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Inside classrooms, more student data is being mined than ever before. What's being done with it?

feature
PAGE 16

6 PARENTMAP.COM

Coachs' words count; taming the anxiety monster; fast breakfasts, hot school lunches and healthy dinners; is your student being Googled?

9 NO BIG KIDS ALLOWED!

Will the kindergarten-only school trend take hold here?

12 IS CO-OP PRESCHOOL RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

It's low cost, requires parent involvement and has many models to choose from

25 THE COOL, CALM AND KINETIC CLASSROOM

Headphones, surgical tubing and wiggle seats are helping kids learn better

29 MOM HAS HOMEWORK, TOO?

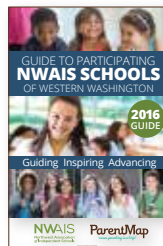
More and more parents are going back to college while raising children. Should you?

COLLEGE
GUIDE

33 SAVE, SPEND AND STAY SAFE

By the time kids graduate from high school, they should be financially literate. Are yours on track?

37 LEARNING RESOURCES



< inside
GUIDE TO
PARTICIPATING
NWAIS
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ParentMap • Learning 2016

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ParentMap Learning is published annually

ParentMap is published monthly

PMB #399, 4742 42nd Ave S.W.,
Seattle, WA 98116

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No big kids allowed!

Will the kindergarten-only school trend take hold here?

By Shawna De La Rosa

Next fall, 600 of the state's littlest learners will get the chance to attend a school customized for their bodies and brains.

Mulkiteo's class of 2030 will be the first group of kindergartners to enjoy a brand-new school designed on a small scale and made possible by a big vision. There will be heated floors to take the edge off chilly story times, color-coded classrooms, family-style dining areas with food delivered via carts, and pint-sized restroom facilities.

The 65,000-square-foot, as yet unnamed school is being built on the site of the former Fairmount Elementary School.

"When we were designing it, we got down on our knees and looked at the world through a 5-year-old's lens," says Heather Craggs, a teacher mentor who taught kindergarten for 21 years. "We kept that perspective throughout the design process."

Craggs is a member of a group of teachers, parents and administrators who all collaborated on the design of the new building for kindergartners, who "are like little sponges and are naturally egocentric," she says.

The main idea was to create four smaller pods within the building. The new school will draw from five to six home schools. Students from each school will be grouped together so they can keep friendship continuity as they make the transition into other schools for first grade.

"The intent is to try and keep the kids together," says Craggs.

Without a central cafeteria, dining will be family style to encourage conversation and sharing. Food will be delivered by carts for those who buy lunch. For example, if spaghetti is on the menu for the day, the students will dish up and pass the food around to each other.

An entire school dedicated to one age group allows teachers and administrators to focus on specific learning goals and literacy issues, explain supporters of the growing trend.

But in Mukilteo, it was overcrowding, rather than kindergarten togetherness, that prompted the idea for the new school.



In order to offer all-day kindergarten, the district needed to double its number of kindergarten classrooms. A bond passed in 2014 will fund the new \$33.5 million center.

Overcrowded districts around the country are looking for ways to not only free up space, but also improve education.

Craggs said there has been a lot of national interest in the new center.

In fact, the district was invited to give a presentation on the new school at the National School Boards Association's annual convention in Boston this spring.

Proven model elsewhere

While Mukilteo's all-kindergarten center is still unusual in this region, there are other schools around the country that have adapted the model of single-grade schools.

High enrollment numbers and overcrowding prompted the Upper Darby

School District in Pennsylvania, an early adopter, to implement an all-kindergarten program in 1997.

The program has proven to have many benefits, says Dana Spino, manager of media services for the district.

"There is a single focus throughout the building," which has a heavy emphasis on preliteracy, math and writing skills, she says. "That promotes success."

A less tangible benefit appears in the development of community within a large district.

The 12,000-student district boasts 14 schools in 8.5 square miles. Often, the kindergarten center is the only opportunity children have to meet friends early in life before dispersing to their neighborhood schools around the district. Later, when in high school, the children merge again and become reacquainted with old friends. >>



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kindergarten

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continued from page 9

Is it right for all kids?

As more Puget Sound-area school districts experience capacity issues, dividing the traditional elementary school into schools of fewer grades could become a more common solution. But is it ultimately a win for kids?

"Assuming that the vision and leadership for the school are effective and on target, there is the opportunity to ensure that all kindergartens receive a high-quality, developmentally appropriate and rigorous learning opportunity," says Kristie Kauerz, research assistant professor in the college of education at the University of Washington, of the potential for K-only schools.

On the other hand, adding transitions for children, such as when they move to a new building after kindergarten, must be done with care.

"I would want to know what kind of systemic strategies are in place to ensure that there is continuity across the age and grade levels, not just for the children, but also for the teachers, school administrators and families," Kauerz says.

Spino acknowledges that is a challenge at their Pennsylvania school.

"It is easier for a student to transition from kindergarten to first grade if they are in the same building," she says.

Despite the growth of technology, it's still simpler for teachers to share information about students if the teachers are in the same building. "It makes it more difficult for first-grade teachers to be fully aware of the strengths and needs of students transitioning from the kindergarten center," Spino says.

The logistics of transportation and busing can also be an issue.

In Oregon's David Douglas School District near Portland, a kindergarten-only school served as a short-term solution to overcrowding until a 2012 bond measure funded more classrooms.

There were many positives to having all the kindergartners in one place, says Dan McCue, communications manager for the district. But there were also plenty of drawbacks, especially transportation.

"They were losing significant instructional time at either end of the day," he says.

Not all kindergartners attended the kindergarten center. In fact, there was a lottery in place that allowed some kindergartners to attend their home school.

"On average, most parents wanted their child to stay in their home school for a variety of reasons: convenience, more instructional time, siblings in the same building and continuity going into first grade," McCue says.

The Upper Darby all-kindergarten model has existed for 19 years, but the district is always considering making appropriate changes if necessary.

"Truthfully, we are constantly assessing the benefits of a kindergarten center versus kindergarten in home schools to best meet the needs of our students and families," Spino says. ■

Shawna De La Rosa is a mother of three boys. When she's not driving one — or all — of them to a practice, she writes about everything from education to the economy, the stock market to small business.



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Is co-op preschool right for your family?

It's low cost, requires parent involvement and has many models to choose from

By Bryony Angell



Age 2 arrived at our house with a whirlwind of “Look at me!” and tugs on parental limbs. It was time to find my son a preschool, one where he could express that impulse for social contact with other children his age and — eventually — start to prepare for kindergarten.

Having attended a cooperative preschool as a youngster, I remembered that preschool includes parents, not just teachers. I also knew that I wanted to be with my rambunctious son during his first foray into a sociable, structured learning environment. He would be more comfortable, and I would meet other parents of children the same age.

We chose the co-op model for our family for a number of reasons. It was convenient (a variety of locations and schedules), high quality (excellent teachers, a parent-education component and an affiliation with local colleges), inclusive of parents and, very important, affordable.

I also loved the parent involvement. The parents’ role in running the school is a co-op preschool’s most distinct feature. While it’s not for everyone, that level of involvement allows for direct impact on a child’s education and builds community among like-minded parents; that involvement is also what makes co-op preschool tuition from one-half to two-thirds less than many other preschool models.

