

LEARNING ISSUES

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VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Dr. Norman Doidge, a Toronto psychiatrist, calls the Arrowsmith program a 'jewel.'

'Incredible jewel' targets areas of the brain that need to be retrained

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Toronto's two public school boards will this week hear from parents who want them to offer a unique made-in-Canada program for children with learning disabilities.

The Toronto District School Board will be asked tonight to introduce the Arrowsmith program in a pilot project. At a meeting on Wednesday, the Catholic board, which launched Arrowsmith 10 years ago and is reviewing it, will hear from anxious families urging them to continue.

The groundbreaking program, created 30 years ago by Barbara Arrowsmith Young of Toronto, is unusual because it's aimed at "fixing" learning dysfunctions through a series of cognitive exercises to strengthen weak areas of the brain. This goes against the conventional notion that learning disabilities are lifelong and children should be taught to work around them with accommodations – such as computers for poor fine motor skills and handwriting, or calculators for those struggling with math.

The approach, while controversial, has steadily attracted followers as a result of growing research into neuroplasticity, which demonstrates the brain is not hardwired for life and can be taught to reconfigure itself, as shown in people recovering from strokes.

"You have in that program an incredible jewel," Dr. Norman Doidge, renowned Toronto psychiatrist and author of *The Brain That Changes Itself*, told a Toronto Catholic District School Board meeting last month. Doidge, who has researched neuroplasticity programs around the world, said Arrowsmith is one of a kind.

Clint and Evette Harder of Scarborough agree. Their 8-year-old daughter was diagnosed with severe learning dysfunctions, making her early school years painful and unsuccessful. Since

enrolling in Arrowsmith at Holy Spirit Catholic School last year, she has learned to read and write, enjoys school and no longer comes home crying and calling herself stupid.

"She's grown by leaps and bounds," Evette Harder says. "And her confidence has skyrocketed."

The 67 students currently enrolled in the Catholic board's Arrowsmith program don't focus on academics. Instead, they work on underlying cognitive problems through a series of intensive repetitive exercises. In one, for example, they trace pages of symbol sequences while wearing an eyepatch to target a specific part of the brain that needs strengthening.

The idea is that after an average of two to four years in the program, the children have overcome their disabilities enough to return to a regular classroom, where they are able to catch up on academics.

Toronto's Catholic Board is the only public system to offer the program, also available full-time at the private Arrowsmith School in Toronto for \$19,000 a year. It is offered at private schools in Peterborough, Vancouver and several U.S. cities. In September, the Learning Disabilities Association of Saskatchewan began providing it, for a fee, to 12 students in Saskatoon.

The board, facing a budget deficit and a recent furor over trustees' use of public funds, is reviewing all its programs for learning-disabled students and will present a full report next month. Board documents show Arrowsmith costs \$174,000 a year, not including teacher salaries and classroom material – or roughly \$2,500 per student.

Clint Harder is among those who believe the investment will pay off.

"We know this will allow our children to escape the clutches of their learning disabilities," he said in last month's presentation to the board. Parents will make a second pitch at this Wednesday's meeting.

Harder presented 40 letters of support from parents who had tried everything from intense special ed to reading programs to private tutors, without success. One family recently moved back to Toronto from Spain to enroll their son.

That meeting also heard testimonials from Shirley Brown Vitullo, who has taught Arrowsmith for 10 years at St. Theresa Shrine Catholic School, and a Grade 8 student who has returned to a regular classroom, where he's earning marks in the 70s and 80s without extra support.

Vitullo Brown said in an interview she's committed to the approach because it empowers students to learn and builds on their successes.

"I feel positive that the parents and the children's progress will speak loudly and they will retain this program," she said.

Three separate studies of Arrowsmith students in the past five years have shown they had increased their rate of learning academic skills (such as math and reading comprehension) by 1.5 to 3 times their rate prior to the program.

A January, 2007, report found that among 42 Catholic board students who had moved on to high school, report card averages were 79 per cent. Sixty-nine per cent of the kids were not receiving resource support; a quarter were receiving one period a day or less.

Toronto trustee Irene Atkinson believes the evidence is compelling.

"I think it's time the Toronto board offered this opportunity to some of our students who would benefit from it," she says.

Christina Buczek of Etobicoke, vice-chairman of the Toronto board's special education advisory committee, has a son attending the Arrowsmith School on Saturdays. But she says it should be available to parents who can't afford to pay.

That's why Buczek plans to move a motion at tonight's committee meeting calling for a two-year pilot project based on Arrowsmith and Fast ForWord, another neuroplasticity-based program.

"It offers a lot of hope to a lot of people with brain disabilities," she said.