

Mainstreaming Makes a Difference
A popular integration program for learning disabled
could benefit children in Los Angeles.

By Sharon Schatz Rosenthal

Eight-year-old Tamar's fingers dance across a set of harp strings like small waves rhythmically pounding the surf. While the large instrument dwarfs her, she doesn't seem to mind as she sits and plays a complicated classical tune. After the musical interlude, she hops onto her living room couch; her shiny dark hair bounces as she moves. Her bright smile reveals a missing front tooth with its adult counterpart just barely poking through.

"Tamar is a real leader among her friends and she's so good at sports. Oh, and she takes dance and gymnastics," her mother, Margie Levinson, informed me privately. With so many activities, boundless energy and obvious talent, it is hard to believe that like 40 to 50 percent of students across the nation, Tamar has faced serious learning problems in school.

Class participation and oral presentations were sources of frustration for her. But just as her mother focuses on her attributes, so does the philosophy behind Schools Attuned, the teaching method that helped Tamar cope with an expressive language difficulty.

Teachers at Yeshiva Ohr Eliyahu in Culver City noted the problem back when Tamar was in first grade. As the bestselling book "A Mind at a Time" by learning expert Dr. Mel Levine, says, the eight types of learning differences that Schools Attuned addresses are more minor and subtle than problems that demand special education.

When Tamar's teachers identified her weaknesses, they took advantage of her excellent leadership skills. By putting her with friends during group presentations and allowing her to prepare early for upcoming class discussions, Tamar was able to succeed. Her music and dance talents help her with organization, as both skills involve sequencing. Without Schools Attuned, Levinson says it would have come to a "high-anxiety" situation. "But it turned into pleasant one, where she gained confidence."

Tamar is currently a happy and well-adjusted student gearing up for third grade.

For many Jewish day schools in Los Angeles, placing children with learning differences has become somewhat of a gray area. Until two years ago, private schools had access to special education services through public school programs. While a child with learning differences may not have severe difficulties that require a full-blown special education program, that child can still benefit from parts of these programs. Recently, the laws have changed and a federal mandate stipulates that each district must decide how much they are willing to offer.

While Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) used to provide services to day school students, support is now very minimal. "There are a lot of kids who were really left in a lurch

when the district changed that [policy]," says Rabbi Shmuel Schwarzmer, a local Schools Attuned mentor and facilitator. "The schools have been trying to pick up whatever slack they can. Often parents have to go to private sources, which are very expensive."

This year, 3,200 educators were trained in Schools Attuned, a national program enabling kindergarten through 12th-grade educators to evaluate students and then adjust their teaching styles to accommodate the children. At the Los Angeles Regional Training site, 325 educators from about 100 schools in the Los Angeles area went through the training. The numbers of teachers who've gotten onboard with the program has tripled since local training began three years ago.

Through training, teachers learn about neurodevelopmental function and dysfunction, allowing them to refine their awareness of language, attention, memory, neuromotor functions, social cognition and other factors. Rather than labeling a child with terms like "Attention Deficit Disorder" or "Learning Disabled," teachers identify a student's strengths and weaknesses in regard to learning. The strengths are then used to overcome areas of difficulty.

Schools Attuned stems from the All Kinds of Minds Institute, a not-for-profit organization in Chapel Hill, N.C. The institute was co-founded by Charles Schwab and Dr. Mel Levine, professor of pediatrics and director of the Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. The program is based entirely on Levine's research theories. His philosophy is that different minds work differently and everyone has certain strengths and weaknesses. "We're teaching teachers to observe how [children] are in the classroom. To notice how a kid holds his pencil," explains Levine. "If he has trouble writing, to recognize the reasons why he has trouble writing. To call on a kid and notice that he has trouble converting ideas into words, for example."

While Schools Attuned is available at six training sites around the country, the Etta Israel Center (EIC) has served as the Los Angeles Regional Training site since 1999. EIC is a local nonprofit organization that provides direct service to people with special needs in the Jewish community. In addition to supporting Schools Attuned, EIC also provides educational services, disability programming for the Los Angeles Iranian Jewish community, a residential group home for Jewish adults with developmental disabilities and help for students with developmental disabilities.

