

# Supporting Children's Needs

*The number of pupils with Special Educational Needs at independent prep schools has risen by 22% over the last decade. Lucy Rose of IAPS investigates this growing trend.*

ACCORDING TO FIGURES FROM THE INDEPENDENT Schools Council (ISC), between 1998 and 2007, 158 specialist schools in the maintained sector were closed down. Affected pupils were promised accommodation in mainstream schools with learning support units, but when the Government failed to create enough places, the number of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in maintained primary schools dropped by 9%. Conversely, during the same time period, the number of pupils with learning support needs in the independent sector rose by 22%.

The figures are startling, and suggest that independent prep schools picked up where state primaries could no longer help. But is this really the case? Or are parents actively turning to the independent sector for its better facilities, smaller class sizes and more bespoke and individual teaching and learning approaches? Are parents and teachers now more aware of

the learning difficulties of a child, however mild, which are then identified and acted on more frequently and quickly than ever before?

During 2008, the Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS) joined forces with the ISC to conduct a research project entitled *The Value of an Independent Prep School Education*. The research went into detail on issues such as behaviour, curriculum, extra-curricular activities and staffing. In addition, it quizzed Heads about the level of support their school provided for pupils with SEN. The results showed a variety of provision, including those who developed an entirely different curriculum developed to meet each child's individual needs (16% of schools) and those who offered support in a specialist unit that gave pupils the skills they needed to help complete assignments (24% of schools).

I paid a visit to one such independent prep school to find out more first-hand from the staff and pupils.



**The Coach House, Cheltenham College Junior School**  
Cheltenham College Junior School's Learning Support Department offers bespoke SEN support for pupils with a range of mild learning needs, most commonly dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Housed, as the name suggests, in a converted coach house in the grounds of the school, the facility caters for children from Years 3 to 8. In addition to those who join the school with a previously identified issue, all pupils are screened in Years 4 and 6 for dyslexia and approximately 18% of children will visit the Coach House for additional support at some point during their time at the school.

The small team of staff, led by SENCo Gill Barrett, develops an individual programme for each child to help them develop skills and address areas with which they are having difficulty. This support, in conjunction with small set sizes and effective mainstream differentiation means that pupils who have specific difficulties, however mild, have their needs well met.

Gill says: 'The Coach House was created to ensure we can provide each child with the opportunity to fulfil their individual potential by creating a secure and sensitive environment for effective learning. We aim to develop a positive attitude towards learning by providing support

where appropriate to develop self-esteem and general self-confidence.'

As well as addressing individual specific needs by Coach House teaching, there is a team of learning support workers who provide invaluable in-class support for pupils who are experiencing difficulty in accessing the curriculum. The Coach House aims to provide a flexible support system which is responsive to the needs of the pupils. Some initial assessments can be conducted in-house, with referral to the specialist support of an independent Educational Psychologist or Speech and Language therapist, if required, in particular to ensure the correct exam entitlements are put in place.

Gill and her team work closely together with subject staff, class teachers and parents, to make sure each child's needs are met and to achieve continuity across the curriculum.

The Coach House currently offers support in literacy, numeracy and study skills. In addition it supports several pupils who have dyspraxic difficulties and offers guidance for Year 8 CDT Scholars in terms of organising their portfolios.

Parents receive an Individual Education Plan and a termly summary from the Coach House team, which outlines the topics covered by the child and the progress they have made. School reports are also produced by the team as part of the whole school reporting procedure. In addition, parents have the opportunity to meet formally with Coach House staff at parents' evenings, or pop into the unit for a discussion on their child's progress at any point during the term.

Lessons in the Coach House are mainly one-to-one, with some in pairs or small groups, depending on the child

and their particular needs. I asked Gill whether there was any stigma attached to those children attending the unit. She said: 'Although we spend a lot of time on individual or small group support sessions, it's also common for us to extend our support to entire year groups. I deliver several whole school study skills sessions throughout the year, for example Mindmapping for Year 8, Learning Styles and Study skills for Year 7, Project skills for Year 6 and Introduction to Mindmapping for Year 5. These sessions always go down very well with the children as it's sometimes a more dynamic way of learning, which is good fun, and can help diffuse some of the pressure they feel around exam time. It also helps them to understand what type of learner they are and teaches them effective ways to revise. As a result, all of the children are very used to the Coach House and rightly see it as just another facility at the school, rather than something for a select few.'

The Coach House is split across two levels, with small break out areas for groups to work in. Gill adds: 'The children are always keen to come over to the Coach House and we aim to create a stimulating and encouraging environment while they are here. There are plenty of areas for small groups to work in and we have a wide range of multi-sensory resources, including card games, board games, mind maps (created using Inspiration software), interactive whiteboard activities, Wordshark and Numbershark on the computer. We love using playdough, juggling balls, glitter glue and other tactile materials to reinforce learning. We have lots of fun in the Coach House!'

The Coach House is clearly well-equipped and with 18% of pupils on its books, well-used too. Has it always been so? Gill says: 'I certainly think we've got busier over the past few years. Although the majority of our pupils only have mild learning issues, they are dealt with very thoroughly and they receive all the support they need. This is important when set against an increasingly academic curriculum as the pupils approach Common Entrance exams. Obviously parents are keen to get the best for their child and if that means a bit of extra support in a specific area, then that is generally well-regarded. It's about finding the best way for each individual child to learn and giving them the confidence to do so. We aim to teach children strategies which they can then use independently to allow them to fulfil their potential at Senior Schools and beyond.'

Adrian Morris, Headmaster of Cheltenham College Junior School comments: 'We're very proud of our learning support department, the Coach House. Aably led by SENCo Gill Barrett, all members of the team play an important and valued role in ensuring that all our pupils with learning support needs gain access to the full curriculum and develop strategies for future learning. The Coach House environment is full of activity and ideas, which transfer well into the classrooms and provide a real value-added education. I know how grateful pupils, parents and staff are for the expert direction and dedication the Coach House team put into their crucial roles.'

Lucy Rose is PR & Communications Officer for IAPS.

#### What the pupils say...

*"It's good to go to Coach House because I can catch up on my reading and writing. It helps me get along better in my English classes. I like using Wordshark on the computer because it is fun to play on."* (Year 8 pupil)

*"I like coming to Coach House because we play lots of fun games which help me to learn. I made some mind maps for Science which helped me with my exams. Everyone enjoys coming to Coach House."* (Year 7 pupil)

*"I like Coach House because it is quiet and I can concentrate. We do fun things like make posters and play word games. We also have to balance a ball on a loop – it's fun!"* (Year 6 pupil)

*"I like coming to Coach House – you get lots of exciting things to do. I like the individual help, which helps me to learn. I enjoy reading the books here. There is a good sticker reward system too. I like the games we play – they help me to remember information."* (Year 6 pupil)