

Teaching to difference

Pinnacle School helps kids work to their strengths
By Anne Kibbler, H-T In School Reporter

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Sarah Beardsley had trouble reading the word "the" when she first started at Pinnacle School three-and-a-half years ago.

Now, says the 11-year-old proudly, "If I try real hard, I could probably read 'antidisestablishmentarianism.'"

Pinnacle School, formerly the DePaul School, is a good fit for children like Sarah, who was held back in public school before being diagnosed with dyslexia. The hands-on curriculum, small class size and individual student attention at Pinnacle have brought her a long way.

Her mom, Linda Beardsley, can't say enough good things about the school. She knew Sarah was succeeding when she came home and said, "Mom, I want to start a library."

The school, Linda Beardsley said, is "a jewel in the middle of Bloomington that so many people are unaware of but that they are so blessed to have."

School one of two in state

Pinnacle is one of only two schools in Indiana devoted exclusively to working with children with dyslexia and related learning differences. The other is the Hutson School in Indianapolis.

Pinnacle's services are in demand. Since the school moved last August from East Third Street to a larger home in the former United Methodist building on East Second, the number of students has increased from 27 to 41. And the school, which serves grades 1-8, is preparing another room in the building to be used as a classroom to accommodate even more students.



Michaela Walton listens to teacher Connie Giles read a story to her class Thursday afternoon at Pinnacle School. Staff photo by Chris Howell

Director Denise Lessow said the classic education model doesn't work for students who come to Pinnacle.

"The preferred mode of instruction is from textbooks with reading and writing," she said. "For our students who began in that traditional classroom, they were working in their weakest mode. Here they are all in the same boat, and everything is structured for their success."

At Pinnacle, a learning difficulty is defined as a difference.

"We don't approach it as a deficit. We approach it as a plus," Lessow said. "The kids are smart enough that they realize they are different. Here, they recognize there are many other people like them. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You work from your strengths."

Spotting dyslexia

It can be hard to identify a child with dyslexia. Lessow said an important cue for parents and teachers is a gap between the child's potential and performance.

"People have the misconception that children with dyslexia are not bright, but actually most of them are gifted," she said. "They just have trouble in processing."

In processing disorders, the brain can't access or link information as readily as it might. If the brain can't put two and two together, it can't easily make information available for the person to put to use.

Such disorders can show up in reading, spelling, handwriting or math. Some children with processing disorders have difficulty with organization or with following lists or sequences. Lessow said a lot of children at the school think in pictures.

"They have a 3-D image in their minds, and they can rotate it," she said.

Although dyslexia is evenly distributed between the genders, 80 percent of Pinnacle's current population are boys. Dyslexia often is identified earlier in boys than in girls because boys with such disorders are more likely to act out, Lessow said.

Early language trouble a clue

Linda Beardsley realized early on that her daughter was having trouble with language.

"She would do more memorizing than actual reading," said Beardsley, whose 27-year-old son also is dyslexic. "She couldn't figure out numbers and letters because they were upside down and backward in her mind. She couldn't tell a number from a letter."

Within a couple of months of starting kindergarten, Sarah was overloaded by trying to memorize information. Linda home-schooled her, then sent her back to kindergarten the next year. Sarah made it to first grade — one year behind — but then, said her mom, "things completely fell apart."

Sarah's self-esteem was low. Kids were teasing her. Teachers suggested she wasn't trying hard enough.

Linda decided enough was enough. She enrolled Sarah in what was still the DePaul School — the same school her son had attended years before — and moved her family from Johnson County to Monroe County.

Longtime teacher Connie Giles, who helped develop the early DePaul program into a full-time school, helped Sarah blossom.

"It was the best decision I've ever made," Linda Beardsley said. "Sarah's smile came back."

Linguistic lessons daily

Laura Strickler wrote a series of letters on the wipe-off board at the front of her classroom.