EIC offers an extensive School's Attuned training program in Los Angeles each summer and several smaller groups throughout the year. In late June, EIC offered an intensive five-day program for administrators and counselors from public and private schools all over the city and beyond. Dr. Michael Held, EIC's executive director feels that "by using [the Schools Attuned] practices, teachers can make fewer and more responsible [special education] referrals." Having utilized Schools Attuned for the last three years, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, a LAUSD charter school, reported a 50 percent drop-off in these referrals. Held also believes that Schools Attuned can be particularly effective in the Jewish day school system, where services for children with learning differences are scarce.

Currently, when a day school student is referred to special education, an LAUSD employee comes to the school once a month for a one-hour consultation with the child's teacher. However, this service is only available to children who qualify for special education not lesser difficulties, like those of Tamar. "There are a number of kids with more minor problems," Schwarzmer says. "If their problems are not severe enough to qualify, the federal government won't help."

Aviva Ebner, principal of secular studies at Emek Hebrew Academy in Sherman Oaks, believes that her students' standardized test scores were higher than expected after the school incorporated Schools Attuned into their curriculum. Dr. Andrea Ackerman, a psychologist at Sinai Akiba Academy, has served as a training facilitator since 1999. "I see such an infusion of optimism," she says. "I think students start to feel optimistic when they see other students with difficulties succeeding."

But not everyone is convinced that Schools Attuned is the answer. Loren Grossman, an educational advocate and consultant specializing in special education and gifted children, says that the program is one of many, like Tomatis, Earobics, Fast Forward, Linda Mood Bell and SOI Learning Systems. Levine's theories, she said, are not necessarily superior to the others. "With all of these [programs], you're getting at the same thing. You're turning up visual or auditory processing problems," Grossman says. "None of these programs have been tested. There are only anecdotal studies. It's not absolutely certain that these will work and some may have very short-term effects." While statistics show that Schools Attuned has had steady growth in Los Angeles, Grossman comments that the program isn't very widespread in this city.

Wendy Mogel, a clinical psychologist and best-selling author of "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee," feels some parents have unrealistic expectations of their children and look to special education or other resources as solutions. "I often see children who don't have anything wrong with them, except they're not spectacular in a certain area. I see kids in private schools who request untimed SATs who don't need it and kids who get tutored and don't need it." She says she has heard "mixed reviews" on Schools Attuned.

Skeptics in the field may change their minds in the next few years, as CSUN's College of Education will be conducting research on the effectiveness of Schools Attuned in months to come. Recently, the Eisner Family Foundation, an organization dedicated to helping enrich the lives of underserved children, made a \$7 million donation to the CSUN's College of Education. This gift will establish a new Center for Teaching and Learning, which will be the first college program in the country to incorporate Levine's theories.

While the philosophy may have yet to prove itself to some, it is already a state initiative in both North Carolina and Oklahoma. As the program continues to expand in Los Angeles, local parents, teachers and students seem more than pleased with the results.

Leading me into a guest room, Tamar shows me a picture of her second-grade class from last year. "Show me your friends," I say, and she points to more than half of the uniformed girls in

the photo. Again, a smile lights up her face. "With Schools Attuned, Tamar is allowed to feel successful," Levinson says. "She's doing great and we're just going to keep strengthening her strengths." The image of Tamar's fingers methodically tweaking the harp strings comes to mind a skill she will use to enhance organization and help get her thoughts in order and I am reminded of the cornerstone of Levine's teachings: "Different minds learn differently."

Excerpts from "A Mind at a Time" by Dr. Mel Levine

"Different minds learn differently."

"Different brains are differently wired."

"I am beckoning parents, teachers and policymakers to recognize how many kinds of young minds there are, and to realize we need to meet their learning needs and strengthen their strengths, and in doing so, preserve their hopes for the future."

"A school for all kinds of minds will not label its students."

"Labeling is reductionistic. It oversimplifies kids. The practice overlooks their richness, their complexity, their strengths and their striking originality."

"Schools are like airport hubs; student passengers arrive from many different backgrounds.... Their particular takeoffs into adulthood will demand different flight patterns."