

THE DAILY SPECIAL

TEACHING THE DYSLEXIC

EDUCATION | 'Special needs' programs don't help dyslexic kids, argue parents who want the public school system to do more for those with the disability

BY JANET STEFFENHAGEN VANCOUVER SUN

In many ways, Jonah Weyler is a typical Vancouver teen. He's an accomplished soccer player who dreams of a professional career, he plays guitar and he thinks weekends are best spent on a skateboard.

But when it comes to academics, Jonah knows he is different.

"Most kids can read a paragraph in a minute, but it takes me five or six minutes," he said, his quiet voice almost disappearing as the talk turns towards schooling. "I don't like reading at all."

Jonah has **dyslexia** — a learning disability that affects reading, writing and spelling — and has just returned to the public school system after three years at Fraser Academy, an independent school that specializes in education for students with language-based learning disabilities.

While he's happy to be attending a regular school with friends from his west side neighbourhood, Jonah, 14, struggles every day because his school — Lord Byng secondary — is a regular public school with no special program or particular knowledge about **dyslexia**.

"If Byng had some of the things that Fraser does, if teachers would actually teach me, it would be really good," he said. "But they mostly just try to keep all the kids on the same page."

His parents, who have gone to extraordinary lengths to help their son with his education, have been watching him closely — with trepidation — during the three months he's been at Byng.

His father, Rex Weyler (who was a Greenpeace Foundation director and photographer), teaches him math through distance education to lighten the load at school and helps him with science; his mother, Lisa Gibbons, tutors him in English and social studies and reads with him daily.

They have drained their bank accounts to pay for psycho-educational assessments and private education — which can reach almost \$20,000 a year for students at Fraser Academy — and worry they might still have to mortgage their home to get Jonah the help he needs.

They are well aware many others don't have those options.

They aren't critical of Byng in particular nor of Jonah's teachers, and they understand why their son wants to attend a regular school rather than continuing in a "special" program.

"He just wants to be normal for a year," Gibbons explained.

But they worry that Jonah — despite his positive attitude and his willingness to work — will fall through the cracks. And they wonder why public schools are held responsible for educating some children but not others.

"I pay my taxes. I support the school system. Why can't the school system educate my child? It's not difficult," Rex Weyler wrote in a recent e-mail to The Vancouver Sun.

"Jonah and thousands of other school children need the attention and teaching style that specialists have perfected," he says. "The teaching method for these kids is not rocket science, but merely education styled for their manner of learning."

Although only a small percentage of students have been designated by the B.C. education ministry as learning disabled, experts say that would jump to 10 to 15 per cent if all children were assessed.

Weyler believes public schools should either learn how to teach to their differences or the

government should offer tax rebates allowing their families to take them elsewhere for education.

"The current 'special needs' efforts in the public schools, perhaps well intentioned, are virtually useless for most dyslexic kids because they are poorly conceived, shamefully out of date, under-funded and under-trained," Weyler stated.

Byng principal Darlene Braeder was surprised by Weyler's frustration because she said Jonah is well supported in his new school. He has an individualized education program (IEP) that outlines the services and resources he needs to succeed and he has daily support from special-education assistants who work with him one-on-one.

"This school has responded extremely well to students with special needs," Braeder said in an interview. "As a staff, we're aware that a whole range of learning abilities have to be met within the resources we have at the school."

But Jonah's parents aren't the only ones dissatisfied with the level of special education in public schools. The B.C. Teachers' Federation (BCTF) also says special-needs students aren't getting the support they need and forced the issue on to centre stage when it went on strike in October.

As a result of the union's actions, the issue has become a priority in B.C. The province has ordered all districts — for the first time — to report on the academic progress of special needs students such as Jonah and said it will be a priority for discussion at the round table that was established during the teachers' strike to examine their concerns.

BCTF researcher Charlie Naylor said B.C. has a history of under-funding special education but the situation has worsened in recent years. "I would agree that a lot of learning-disabled children's needs are not being met," he said in an interview. "The question is where does the fault lie and what do you do about it? It's a systemic issue — it's not just Byng."

Some believe the only way to force change is through legal action and they've long pinned their hopes on a case that's been before the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal for several years.

The case began in the 1990s when a North Vancouver couple, Rick and Michelle Moore, filed an unprecedented humanrights complaint against their school district, alleging it had discriminated against their son Jeffrey by failing to teach him to read.

Jeffrey, who is also dyslexic, was in Grade 3 at Braemar elementary and reading at a Grade 1 level when his parents came to the conclusion he wasn't getting the education he needed.

