THE LEARNING BUSINESS

PRIVATE LEARNING CENTERS CAN FILL THE GAPS IN A CHILD'S EDUCATION.

Blake Boudreaux’s mother, JoAnn, always knew Blake, now 11, seemed to learn more slowly than the other kids.

So each time he started a new school year she would talk to his teachers, and each time she was told he just wasn’t maturing quickly enough.

When Blake was in third grade, he was tested by the Iberia Parish School Board. Boudreaux says he was classified as learning disabled.

The family was told he had some sort of auditory dysfunction, that he could hear but didn’t listen, and that directions would have to be read to him slowly and more than once.

Basically, Boudreaux says, he had a problem with reading and comprehending what he was reading.

“He really had a problem with everything, because you need reading in all subjects.”

By fourth grade, the problem was worse. Math was the toughest. And Blake couldn’t take science and social studies at the same time, so half the year he took one and the next half the other.

The school tried to help out, Boudreaux says. But she didn’t think it tried hard enough. “I butted heads a lot at school. I know I must have left some bad feelings. But I was fighting for my child.”

Just before the school’s accredited fifth grade the Boudreaux’s insurance agent told them about Huntington Learning Center in Lafayette.

They gave it some thought but wanted to see how he would do in fifth grade. Blake made a C in the first six weeks in math, and F in the second, third and fourth.

The Boudreaux brought him to Huntington and were told Blake didn’t have anything wrong with him. Rather, he had just missed out on some basic skills and would need to be worked at a slower pace.

Blake made a D in math on his next report card. “But I could see there was a change in him. His self-esteem was unbelievable,” Boudreaux says.

Before Huntington, Boudreaux says, Blake hated school. He didn’t want to go in the morning and cried when he got back. “He’d go to bed hating it,” she says.

Immediately after enrolling Huntington, Boudreaux says, Blake stopped crying. “He was reading better.” He was doing his homework on his own.

In the last six weeks, Blake brought up his grades in two subjects and made an A in math. “He needed it to pass,” Boudreaux says. “He made an A. I did even ask the teacher to see if she gave him the grade, and she said in fact she did.

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Boudreaux says, both children operate at varying levels in the learning centers. Huntington, Boudreaux says, is based on group work with parents and follow-up with students, Huntington’s centers from coast to coast are experiencing the 95-per- cent success rate. “We go to the schools and actually visit with the child’s teacher,” Stewart says. “The trick is to have them learn at the center into the classroom is really the yardstick of success.”

Individual centers can boast of success rates, but there is still little data from long-range studies on the effectiveness of these centers.

A diagnosis that thinks his or her child may have a problem or is capable of better performance in school suggests the obvious and most economical action first: Talk to the school’s guidance counselor and ask if the school offers evaluations and tutoring if necessary. Even if the student is in college, tutoring is usually provided free.

If a school center is chosen, or even recommended by the school, parents initially may want to inquire about the program’s financial aid. For example, Sylvan Learning Center motivates children by letting them earn tokens that can be cashed in for no-ground rewards. Depending on the child and the center’s situation, Huntington, on the other hand, operates on the belief that children should work for the rewards of learning as is the parents’ preference, this alone could be a deciding factor.

The center will want to conduct an initial appraisal of the child, determining both academic strengths and weaknesses. The cost is usually about $100.

Once learning centers say they are built on the premise that many students simply need to learn how to learn: And because students learn in different ways and at varying rates, individualized instruction that addresses these differences comes first.

In the third year, Boudreaux says, Blake was still doing well. “He was talking better. He was doing his homework on his own.”

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By Leslie Turk

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Once learning centers say they are built on the premise that many students simply need to learn how to learn: And because students learn in different ways and at varying rates, individualized instruction that addresses these differences comes first.
The environment at home is important for a number of other reasons, also. Intelligence is only one factor that leads to success throughout a child's education. Parents play an important role in educating their children, from the toddler years through elementary and secondary education.

"Nurturing a child's own enthusiasm for learning is the greatest gift you can give," says Huntington founder and president Dr. Raymond Huntington. "A child who is excited to learn new facts and new skills will continue to be motivated in school and throughout life."

"Reading to a pre-schooler is probably the most important thing you can do," Rogers says. Get them involved in the story, she says. For example, let them finish sentences as you point to pictures.

Stewart says it's often up to parents to recognize that their children may be capable of doing better in school. He says statistics show that most students can perform on either an average or above-average level. While some parents are not satisfied that their children are making Cs, some are, he says. "But let's make sure the child is performing to his potential."

Most learning centers also cater to adults—because problems are often carried into adulthood—and do not go into clients' homes to provide instruction. Some also work in private school settings.

Stewart says computers, while available, aren't used much in Huntington's programs. "Our primary method of instruction is human being to human being. There is no machine that can teach a child to comprehend."

Although one-on-one instruction is policy at Huntington, the student doesn't necessarily see the same instructor each time she visits the facility, which is usually twice a week for about 1 1/2 hours each visit. "We shun the strict one-teacher-to-one student. That's not the real setting in school," Stewart says.

Sylvan's student-teacher ratio is typically one teacher to three students, and the students usually see two instructors so that they don't become too dependent on one person.

While most learning centers don't purport to be a cure-all for every child or adult who is having problems, they can help most achieve some level of success they otherwise would not have. It's always comforting—and the center should be up front about it—to know when you can expect to see results. Be wary of anyone who makes promises or guarantees, and know that your own or your child's case may not necessarily follow a trend of others with similar problems.

But in the case of the Boudreaux family, everybody's life has changed for the better since visiting Huntington. "They haven't only changed his life," Boudreaux says. "They changed mine, too. I can't wait to start off the school year with this program."

Here is a checklist of questions compiled by Huntington Learning Centers for evaluating a center's services.

- Are the teachers at the center state-certified? Is the director also qualified?
- What materials will be used?
- Does the center rely too heavily on machines?
- Does it have a wide range of teaching techniques available?
- What is the center's method of motivation?
- What age range of students attend the center?
- Does it aim to transfer skills learned at the center to school work and homework?
- Will the estimated length of the program be discussed prior to enrollment?
- How will the child's progress be measured?
- Will parents and teachers be informed of progress? How often?
- Will the director meet with parents to offer guidance for working with students at home?
- If the center can no longer help, will it refer the child to someone who can?
- How long has the center been in operation?
- Is any contract or long-term commitment required?
- What is included in the fee? What is not included?
- Can the center supply current references?