

GATEWAY TO A SPECIAL EDUCATION

BY ROBIN T. REID

photo by David Rehor

Yisrael Doniel Jacobson writes while his teacher, Vicki Stetler, watches.

Yisrael Doniel “YD” Jacobson’s first day of school was fantastic. On that day, the nine-year-old Gateway School student spelled out f-a-n-t-a-s-t-i-c almost perfectly. It can be a tricky word for a child that age to spell aloud; but for Jacobson, who has a form of autism, it’s even trickier.

In another classroom across the hall at Gateway, another nine-year-old was also making great strides of his own. Nathaniel Epstein was coloring a picture of a birthday cake. Using a purple marker, he drew around the sides and then colored in the center.

“For him even to color is a huge deal,” said his mother, Jennifer Bishop. “When he first got to Gateway, he’d just spin the pencil or just make a dot. Now, he’s attending to a basic task, and that just blows my mind.”

Gateway is a private school in Baltimore for children aged three to twelve. Founded in 1960 by Baltimore nonprofit the Hearing and Speech Agency, it specializes in working with children who have communication disorders related to autism, developmental delay, or other conditions to develop speech and language skills to their full potential.

“Language is the basis of all social and academic development—learning, interacting with others, reading, being able to express a need. It all depends on having communication skills,” said Jill Berie, the school’s educational director. “If a communication difficulty is barring the way to a child’s development, Gateway is an excellent place for that child. When we can open the door to communication, often a child’s development just takes off.”

Preschool, kindergarten and elementary-school classes consist typically of no more than six students, one teacher, and two assistants. The children are placed in classes based on a combination of factors: chronological age, language proficiency, academic performance, social skills, and behavior. Nobody gets graded here; the emphasis instead is on developing language and social skills and helping each child to be as independent as possible.

“Our goal is to get our kids into the mainstream,” Berie said. “About 50 percent of them have autism. We have more boys than girls, because more males are identified with disorders. Girls don’t get identified because they don’t immediately cause problems in classrooms.”

Gateway has students from Baltimore City and

County, as well as Carroll, Anne Arundel, and Howard counties. Some come courtesy of public schools when they cannot provide an appropriate Individualized Education Program (IEP). This provision stems from federal laws passed in the 1970s that children with disabilities have a right to free, appropriate, education.

Jennifer Antezana came to Gateway after a teacher in her public school noticed that the nine-year-old was having trouble speaking, reading and negotiating friendships. An evaluation at HASA revealed that she had a speech-language impairment. After two years at Gateway, Jennifer is one of the most popular children in school. “She’s making great progress, especially in language therapy group,” said Gateway social worker Naomi Berkenbilt. “Gateway has



photo by Jennifer Bishop

Nathaniel Epstein, 9, has learned to communicate what he wants at Gateway.

The IEP Process

Getting a child with special-needs the “free and appropriate public education” guaranteed by federal law sounds perfectly justified on paper. But making it happen can be complicated. And that’s where the Maryland Association of Nonpublic Special Education Facilities can help. Dorie Flynn, MANSEF’s executive director, explained the law, how it’s changed, and gives advice on how to ensure that it’s carried out to a child’s best advantage.

Q: Explain the federal laws that gave way to the IEP concept.

A: The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is our nation’s special education law. The IDEA guides how states, school districts, and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible children with disabilities.

Congress originally enacted IDEA in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) just like other children. Each child who requires special education services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP dictates the type of services the child needs to obtain educational benefit. In addition, the IDEA mandates that there be a continuum of placement options for children with special needs.

Q: How does the IEP process start?

A: Parents can start the process by asking—the request should be in writing—for a team meeting to review their child’s educational needs. The school system can also start the process.

Q: What sort of assessment does one request for a child? Who does the assessing and what does it include? Who pays for it? How much does it cost?

A: The types of assessments can include a psychological, educational evaluation, a social history, and any other evaluation that the school system recommends and parents agree to. The assessments are conducted by qualified and/or licensed professionals, many of whom who are employed by the schools. In addition, the school system can contract out for the assessments and evaluations. It is responsible for identifying children with special needs and therefore pays for the assessments. However, parents can also obtain

independent assessments on their own and at their own expense.

Q: Does the IEP dictate where the child goes to school?

A: No. The school system and the parent need to look at all the options when providing services to children with special needs. It is important to place children in the least restrictive environment before seeking more intensive services.

The IDEA mandates that children with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers. The school may have many programs within their system that serve children with special needs that would necessitate a child not being served in their zoned school. When the public school system does not have the internal resources to implement the IEP, then it makes a referral to a nonpublic special education school. The intent is for the child to obtain educational benefit regardless of where the service is delivered.

Q: How much does the public school system pay the private school?

A: Since the public school system is obligated to provide a free and appropriate public education, they then place the student in a nonpublic special education school approved and accredited by the Maryland State Department of Education. The cost of the tuition is based on a formula established by state law. The local school system shares in the cost of educating students in nonpublic special education placements. The intensity of the program and the services it provides have a direct impact on cost, because some children require more intense support and service.

Q: Where can folks find advocates (lawyers, etc.) if they don’t have the money to pay for help in the process?

A: Each county in Maryland now has a hotline to reach a “family navigator”; these individuals will provide assistance over the phone. The list can be obtained from the Maryland Coalition of Families for Children’s Mental Health (www.mdcoalition.org). In addition, there is the Parent’s Place of Maryland (www.ppm.org).

Parents can also visit the MANSEF website (www.mansef.org), and click on the section “Download Membership Directory.” There they will find a list of advocates and educational consultants.

been heaven for her.”

Jennifer Bishop is also pleased with her son’s progress at Gateway. Nathaniel came to the school when he was four, because of multiple disorders affecting both his physical and mental abilities.

“I looked at all the school options,” she said, “my local school, the city’s special-ed school, and some of the other nonpublics. Each time, I’d think that there weren’t any kids like him here. Then I came to Gateway, and I could see that he’d be part of a peer group. He’d get fun out of the socialization.

“Everything is about language,” Bishop continued. “The teachers promised they’d use everything to see what caught on with Nathaniel. In the last year he’s started to use words and pictures. He has to come up with something to get what he wants ... he’s more cooperative and independent than he was even two years ago.”

At the end of their time at Gateway, students go on to the public or private schools that best suit their needs.

“We spend a lot of time getting them ready,” Berie said. “If we didn’t, then we wouldn’t be doing our job.”

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Ages: 3 to 12