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Cooperative preschool: A short history

The American cooperative preschool model was initiated in 1916 by a group of faculty wives at the University of Chicago, among them Katharine Whiteside Taylor, who was to become a co-op preschool pioneer.

Author of the landmark 1954 *Parents and Children Learn Together*, Whiteside Taylor has local ties. In 1941, Seattle Public Schools hired her to create a “family life education” program to provide social education for children and parenting education for parents. The model gained popularity across the state, and in the 1960s became formally affiliated

with state colleges and technical schools.

Today, many community colleges and vocational schools in Washington state offer early childhood education classes for parents in addition to a classroom for children, which serves as the “learning lab” to supplement parent education.

How cooperative preschools work

Co-op preschools offer learning environments to children and their parents, with children’s ages ranging from 2 months old to 5 years of age. Although every school is somewhat different, common features of the co-op model include:

PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM: The curriculum of a cooperative preschool is play-based and aligned with state learning standards, with each class structured for a specific age group and with corresponding age-appropriate activities and materials. Play-based preschool education is based on research showing that young children learn critical early skills — such as resilience, conflict resolution and sharing — through playing.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT: As the word “cooperative” indicates, parents are involved in all aspects of running preschools. Parents, nannies or other adult family members serve

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Is coop preschool right for your family?

continued from page 13

as co-teachers in the classroom one day a week, helping manage and guide the children at the teacher's direction.

The presence of the parent in the classroom builds a child's trust and awareness of the importance and love for learning both at school and at home. Being in the classroom "gives a parent the best opportunity to observe adult and child interactions and get questions answered," says Seattle Central College educator Pam McElmeel.

Parents also form the school's board, which is responsible for duties such as hiring teachers, increasing tuition and making major school purchases. It's not as daunting as it sounds.

How to find a co-op preschool and enroll

If your family does have the time to be involved and is excited about the idea of a co-op preschool, now is the time to start looking for a preschool for next year. Here's how to get started.

ATTEND A REGIONAL PRESCHOOL FAIR.

Many take place in the early winter months and are a chance to meet and ask questions of school reps from many different types of preschools in person. ParentMap, for example, offers regional preschool fairs every January.

TALK TO PARENTS IN YOUR


COMMUNITY. Each preschool has a distinctive character, influenced somewhat on the neighborhood and the families that form the preschool.

TAKE A TOUR. Visit the schools you're interested in, either by making an appointment or attending an open house.

APPLY. Typically, parents who have already enrolled have priority in registering their children for the following year, and new parents have to wait until priority registration is over to apply. Be sure to follow your preschool system's specific enrollment guidelines, and note that many co-op preschools offer rolling enrollment and may have space throughout the school year. ■

Bryony Angell loves nature, art and mid-century architecture, and can find a way to connect all three to parenting. You can see more of her writing at bryonyangell.com and follow her on Twitter @bryonyangell.

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Start your search at least one school year prior to attending, if possible. Tours are typically offered October through January the year prior to the time you want to enroll, but some schools have rolling admissions that will provide opportunities to enroll and attend as soon as slots become available. If you didn't start one year ahead, don't freak out. Call around and visit as many schools as you can. Most

have wait lists, and there are often last-minute openings. Be persistent (but not annoying) by checking back in and being proactive.

The best ways to find preschool programs are to attend preschool fairs (see parentmap.com/events for more about our preschool fairs), get recommendations from fellow parents and scope out programs located close to home or work.

Schedule a tour. You can attend an open house to hear about the philosophy and admission process, then submit the application and fee. Usually you can tour the school while classes are in session, and sometimes you can even bring your child to spend time in the classroom (though sometimes having Junior along can be more distracting than beneficial). Be ready with a notebook on the tour, and bring a list of all your questions.

Know how often and how long you'd like your child to go. Children usually attend preschool for two years between the ages of 2.5 and 5 years old. Some preschools run half-day programs, some have full-day programs, and some full-time daycares have a preschool component. Some preschools run five days of the week only, and others allow you to customize your child's schedule.

— Kali Sakai

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Inside classrooms, more student data is being mined than ever before.

What's being done with it?

By Jenna Vandenberg



watching

Server farms of data and armies of analytics gurus have streamlined online shopping, helped drivers avoid traffic jams and dictated how much guacamole goes into burrito bowls. Now, algorithms are at work in schools, attempting to revolutionize learning. Software engineers tabulate every student keystroke and government officials report every test score, hoping to make education more personalized and more equitable.

The programs are constantly tracking your student, and kids' academic behavior is constantly being analyzed.

But do all these metrics add up to a better, more personalized educational experience? And do the risks — privacy breaches; students being profited on — outweigh the benefits?

Like the never-ending data sets, the answer seems to be constantly changing: We don't know. Not yet. Only with enough teacher support. Only for some students.

The one thing we do know: Your student will, increasingly, be interacting with big data.

The promise of big data

Educational analytics have long promised to deliver the holy grail of teaching: personalized learning. One of the hallmarks of the century-old Montessori movement, personalized learning is the concept of teachers addressing the specific needs and interests of individual students, rather than teaching the entire class the same predetermined concepts. In theory, students get more out of their education if it is tailored to their specific needs.

But customized learning requires planning individual lessons for every student, every day. Few teachers have the resources to do so. Enter big data — a term that generally refers to large data sets that can be analyzed by computers to reveal patterns, trends and associations — and online learning platforms, powered by that data.

Online educational nonprofits such as Khan Academy and CK-12 are already present in most schools, with their videos and lesson sets. For-

profit companies such as Knewton and Pearson Education have assessments linked to lessons that collect student knowledge. Every answer clicked, every second between problems and every tap of the help button immediately recalibrate a student's learning profile. Automatically, the next perfect piece of content, tailored to the student's continuously measured need, is always delivered to each student. There is no needless repetition and no information given that students aren't ready for.

Sounds tantalizing, doesn't it? Just stick students in front of a computer and let the videos and analytics do the teaching. These platforms have led to an explosion of online charter schools, serving kindergarten through high school. Traditional high schools also purchase programs for credit recovery, letting students redo a failed class online.

Results have not been good.

The 2015 National Study of Online Charter Schools found that "students of online charter schools had significantly weaker academic performance . . . compared with their counterparts in conventional schools." After spending a year of learning online, students are nearly a year behind their peers.

And it's not just lower achieving students attending school online who have negative results. A recent study out of the Northwestern University School of Education and Social Policy found that "high-achieving eighth-graders who took algebra online performed worse than similar students who took the course in a traditional classroom."

Clearly students need more than online content, no matter how personalized or data-driven it is. Blending online resources into traditional classrooms has been relatively successful, but systems to collect data, analyze student knowledge and personalize instruction are still in their infancy.

That is, unless your school is supported by Silicon Valley funds. Google, Facebook, Amazon

and Microsoft, for example, are heavily invested in education analytics, and these large, data-driven companies, and some of their high-profile executives and philanthropists, have been generous contributors to some charter schools built on personalized learning.

Teachers versus data?

