

Arrowsmith: An Innovation in Special Education

by Rachel Zimmerman and Malkie Deutsch

Imagine a student classified as learning disabled achieving a grade of 92 on the Regents! Imagine a child previously unable to learn a blatt gemara understanding it well enough to teach it to his peers! Imagine a socially awkward child successfully managing a social situation! It is possible! These and other amazing scenarios have happened over the course of this past year as a result of a remarkable program known as Arrowsmith.

Beth Jacob of Boro Park and Tiferes Yisroel of Flatbush were the first Orthodox Brooklyn schools to implement the innovative and highly successful Arrowsmith Program. Yeshiva Degel Hatorah is the first Orthodox Monsey school that currently offers this program. The Jewish Educational Center of Elizabeth, NJ was the first Jewish Day School in NJ to offer the program.

The Arrowsmith program has its roots in Canada. Results have been so amazing that the Toronto Board of Education has implemented the program in many of its public schools. The Arrowsmith Program is based on the latest advances of neuroplasticity. It aims to strengthen the weak areas of the brain to expand learning capacity. Scientists have proven that these cutting edge brain exercises which increase in intensity and speed can help change actual intelligence. This program addresses nineteen different cognitive areas. The program addresses difficulty in English and Hebrew reading, dyslexia, English and math comprehension, conceptual thinking, fine motor skills, kinesthetic, handwriting, short and long term memory, organizational skills, auditory processing disorder, social skills, attention deficit, in addition to many other areas.

The Arrowsmith program is a one-to-four year curriculum designed to reduce or remove learning disabilities through the use of computer and auditory exercises that stimulate underperforming areas of the brain. Research studies have shown that when an impediment to learning is removed, children can begin learning at an accelerated rate. Although the Arrowsmith Program does not teach math or reading, the specialized exercises strengthen the areas of the brain required to perform these specific tasks. Children soon catch up to their grade level and are able to participate in a full academic curriculum. They no longer require other forms of remediation and tutoring. The reason for this amazing accomplishment is because the 'mental block' is opened and no longer needs to be compensated for.

Dr. William J. Lancee, head of research in the Department of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto and associate professor at the University of Toronto, confirms Arrowsmith's efficacy. "All deficit areas identified by the Arrowsmith Program improved as a result of the application of the Arrowsmith Program Cognitive exercises," Dr. Lancee wrote in a November 2005 report, funded by the Donner Canadian Foundation, summarizing the findings of a three year study. The results, he said, "strongly support the effectiveness of the Arrowsmith Program for a wide spectrum of learning problems". Dr. Norman Doige included an entire chapter on the Arrowsmith Program, in his book The Brain that Changes Itself (a New York Times best seller in the U.S and Canada). However, the most impressive advocates for the program are the parents and children themselves. Parents and children are thrilled when they realize they can now keep up in class or ace a non

remedial exam. Arrowsmith tracks each child consistently to ensure that goals are met so that children can be completely mainstreamed in the shortest time possible.

Although Arrowsmith claims an 85% success rate, all of the 19 participants in Bais Yakov's Arrowsmith Program in the past year have seen significant improvement in the mental areas they were working on. With a brocha from Reb. Dovid Feinstein shlita and the go ahead from Reb. Asher Ehrenreich, esteemed principal, the Arrowsmith program found a home in Bais Yakov of Boro Park. After just a few successful months, parents from Lakewood, Boston, Baltimore, and the Tristate Area have shown interest in establishing the Arrowsmith Program in their schools as well.

The Arrowsmith program must work in a school setting in conjunction with a regular classroom curriculum. The school is required to provide a classroom and some computers. Children spend approximately four periods a day in the Arrowsmith classroom while the rest of their time is spent on regular classroom instruction in their own classes. The host school usually does not assume any financial responsibility. Parents in a cooperative effort cover all the costs required for supplies, teacher training, and teacher salary. Malkie Deutsch and Rachel Zimmerman, the two Bais Yaakov mothers who spearheaded the effort to bring Arrowsmith to Bais Yaakov, take care of all the particulars and make sure the program runs smoothly. The costs for the program are separate from any tuition parents are responsible for. Due to the efforts of these two mothers, the New York State Department of Education has now begun to recognize the Arrowsmith program as a viable approach to special education. As such, the New York State Board of Education has reimbursed Tiferes Yisroel and Bais Yaakov parents. Grants and options are available in order to help make this life changing program affordable.

The success of the Arrowsmith programs in these schools is also due to the handpicked amazing teachers who run the programs. Mrs. Devorie Sonnenschein, a special educator, is enamored with the program. She has stated that special ed tactics required remedial instruction with little improvement. "It was frustrating." She claims. The Arrowsmith exercises work so that the child can function in a regular classroom without remedial instruction. "Better yet, the information is retained." Mrs. Brocha Neuman, the teacher in the Arrowsmith program at Tiferes Yisroel was so ecstatic with the results she saw, that she went to speak with Reb. Shmuel Kaminetsky Shlita, who told her she had a responsibility to inform the public of the incredible improvements she witnessed.

Malkie and Rachel explain that the goal of Arrowsmith is mainstreaming children. They explain to parents that the milestones their children achieve will be permanent once they've completed the program. The only problem they've come across so far is that success can be addictive! They recently informed a parent whose child was managing average work in her regular classroom that she no longer needed to continue in the program. The mother's response? "I want another year". "Why be satisfied with 70s or 80s if we can possibly reach 90s?" We owe this opportunity to all our children.