

Busy parents turning to tutors One-on-one instruction seen as efficient way to give kids a leg up

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More than one million Canadian school children, including top students, have gone to tutors, says a new study that reports almost one in three parents have hired private academic help for their kids.

Dahlia Miller of Smart Tutor Referrals in Victoria said those numbers indicate the field could be referred to as something of a "growth industry," although tutoring itself is nothing new.

"The classroom is newer than tutoring, so to have people recognize the benefits of a skilled adult sitting down mentoring a young person is not a new trend."

The Canadian Council on Learning -- which is an independent, federally funded non-profit group -- attributes the high numbers to an era of "intensive parenting." Parents, particularly the more affluent, want their children to have a competitive edge and attend university or college. The findings in the 2007 Survey of Canadian Attitudes Toward Learning were released yesterday.

The large-scale survey of 5,361 adults found that people are increasingly hiring private tutors because schools are falling short of escalating expectations and parents are too time-restrained to cope with the stress of homework.

The top reasons Miller finds parents in Victoria bringing their children in for tutoring are a desire for a one-on-one learning environment and for support with homework. Busy working parents can find helping with homework hard to combine with other aspects of family life, she said.

"I think it's a bit of a sociological trend, with parents working more and wanting to spend quality time with their kids rather than fighting over homework."

Darlene Pettitt of Oxford Learning, a 25-year-old Canadian company that came to Victoria six years ago, said the business of tutoring or remedial education has gained a higher profile in recent times more than it has gained student numbers.



CREDIT: Ray Smith, Times Colonist

Teacher Melissa Lee works with student Jack Elliott at the Sylvan Learning Centre in Victoria.

"I think it's more of an awareness issue. I don't know that my numbers have skyrocketed in the past five years. I'm busier, but nothing major from five years ago." Pettitt said she currently has about 100 students.

"Certainly this business was developed because there was a very big need for parents and children to outsource, out of the public system and even the private system at times, and seek the help that they need to build their foundation."

Linda Birley of the Kumon Centre said there is a range of benefits students receive from programs they take.

"Sometimes kids may not get what they need in school, but also some parents just want to ensure that their kids are doing okay and maybe even give them a bit of a boost or let them go a little bit ahead of whatever they may be doing in school."

At Sylvan Learning Centre, Penny Loomer said she has seen considerable growth during seven years there. One of the biggest growth areas has been in math programs, which used to involve about 20 per cent of Sylvan students but are now taken by 40 per cent.

Irene Corman, an associate superintendent for the Greater Victoria school district, noted that the survey said the majority of students who have gone to tutors have an A or B average.

"I'm not sure that it says anything bad about the school system as much as it does about the parents' aspiration for the children to be competitive. I think it's interesting but it's not particularly surprising."

Corman noted that the public-education system offers several programs for students needing extra help, and most teachers stay after school at least a few times a week to offer assistance.

For some middle-class families, private tutoring is a lower-cost alternative to sending their kids to private school, said Paul Cappon, president of the learning council.

Cappon described the movement toward tutoring as "enormous." There are several multinational companies operating in Canada, such as Kumon Math and Reading Centres, which has 338 centres scattered across the country teaching more than 44,000 students, up from 26,500 a decade ago.

There are hundreds of smaller, independents and unknown numbers of one-person operations, run by university students, who post their services on school bulletin boards nationwide. On the Canadian website findatutor.ca there are 560 choices, with rates ranging anywhere from \$10 to \$60 an hour.