Charter and private schools are often touted as the champions of big data, but their leaders are careful to note that the teachers, not the data sets, drive powerful instruction. Summit Public Schools, a California charter and recipient of Facebook funds, has recently moved to Washington state.

"We believe in the power of a school community coming together. In no way should technology or data replace the power and magic of a teacher-and-student relationship," says Summit chief regional officer Jen Wickens. "Teachers are supported with the 21st-century tools that we have."

And they are well supported with tools. Facebook has donated software engineers to work with Summit teachers on a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) dashboard.

"For us, personalized learning doesn't mean just technology and data," Wickens says. "The majority of the student day is spent making meaningful connections with teachers, mentors and other students."

"Fully online schools tend to show very poor results, while personalized learning schools show very promising results. Summit Public Schools are personalized learning schools, not online schools," says Robin Lake, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

At Summit Sierra in Seattle's Chinatown-International District, 10th-grader Sammie* explains the approach: "Each project has steps you work through. You work at your own pace, but you still have to keep up. You turn something in on the PLP, the teacher will go through it, make comments . . . and then you get a little green wrench." She points to assignment

Someone's watching

continued from page 17

boxes on her laptop. "These boxes will turn this really scary shade of red when they are overdue, so you get really motivated."

There are benefits to the method, says her classmate Jackson*: "I'm independent and visual; I like seeing all the steps ahead of me and taking care of them."

Both students say they also appreciate the differences in testing. At schools they previously attended, Sammie and Jackson say tests were given to the class and then everyone moved on. At Summit, students take a diagnostic pretest, and then focus only on objectives not yet mastered with the help of resources that teachers suggest via the PLP.

For students, this interactive learning map is the place to prove what they've learned and move ahead on new topics. For teachers, the PLP is a data-driven gradebook. With a quick glance at a screen, teachers can see exactly what their students know. Summit Sierra science teacher Camden Hanzlick-Burton says the visual data allows him to be more specific when deciding who and what to reteach.

"We can get more granular with the objectives for content assessments," he says. "That's where the data is really useful, because [then] we can dictate if [reteaching] is happening as a whole class, small workshop or after school hours. Technology is not doing anything that teachers haven't already known. It's not revolutionary, but more efficient."

This personalization of the learning and reteaching process is something teachers always strive for. Teachers don't need online platforms or computers to know students fail tests, but in order to figure out exactly what each student didn't understand, a teacher would have to break down every question and create a chart to show which students understood which concepts. Many teachers do this by hand or know it intuitively. The PLP makes it automatic.

But does this data equate to better outcomes for students? Naturally, Summit says yes. Its website reports its California schools are ranked in the top 20 percent of public high schools in the state. The 2015–16 school year was Summit's first

in Washington, so no data has been reported to the state yet, but according to Wickens, Summit Sierra students outperformed the national average in both math and reading on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment.

However, it's hard to peg statistics solely on big data. Summit schools, which are public, receive Facebook resources, have the autonomy to hand-pick teachers and are responsible for only one-fifth the number of the students a traditional high school has. Also, comparing charter and

Teachers at both schools use data and personalized lessons, but Ventilla's quest to turn teachers into "data-enabled detectives" goes a little further: AltSchool records every single classroom moment through a surveillance system called AltVideo.

Carolyn Wilson, teacher and director of educators, explains that AltVideo allows teachers to travel back through their day: "We can go back to a lesson and see which students were hesitating, which ones wanted to speak up but

didn't, which ones looked distracted." When children are learning to write, AltVideo allows teachers to analyze minute details, such as how close their eyes are to the paper.

"If I see something I want to think [about] more deeply later," Wilson says. "I can bookmark a moment to look at after school or during my planning time, or I can take it across the hall to my colleague who may have a specialty in math or reading."

According to Wilson, AltVideo is only used by teachers and the school sees there are no engineers looking at videos to get aggregate data. The school will not provide details about where or how videos are stored.

Districts around the country are discussing student safety and protection from data breaches, and some have experienced data breaches already. The U.S. Department of Education, nonprofit groups and education consortiums have begun issuing best practices, rules and guidelines to safeguard student data and help districts navigate as they seek to bring more educational technology online. But contrary to being resolved, privacy concerns around personal data are likely just beginning to heat up.

Another concern: While video footage could be a useful tool, many are wondering about the implications of students growing accustomed to constant surveillance. Others are concerned about the amount of screen time students are getting at school. California charter Rocketship Education has drawn criticism for its daily practice of placing 100 elementary students in a room with 100 laptops. One adult oversees the "learning process" by enforcing hours of silence as the students work through



Many are wondering about the implications of students growing accustomed to constant surveillance

traditional schools is problematic. Summit accepts students through a random lottery, but students still have to complete an application process that is separate from Seattle Public Schools. "We work very hard to secure a diverse and high-needs population," Wickens says, "from door-to-door canvassing, tabling at community events, phone banking and presentations at food banks and low-income housing areas." Summit Sierra's population of free and reduced lunch students last year was 56 percent, compared to Seattle's average of 40 percent.

Surveillance, screen time and profit

Summit schools aren't the only places where software engineers crunch numbers and design dashboards for teachers. In 2013, Max Ventilla left Google, where he'd been working on personalizing search terms (aka how Google knows what you want before you do). Ventilla raised \$100 million to start up AltSchool, a private pre-K–8 network. Whereas Summit has PLP, AltSchool students get a customized "playlist."

educational content and learning games.

Critics are also asking who profits.

Screen time giants such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft are walking the line between philanthropy and entrepreneurship, leaving many wondering if education reform should be in the hands of corporations. The political action committee working to save charter schools in Washington receives most of its funding from Connie Snyder Ballmer, the wife of Steve Ballmer; Reed Hastings, a cofounder of Netflix; and Vulcan Inc. (owned by Paul Allen).

While many companies right now are donating their time to develop these tools, and not profiting by it, the fact that millions of children are relying on technology to learn certainly doesn't hurt Silicon Valley. There is big money to be made in educational analytics: The education app market is expected to grow 35 percent in the next three years, and the education gamification market is expected to grow 65 percent in the next three years. Big data is vital to both of those markets.

Equity issues: Who's being helped?

Video cameras, online platforms and data sets are not exclusive to charter and private schools. Like the No Child Left Behind Act, December 2015's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) dictates that every district in the nation report a dizzying number of statistics on everything from suspensions to tardiness to grades on biology exams. These numbers are broken down by gender, race, special education/language status and family income level. (Data for every Washington state school can be found on the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction website, k12.wa.us, under the Research and Reports tab.)

Education data is often helpful. Test scores can illuminate gaps that exist due to socioeconomic differences, so districts can try to address them. Aggregate data is used to compare programs, set goals and measure progress. Susan Canaga, the program manager for data governance at the state's Office of Superintendent of Public

Instruction (OSPI), spends her days ensuring that the state is using quality data to help people make good decisions, often analyzing numbers through an equity lens. When looking at graduation rates, Canaga says, "We can start connecting and learning from districts that are having success. We have identified some districts that were positive outliers and interviewed them to find out what they are doing." Districts with the highest graduation rates are currently pairing up with and mentoring other districts.

