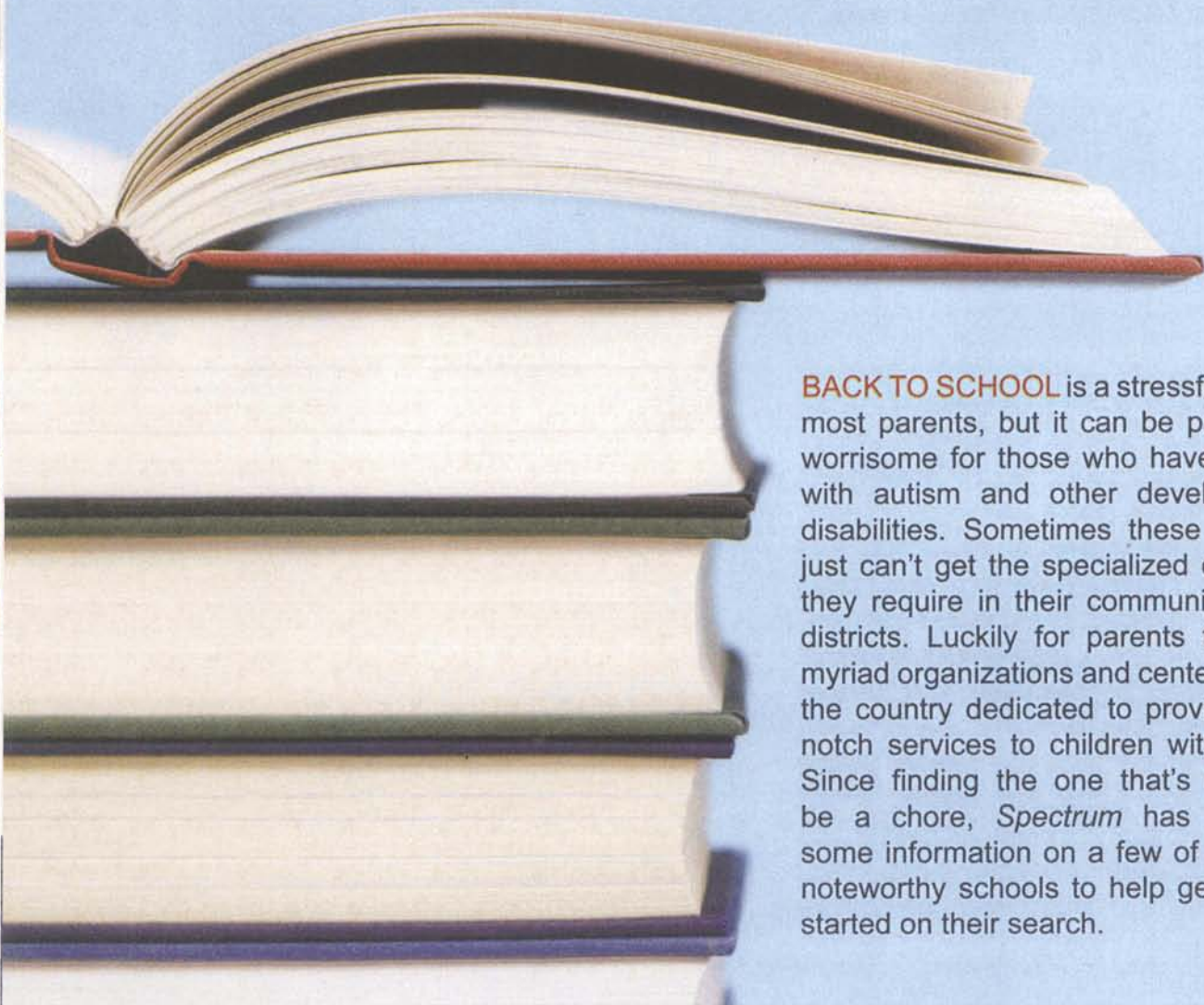


The Back to School NUDGE

Getting you started on that search for
the right school. By Nick Buglione



BACK TO SCHOOL is a stressful time for most parents, but it can be particularly worrisome for those who have children with autism and other developmental disabilities. Sometimes these students just can't get the specialized education they require in their community school districts. Luckily for parents there are myriad organizations and centers across the country dedicated to providing top-notch services to children with autism. Since finding the one that's right can be a chore, *Spectrum* has compiled some information on a few of the more noteworthy schools to help get parents started on their search.