"Keep your focus, Nate," she said to one of the five students in the room. "Look at me." She wrote and, facing the students so they could see her lips, carefully pronounced the combination "-onk." The students repeated the sound.

"Say it and write it each time," she said. "If your hand is moving, your mouth is moving too."

The kids copied the letters on their papers and mouthed the sound.

Linguistics lessons are part of the daily routine at Pinnacle. Much of each morning is given over to developing students' reading, writing, spelling and other language skills using a variety of programs.

Strickler was teaching a method called Orton-Gillingham, in which students progress through an orderly series of steps to learn individual letter sounds, syllables, then words. Reading, saying and writing the

sounds engages a variety of senses and reinforces the learning process.

Kids also can improve their language skills through a software program developed by Kurzweil Educational Systems for students with learning difficulties. And IU professor Genny Williamson provides individual after-school tutoring in the building's Brock Reading Clinic for children from Pinnacle and other schools.

While language-based lessons occupy much of the mornings at Pinnacle, afternoons are devoted to subjects such as science, social science, art, engineering and drama.

Many students with processing disorders have strong mechanical, creative or other practical skills. Hands-on learning in the afternoon classes allows students to develop their strengths, gain knowledge and confidence and transfer those assets to their language learning.

Sensory activities help develop connections within the brain, making it easier for kids to remember what they have learned, said Lessow.

Lessow is in the middle of teaching a unit that includes letting students observe, touch, listen to and build robots. Middle-school science teacher Morgan Volrich spent last Thursday afternoon teaching students how to make a sundial.

Pinnacle also partners with community organizations such as the Monroe County YMCA and the John Waldron Arts Center to provide PE, art, music and other subjects.

Lessow said there are lots more children in Monroe County who could benefit from the kind of services her school offers, but many can't afford it. This year the school was able to cover expenses for about three students through business donations.

Lessow's goal is to raise enough money to establish many more scholarships.

As for Linda Beardsley, there's no question what she would do if she won the lottery.

"If I had a million dollars to invest in that school, that's where my money would go," she said. "I've never seen a school like DePaul where they put everybody in a melting pot and make it work."

No bar to success

Dyslexia is not curable. But people with dyslexia can be successful in virtually any field if they have the appropriate instruction and support. Among some well-known personalities with dyslexia:

- Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Atlantic Airlines and Virgin Megastore
- John Horner, paleontologist and technical adviser to Steven Spielberg
- Greg Louganis, Olympic gold medalist in diving
- Rob Lowe, actor
- Craig McCaw, billionaire founder of McCaw Cellular
- Patricia Buckley Moss, award-winning painter
- Paul Orfalea, founder and chairman emeritus of Kinko's
- Nolan Ryan, Baseball Hall-of-Fame pitcher
- Charles Schwab, founder and chairman of Charles Schwab & Co.
- Jackie Stewart, professional racecar driver

SOURCE: International Dyslexia Association

Dyslexia

How can you tell if your child is dyslexic? Here are a dozen common characteristics that might indicate dyslexia or a related disorder.

- Appears bright, highly intelligent and articulate but has difficulty with reading, writing, spelling
- Has poor self-esteem; hides or covers up weaknesses; easily frustrated or emotional about school work
- Talented in art, drama, music, sports, mechanics, engineering
- Learns best through hands-on experience, observation and visual aids

- Trouble with writing or copying; may have poor handwriting; may be uncoordinated or have difficulty with team sports; often confuses left/right or over/under
- Has difficulty telling time, managing time, learning sequenced information or tasks, being on time; difficulty counting objects and dealing with money
- Excellent long-term memory for experiences, locations and faces; poor memory for sequences, facts and information not experienced
- Reading or writing shows repetitions, additions, transpositions, omissions, letter/number reversals
- Reads and rereads with little comprehension
- Spells phonetically and inconsistently
- Difficulty with organization
- Strong sense of justice; perfectionism

Adapted from the Davis Dyslexia Correction Program.

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