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Learning how we learn
Chapel Hill's All Kinds of Minds marks 10 years helping kids

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CHAPEL HILL -- A boy in a red rugby shirt sat hunched over a desk, working on what appeared to be a test. In another room, his parents watched his progress on a computer screen.

They -- along with researchers, clinicians and learning specialists -- were learning how the boy learned. They hoped the task would help him strengthen his strengths, overcome his weaknesses and succeed in school and, ultimately, in life.

It's a goal All Kinds of Minds founder **Mel Levine**, a pediatrician, has for all children.

"Ever since I was a little boy, I have been fascinated by schools and learning," said **Levine**, speaking in his All Kinds of Minds office in Chapel Hill. "We're giving schools, parents and clinicians the tools they need to help children succeed.

When he says "we," **Levine** is talking about the nonprofit All Kinds of Minds, an institute dedicated to helping children learn that this year is celebrating its 10th birthday.

In the years since **Levine** and financier Charles Schwab founded it, All Kinds of Minds has trained some 28,000 educators who have, in turn, reached 1.5 million students.

It has evaluated 2,900 individual students, like the boy in the rugby shirt. The Chapel Hill-based institute also has opened an office in New York City, and has raised nearly \$65 million in private donations.

Building on strengths

But, perhaps more important to **Levine**, All Kinds of Minds has changed the lives of thousands upon thousands of students -- simply by helping them, their parents and their teachers understand how they learn.

"You find a student who hasn't always done well in school, but is fantastic with Legos, is interested in fashion and has a terrific sense of style," **Levine** said. "You teach her to build on her strengths, and you see all these attributes come together, and she becomes a successful fashion designer. But she did poorly in school, and had a behavior problem."

If the parents of that girl had taken her to All Kinds of Minds -- either in Chapel Hill or New York City -- she'd likely have entered the Student Success program. The institute's newest offering, the program began in 2000.

For a \$3,450 fee, the family would go to the office early in the morning. There, the child would take a slew of tests, then work with pediatricians and learning specialists, while her parents watched from another room.

Then, working with the test results and a host of evaluations filled out by her, her parents and her teachers, a team of evaluators would "demystify" the child -- a hallmark of the program.

The parents and child would learn her strengths and skills. They'd receive tips and follow-up advice on how to overcome her weaknesses without dwelling on them. They'd have in-depth conversations about the techniques she should use in school.

The results frequently surprise parents -- sometimes even the child.

"Obviously it's a problem if your parents don't understand how you learn, or your teachers don't," **Levine** said. "But it's probably more of a problem if your image of yourself is not accurate."

Self-esteems rise

Of the families who have participated, 75 percent used the suggestions at home and 73 percent have incorporated the suggestions for school, said Beth Briere, clinical manager of the Student Success program.

About 60 percent of families saw the child's self-esteem improve, she added.

"For some kids, this is the first time anyone has ever told them they are good at anything," Briere said. "That's what this is all about."

The methods are controversial to some.

Clinicians at All Kinds of Minds won't tell a student he or she has a learning disability or other condition that might slow him or her down academically. They prefer to focus on the strengths, and say students learn differently from one another.

Others say the program is impractical for every school.

But **Levine** is trying. He's written nearly a dozen books and has another in the works.

Levine, who has a goose farm in northern Orange County, has been on Oprah Winfrey's show and "The Today Show," and offered parenting and teaching advice in dozens of publications.

Schools locally and across the country train teachers in Schools Attuned, a program that teaches them how the mind works so they can share that knowledge with their students. Many schools have contracts with All Kinds of Minds to provide periodic training to teachers.

Understanding the mind

Schools Attuned is the oldest part of All Kinds of Minds, having existed even before the institute was founded. Based on the theories expressed in **Levine's** books, the yearlong trainings occur in schools across the country and Canada.

At a recent Schools Attuned session at New Hope Elementary school in Hillsborough, facilitator Rebecca Von Hoene led teachers through a project on neurodevelopmental profiles, which helps educators learn where a breakdown in learning is occurring. Later, they'll work on "demystifying" individual students.

The teachers laugh, listen and remain engaged throughout the entire two-hour session.

"If you're completely tired by the school day, you'll be completely whip-tired when you walk out of here," Von Hoene told the 20 or so teachers. "But you will have had fun while you're here."

The teachers are expected to share what they've learned with their students. For example, Von Hoene said, if a class has trouble listening, the teacher should discuss why with her students.

Levine has even made videos for the kids, including an infamous one in which he rides his tractor through his farm, showing the animals that have poor social skills.

The animals, **Levine** said, sometimes mirror what he sees in children.

"I can have a whole gaggle of geese, and I can't believe how different they are," he said.

"They are all kinds of minds, even among 2-day-old geese."

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Interested in hearing more about All Kinds of Minds and **Mel Levine's** methods?

Levine will give a talk Thursday at the Sheraton Imperial Hotel in Durham as keynote speaker in a two-day professional development symposium. The UNC professor is scheduled to speak from 9:15 to 11:45 a.m.

The Connecting Minds symposium, which continues Friday, is hosted by All Kinds of Minds and the Schools Attuned program.

For more information, visit allkindsofminds.org or call Christie Smith at 933-8082, ext. 2221.

The Student Success program also hosts regular open houses. The next one is slated for 6 to 8 p.m. Jan. 19 in the Chapel Hill offices of the program at 1450 Raleigh Road. It will focus on homework.

For more information, call 442-1033.

THE HERALD-SUN PHOTOS BY BERNARD THOMAS

Teachers (from left) Stephanie King and Leslie Kelley, both from Seawell Elementary School, and Gina Rhoades of Pathways Elementary work on a project as part of training for the All Kinds of Minds program.

THE HERALD-SUN BILL WILLCOX

In the years since **Mel Levine** founded it, All Kinds of Minds has trained 28,000 educators who have, in turn, reached 1.5 million students.

THE HERALD-SUN PHOTOS BY BERNARD THOMAS

Teacher Carrie Bartlett of Perry Harrison School in Pittsboro ponders a question during training for the All Kinds of Minds program.

Rebecca Von Hoene serves as a facilitator for a session of Schools Attuned, the oldest part of the All Kinds of Minds program.

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