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Taking AIM: Understanding learning differences

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The first time parents hear that their child may have a learning disability can be a very daunting experience. Fortunately Greater Philadelphia has excellent resources for children who learn differently including the Academy In Manayunk (AIM), which opened its doors in 2006. AIM, modeled after Sally Smith's legendary Lab School of Washington®, uses a research-based curriculum as it partners with the region's universities to meet the individual learning styles of its students. AIM students "live it and learn it" through educational immersion, data-driven progress monitoring and assistive technology.

But what is a learning disability or learning difference? The National Institute of Health (NIH) estimates that 4 million children in the United States have learning disabilities — with four times more boys than girls being diagnosed. Nearly three-quarters of those are students classified as having the specific language-based learning disabilities of dyslexia (an oral and written language or reading disability), dyspraxia (a severe disability in writing and other fine motor skills), dyscalculia (severe difficulty in understanding and using symbols or functions needed for success in mathematics) or dysgraphia (severe difficulty in producing handwriting that is legible and written at an age-appropriate speed). The NIH further estimates that 15 percent of the U.S. population experiences significant difficulty learning to read.

In 2003 a study by the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities showed that in Pennsylvania the prevalence of learning disabilities in children 6-17 years of age and served by IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) is 6.57 percent. In Philadelphia County alone that's about 19,000 children and in Montgomery County almost 10,000.

Further national studies show that 50 percent of all students in special education in the public schools have learning disabilities, and two-thirds of secondary students with learning disabilities are reading three or more grade levels below their peers. About one-third of children identified with learning disabilities drop out of high school — twice the rate of their non-disabled peers. A study of students who dropped out of Philadelphia public high schools during the 2003-04 school year showed that a shocking 78 percent of eighth-grade students who failed either math or English later dropped out of high school. In our own city we are losing too many students because it is not being recognized that they need to learn differently.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities released last month a groundbreaking report on "The State of Learning Disabilities" in the U.S. The report underscores that important progress has been made in assuring a better future for people with learning disabilities, but that much needs to be done to improve the academic and employment outcomes of these children and adults. The Academy In Manayunk looks forward to learning from this recent study and sharing its results as it works to support literacy for all in this region.

In its first year in 2006, the Academy In Manayunk enrolled 27 students in grades 2 through 7. In June 2009 the school completed its third year with 102 students in grades 1 through 9 coming from over 15 school districts in five counties. For the fall of 2009 the Pennsylvania Department of Education approved AIM's license to extend into the 10th grade. The school plans to add a grade each year until it offers grades 1-12. The impact AIM can make on students and

teachers throughout this region is evident.

As Lab School of Washington founder Sally Smith describes, learning through the arts is critical to the success of children with language-based learning disabilities. As you enter the Academy In Manayunk, it is clear from the very first step that students at AIM are engaged in a variety of multi-sensory and multi-media activities that allow them to develop an understanding of their world that they often cannot learn from textbooks and printed materials. Many of these children have struggled to read and write at their previous schools and felt little success in exercising their unique intellectual capacities. They are now able to demonstrate, in ways other than paper-and-pencil tests, the depth and breadth of their understanding and reasoning. It is truly amazing to see their confidence soar.

At the Academy In Manayunk teachers teach teachers. AIM's dual mission is to be a center for educational excellence and professional development in the field of learning disabilities. AIM is one of only 14 Wilson Reading Partner Schools in the country and is pleased to be able to offer this research-based training to teachers in Greater Philadelphia. This summer the Academy is offering up to 50 hours of teacher-training courses. Last summer 27 teachers attended the newly released RAVE-O training from Tufts University and hailed from as far away as Wisconsin, California and Ontario, Canada. To date over 350 teachers and professionals have attended seminars at the Academy In Manayunk benefiting hundreds of children in their classrooms! This is a great multiplier effect.

Collaboration is key if Greater Philadelphia is going to continue to offer families the education options children who learn differently deserve. Academy In Manayunk university partnerships continue to expand creating a Research to Practice consortium in the field of learning disabilities. AIM welcomed students from St. Joseph's University, West Chester University, Temple University, Thomas Jefferson University and Eastern College to experience the Live It, Learn It philosophy and has launched research projects with Temple University and Thomas Jefferson University as well as co-teaching arrangements with St. Joseph's University in special education.

To learn more about education resources for children who learn differently, and teacher-training opportunities to serve these students, visit www.aimpa.org or call 215-483-2461.

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