**Virginia Institute of Autism
Charlottesville, VA**

viaschool.org
434-923-8252

The Virginia Institute of Autism was founded in 1996 by two couples who weren't satisfied with the service local public schools offered children with autism.

"We decided to start our own school," says Bernie Webb, one of the co-founders whose 18-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter still attend the institute. "It's been a godsend. Our kids have made serious improvements, considering the hurdles they've had to overcome. It is amazing to me how well they are doing. I never thought my daughter would be able to speak and she is now verbal."

The institute offers a year-round school that can accommodate up to 30 students. Students are separated into three different modules according to age. In the toddler and pre-school module instruction focuses on teaching appropriate behavior, communication and social skills.

"Our school program practices applied behavioral analysis that is rich in positive reinforcement," says Kate Lambert, director of development and communication. "It focuses on teaching behavior systematically."

The next module is for children ages 7 through 12. While there is a continued focus on behavior, communication and social skills, a more traditional academic curriculum is mixed in. There is also a module dedicated for students 14 through 21, which concentrates on vocational training and independent living.

Aside from its school, the Virginia Institute of Autism offers outreach programs, including early intervention and consultation and training services for community schools. There are currently 37 administrators, outreach consultants and instructors on staff. The majority of the students live in the Charlottesville, Va. area, with most expenses picked up by their local school districts.



**Montcalm School for Boys
Albion, MI**

Starr.org
866-244-4321

The Montcalm School for Boys opened in 2000, a project of the non-profit organization Starr Commonwealth. Students in the year-round program suffer from a wide range of disabilities, including autism, bi-polar disorder, ADHD, emotional disturbance and substance abuse. They range in age from 12 to 21.

A residential facility where students live in cottages according to their age and disability, the Montcalm School aims to create a positive peer culture among the kids. "Through the group process they learn to interact and understand each other better than adults will get them to," says Dana Richards, senior residential family specialist. "The students go to school as a group, they go to therapies as a group, and when they go into the community, they go as a group."

Licensed by the Michigan Department of Education, the Montcalm School offers a full curriculum of high school courses and college-level work. "When they turn 18, they go into a transitional living program on the campus that focuses on independent living skills like money management and time management," Richards says.



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There are currently 60 boys in the school. The staff also helps develop and follow student Individualized Education Plans, which are updated via conference calls with each kids' local school district.

"For a far away facility it felt 100 percent more like a local school than a local school ever did for my son," says Nancy Grudens-Schuck, of Iowa, whose 19-year-old son graduated from the Montcalm School after four years in the program.

Students have plenty of opportunities to remain active, as the school boasts a full size gym, pool and recreation center. There's even a lake on the grounds where the boys can go fishing or boating. A similar program for girls is run in Van Wert, Ohio.



The New York Center for Autism Charter School New York, NY

NewYorkCenterforAutism.com
212-860-2580

Authorized by the New York City Department of Education and located within a Manhattan public school, the New York Center for Autism Charter School just completed its third year.

The school has 28 students that are evenly divided among seven classrooms. In each class there is a certified, special education head teacher, as well as three other instructors with at least a bachelor's degree. That gives the school a remarkable teacher-to-student ratio of one-to-one.

"We use applied behavioral analysis as the teaching methodology at the school, and as part of our program we do intensive family outreach," says Jamie Pagliaro, executive director of the school. "Our goal is to provide individual instruction using ABA and to help each child reach his or her full potential."

Each student has a monthly, on-site clinic meeting with the staff. Home visits to each student also take place monthly.

With 5,000 to 6,000 autistic students residing in New York City, it's no wonder the school is currently at full capacity. Each year, however, there is a lottery in which winners are placed on a waiting list should an opening become available.