However, there are pitfalls. The need for assessment data requires students to complete a yearly battery of tests, some necessary for graduation. The negative effects of standardized testing include skyrocketing stress levels; the elimination of social studies and the arts as teachers focus more on tested subjects; teachers losing autonomy in their classrooms; and schools being judged on their test scores. This last factor is particularly problematic because test scores correlate strongly with socioeconomic factors. When government offices and online

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continued from page 19

resources such as GreatSchools rank schools based on test data, they are essentially ranking schools on the wealth of their student populations. Concerned over the emphasis on standardized tests, many families have opted out, and some teachers have criticized the current testing landscape as well.

In the quest to manipulate data, schools often focus resources on groups of students who are likely to improve overall test scores. Teachers spend hours identifying kids who didn't meet a benchmark last year, but were close. Those will be the students who will get more teacher attention and resources, at the expense of the highest or lowest achievers.

Privacy concerns

In addition to increased screen time, online school failures, tension over standardized

tests and questions about ethics, privacy is a concern. In 2014, Google rolled out a free Apps for Education platform, and thousands of public teachers signed their students up. In 2015, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a nonprofit with the goal of defending civil liberties in the digital world, filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission claiming that Google was "collecting, maintaining, using and sharing student personal information." When students are logged into their Google Apps for Education (GAFE) accounts, data about other, non-educational sites those students visit is collected and used to enhance their behavior profiles. In a 2015 blog post, Google countered that "schools can control whether students . . . can use additional Google consumer services — like YouTube with their GAFE accounts."

Many districts do block social media and video-sharing sites, and give students a school Google account to eliminate any connection to personal accounts. Yet the EFF remains concerned that Google released its free Apps for Education platform for reasons that are less than philanthropic.

Along with 200 other companies, Google signed the Student Privacy Pledge in 2014, which promised to "not collect, maintain, use or share student personal information" and "not to build a personal profile of a student" Jose Ferreira, CEO of Knewton, also signed the pledge, but prompted many raised eyebrows during a 2012 Education Datapalooza talk when he called education "the world's most data-mineable industry," claiming that his company gets 5–10 million actionable data points per student per day. Ferreira promised that data

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continued from page 21

was not for sale, but his boastful proclamation that “we literally know everything about what you know and how you learn best” continues to make privacy advocates nervous.

Google and Knewton are still in the education business, but InBloom, the data analysis corporation used by New York state public schools and which was backed by \$100 million in seed money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, had to shut down because of privacy concerns. The closure wasn't due to a scandal or a break in the data shield, but a simple issue of mistrust. Parents are wary of corporations mining their children for data.

Constant surveillance seems like a high price to pay for the hope of better educational outcomes. In a world of WikiLeaks, cyberattacks and security breaches at major financial institutions, this wariness is not unfounded. The

federal Education Department has been accused of doing a poor job of safeguarding data. Much is still unknown about privacy and security, and perhaps the inner workings of a third-grader's mind is something that shouldn't be transparent until the benefits are clear.

While data has the great potential to personalize instruction, students may still be more likely to achieve inside a traditional classroom rather than on a data-enabled online platform. Malia Burns, the executive director at Summit Sierra, points out that a school's most critical component is not data or technology, but its teachers.

“Technology takes the teacher's role and makes it more impactful,” she says, “but the teacher is still the one making all the decisions about the personalization.” This is a lesson that education reformers have been quick to learn. Data does not personalize education, teachers do.

But data helps. And even though the playing field is mucked up by questions about ethics, profiteering, privacy and testing, the promise of big data is too big to ignore. If education reformers and app developers can address concerns, personalized learning will put adaptive assessment tools at teachers' fingertips, provide students with individualized online tutors, and help schools keep every student engaged and accountable for their own education. ■

Jenna Vandenberg is a Seattle-based writer, runner and teacher. She has taught middle school in China, Norway and Las Vegas. Although often distracted by small town baseball games, muffulettas in New Orleans and cheese farms, she is trying to run a race in every state. Follow the quest at runningthroughthisworld.com.

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pg 45

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Headphones, surgical tubing and wiggle seats are helping kids learn better

By Nancy Schatz Alton

When I was a fourth-grader, I'd tell my teacher the noise level was too loud, and he'd turn to the class and say, "Quiet! It's too loud for Nancy to concentrate!" His loud, taunting voice cued my shame.

Fast forward to 2016: Many educators now work to create classrooms to help every child reach her learning potential, even if that child needs less clamor or more movement. Schools and districts are building programs around therapeutics and class materials that help children with anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, sensory issues and other learning challenges feel comfortable and focus.

"The classroom is a really complex, sensory-rich environment," says Megan Eastman, an occupational therapist at Seattle Therapy Services. "The classroom presents the highest level of challenge for children who have difficulties with sensory processing or with attention or anxiety issues."

Some schools have official resource rooms filled with these new materials, while other teachers and parents who don't have access to such programs are improvising with their own kits and supplies.

Good techniques for all kids

Sensory processing is how our nervous systems receive messages from our senses. Sensory processing disorder (SPD) causes sensory signals to either go undetected or not get organized into appropriate responses. So kids with SPD or other sensory issues can have trouble processing visual and audial information, especially in a busy classroom.

Meanwhile, students with anxiety often become overwhelmed faster than other students. Children with ADHD or autism are often kinesthetic learners, meaning they learn better if they can move their bodies. This can be difficult in a traditional classroom setting where sitting perfectly still at a desk is emphasized.

To normalize different learning styles, Seattle-area teacher Abby Mansfield starts off



the school year with a lesson on the brain.

"We look at the brain together and we talk about different learning styles. We connect that to how we are all different and in our room we will respect everyone," she says.

Mansfield also classifies each segment of the day into activity types: This is a loud activity; these 15 minutes will involve movement; reading time will be quiet today.

"If a child who learns best when it's quiet complains to me during a loud time, we brainstorm ways to make it quieter, from using headphones or working in the hallway," Mansfield says. "I remind them that in 15 minutes, loud time is over and we'll then move into 30 minutes of quiet."

Of course, good classroom management is the scaffolding of this approach. On top of that are the tools students can use to either calm themselves down or help focus their energy. Some of the materials are objects that look alluring to — and could help — every student. Occupational therapists (OT) and special education teachers point out that we all have sensory needs, and these classroom tools are for all learners.

Learning is about keeping that match lit. When your brain works differently, your match can burn out faster

Think about what you do in a work setting or conference to meet your needs: politely tell your chatty neighbor you're having a hard time hearing, take a break (without needing to ask permission), doodle, chew gum, wiggle a leg, says Laura Kett, a Seattle-area pediatric OT. "Making yourself comfortable in an environment is not a special need. We all meet our sensory needs in different ways."

"One teacher [who] worked with my oldest son offered sensory tools like over-the-ear muffs and other learning options like reading a book on a beanbag to all students. Some

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The cool, calm and kinetic classroom

continued from page 25

were always available, and others had to be earned,” says Angela Fish, executive director at Exceptional Families Network, a Lakewood nonprofit organization that provides education, support and advocacy services for families of children with special needs. Her son has autism, SPD and ADHD.

