



Parents Talk about LEAP Clinic and How Their Children Benefit

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EAU CLAIRE — Fifty area children received special instruction this summer through the Learning Enhancement and Progression Clinic, a collaborative program of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire special education department and the Eau Claire School District that ran June 13-July 14. The program, which has been running for about 20 years, provides instruction in reading, mathematics, written expression, spelling, study skills and social skills to K-12 students who need extra assistance and specialized attention for a variety of reasons.

On the last day of the clinic, parents of seven of these children met in a small room at Roosevelt School, where the clinic meets, and talked about what the program has meant to them and their children.

Joel Levandowski, whose daughter Kelci has been coming to the LEAP Clinic for four years, explained that Kelci has a visual impairment — hereditary optic atrophy — which renders her legally blind. Although Kelci gets special education services during the school year, she doesn't qualify for regular summer school. According to Levandowski, he and his wife, Jane, believe the specialized attention she gets at LEAP has helped to keep Kelci from falling behind. She will be entering the fifth grade this fall.

"We've noticed a real difference," said Levandowski. "We believe this is at least partly due to the LEAP Clinic's preparation. They get her school records, so they know where she left off during the regular school year and where to start from during the summer."

And Kelci enjoys coming to LEAP, said Levandowski, noting that she recently chose to pass up an opportunity to attend a one-week LIONS camp because it would have overlapped with the five weeks of LEAP Clinic instruction.

Myra Hayden drove her son Anthony, who will enter the fourth grade this fall, to the LEAP Clinic from Elk Mound because of the clinic's reputation.

"Anthony's challenge has always been reading and math," said Hayden. "By the end of second grade he was already a grade level behind. But we took him to a Sylvan Learning Center before he was able to get into the LEAP Clinic, and I can see the confidence that both Sylvan and LEAP have given him," said Hayden.

Greg Cleveland, whose son Emmitt has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, one of the Autism spectrum disorders, sees the five weeks of consistent instruction offered by LEAP as one of its most important aspects. His son, who is going into sixth grade and attended LEAP for the first time this summer, needs special help with social skills — "the kind of things most people take for granted their kids know," said Cleveland. The children get 45 minutes of social skills practice, which includes role playing and training in manners and appropriate behavior.



UW-Eau Claire special education graduate student Lynn Martin, center, and undergraduate student Leah Philleo worked recently with participants in the 2005 LEAP Clinic, a program for K-12 students with special learning needs. (Photo by Linda Brunner, UW-Eau Claire special education department)

Christy Riley, mother of 10-year-old Jack, another child with Asperger's, agreed. Jack has been coming to LEAP for three years.

"For Jack, it's been amazing," said Riley. "The consistency is really important. Our kids need more structure than most kids to keep progressing. When they aren't in a program like this, we see them backsliding in terms of their behavior and achievement."

Lynn Larabee, whose son Alberto was adopted from the Philippines and has been in special education since grade three, said one of the things she sees the clinic working with the students on are spelling and math facts.

"One of the reasons children with learning differences struggle is that basic facts are not an automatic for them," said Larabee. "If a problem takes too long to solve, children with learning differences can give up easily because of frustration."

Larabee said that as educational philosophies fluctuate, she's noticed that there's not as much time for repetitive practice of these skills in regular classrooms, and teachers and students often are focusing on other important types of learning, such as critical thinking and problem solving.

"Students who need more time to focus on the repetitive drills to reach the same automatic level as their peers do not have enough time to practice," said Larabee.

Special education professor in the College of Education and Human Sciences Dr. Vicki Snider, who co-directs the LEAP Clinic with Laure O'Keefe, a special education lecturer, said that while one of their goals is to produce an immediate, noticeable increase in the reading level and overall academic achievement of the students attending the clinic, another one of their goals can have even more lasting, long-term consequences.

"We really want to increase everyone's expectations concerning what these students and their teachers can achieve," said Snider.

"LEAP does a great job of helping kids feel better about themselves and what they can accomplish," said Janet Driever, whose son Peter is attending LEAP for the second time. Peter was adopted from Siberia and also has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

"Children tend to shy away from things that they aren't good at or that make them feel different or unable to keep up," Driever said, noting that the smaller classes, one-on-one direct instruction and immediate feedback help her son see himself as more able.

Riley agreed. "My son's LD teacher during the regular school year tells me that she can see the difference in Jack after he's attended LEAP," she said.

Another thing all the parents agreed on was the importance of early intervention for their children so they can stay as close as possible to the achievement level of their peers as they progress through the school system.

Snider, who recently finished tallying the results of the parent satisfaction survey handed out during the last week of the clinic, found the results supported the comments of these parents. When asked how they would rate the quality of the instruction their children received over the summer, 19 parents rated the instruction excellent, 14 rated it good, 1 rated it fair and none gave it a poor rating. All but one parent agreed or strongly agreed that they would consider enrolling their child in the clinic again. The questionnaire had a 74 percent response rate.

Both Snider and O'Keefe, who direct the 14 UW-Eau Claire undergraduate and graduate students majoring or minoring in special education who make up the main teaching force for the clinic, stress that the LEAP Clinic focuses on students with mild disabilities and students without disabilities who often fall through the cracks in general education. Most of the kids in LEAP are the ones who are most likely to be able to function at or close to normal grade level if they get this extra help. Snider said the clinic is not able to accommodate children with more severe academic or social problems.

"Running the clinic requires a great deal of hard work and effort from the directors, the teaching staff and the students," Snider said. "As a teacher educator, the clinic is where I practice what I preach. Effective instructional practices and skilled teachers can make a difference in children's lives. For me personally, it's where the rubber meets the road."