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Second Opinion

Faced with navigating the bureaucratic maze surrounding public schools, more parents are taking along a guide.

By Alexandra R. Moses

Her legs curled beneath her on the leather sofa, fingers fidgeting, 14-year-old Amanda Welborn is talking about her problems with math. She's already taken pre-algebra twice, and her teachers have recommended she take the class again this fall, when she'll be a freshman at a high school in Montgomery County, Maryland.

"I just can't remember, like, anything," she says softly. But it's not her school counselor Amanda's talking to—she's sitting in private education consultant Patti Murphy's living room. The teen tells Murphy she has trouble concentrating and wants more one-on-one attention at school. "I can't really pay attention when they're talking to everybody else," she complains. "I kind of space out in the middle of class."

Educational consultants such as Patti Murphy counsel students and their parents about matters as diverse as learning disorders and college selection. Experts attribute the explosion in the field to the proliferation of child maladies and the perception that school officials can't deal with them.
—David Kidd

Amanda's mother, Gayle Welborn, says she went to Murphy because she believes there is more to Amanda's problem than math skills and she doesn't think her daughter's school has been responsive enough. "Amanda is thinking she's stupid," says Welborn, who also fears that her daughter could turn to self-destructive behavior if she doesn't get help.

Welborn is among a growing number of parents across the country who are turning to private education consultants to squeeze more services or alternative testing out of public schools or to find a specialized private school to address a

FROM THE ARCHIVES

"Stepping Out of the Mainstream," October 1, 2002.

"All Children Great And Small," January 1, 2001.

"Connections: Failure And Success," October 1, 1997.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

The **Independent Educational Counsultants Assocation** offers a primer on **"The Consultant & Learning Disabilities."**

student's needs. While such professionals aren't new—wealthy parents have for decades turned to consultants for help in selecting elite schools—their numbers are swelling and their focus is shifting.

Mark Sklarow, executive director of the Fairfax, Virginia-based Independent Educational Consultants Association, says his organization started in the 1970s with just a handful of experts on boarding schools. Today, according to Sklarow, the association has about 500 members and the number of consultants nationwide has doubled to about 2,000 in the past four years.

The boom, consultants say, is in response to increased student diagnoses of emotional and learning problems coupled with parent frustration regarding the inability of overburdened school personnel to address the maladies.

"We're doing a better job of acknowledging that not all kids learn the same," Sklarow says.

His organization's members still hunt up exclusive schools, but about 61 percent of IECA professionals now counsel children for learning issues—one-third more than they did five years ago, according to Sklarow. Emotional and behavioral problems are also on the rise: Thirty-eight percent of members work with clients facing those obstacles, up from 25 percent during the same period, he added.

Cheryl Dellasega, an associate professor of medicine and humanities at Penn State University, believes that more children are emotionally troubled because they try to do too much and that the niche has grown to address that. "Kids feel from early on ... these big pressures to be successful in a number of things," says Dellasega, who sent her own daughter to a consultant. It used to be enough, she adds, for a student to be a star football player. "Now, you've got to be the football player with straight As [and] with the active volunteer group."

For one Washington, D.C.-area parent, an outside perspective was what she needed to find help for her teenage son, who suffered from depression and other problems. A parent can do research on the Internet, visit campuses, and meet with teachers, but a consultant will know the true differences between schools, says the woman, who for privacy reasons didn't want her name used.

"It was just becoming overwhelming, and I needed to delegate some of the responsibility to

... someone I could trust, who could overview the situation," the mother says. Her son recently began a private program.

This expertise doesn't come cheaply, however. The D.C.-area mother says she paid about $2,000 for services. An IECA survey pegs the average hourly fee at $154, but rates can go as high as $350.

Consultants' growing influence has been met with mixed reviews from public school officials. "As a general rule, I would vastly prefer parents to start with the resources in their school," says Kent Weaver, a high school counselor specialist for Montgomery County Public Schools, "as opposed to someone assuming that they're not going to work it out and have to bring someone in."

Jill Berman, a consultant in Fairfax County, Virginia, doesn't disagree. Parents and schools often have different ideas of a child's needs, she's found, and a consultant shouldn't automatically go in on the attack.

Parents also run the risk of losing perspective on their child's problem, ultimately blaming teachers for poor performance, says Sister St. John Delany, an associate professor of education at Pace University in New York. "Children bring so many problems with them to school," Delany says. "And teachers have difficulty handling all these problems. I think that's why parents lose confidence in their teachers."

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