“The students who used the readily available sensory tools the most were those without learning differences. Since the stigma of being different was removed, the kids who needed those tools the most didn’t actually have to use them as much as they might typically need to,” Fish says.

A wide range of tools

Fidgets are sensory tools designed for kids who otherwise might rip paper or bounce their feet to help them increase attention and concentration while reducing stress and anxiety. While OTs and teachers have always created gizmos from everyday objects, fidgets and other materials are now more widely available, especially online. Increasingly popular tools that can help kids self-regulate and focus on learning include:

- **A yoga ball** as a classroom chair
- **surgical tubing** tied across the bottom of the legs of a chair to hook feet into and push against
- **wiggle seats** (a nubby, rubberized seat cushion that functions like a tiny yoga ball)
- **stress balls** (some are smooth, and some are tactile)
- **a soft pencil grip**
- **kneadable erasers**
- **pipe cleaners or twist ties**
- **a piece of paracord, fuzzy fabric or a smooth stone** that children can keep in their pocket and rub between their fingers
- **thinking putty** (also called therapy putty) for kids to play with, often below their desks
- **a white board**, so mistakes can be erased
- **graphic organizers** for writing tasks
- **a standing desk or a standing table** at the back of the room for kids who need to stand

- **break cards** so kids can take breaks in the hallway when they need without calling attention to themselves
- **flip charts** that implement colors for better communication: green (no help needed), yellow (I need help but it’s not urgent), red (I need help right now); charts can also be used to indicate whether a child wants to read out loud during reading (green)
- **assigned chores**, such as bringing the attendance list to the office, for movement breaks
- **noise-canceling headphones**
- **a visual schedule** of the day on the board
- **chewing gum**

Teaching kids how to use these tools appropriately is part of the process, and the tools can be put away if they become distracting to the child or other students. “Learning is about keeping that match lit. When your brain works

differently, your match can burn out faster,” says Megan Reimann, a coach and learning specialist at the Hallowell Todaro ADHD Center in Seattle. “We teach kids how to modulate their attention and focus. Kids learn what they need to do to keep that match lit, whether that means standing, using a wobble stool or a camp chair that squishes then up or laying on the floor.”

If you think your child may benefit from using learning tools, local educational specialist Zoe Leverson recommends using your home for a trial run first. See what your child does while bored at family dinner: Does she chew on her sleeve, or bolt and climb the walls? Give your son a Koosh ball while he reads a book and see if it helps.

Then talk to your child’s teacher. Ask if your child is having trouble paying attention in class. “If the teacher agrees, say, ‘We’re noticing this tool really helps at home. What do you think will work for our child?’ The more you can work as a team with the teacher, the better,” Leverson says.

A school’s OT is also a resource for every student in every classroom, even if a student doesn’t have an individualized education plan. Some parents ask their child’s private OT (whom they see outside of school) to come and observe the classroom.

“We see what environment the teacher has already cultivated. The teacher’s goals for their classroom are really important,” Eastman says. “After observing the child in that setting, we really tailor our recommendations so the tools are successful for both the teacher and the child.”

Really simple tools can be easy but powerful ways to help a child succeed in a classroom. When putty play under a desk or extra movement breaks correlate to an improved classroom experience, a student builds not only academic success but also self-esteem. That is a vast improvement upon the embarrassment I once felt every time my teacher teased me for requesting a quieter classroom. ■

Nancy Schatz Alton is the co-author of The Healthy Back Book and The Healthy Knees Book, and is currently working on a memoir about her daughter’s learning journey.



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Mom has homework, too?

More and more parents are going back to college while raising children. Should you?

By Natalie Singer-Velush

Of all the memories of my journey back to college as an adult with two children, the one that will stay with me forever is this: It's 5 p.m., time to leave for my first night class, and my youngest daughter stands on the porch, tiny arms outstretched, tears coursing down her face.

"Noooooooooooo," she screams, ending with a spectacular wail. "Mommy, don't leave me."

How can I do this? I wonder as I speed off down the road, hands shaking on the wheel.

How will it ever work?

And yet it did. And it can for you, too. With careful planning and some proven strategies, millions of parents are making college work.

Should you go?

Deciding whether to return to college, and when, is a complex choice. Sometimes, the need is clear: You want to pivot into a new career, or climb the ladder in an industry you're currently in and need new training or certification to be able to do so.

In other situations, the cost-benefit analysis might not be as clear.

"Conventional wisdom is that you only go back to school and get a degree to achieve a specific

goal. But, college does more than that," says Andrea James, founder of Solve for X Coaching.

"The structure [of college] can be helpful to parents, because they don't have to design their own personal transformation curriculum. It also creates accountability, which many of us need for motivation," James says. "It breaks you out of your current environment, stretches you and puts you in new contact circles — and those new people in your life can expand your sense of possibility. These are fantastic reasons to go — even if there's no end goal in mind."

So, let's say you decide college is right for you. How will you make it work?

Accept what you cannot change

To succeed as a student parent, you need to first accept that you won't be like other students — unless they're parents, too. And some of them will be: Increasingly, college classrooms, physical and virtual, are populated by adult learners, many of whom are parents. A 2014 study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that 26 percent of all undergraduates, 4.8 million students, are raising dependent children.

So you likely won't be alone. Yet it may still feel

like you are sometimes — when class assignments and the kiddie carpool are competing for your time; when you need to be studying and your child wants help with her homework.

"The number-one challenge we hear, in terms of what prevents someone from starting school, has to do with time management and balancing life with school," says Claire Lewis, director of Enrollment Services for the University of Washington (UW) Professional & Continuing Education program.

That was the case for Becky Sander, mother of four children now ages 8, 10, 12 and 14, who completed her Bachelor of Arts in integrated social sciences through an online UW program. As if that doesn't sound complicated enough, Sander also home-schools her children.

"How can I possibly have any more time?" Sander says she wondered as she considered adding school commitments to her already full plate. "Isn't that what all parents think?" she asks.

Financial stability is another issue that, while not unique to parents, affects student parents differently.

"Even if you begin making tuition, there can be unforeseen circumstances that come up. The car breaks, and the student has to cover that;

Mom has homework, too?

continued from page 29

they have to get their child to care,” Lewis says. Additionally, many student parents are paying for child care for young children or financing their child’s college education.

Fortunately, most schools have financial coaches who can help parents navigate the hurdles and build a plan that works for their family.

Optimize your strengths

While becoming a student parent can feel like the hardest choice in the world, or the stupidest, there are many ways that being a parent makes you stronger as a student.

The first minute I set foot in a college classroom as a grown-up and mother, I knew I would never take the time I spent there for granted. I never missed a single class, an attendance record that put my first college experience, as a teenage undergraduate, to shame. I simply valued the opportunity too much to not take full advantage.

“Older students often see things in perspective

and are more efficient in their use of time,” says Laura Kastner, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and the author of *Wise-Minded Parenting* and other books. “Their life experience contributes to the depth of their academic work.”

I found this to be true, first when I returned to school for two writing certificates, and then when I returned to UW Bothell to earn my MFA. At first, I was jealous of the extra time the unencumbered 20-somethings in my cohort seemed to have.

Then I noticed that they weren’t necessarily getting more done.

