

# Program offers hope for autistic students

By Elaine O'Connor  
Education Reporter

A new pilot program for autistic students in Vancouver this fall promises to help kids whose disruptive behaviour has kept them out of public school.

"Our objective is to integrate them back into the system," said Ken Fraser, executive director of the Vancouver Resource Society. "If there are behavioural issues, we'll deal with them. They won't get kicked out."

Cheryll Sacco hopes the program will work for her 11-year-old son, Alex. He's had just one hour of schooling a week for the past year, and Cheryll says the stress of constantly caring for him contributed to her recent heart attack.

"It's such a relief," said the Vancouver parent. "It's been over a year since he's had real schooling. He was with me 24/7, and it's taken such a major toll on my health and my social life. I'm not able to go to work, not able to do anything except take care of him."

The Learning for Autism VRS school was conceived after Fraser noticed autistic youth he serves weren't in school. So, together with the Burnaby Online distance learning program and Richmond behavioural consultant Lorill Johl, he helped find an alternative.

Starting in September, 10 students aged 12 to 18 will attend class four days a week, each with their own assistant. The program will run largely on reallocated existing funding. Burnaby Online will supply the adapted curriculum, technology and teacher.

"There's a huge demand," said Johl. "Some parents have been so discouraged over the years, it's like a light for them."

There are up to 1,000 school-age autistic children in B.C., according to the Gateway Society, a non-profit group that helps people with autism.

Dairn Kwok, a Ministry of Children and Family Development social worker, agrees the students have fallen through the cracks.

"Parents have been really positive about the program



Wayne Leidenfrost — The Province

**Cheryll Sacco (right) hopes the autism school will help her son, Alex, get real schooling again.**

because their children were out of school for so long or having trouble."

Autism is a brain disorder causing developmental disability that impairs communication, learning and behaviour. The cause is unknown, although genetics and viral infections are considered factors. There is no cure.

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