In desperation, they transferred him to Kenneth Gordon independent school in Burnaby, which — like Fraser Academy — caters to dyslexic students.

They also began their long search for answers about why their neighbourhood school failed to teach their boy to read, given that the law says schools must provide sufficient education to all students to the point of "undue" hardship.

"Learning to read is the basic foundation of public education," his father said after filing the complaint. "You might as well not have public education if you can't teach kids to read."

The former human rights commission backed the Moores after finding prima facie evidence of discrimination. In 2001, the tribunal began a public inquiry, with testimony from the family, the school district, the education ministry and reading experts.

Jeffrey, meanwhile, had finished his studies at Kenneth Gordon and moved to Fraser Academy for high school. He graduated from Grade 12 in 2004 but the tribunal has yet to make a ruling.

The Moores are seeking compensation for money spent on Jeffrey's education and an order that tuition be paid whenever public schools cannot provide sufficient services to learningdisabled students.

Another family, meanwhile, is looking to the courts for answers.

Last year, a North Vancouver law firm announced plans for a class-action lawsuit against the government on behalf of a Vancouver mother, Lynne McGivern, and her dyslexic son.

McGivern accused the province of showing reckless disregard for dyslexic students through the failure of its schools to assess their condition and provide remedial instruction.

She said her son, Justin, was never tested for learning disabilities but was categorized as a behaviour problem and bounced from school to school.

The class-action lawsuit has not yet been approved by the courts. Lawyer Jim Poyner said he was waiting for a decision by a Quebec court on a similar case that had been filed earlier.

That decision came in September, when Quebec Superior Court authorized the action against nine Montreal school boards and the province's education minister. Poyner said he will now proceed with his case.

The BCTF says one of the problems for learning-disabled kids in the public school system is that teachers do not have the training they need to teach them.

Although for more than 10 years, B.C. has had a policy that promotes inclusive classrooms, universities offer only occasional courses on learning differences. Naylor said such information should be woven into every class.

A study by the BCTF in 2002 in Coquitlam and Nanaimo school districts suggests 43 per cent of teachers feel unprepared to deal with the diversity of students they encounter in their classrooms.

Howard Eaton, a University of B.C. instructor who teaches about learning disabilities, agreed new teachers need more information. He said they should be required to take a full course on learning disabilities.

"If we're not doing a yearlong course on learning disabilities . . . it's sort of like a medical doctor going through (university) without taking courses on the human heart," he said.

But Paul Shaker, education dean at Simon Fraser University, said it would be too much to expect all teachers to understand every disability.

"We need to think about creating school settings where there is appropriate support for the generalist teacher and in terms of teams, instead of individuals, bearing this responsibility," he said in an e-mail.

"In preliminary teacher preparation, our goal is to create an attitude of openness to inclusion and a problem-solving disposition. When these attitudes are combined with a sound sense of curriculum and instruction and placed in a supportive professional environment, the new teacher can grow into the demands of their role."

Naylor said teachers don't have that kind of support because neither the NDP nor Liberal governments committed the resources necessary to make inclusive classrooms work for all students.

The situation has become worse since the Liberals came to power in 2001, he added.

His complaint is not only about government-imposed changes to teachers' contracts in 2002, which eliminated strict class-size caps and removed limits on the number of specialneeds children in any one classroom. Those changes, although hated by the union, were supported by other education partners — the provincial organizations for trustees, superintendents, principals and parents.

Naylor also blames the Liberals for de-targeting \$230 million in special-education funding, which was intended to give school boards the flexibility to respond to local needs, and downloading unanticipated costs on to cash-strapped boards. Since they were no longer required to spend a fixed amount on special education, many boards used those dollars to patch gaps elsewhere, he said.

The number of students designated as having special needs declined from 7.8 per cent in 2001 to 6.9 per cent last year after money for their programs ceased to be targeted. The number of special-education and learning assistance teachers also fell.

More than anything, Naylor criticized the Liberals for placing demands on schools and calling for accountability but not acknowledging its role in helping them to improve.

"We need to work at this together," he said. "If you go around wagging your fingers at teachers and districts, if you go around saying 'we're going to hold you accountable but we're not going to give you the support or help build a better system,' it's not going to happen."

Education Minister Shirley Bond said dyslexic students, like all others, have the right to expect an education program that meets their needs. The Liberals and the province's school boards say locally elected school trustees have a better idea about what's required in individual

schools than a government in Victoria.