It turns out we parents are really good at multitasking and staying focused, skills we sharpened by rearing children.

“One of our enrollment coaches recently made a call to a prospective student, and as the student answered the phone, our coach heard all kinds of noise in the background,” Lewis says. “You could hear a child, you could hear a guitar, and the woman said ‘Hi. I’m teaching my 4-year-old

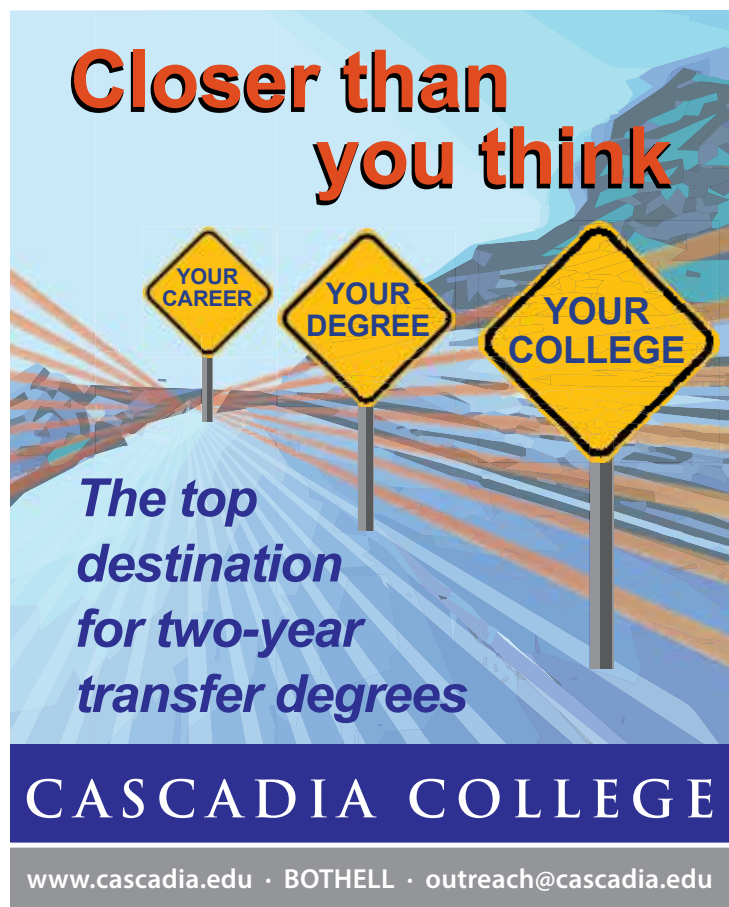
their guitar lesson right now, but I’m still available to speak if you are.’ She went on, breaking from a ‘Honey, that’s good, next string’ to ‘OK, what’s the tuition?’ She was plowing right through her life’s circumstances, because this is her goal.”

Plan, prepare: strategies for survival

The key to survival as a student parent is the same key to surviving parenting itself: Plan. You wouldn’t go on a daylong outing to the zoo without snacks and Band-Aids in your bag, would you? Preparing for success at college is much the same.

As a student parent, I learned quickly to separate my time and space devoted to school from that devoted to my family.

Each week, I calculated how much time I needed to complete assignments and study; then, I plotted on the calendar when I would do it and where. Marking the calendar committed me to it. Saturdays and several nights per week



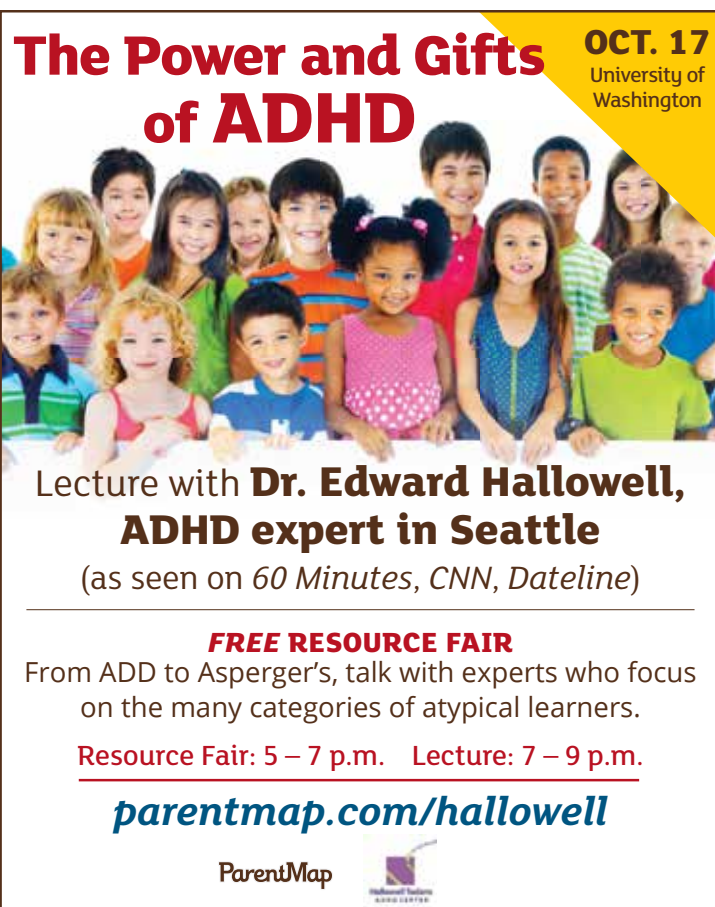
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were set aside for studying (coffee shops were a location of choice), while my husband shuttled the kids from soccer games to park play.

A related tip: Fit in studying everywhere you can! Online programs are particularly flexible. “[Students] can watch lectures while their kids are at a playdate, off at soccer practice or while mom is nursing or their baby is napping,” says Aimee Kelly, assistant director of academic services for the UW Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Social Sciences program.

The idea of optimizing your time works for many types of programs and students, even those who also work full-time. “Maybe you have an hour lunch break every day at work and you can commit that,” Kelly says. Or you might use your bus-commute time to do some reading for class.

Of course, you need to accept that for a short time while you are a student, you won’t be able to do everything. I had to miss soccer games, a science fair and even one child’s much-rehearsed role in a play.

“What surprised me the most,” Sander says, “was the guilt of not being able to do everything with my kids that I wanted to. I kept reminding myself that it wasn’t going to last forever.”

And speaking of guilt: Don’t give in to it.

“Validate your family’s hardship,” Kastner says. Apologize when you miss a big moment. But don’t give up your dream or your own self-care.

Another tip: Involve the kids. My kids got a kick out of the fact that now Mommy had homework, and after dinner, as a ritual, we worked on our assignments together. For a younger child who remains in your care when you need to study, try creating a box of toys, books and activities that’s only brought out when you are doing schoolwork. The novelty will buy you some time, as will the occasional screen time. Remember: No guilt!

Keep your eye on the prize

Sander says she always knew that she needed to go back to finish her bachelor’s degree for her children.

“I tell my kids every day that education, and finishing what you start, is important and to always better themselves. I wanted to teach them perseverance when it gets tough. There’s no better way to teach that than demonstrating it.”

