

For autistic kids a new option

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Kevin Gersh's pitch -- "customized education" -- rang true for the parents who packed Overtown's Temple Israel on a recent Thursday.

By letting his students help design their own educational plans, they are better able to focus on textbooks, Gersh explained. The unconventional teaching method is at the core of Coral Rock Academy -- a private school opening in September for children with autism and other neurobiological disorders.

Gersh runs two similar schools in New York state, including a college program. Coral Rock educators boast that the school will also offer the therapeutic services necessary to build social skills in children whose conditions often leave them isolated from peers.

Currently housed at the temple, the school plans to enroll 20 students from grades 4 to 12. With an annual tuition of \$30,000, officials are hoping to raise money to provide scholarships to many of Miami's poor and working-class families.

Nationwide, the incidence of autistic children has increased to one in every 150, leaving educators scrambling for ways to serve their needs better.

In Miami-Dade County, the number identified in public schools grew from 1,446 in 2005 to 1,700 this year.

In Broward County, the number has risen by 300 a year over the last four years to about 2,400, officials said.

Miami-Dade public school officials are forming an autism task force, and a similar advisory council works to identify students in Broward and offer services such as speech and language therapy.

"We've seen an epidemic in the rise of kids with autism . . . but there are only a handful of schools that cater to their needs," said Helene Good, head of the Community Committee for Developmental Handicaps.

"There are only three or four such schools in South Florida."

To the parents who came to hear about Coral Rock -- many of them already disconcerted over district efforts -- Gersh's pitch sounded most promising.

"I like what I'm hearing," said Mark Hunt, a film producer whose 10-year-old autistic son struggles at Gloria Floyd Elementary School.

"We've had mixed results with him."

"There's never been a school like this before," said Susan Laurodo. "The possibilities are limitless."

Her son Oliver, recently profiled in The Miami Herald, spent the past year being home-schooled while his family fought district officials over his educational plan. Oliver had been attending Palmetto Senior High School, but his parents argued that MAST Academy, a magnet school, has a smaller setting and is more suitable.

Now, after more than 20 rejections from other schools, the family hopes that Coral Rock may offer their son a seat.

The school's arrival in Miami was inspired by another family's similar ordeal.

After his autistic son was pushed into classes with violent teenagers kicked out of 13 schools, Marty Steinberg decided to send his son Randy to a

program at Yale for autistic children.

Steinberg, a prominent local attorney, calls it ``the worst day of my life."

So, alongside a group of other parents, he lobbied to find a vendor who would bring such a program to South Florida, a search that took more than two years.

They found Kevin Gersh.

His institutions all revolve around the idea that when children control their education, they strive academically.

For children with neurobiological disorders, often isolated from regular kids, the philosophy works to foster their self-esteem, said Gersh, who suffers from dyslexia and attention deficit disorder.

Steinberg is garnering support to build a permanent school somewhere in Miami-Dade.

But experts argue that changing the system to suit students' needs may place children at a disadvantage in society.

"A lot of accommodations are made for kids in those schools, but society has made little progress in accommodating people with neurobiological disorders," said Dr. Peter Gerhardt, head of the Scientific Council Organization for Autism Research, based in Virginia.

So, educators have to focus on teaching skills that help children make the transition to life in the outside world, Gerhardt said.

At Temple Israel, a game room equipped with air hockey and basketball hoops sits across from two makeshift classrooms. It's where students can go to unwind if they become agitated.

Teachers are also planning field trips with neighboring schools so the students interact with other children.

Meanwhile, Oliver Laredo seemed to be making friends at the meeting. He flipped his cellphone, then nudged Alex Proctor, 14, as Gersh walked over. Alex stared wide-eyed at the giant barracuda that beamed onscreen.

"I caught him last week!" Oliver exclaimed. ``You wanna go fishing with me soon?"

"Yeah, I'd like that," Alex answered.

Said Gersh: ``OK, we'll have a day of class down by the pier."

About the Author

From www.miamiherald.com:

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Speech Language Therapy Abstracts. Tongue movements for speech in three adults with Down syndrome and one normal speaking control.

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To provide information in Vietnamese regarding speech and language development, disorders that affect communication, and general.

Professional speech pathology resources, including Jobs , discussion areas, message forum, product listings, continuing education courses, and other free.

Therapy may also focus on different channels. So the goals for therapy may target auditory skills or speech and oral motor skills, or encoding.

This page describes the degree courses in speech and language therapy. Most speech and language therapy students will do a three or four year degree.

The largest repository of Speech Language Pathology and Audiology related links on the web. An open web directory project updated and maintained.

