

LEARNING TO FLY

Local schools are getting creative with accommodations and programs to help students thrive.

By Amy Souza



Jemicy students practice reading aloud to the best listeners imaginable.

Bill and Suzanne Mannion watched their older daughter, Emma, struggle during first grade. Other students made fun of her for having trouble with simple addition, and the Mannions could see their daughter's self-esteem drop. They feared she might get held back a grade and worried that might further lower her confidence.

After Emma was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and dyscalculia—difficulty in comprehending numbers and arithmetic—the Mannions moved their two kids (Emma is 10, Anna 9) to St. Clement Mary Hofbauer School in Baltimore, where Emma is part of a program that gives her the academic support she needs. Called PRIDE (for Pupils Receiving Inclusive Diversified Education), the K-8 program run by the Archdiocese of Baltimore focuses on helping students with low- to high-average intelligence and mild to moderate learning disabilities.

Students spend language arts and math periods with their PRIDE teacher and classmates, and then spend the remaining school day—homeroom, social studies, religion, etc.—with the rest of their peers.

"It's great for the kids," says Kate Dannals, St. Clement's school guidance counselor. "It gives them a chance to have a Catholic education and be part of a smaller, more structured community with faith-based values, while getting the educational support that they need." PRIDE class sizes are small, which allows instructors to focus on each student's particular learning style and to suggest accommodations that help in other classes, as well. For instance, during regular class periods, Emma sits

at the front to minimize distractions, receives study guides and opts to use one separate notebook for each class, instead of a big notebook divided into sections.

“The first year in PRIDE, we saw Emma smiling more,” Bill Mannion says. “You could see she was happier and felt more accepted. You could see how confident she was getting.”

By third grade—her second year in PRIDE—Emma won an academic achievement award for most improvement. During one semester in fourth grade, she made the honor roll.

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD Many parents want their children to receive a private or parochial school education. But if those children have learning or developmental disabilities, there’s no guarantee they’ll receive the help they need in a traditional classroom setting. Maybe they’ll struggle through, feeling dumb. Maybe they’ll get picked on. In the worst case, they might give up on themselves.

“Unlike public schools, private schools have no responsibility per se to meet all accommodations,” says Paula McCormick, an independent special education advocate in Glen Burnie. “Many have a great attitude and want to do what they can to help the student, especially if the student is already placed there and is part of the community.”

The first step is to figure out what’s wrong. As part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, school districts must seek children with learning disabilities who may be eligible for special education services. Often, though, discovery begins with teachers and parents who notice a child is having difficulty in one or more academic areas. Parents can then turn to their local education agency to see what types of testing it provides. Parents might also visit pediatricians, psychologists and other outside experts for specific tests. Getting good diagnostic data is crucial, because it informs which changes will make the biggest difference and provides a starting point for negotiating with the child’s school.

Accommodations can include extra time to take tests, preferential seating to minimize distractions, or various high and low-tech solutions, such as a calculator for math, a computer for taking notes, or books on tape instead of reading. Knowing which accommodations might help means understanding the child in question. Parents, teachers and the children themselves need to learn as much as they can about a particular disability and ways to get past it.

“Learning disabilities go along with other difficulties,” says McCormick, “including organization, study skills, social and emotional needs, self-esteem and the ability to advocate for their own needs. Students need to be able to know what they need and know how to ask. They need the language to say, ‘I need these specific accommodations and this is why.’”

BEYOND ACCOMMODATIONS: SPECIAL SCHOOLS

In some cases, a child might benefit more from attending a public school—if its services meet the student’s needs—or a special education school.

“Teacher-to-student ratios are generally smaller in a specialty classroom,” McCormick says, “and they have specialized materials.”

Ben Shifrin, head of school at the Jemicy School in Owings Mills, believes learning should be exciting and fun. For children with dyslexia, however, he knows it can be anything but. In the second grade, Shifrin’s teacher held one of his papers up to the class and said, “Now here’s an example of careless work.” His offense? The young Shifrin, who was dyslexic but didn’t know it, had transposed letters in some written words. He went home, humiliated, and soon began dreading school. To this day, he feels a sting when remembering the incident.

That turned out to be a formative experience for Shifrin, however. A few years later, his dyslexia was finally diagnosed and a teacher took an interest in helping him learn to read. Shifrin graduated from college with top honors and went on to graduate school. He followed his passion into special education, and is now an advocate for children with dyslexia and other learning differences.

Shifrin notes that learning differences don’t go away; instead, they are something each person must learn to live with. Nor does having a learning difference, such as dyslexia, mean a person can’t succeed.

“Our brains are wired to speak,” Shifrin says. “Reading is something we created, and not all brains make that connection. It has nothing to do with intelligence.”

At the Jemicy School, which serves children in grades 1 through 12, specialized curricula help children learn to read and hands-on, experiential programs put the fun back into school. And then there are the canine companions. Teachers whose dogs pass a certification exam can bring their pets to campus and into their classrooms (barring any children with allergies), where children can play with or read to the dogs.

“Having the dogs there produces miracles in our children,” says Shifrin. “It takes the anxiety away if a child can read to a dog. This animal is a safe ‘person’ who is not going to evaluate them.”

SUPPORTING COMPLEX NEEDS For children and young adults with severe learning issues, physical disabilities and medical conditions, challenges go beyond basic accommodations. At the Delrey School in Lansdowne, students aged 2 through 21 with very complex needs receive care, such as therapeutic feeding and physical therapy, in addition to education. Most of Delrey’s students are not on a diploma track, but the school tries to follow the current public school curriculum, says Principal Mimi Wang. Academic achievement, however, is not the only measure of success.

“With our therapeutic feeding proto-col, for instance, the goal is for the student to be able to oral feed, so they don’t have to rely on a tube,” says Wang.

Physical therapists work with students to build motor development and use the school’s Sensory Processing Room to help children who can’t tolerate certain textures, bear weight or place themselves or others in space. The room has protected floors and walls, special lighting, multisensory learning materials and speaker/amplification boxes, all designed to stimulate the senses in a safe environment.

For the past 25 years, the school has also run a community daycare for typically developing children aged 2 to 5. The youngsters spend time with Delrey students, integrating both groups of children and thereby broadening the definition of “normal.”