

# Breaking the Mold

Newly Opened Siena School Serves Students Who Learn Differently

by Carolyn Cosmos

**T**here's a brand new school in Silver Spring, Md., for underserved students—in this case, bright kids with language-based learning difficulties such as dyslexia. It's called the Siena School, and it just opened this fall.

The break-the-mold school comes from a break-the-mold educator, Erik Heyer, Siena's founder and head of the school. Heyer once tutored in public schools and considered becoming a teacher, but he moved into finance instead, receiving a master's of business administration from Harvard and working at J.P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs.

Heyer eventually combined the two interests: He became a national figure in the charter school movement and an officer of Victory Schools, a for-profit educational management firm.

"I was part of the charter school and public school reform movement," he said. That unique perspective gave him a bird's-eye view of the country's education landscape, where he spotted a population of students whose needs were being ignored: average or bright students with "learning differences"—he won't call them "disabilities"—such as mild to moderate dyslexia.

Dyslexia encompasses a group of brain-based disorders that affect reading and understanding symbols (letters or numbers), but don't otherwise directly affect behavior or IQ, although the social and academic difficulties they create can lead to problems ranging from mild frustration and loss of self-esteem to dropping out of school.

One identifying hallmark of a learning difference is "good-kid" underachievement: Teachers and parents wonder why these apparently bright students are doing so poorly. Why are they passing one subject and failing another? The cause may go undetected, and even if it is identified, frustration can follow because such students are not likely to get adequate help.

These students may not be not sufficiently disabled under U.S. law and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to qualify for assistance from over-extended special education programs. Or they may be out of place in programs serving children whose problems are more severe. If placed in a special reading class, their across-the-board needs won't be met in other subject areas where they may be struggling as well.

Some of these dyslexic children left behind are very gifted. Famous dyslexics who survived academic struggles include Albert Einstein, Pierre Curie, Whoopi Goldberg, Agatha Christie, Pablo Picasso, Winston Churchill, Henry Ford, Ted Turner, Walt Disney, as well as the founders of Kinko's and JetBlue.

So Heyer, who had moved from Manhattan to Washington, D.C., decided to change the existing landscape by establishing a school that served this particular population. He wanted to create a positive learning environment for challenged children whose potential is high—for the kids whom Heyer describes as having "lagging academic achievement in spite of strong cognitive abilities."

Enter Siena. The school began this fall with 30 students in grades 5 through 9,



The Siena School in Maryland opened this fall with classes geared toward children who have mild to moderate language-based learning difficulties, such as dyslexia—conditions that are often inadequately addressed at other schools.



and will add one grade a year until it offers grades 5 through 12 in 2009. Following the Maryland state curriculum as a core, it provides small classes where students are placed in each subject according to ability rather than age or grade.

Not only are the reading programs designed to address the needs of children with learning differences, all Siena subject matter is taught in ways that work specifically with these students. Highly structured and individualized reading and writing instruction is intertwined with multi-sensory, multimedia, interactive, and inquiry-based learning techniques in other subjects. Classrooms are wired for high-speed Internet access, and students use computers extensively.

"We focus on the key elements of reading and the basic building blocks through direct and systematic instruction," Heyer said. The school relies on a number of national reading and writing programs to do that. "Dyslexia is a neurological difficulty in connecting printed characters with sounds and in making word associations," Heyer explained. "MRI [magnetic resonance imaging] studies show that brain activation is different in people with dyslexia." However, he added, the brain is "plastic" and through these structured activities, students develop additional, compensatory neural pathways.

Eventually these students, often working with reading software programs at their own pace, can "become highly skilled at decoding letters and other symbols. They will become readers, but they won't have quite the same fluency as some-

one without dyslexia," Heyer said. The process resembles that of a right-hander who's lost the use of the right arm as an adult and learns to become a "leftie."

Heyer and the other founders and supporters of Siena visited other schools that addressed the needs of children with both similar and different learning challenges to create a "best-practices" model. They found that a multi-sensory approach seemed to be the most effective.

"These children can learn, but they learn in a different manner. The math equation can go in, but you need to employ different senses, different learning channels to get it there," Heyer said. "All classrooms are set up with U-shaped seating arrangements to promote interaction. There's a lot of movement in our classrooms, a lot of assistive technology. If you walk in, it looks like a good traditional school, but it's a richer environment."

Siena's tailored approach doesn't stop with just phonics, however. "That would make for a dull program and a dull person. Many of these children are truly gifted in science, the visual arts, athletics, and we need to make sure that's not lost because these are the areas where they will be driven to succeed," Heyer said.

In science, for example, the school offers structured lab experiments and experiential learning, some of it developed in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution. In learning a second language, Heyer said the school will apply the same techniques used to develop basic reading skills—that is, a focus on phonological awareness and a multi-sensory curriculum.

Middle school students take a class called "Strengths," in which they choose a subject area to develop and work on a group project. Currently, one Siena Strengths group is publishing a magazine, with students taking on different



The Siena School in Silver Spring, Md., uses a multi-sensory approach and other techniques to teach students with mild to moderate language difficulties.

roles and researching and writing articles in their chosen areas. Another group is making an animated film about animals.

The school has a Siena Scholarship Fund that will provide assistance to low-income families whose children are eligible to attend. More information is available at [www.washington-scholarshipfund.org](http://www.washington-scholarshipfund.org).

Heyer is very clear about the population the school is set up to serve: Students may be no more than two grade levels behind. If they are three or four levels behind, they have different needs and require a different kind of support than the school can offer, he said. And Siena is not set up to deal with students who have "significant emotional or behavior problems."

"There's been a big gap in programs for children with mild to moderate learning disabilities and differences," said Heyer, who's come to Silver Spring to fill that gap.

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