

HELPING MONTESSORI EDUCATORS REACH ALL KINDS OF MINDS

by Mary Jo Dunnington

Schools Attuned is one of a suite of professional development programs from All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit institute that translates the latest research on how students learn into programs and tools for educators to help students become more successful learners.

Based on the research of Dr. Mel Levine and others, these programs are built around a neurodevelopmental framework that stems from the theory that the human brain is made up of a network of neurodevelopmental functions. A subgroup of these functions is responsible for learning and academic performance. The strength of these functions can directly influence an individual's success in and out of school. Every learner has an individual neurodevelopmental profile composed of specific strengths and weaknesses.

All Kinds of Minds believes that equipping educators to identify and understand their students' learning profiles empowers them to be more effective in helping students find success. Armed with knowledge and language to describe their observations about student learning, teachers are better able to address and manage the learning needs in their classrooms and schools.

When Jan Deason, head of school at Atlanta's Arbor Montessori School, was looking for professional development to help her

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faculty make classrooms successful learning environments for more children—especially those with learning challenges—she selected Schools Attuned. A research-based program that educates participants about how different brain functions influence learning and ways teachers can use this knowledge to better

understand and tailor instruction to students with different learning profiles, Schools Attuned seemed to Deason like a natural fit with the Montessori approach.

“Montessori teachers are trained observers, and Schools Attuned deepens and values teachers’ observations,” Deason says of the training. She notes the program has transformed the way her entire staff think and talk about learning, giving them common language and concepts from the science of learning to use when discussing individual students.

Schools Attuned is one of several programs developed by All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit organization dedicated to translating research from neuroscience and related fields into knowledge and tools educators can use to help all children learn effectively. The five-day Schools Attuned course introduces educators to eight neurodevelopmental constructs, showing how strengths and weaknesses in these different areas of brain function lead to learning challenges for various students. Course participants learn to identify and understand individual learning profiles among their students; they also learn about research-based interventions and accommodations that they can use with students who are struggling. All Kinds of Minds also offers three- and one-day professional development opportunities, and is introducing online learning modules for educators during the 2009-2010 school year.

At the Montessori School of Denver, where fifteen primary and upper elementary teachers have participated in Schools Attuned, the training has strengthened educators’ skills at identifying the learning strengths and challenges of students with special needs.

“Schools Attuned has helped our teachers go beyond the diagnosis that the kids come in with—like ADD—and helps them pinpoint where the actual breakdown is occurring,” observes Julie Bragdon, Director of Primary Education. “Kids come in with a variety of labels—or their own defeating self-image—and Schools Attuned has helped us look at kids from a variety of viewpoints. It has helped our teachers be more hopeful when they work with a child who is struggling, because Schools Attuned gives them so many different strategies to try.”

Promoting the ideas of hope and optimism that all children can learn are foundational to Schools Attuned and other professional development programs from All Kinds of Minds. “So often special education is focused primarily on finding out what’s wrong with a student and how to remediate the problem,” notes All Kinds of Minds CEO Mary-Dean Barringer, a former special education teacher. “In our urgency to ‘fix’ what’s wrong, we forget to focus on the more important question—what’s going right in the child’s learning? Programs like Schools Attuned start with the search for learning strengths and personal interests as the initial building blocks for a successful and meaningful individualized education plan.”

According to Bragdon, Schools Attuned provides teachers at the Montessori School of Denver with essential professional knowledge and skills that other training has not addressed: “Schools Attuned is like grad school in a week, and has really deepened our teaching practice.”

Bragdon also notes that the training better enables her teachers to have constructive dialogues with parents about what students are doing in the classroom, and how parents and teachers can collaborate in the implementation of learning strategies designed to support their children. The Montessori School of Denver has also engaged parents in an “All Kinds of Minds Fair,” during which students showcase activities to introduce parents and other caregivers to the neurodevelopmental constructs and how these relate to learning. “Parents help fund professional development at MSD through their contributions to the Annual Fund,” Bragdon points out. “So it is important for us to educate them on the value of Schools Attuned

and the payoff the MSD kids get as a result of our commitment to the All Kinds of Minds training.”

At Arbor Montessori, Deason and her faculty also expose students starting in the elementary grades to the language and concepts from Schools Attuned, to help students become more aware of their own learning profiles. “When I was teaching our adolescents (seventh and eighth graders), I did a more extensive workshop with them and had them do a self-evaluation so they could identify their own learning strengths in the classroom setting and see where they might need some help. We always talk about their strengths first and identify their affinities,” Deason says.

All Kinds of Minds’ Barringer says she would love to see her organization partner with more Montessori schools to further enhance their work in special education and beyond. “Montessori educators have developed an art of teaching that respects the unique timetable by which each child’s learning unfolds,” Barringer says. “They have perfected the practice of being accomplished ‘kid watchers.’ When those observations are reviewed through the neurodevelopmental framework, teachers deepen their understanding of how each child is wired to learn. This further enriches how they come to know their students and what they need in terms of instruction so that each child fulfills his or her greatest promise.”

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Bragdon concurs. “Schools Attuned is an amazing complement to Montessori. Like Montessori, it is respectful of the child. Schools Attuned also seeks to form partnerships between the child, parent, and school—just like Montessori!”