Lewis, who is in a doctorate program herself, is expecting a baby. “It’s daunting,” she says. “I want my child to go to college, and I want to pay for that, and it helps to remember my own education will help me do that down the road.”

And for me, there was no better feeling (besides hitting that final “Send” to deliver my 50,000-word thesis) than to see the faces of my daughters, so proud of their mom, at my graduation. ■

Natalie Singer-Velush is ParentMap’s executive editor. She recently spent two years completing a master’s degree and vows not to return to school again, at least until her own children are in their thirties.

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Save, spend and stay safe

By the time kids graduate from high school, they should be financially literate. Are yours on track?

By Kim Eckart

Years ago, Marcia Shepherd decided to teach her two children about money — and not just about saving for a rainy day. Newly divorced, with her ex-husband living out of state, Shepherd figured that someone needed to show her teenage daughter and elementary-school-age son the realities of spending, financial obligations and the difference between what you want and what you need.

Today, Shepherd's 16-year-old son knows how to comparison shop, what car insurance costs, why credit cards can be dangerous and, being a teenager, how many hours he'll have to work at his part-time job to fix his broken iPhone. Most of these lessons, Shepherd explains, stemmed from "teachable moment" opportunities — dissecting a bill that arrived in the mail, discussing prices and consumption during a stop for gas — and continue as her son sets aside money for college.

"I don't want my kids to become adults and say, 'No one ever told me,'" Shepherd says.

Not every parent is so diligent. But financial planners and educators say teens — and even young children — need a firm foundation in personal finance in order to navigate everyday life. The sooner these current (and future) consumers understand how to spend, save and invest wisely, the greater chance they will have of becoming financially stable adults. To that end, this fall the state of Washington adopted financial education standards for grades K–12, in an effort to cover at school what may not be covered at home.

But when it comes to money, experts say, parents should be the first responders.

"Don't be afraid to talk to your kids about money," says Lyn Peters, spokesperson for the state Department of Financial Institutions. "Parents are hugely influential. No one is a perfect money person. Work with your kids on how to be financially capable so that they can stand on their own two feet."



Needs versus wants

Learning how to manage money is a life skill. And sometimes, it takes a big mistake to come to terms with reality. The biggest lessons for teens? Controlling spending, understanding the consequences of borrowing — especially student loans — and protecting themselves against identity theft.

Today's digital generation is more accustomed to debit and gift cards, and to mobile technology, than cash, explains Laura Levine, president and CEO of the Jump\$tart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that has created teaching standards for states to use as a resource.

When everything is electronic, there is a distance in the transaction, making it even more important that teens know how much money they have and where it's going. To kids, buying

*Sometimes,
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big mistake
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terms with
reality*

is simple, says Levine: "You swipe that card and you get stuff."

For the most part, protecting against identity theft requires the same precautions, no matter the consumer's age: watching bank statements for unfamiliar charges; avoiding online or mobile purchases on public wireless connections, which are often not secure; and signing up for account alerts, which many banks provide.

Teens, however, are especially prone to another identity-theft risk: sharing passwords. The honest roommate may not give anything away, Levine offers, yet the roommate's shady friend might get ahold of a password. The solution: Keep all account passwords private and change them often.

"We want to make students more aware of the world in which they're living," Levine says. "Parents need to put more emphasis on keeping track of money, because we make it so easy for kids to spend it." >>



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Save, spend and stay safe

continued from page 33

A variety of online guides and lessons are available, both for the individual child and for the whole family. But these should accompany, not replace, conversations between kids and parents.

The first step, says Dana Twight, a financial planner in Seattle, is to define needs and wants — which leads to a discussion about opportunity cost. Money spent on snacks and movies, for instance, is money that isn't available to buy the shirt, shoes or gadget you also want. (Another real-world lesson: Put your older teen in charge of the grocery shopping for a week, with a set amount of money and some guidelines for meals.)

Establish a formula for saving and spending, especially when a teen has a job, Twight says. One option is to set aside 50 percent for long-term savings, reserve 25 percent for a month and keep 25 percent available for immediate spending. Offering a "parent match" (think 401(k) matching) can be further incentive to save.

Be sure to explain the purpose and results of saving, Twight adds; otherwise, it becomes an almost esoteric concept. For young people, the idea of an "emergency fund" doesn't ring true. Instead, give the savings account a name that's relevant to the child, whether a study abroad fund, a college fund or a new cell phone fund.

James Anderson, a Tennessee-based financial planner, explains: "It's natural for young people to live largely in the present. Sometimes the notion of preparing for the future can be more abstract for them. A financial adviser accepts the idea that one should start saving as soon as possible, but

young workers feel that they can easily make it up later on."

A father of three, Anderson says teaching about money is like any other basic concept of being a happy and healthy person, with the same importance as being empathetic, eating vegetables or studying hard.

Beware when borrowing

Borrowing money also carries lifetime lessons. Although laws now limit the marketing of credit cards to young people, plenty of college students have credit and misuse it. Teaching the repercussions of late or missed payments — and the lasting role of the credit report — is key.

"If you learn credit by trial and error, it's an expensive and long-term lesson," Levine says.

In other words, whatever you buy, you still have to have the money to pay for it. And that goes for college, too.

Even before a teen or family researches student loan options, they should talk about career choices, says Pam Whalley, director and president of the Center for Economic and Financial Education at Western Washington University. That doesn't mean kids should seek out only lucrative careers, she points out, but they should have a clear idea of what their chosen profession will yield, and what college or trade school will cost them. That way, they can either start preparing for substantial debt or make decisions that will mitigate that debt. Running Start or school-district-affiliated skills centers, for example, allow high school students to earn college credit or begin training before

graduation. (Learn more about whether Running Start is right for your child: parentmap.com/runningstart.)

A lot of teens aren't set on a career, Whalley notes. But talking about their interests and where they see themselves in the future is a start. Several websites, such as those of the College Board and the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, provide information about the costs of undergraduate and graduate degrees, and the expected salaries from those degrees.

And if a teen intent on a doctorate in sociology researches the costs and benefits and still wants to press ahead?

"If that is what is going to make them happy, then look at what colleges will be able to deliver that, without making [that teen] go into massive amounts of debt," she says.

That's how Rob Mathewson sorted through college options with his twin sons, starting when they were high school sophomores. It was a daunting prospect, Mathewson says, so they broke it down first by academic interests

and career goals. They researched average salaries and, when college acceptance letters and financial aid packages arrived, made some projections.

"We were able to put all these pieces together as to what they might be making when they got out of school, what their loan burden might be and what their living budget might be," he says.

And that's when a couple of dream schools fell off the list, Mathewson says. It was a conversation, in a way, about opportunity cost.

"This is what you're taking on," he recalls telling one son. "Ultimately, he decided it wasn't worth it."

