they're called a name they won't do it," Banks says.

"When you have an environment where kids feel they won't be disrespected, you can do an awful lot of teaching," says Rosoff.

Adam Boyer, 16, of Framingham, says he got into too many fights in public school because he sometimes can't control his behavior. "The teachers here are helpful, and they pay more attention to us," he says.

Before coming to Learning Prep two years ago, Boyer says he had to use a calculator to add and subtract, and now he doesn't use one anymore.

A lot of the students have difficulty socializing because with their disability often comes immaturity, says Rosoff. "Language impairment is not just with the spoken or written word," she says. "We do a lot of communication with our bodies." Learning Prep students often don't understand how to read people's tone of voice or body language, so they "invade other people's space. They don't know how to initiate a conversation, or share for appropriate play," she says.

Older students don't know how to maintain relationships in a way that doesn't constantly expose them to teasing, so they are taught skills as basic as waiting their turn, says Rosoff. Occupational therapists go into classrooms and co-teach to show teachers how to accommodate each child's fine motor and perceptual deficits, which greatly impact his ability to read, write, copy off a board, and relate himself to other people around him, says Rosoff.

Some 70 percent of the children who enter Learning Prep between the ages of 8 and 10 do return to alternative programs, primarily offered in public schools, she says.

"We don't give them any false promises; we try to give them alternatives," says Rosoff.

But, like Cades, Boyer expresses no ambivalence about staying at Learning Prep. "I don't want to go back to public school. It's more secure here, and I've made friends," he says. "There's no fights, no teasing."

"If more schools were like this," says Cades, "more kids would have a better chance to make something of themselves."