



Two-tier system evolving for special ed

Cash-strapped, cookie-cutter public system failing kids with high needs, say private educators

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Sammy Miller always had quick reflexes on the infield, a decent hockey shot and a knack for computers. In the classroom, things didn't come as easily. During grade school, she struggled to read and was quick to give up. She didn't feel she fit in.

In Grade 9, Miller's parents enrolled her in YMCA Academy, a small independent high school in Toronto for teens with learning disabilities or learning styles that aren't suited to traditional high schools.

"At the beginning, I used to doubt myself every five seconds," says Miller, now 18. "I argued with the teachers that 'I can't.' But they wanted to help, and believed in me and that I could do better."

Today the teenager gobbles up fiction and writes short stories. She understands her strengths, her own learning style and how to advocate for herself. In September, she heads to Fanshawe College in London, Ont., to study multimedia design and production.

The small environment made a big difference, Miller says. There were 47 students at the academy this year, a staff of 15 and the school is on one floor of an office building. "You don't get lost." People notice if you're absent for a day.

There's no stigma about using assistive technology to help with note taking, reading or writing because everyone has a laptop and software.

Miller says her peers understand what it's like to struggle; teachers are interested in more than academics. "There is always somebody willing to help and talk to you."



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Samantha Miller, right, and Iona Moeller are students at YMCA Academy, a small independent high school in Toronto.

YMCA Academy is among a handful of private schools and tutoring services in Ontario trying to address a widening gap in the public school system – special education services for students who learn differently, have learning or attention problems or other special needs.

Growing demand for special ed, lack of teacher training and a funding shortage have left many kids floundering in the public system as they wait for supports and services they are entitled to.

As a result, families who can afford to do so often turn to private schools that offer small classrooms and alternative learning environments, or others aimed specifically at special-needs students.

YMCA Academy, launched in 2003 with five Grade 9 students and four staff, costs roughly \$14,000 a year. Subsidies geared to income are available and are currently provided to 30 per cent of students. Schools for special needs students typically have annual fees of more than \$20,000.

Advocates say while they don't blame parents for doing whatever it takes to help their kids learn, the privatization of special ed services is a worrisome trend.

"It's definitely a concern," says Judy Kerr, executive director of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. "A two-tiered system is being developed in Canada; you can look around and see it... but the cost is still prohibitive to most parents."

Erika Shaker, director of the education project with the Ottawa-based research group the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, says it's bad for everyone when families feel they have to pull out students "who pose a challenge to the system."

For her, the answer is not diverting those kids but in strengthening the public system with more funding, shifting away from the focus on standardized testing and a one-size-fits-all approach, and a commitment to addressing a range of learning styles.

Tony Pontes, superintendent of staff development and school support services at the Peel District School Board, says special ed in Ontario is "incredibly under funded." As an example, the Peel Board spent \$10 million beyond its special ed envelope last year, diverting funds from other areas to try and meet the demand. Pontes says another 500 teaching assistants are needed to help students with autism and other special needs.

Providers of private services feel they may be the best hope for many students.

Merle Levine was among the first to start a school for kids with learning and attention disorders when she launched the Merle L. Levine Academy 35 years ago. For \$22,000 a year, the North York school can take up to 80 students from Grade 2 through high school. It is a "catch-up school" aimed identifying the root of a child's learning problems and re-teaching the fundamentals in a way they can grasp, says Levine. The goal is that they're equipped to return to a mainstream school after two or three years.

Levine says "there's nothing magical" about the formula of innovative teaching, engaging all of a child's senses and individual attention.

But it's one the public system can't provide to many of its students without a lot more money and teacher training. Effective special ed is so costly, she adds, that many independent schools have moved away from that target group to focus on regular programming, with additional supports available for students in need.

Barbara Bierman, executive director of the Ontario Federation of Independent Schools, says parents often turn to private schools fearing the public system can't respond quickly

enough to their child's learning difficulties.

"They want their kids assessed and treated fast."

In the public schools, parents often have to fight for and wait for teaching aides and assistive technology.

Even if parents can afford it, they are not permitted to hire an aide themselves and aren't supposed to supply their own laptops or software.

Bierman says research shows student achievement improves with individual attention, parent involvement and constant communication between school and home. Schools like YMCA Academy make that part of their strategy.

Angeline Sarabura is the secretary of Spectra, a network of special ed schools and organizations.

She founded the Gregory School in Ancaster six years ago for kids with autism and other special needs and says many parents choose schools like hers so they can hire aides or "shadows" for their kids, even though it can cost at least \$30,000 a year on top of tuition.

At the YMCA Academy, school head Jim Milligan says the goal is to help students reach their potential – as learners and as people – by taking a holistic approach to education.

The school offers the applied level Ontario curriculum to prepare them for community college, the workplace and apprenticeships, and provides Individual Education Plans tailored to each student's learning style. They learn life skills for job-hunting and living on their own.

Hands-on learning takes place in the science lab, at sewing machines in the fashion classroom, on the basketball court or in the pool at the nearby Metro YMCA. Membership in the fitness facility is included in tuition.

Since the first students graduated two years ago, youth have gone on to train as chefs, plumbers, hairstylists and in multimedia.

Milligan says education should be about more than curriculum, credits and academic achievement.

At the academy, instead of awards for best math or English marks, each year students vote for six peers who demonstrate core values of the YMCA – honesty, respect, responsibility, health, inclusiveness and caring.

Every student needs to feel they matter – to each other and to their teachers – and have their particular strengths and gifts recognized and encouraged, he says.

"I think what we're offering is a different way of thinking about education and relationships."

It's a philosophy that has made a world of difference for Miller. Her graduation this month is bound to be an event filled with pride and promise.

But in some ways it will be bittersweet. Teachers and friends at the school have helped her so much, she says, that sometimes, "I actually don't want to leave."

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