If families are dissatisfied with the service their children receive, they should talk to local educators and trustees, the minister said.

"Resources are in the system to provide for the needs of those students," she added, noting that the \$230 million previously targeted for so-called "high-incidence" special needs — such as **dyslexia** — is still part of the overall grant to boards. "We now have to hold school boards accountable for the programs they provide with those dollars," she said.

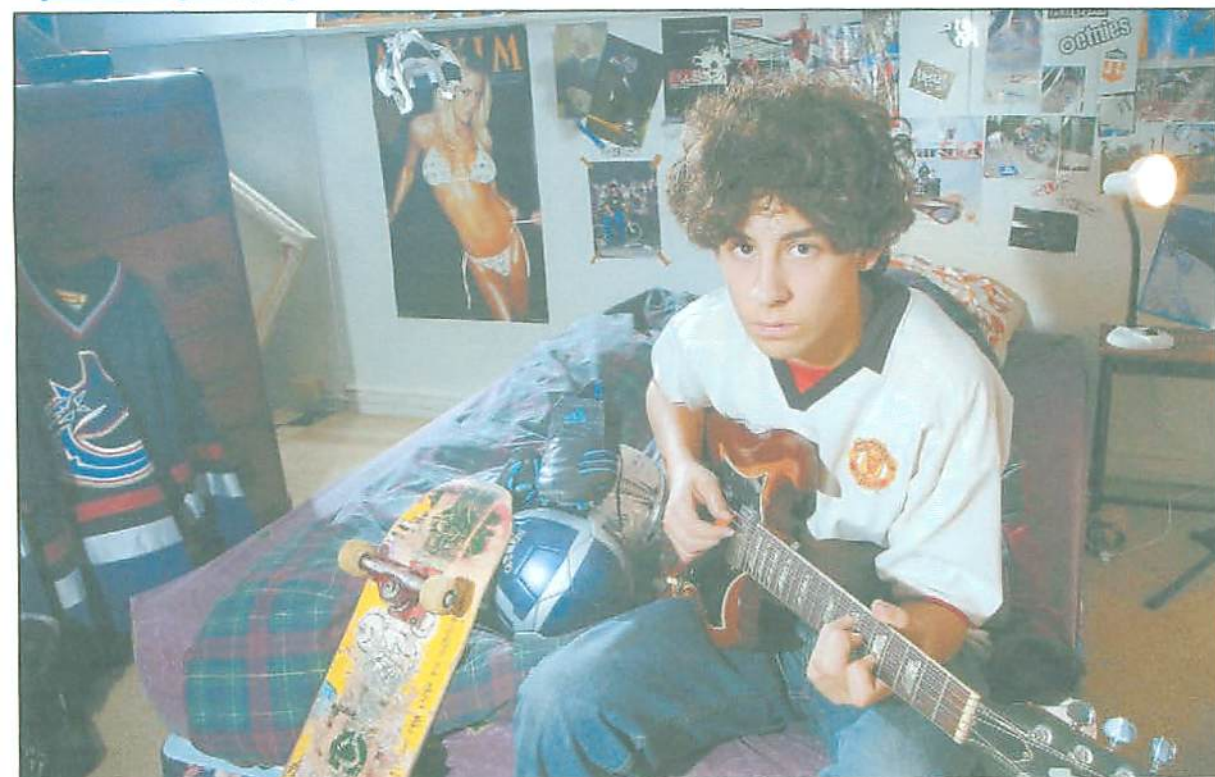
Bond said she hasn't considered giving a tax rebate or voucher to parents who believe their children aren't being well educated in the public system. "What I want to have is a public education system that actually serves the needs of dyslexic students as well as those who are more typical."

Eaton, who operates a private centre at UBC for dyslexic students called the Eaton Arrowsmith School, agrees dyslexic students are encountering difficulties, especially at secondary schools where teachers are responsible for many dozens of students.

"Unless children with learning disabilities are willing to advocate for themselves, they're in real trouble," he said.

That can be difficult, especially since many students don't know they have learning disabilities or don't know what they need to succeed. Even experts have trouble understanding the types and subtypes of learning disabilities and what help is essential for students facing such obstacles, he said.

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MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

Jonah Weyler, with lots of help and encouragement from his parents, is trying a year at a regular public school after three years at a special facility for children with **dyslexia**.



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN
Howard Eaton recently opened the Eaton Arrowsmith School, a private centre at UBC for dyslexic students.