The boys, who left for college this fall, are attending universities that are right for them. And the debt? Manageable. ■

Kim Eckart is a Seattle-area writer, editor and mother. She has been a newspaper reporter and editor, and, more recently, an elementary school teacher.

online resources

• Smart About Money

(smartaboutmoney.org): Free online courses for high schoolers, from the National Endowment for Financial Education

• Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC; fdic.gov)

Free materials, including the Money Smart curriculum

• Washington State Department of Financial Institutions

(dfi.wa.gov): Materials for all ages, including Right on the Money, a guide for college students

• Council for Economic Education (councilforeconed.org)

Financial Fitness for Life lessons, with grade-level ranges and parent guides

• Financial Education Public-Private Partnership

(feppp.org/resources.htm): Activities and links



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continued from page 37

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familycenter@childcare.org

Elise Buie Family Law Group, PLLC 32
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Seattle
206-926-9848
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Family Psychological Services of Kirkland, P.S. ... 28
Assessment and services for struggling students
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425-576-1817
fpskirkland.com

Hallowell Todaro Center 7
ADHD assessment, coaching and therapy
Seattle
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hallowelltodarocenter.org
info@hallowelltodarocenter.org

LearningRX 32
Brain training for dyslexia, ADHD, autism, more
Issaquah
425-657-0908
learningrx.com/Issaquah
issaquah.wa@learningrx.net

Lehman Learning Solutions 10
Resolving learning, attention and processing challenges
Seattle; 206-526-8560
lehmanlearning.com
cindy@lehmanlearning.com

Lindamood-Bell Learning Center 28
Teaching reading, comprehension and math
Bellevue
425-827-6288
lindamoodbell.com
bellevue.center@lindamoodbell.com

Naturomedica 4
Naturopathic health care, acupuncture, IV therapy
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425-557-8900
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info@naturomedica.com

Education Expo Honor Roll

Pacific Northwest Montessori Association 47
Resources and events for families and educators
Statewide
pnma.org
info@pnma.org

Pediatric Speech and Language Therapy 19
Communication assessment and intervention for children
Seattle, Bellevue
206-547-2500
pediatricsspeechtherapy.org
carolray@pediatricsspeechtherapy.org

Puget Sound Independent Schools 8
Admissions collaborative connecting families and schools
Greater Puget Sound area
pugetsoundindependentschools.org

The Samis Foundation 3
Supporting Jewish education for Jewish children
Seattle
206-957-8751
samisfoundation.org

Savvy on Seattle 19
School and neighborhood advice for relocating families
Greater Seattle area
206-489-8083
savvyonseattle.com
jeanne@savvyonseattle.com

Shoreline Kids Dentistry ... 19
Specialized dentistry for children and teens
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shorelinekidsdentistry.com

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Academy Schools 43
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administration@academyschools.org

Asia Pacific Language School 44
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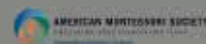


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tbcs.org; chazeltine@tbcs.org

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See
pg 45

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continued from page 41

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Garden Ridge Preschool

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JDS: The Jewish Day School of Metropolitan Seattle

..... 20
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425-460-0200
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King's Schools

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info@thelittleschool.org

Living Wisdom School

..... 22
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425-772-9862
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continued from page 43

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Seattle Area German American School—SAGA....13

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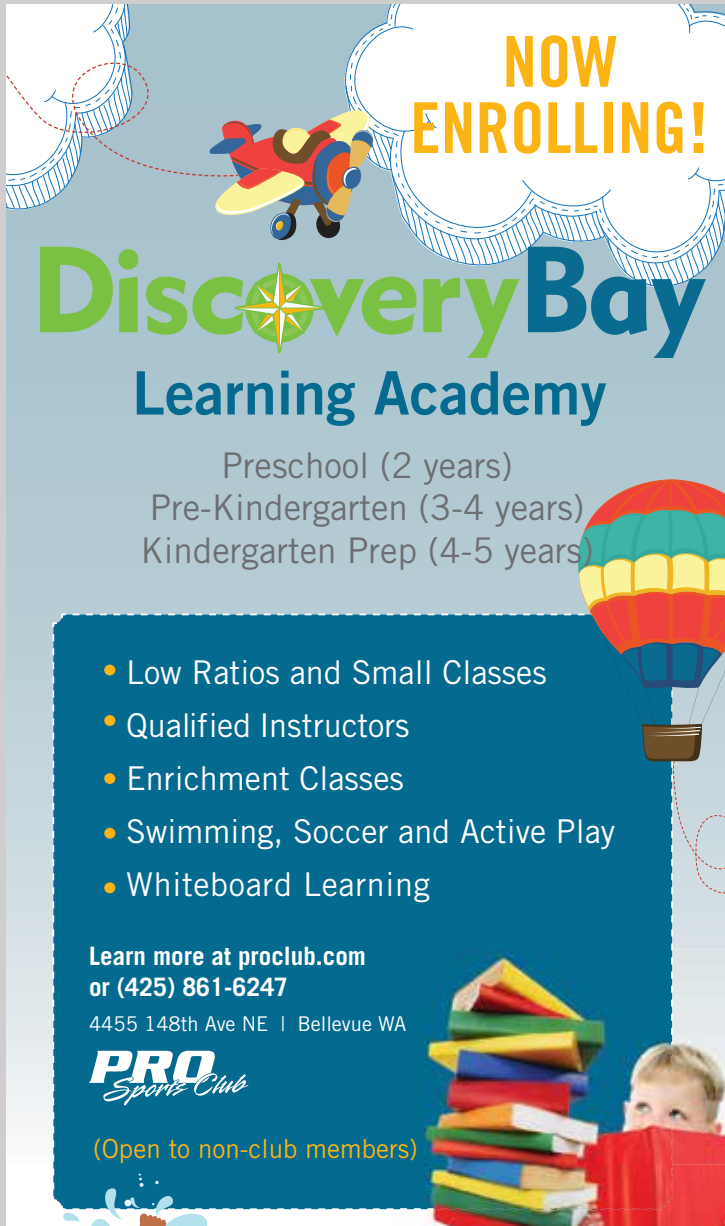
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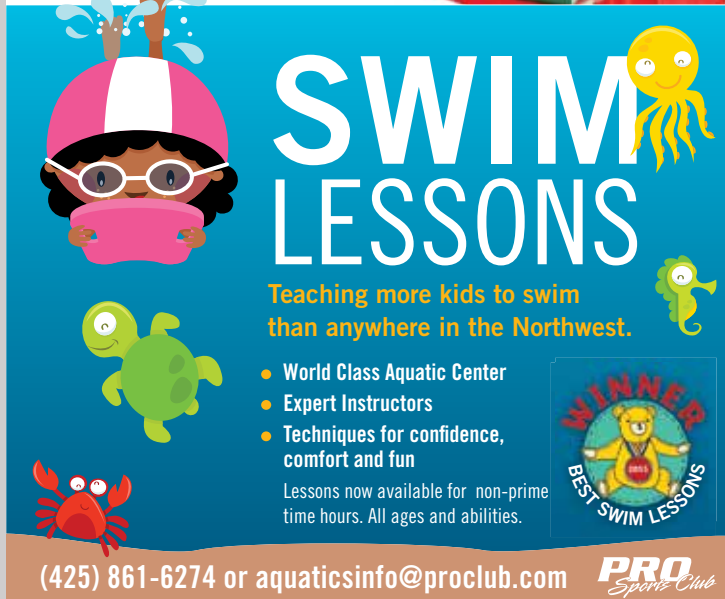
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