

New horizons open at Bromley Brook School

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MANCHESTER - When Laura Mack was 3, she learned to read while sitting on her father's lap as he studied, and gained the impression that "being taught is being loved."

"Imagine my surprise when I went to school!" said Mack, English and theater teacher and one of the directors at Bromley Brook School. "I've been looking for that for the rest of my life." Mack said she felt every student should experience security, warmth, safety and beautiful language - and that's what the students can expect to find at Bromley Brook.

The school, run by Aspen Education Group, is a residential program for girls ages 13 to 17, college-bound but troubled - isolating themselves, acting out, getting into trouble, underachieving, taking unnecessary risks - who recognize their difficulties and want to take an active part in changing their situations.

The school features rolling admissions and a coordinated curriculum with considerable personal interaction and ongoing assessment. When full enrollment is reached, the student-teacher ratio will be 12:1; at present it's closer to 2:1.

With such a small group, there's no place for students to "hide" in class - and a certainty that new material is mastered before a girl moves forward.

"Math is very sequential," said teacher Troy Heaton. Students who pass tests but with low grades develop serious holes in their knowledge base, and will eventually be "beating their heads against the wall because they don't understand" the material. Under mastery learning, a student who passes with a 65 will go back over the test, find out what went wrong, and keep working on it. That student will read, write, listen and verbalize the work, utilizing as many ways as possible to learn it. When ready, the test is repeated - and the second, higher, grade is the one that's recorded, because at that point, the material is mastered.

"Now, there are no holes in the knowledge," Heaton said. "They're confident. There's no math anxiety,



Stephanie L. Ryan Photo

Above, student Lizzie demonstrates the Bromley Brook School's computer-based "reference library" to community visitors during the school's grand opening celebration.

no test anxiety. Some of them get it slower than others, but that's OK, because what they have, they never lose."

While Bromley Brook is a college-prep school, Heaton said, not all the students are at that level when they arrive. "The point is to get them to that level," he said.

Bromley Brook is a Recognized Independent School under state law, with credit transferable to other schools across the country. After a year of operation, it will be eligible to apply for membership in the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

Aspen Education is a California-based group that operates 28 residential and wilderness programs in 11 states. Most residential students attend their programs for about a year, according to CEO and president Elliot Sainer, and that's to be the case at Bromley Brook. A given girl will stay on campus about four months before she gets the nod to go home for visits, but families can visit. The girls will take part in the life of their community, and have already had some outings off-campus. While students have a variety of problems, Sainer reiterated, "It's not a treatment program, it's a school." Girls who come late in their high school careers will graduate from Bromley Brook; others will go to other boarding schools, or home, prepared to go forward.

Mack said the school operates on a few basic principles, and that one key is that "you don't need to know everything now." She pointed out that in the Middle Ages, a person could learn everything he or she needed to know with only three books. Now, students must learn many times that much information, before ever going to college.



At left, teacher Laura Mack describes some of the principles on which the school operates.

In addition, she said, "the environment is increasingly toxic for girls." The gains made by the feminist movement a generation ago have slid backwards, in terms of what girls can do, and do safely. "My generation didn't do a good job," she said. "We watch girls get ground up."

And it's more than just the girls, Mack said. "Traditional college prep grinds up fragile kids." She said that while teaching at other schools, she found herself fighting for the kids, against her fellow educators, in an atmosphere in which academics was everything.

Here, "community, family and academics are given equal attention." Balance makes it possible for students to get the learning done, without damage to themselves. If students are reading great works thoughtfully, and learning along skills-based lines, they can learn the material.

Bromley Brook students live in dorms, sharing rooms with as many as three other girls, with common areas at the end of their halls. Monday through Thursday are strongly academic, with an arts focus on Friday and half of Saturday, followed by some outside activity. Sundays are quieter, meant for study and rest.

Meals are taken in a cozy dining hall. Lounges dot the building outside the academic wing. Students are welcome to play the piano, shoot pool or play games - but not watch television.

Students may bring personal items, such as family photos and stuffed animals, from home. They wear a sort of uniform, since all their clothing is purchased from the same source. Clothing and the initial assessment are all covered under the \$2,500 enrollment fee.

Ongoing academic and life assessments fall under the \$5,000 per month it costs for students to attend the school. "It's expensive, because of the intensity of staffing and the small classes," Sainer said. Financial aid is available, however.

At the school's ribbon-cutting ceremony Oct. 27, Reps. Walt Freed of Dorset and Judith Livingston of Manchester expressed delight at the school's opening in the area.

"This is good for the economy," Freed said. "It brings jobs to the area - professional jobs," and brings talent and wealth to the state.

Livingston added, "We work hard to attract this kind of business to the area, but the school just slipped in."

After a tour, a run through an abbreviated class schedule and the ribbon cutting, Livingston described the school as "stunning, extraordinary."

Livingston said she thought the facility was beautiful when it was first opened, as a nursing home, with an interesting, lasting design. But it's even better now.

"After attending several classes, their program is very exciting," she said. "The way they teach, using the computers, it's the way of the future. ... It's good for the neighborhood, the community and the state of Vermont to have something of this caliber here."

Livingston called the school's opening mutually beneficial. "We're happy to welcome them to the community," she said. "They're providing jobs - career jobs - as well as very respected, advanced programs and sensitivity to students."