

# SPECIAL ED: There's an app for that

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It's not much to look at — just a dull grey device not nearly as flashy as the latest gadgets kids carry around. At first, Suvathan Arulesan was leery of letting his friends see it, but, today, the 13-year-old student can confidently say this innocuous little laptop has changed his life.

Before the device arrived, he was not doing well in school.

"I was pretty much failing," says the soft-spoken Markham student.

But after testing revealed learning disabilities and teachers at his Armadale Public School recommended computer software financed through the Ministry of Education, everything turned around.

Two years later, his marks are on par with his classmates and he is training fellow students and even teachers on the technology, his trusty laptop always within reach.

While advancements in computer technology are welcome by many students, they can be lifesavers for those with special education needs. And as digital devices advance in what they can do, so too, do students who rely on them.

If what's happening in the mainstream classroom can be called a digital deluge, then what's happening in special education is a tsunami.

"The new assistive technology is huge — just huge," says Bernie Smith, principal at technologically oriented St. Augustine Catholic High School in Unionville.

"In my 25 years working with assistive technology, I have never seen anything like what we're witnessing now," adds Phyllis Brodsky, a disabilities education expert in Arizona. "If you are an individual with a disability, there's never been a better time to be alive than right now."

While the bulk of us still marvel at our handhelds, tech tools for those with disabilities are transforming lives — from low-tech erasable pens to high-tech portable computerized devices with software that converts text to voice and voice to text, scans textbooks, organizes thoughts and predicts words.

If the school can prove you need it to access the Ontario curriculum, it's all paid for by the ministry and your school board.

Even garden-variety digital tools such as Facebook and blogs open doors for those who, in the past, struggled and often dropped out.

Sandra, a Richmond Hill mom who asked not to be identified because her daughter, 12, has not come "out" as learning disabled, has watched her child transform.

She was diagnosed two years ago after struggling with the written word. Today, in a mainstream classroom that makes frequent use of online blogs and wikis, she's flourishing.

"She's become a little writer that we never knew existed. We're continually amazed at what's in her head, the ideas and depth ... I



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Suvathan Arulesan uses software and a laptop to scan textbooks at Armadale Public School in Markham with the help of teacher Cindy Harris (left) and special education resource teacher Ada Poon. The computer reads the words to him and he can dictate his written work.



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really believe this is the way of the future."

Educators are watching with interest the growth in smartphone apps.

The York Region Catholic school board has just launched a partnership with the University of Toronto to study how new iPod apps can help those with learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Ms Brodsky, a teacher trainer in severe disabilities, is stoked about the possibilities.

"I think we're on to something amazing. I can honestly say that I've never seen one specific item of technology that has this revolutionary potential."

Programs designed for iPads do much the same tasks, for minimal cost, as \$8,000 devices, she says. "And it's not all stuffed into a big backpack that you're dragging from class to class."

Tanya Khan, a teacher at Kleinburg Public School in Vaughan, has found several ways digital technology can help her special education students. Students' cellphones act as agendas, dictionaries, calculators, timekeep-

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ers for science experiments and heart rate monitors in gym. She posts graphic organizers online to help with time management and lessons for students to review at home.

Society is still reluctant to talk about learning disabilities. Learning Disabilities Association of York Region executive director Lynn Ziraldo says.

D.J. Cunningham, now 28, remembers his own experience as a student with learning dis-

abilities, refusing to use assistive technology despite urging from his parents, one of whom was a York Region school principal.

"You feel different, stupid. I wanted nothing to do with it."

He reached rock bottom, failing in university, before agreeing to try out software to help him read and organize. The impact was "absolutely massive" — so much so, he graduated from university and has created a company, LEARNstyle, that provides training in assistive technology.

His company hopes to reduce the stigma by enlisting video game graphic designers to create cool-looking "skins" to cover industrial-looking school-supplied laptops.

Many see hope in the growing ubiquity of technology in the mainstream. Joseph Ravesi, principal at Sir William Mulock Secondary School in Newmarket, says there is less stigma now that all Grade 9 students are required to use laptops — those who use it for special needs no longer stand out.

A similar change occurred at Armadale School after teachers made an effort to use more assistive technology in the school.

"I wasn't sure what the other kids would think, if they'd call me names, but that didn't happen," student Suvathan Arulesan says.

Janis Jaffe-White, co-ordinator of the Toronto Family Network, a regional network for families of kids with additional needs, says stigma isn't the only thing that keeps assistive devices "hidden in a closet"; so does lack of knowledge.

"There are educators who don't know enough yet about the advantages," she says, adding training is often lacking. "So much money is wasted on equipment that is not being used to the best advantage."

The York Catholic board has developed a new approach to circumvent that. Online tutorials, webinars, training camps, weekend workshops and an evening help desk are available to parents and students who want to learn how to use assistive technology.

Teachers, too, need more support, according to a report released by the national non-profit Curriculum Services Canada.

"Comparatively few in-service and pre-service training opportunities are available for educators across Canada. Therefore, administrators and teachers in our schools ... frequently have limited knowledge."

The report recommends funds or national standards to ensure equity of access.

The problem, says Ms Brodsky, is technology is changing so quickly that agencies and policies haven't caught up.

"The pace is very fast and we have to keep up or we will continue to lose kids through the crack," Ms Jaffe-White says. "It's overwhelming and exciting at the same time. Opportunities are limitless."

*"It definitely makes me feel more informed about the community in which I reside."*

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