Parents have between Jan. 1 and April 1 to apply for the lottery. Applications are available on the school's Web site.

"The school is just amazing," says Michelle Newhouse, whose 6-year-old son has attended the school since September 2007. "I've never met such dedicated people.

They really know your kids and they really put together programs based on your child's strengths and weaknesses."



**May Institute
Across the U.S.**
MayInstitute.org
800-778-7601

When Dr. Jacques May and his wife Marie-Anne founded the May Institute in 1955, not a whole lot was known about autism. "In those days if you had an autistic child, it was blamed on you," says Dennis Russo, chief clinical officer at May Institute.

Six decades later, thanks in part to the institute's work, autism is much less a mystery. Throughout its history, May Institute has provided applied behavior analysis to individuals with autism, brain injury, developmental disabilities and other behavior disorders.

Now one of the largest organizations of its kind, May Institute currently provides services to some 25,000 individuals and their families in more than 200 locations throughout the United States. The institute also runs 6 full schools (four are in Massachusetts; the others are in Maine and California).

These schools are reserved for autistic students who require a more intensive, structured program, in addition to other services, such as occupational and physical therapy, speech and nursing. All schools are led by a highly trained and qualified faculty. The newest one in Randolph, Mass., for example, is led by 40 doctoral-level staff members.

Margaret Cyr's 9-year-old son has attended the school in Randolph since 2003. "I love the program," she says. "It's one of the few schools around, I feel, that truly knows how to educate an autistic child. It seems like year after year my son is becoming calmer, more focused. I think he's making great progress."

Aside from the schools, May Institute provides various community programs for the youngest and oldest autistic individuals. It has centers that specialize in early identification, diagnosis and intervention, while others offer vocational training and geriatric programs.

Staff members can even provide services for students within their community school districts. "They go to where the students are and their goal is to help the kids who can stay in school, stay in school," Russo says.





ABA Academy
Arlington, TX
 abaacademy.com
 817-277-8870

Founded by Nancy Wagner in the fall of 2006, the ABA Academy is just as interested in educating parents of autistic children as the children themselves. "My goal is to train the parents," says Wagner, mother of two children on the spectrum. "Parents are the best teachers because they have their kids 24-7."

With six professionals on staff, the academy currently serves about 23 kids from the Dallas-Fort Worth area in Texas. Students participate in special skills groups and one-on-one applied behavioral analysis therapy sessions. Parents are an integral part of all sessions, Wagner says.

Training the parents in how to improve the behavior, communication and social skills of their kids allows them to continue the interventions at home. And that maximizes the results, Wagner says. "It's the intensive training that makes a huge difference," she says

Dawn Harris' 6-year-old son has attended the ABA Academy for over a year now and she's seen vast improvement. "It's been amazing," Harris says. "When we started he wasn't saying more than two to three words in a row. In over a year's time, he sounds like a typical 6-year-old."

As her son's communication has improved, Harris has noticed that his behavioral outbursts have subsided. "She really trained me as much as she trained my son," Harris says. "Nancy has been really good at making the sessions fun, as



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**New England Center
for Children**
Southborough, MA
necc.org
508-481-1015

The New England Center for Children (NECC) comprises a school in Southborough, which is about 20 miles west of Boston, and 17 group homes in and around the area. The center also runs 15 model applied behavioral analysis classrooms in 11 public schools across Massachusetts.

With about 700 employees, the center currently serves approximately 350 autistic individuals between the ages of 2 and 22. "We provide a continuum of services for children on the spectrum," says Vincent Strully, founder and chief executive officer. "We serve everyone on the spectrum."

In existence since 1975, the NECC runs a year-round, center-based preschool and day school. It also offers home-based early intervention and a transition program where NECC teachers help integrate students back into their local schools.

"My wife and I have seen significant progress," says Robert Ruzzo, whose 6-year-old son Patrick has been in NECC's preschool program for 3 years. "Patrick has a lot of challenges but he's made slow and steady progress."

The NECC's residential program is in part tailored for students with severe and challenging behavior. Students live in one of the 17 group homes in the Southborough area. Instruction in this program is usually in a one-to-one staff-to-student ratio. Its ultimate goal is to decrease the student's dangerous behaviors and increase their ability to function and communicate independently.

