

Tuition Support Program benefits those with learning disabilities

HIGHEST POTENTIAL

Three accredited schools receive tuition funding

CARSTEN KNOX
For Metro

For more than a decade the Department of Education has been providing a Tuition Support Program (TSP) for families of children with learning disabilities, which allows many to attend one of Nova Scotia's special education private schools.

When a child is diagnosed with a learning disability — including Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ADHD — they automatically qualify for that support.

The TSP this year amounts to \$7,900 per student. The funding goes toward tuition for students at one of three accredited schools: Landmark East School in Wolfville, Churchill Academy in Dartmouth, and Bridgeway Academy, with campuses in

Dartmouth, Yarmouth, Truro, and New Glasgow. In this school year there are 224 students benefiting from the TSP, which makes up 95 to 98 per cent of students enrolled.

"Our presence and our ability to meet the needs of so many students who have learning disabilities is very much dependent on the Tuition Support Program," said Erin Paine, director of admissions at Bridgeway.

But these aren't forever schools. They're in place to help students improve their academic, social and behaviour skills, but usually only for three or four years.

"The intent is that it's a short-term placement," said Annie Baert, a learning disabilities consultant at the Department of Education. "The student can receive a specialized intensive support, and then transition back to their local, neighbourhood school. And it's not that the student isn't receiving the appropriate programming in the public school system, but it's an option for parents to consider — a smaller class size and a different school

environment."

Paine said at Bridgeway, children with disabilities learn who they are and grow more confident in what they can do. "Often students come to us with anxiety and depression, not talking and with poor peer relationships. But they can become the child who raises their hand and says to the teacher, 'I can't hear. Can I move to the front?' Or, 'This work is too difficult, it's above my reading level, can I try something different?' They start advocating for themselves."

Working at the school is inspiring, she says. Paine sees what the intensive, particular program can do for children who require that kind of attention.

"To send them back and have them be successful, to have their peers, families, and teachers say, wow, this child is night and day," Paine said. "They left us and had facial tics and weren't talking and had no friends, now they come back to their public schools and lead presentations in class. It's nice to see them do so well."



Confidence and self study are a few of the gains from the Tuition Support Program. SHUTTERSTOCK

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