The majority of the NECC is publicly funded. Aside from its services, the center is renowned for the research it frequently publishes in peer-reviewed journals.



**School for Language
and Communication
Development**
Glen Cove, NY
slcd.org
516-609-2000

Though the School for Language and Communication Development (SLCD) serves all children with language disorders, many of its students are autistic.

In fact, it is the school's philosophy that



Recreational play is a favorite part of the day for thirteen-year-old Kyle and his teacher Kate at the May Center for Child Development.

teaching language is the key to effectively treat autism. "We believe children with autism have severe language disorders, so our entire program is language-oriented," says Dr. Ellenmorris Tiegerman, founder and executive director. "We really believe language is the foundation of all learning. That's what sets us apart from the rest."

Tiegerman maintains that much of the behavior and social problems of autistic children stem from the fact that they cannot communicate effectively.

The SLCD, which opened in 1985, runs a year-round elementary school in Glen Cove, Long Island and a middle and high school in Woodside, Queens. Most of the students come from within a 50 mile radius of New York City.

School classrooms contain 12 students, two teachers and two teaching assistants. The SLCD also offers numerous services, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and language therapy, music therapy and art therapy. "We do every possible service you can imagine," Tiegerman says. "If roller skating works, I'll do roller skating."

The SLCD receives many applications from parents, though it has limited openings on an annual basis. Students are selected based on the classroom space available in the schools. Those who can't get in are placed on a waiting list.

Lynne Koufakis' 14-year-old son has attended the SLCD for 7 years. "When my son entered the school he couldn't talk," she says. "Now I have to tell him to shut up. The staff is wonderful and they truly care about the kids."



**College Living
Experience**
Across the U.S.
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800-486-5058

Run by the Educational Services of America, College Living Experience comprises six sites in Denver, Colo., Monterey, Calif., Chicago, Ill., Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Washington, D.C. and Austin, Texas.

The organization provides services for students with autism and other disabilities. "Typically the students who come into our program with autism are higher functioning or have Asperger's," says Stephanie Martin, senior vice president of operations.

The goal of College Living Experience is to help disabled individuals who are already enrolled in a college, vocational or technical school. Its program offers academic tutoring, as well as life-skills training.

Dolly Galjour's 24-year-old daughter, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome after graduating high school, attends community college in Austin, Tex. and receives services from the College Living Experience there. "It's worked wonderfully," Galjour says. "Aside from the academic help, she's learning how to live independently. Once you're out of high school there aren't a lot of programs to help someone with these disabilities."

The 165 students enrolled in College Living Experience get two hours of tutoring for each subject they take each week. They also receive two hours of independent living training, in which they might learn to do their laundry or plan and prepare a meal. "The

goal of the program is independence," Martin says.

Students are typically 18 years old and up. College Living Experience also has a program aimed at helping disabled students attain their high school diploma so they can get into college.



Pyramid Autism Center
Orange, CA
PyramidAutismCenter.com
714-637-1292

The Pyramid Autism Center (PAC) serves children with autism who live in California's Orange County. The PAC uses the "Pyramid Approach to Education," developed by Dr. Andrew Bondy, a leader in autism research and education.

Started in 1998, the center runs year round. Classrooms consist of one teacher, two paraprofessionals and six students, who range in age from 5 to 22. "Currently we have 22 students and 13 classroom staff," says Stacey Kochanowski, center director. "Additional staff include a behavior specialist, substitute para/teacher, administrative assistant, and a director. All of our services are on-site and within the classroom environment."

Inside the classroom students learn domestic skills, functional academics, community skills, social interactions and appropriate behavior. The center also has an occupational therapist who visits the staff once a week to recommend activities that sharpen gross motor skills.

"My son's challenging behaviors have been reduced dramatically since attending PAC," says parent Eileen Falvey. Her son recently transitioned from the center into a public school.

It costs \$225 per day to attend, though many parents are successful in getting their local school district to foot the bill. ☺

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