The Tutoring Network: A Unique Nonprofit Educational/Civic/Professional Organization

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The Tutoring Network is a nonprofit organization that emphasizes rigorous screening of educational therapists and careful matching of their expertise with the needs of learning-disabled students. It operates a clearinghouse for information pertinent to learning disabilities and strives to facilitate better communication among professionals concerned with the learning-disabled. This paper chronicles the birth and growth of The Tutoring Network and explores possibilities for replication.

With for-profit tutoring centers and chains popping up like so many golden arches across the country, The Tutoring Network (TTN) stands out. It is nonprofit, and it does not embrace or endorse any particular teaching approach, doctrine, or product. What TTN does do is find talented and experienced educational therapists and match their expertise with the academic needs of learning-disabled students. The Tutoring Network also collects and disperses information about learning disabilities. Finally, TTN encourages communication among professionals concerned with learning disabilities.

The Network is unique not only because of these services, but also because of its philosophy. TTN was founded and is now supported by educators, human service professionals, parents, and learning-disabled individuals who believe in the synergistic effects of pooling resources and working together to accomplish more for the profession, the professional, and those in need of specialized educational services. This philosophy is the thread that weaves together the diverse components of TTN:

1. A clearinghouse for tutorial referrals;
2. A clearinghouse for information pertinent to learning disabilities;
3. A communications network for professionals concerned with learning disabilities.

A Short History

Planning for the Tutoring Network began in 1982 when a group of professionals in the field of learning disabilities from the Boston area met to discuss three common concerns. First, there was a need for readily available professional tutoring for people requiring specialized educational therapy. Several excellent clinics and private schools in the area address the special educational needs of the learning-disabled population, but cost, distance, or waiting lists prevent many people from using their services. At the same time, a number of highly-skilled educational therapists were considering going into private practice and were seeking referral sources. Putting the educational therapists and those needing of their services in touch with each other seemed the obvious solution. It was clear, even in the early stages of planning, that this would require rigorous screening to ensure the competence of the specialists, and a careful match between their expertise and the student’s needs.¹

The second concern was the difficulty learning-disabled adults or parents of learning-disabled children encountered trying to locate information about services and/or resources. They often traveled long, frustrating, circuitous routes before finding help. There appeared to be a need for a source providing comprehensive information about services and resources for the learning-disabled in Boston and nearby areas. Pooling the collective knowledge of the professionals involved in these early TTN discussions could create a substantial amount of information that could be used as a basis for developing an information clearinghouse the learning-disabled or their parents could turn to.

Finally, there was a need for a communications network for professionals concerned with learning disabilities. Two concerns were paramount. First, private practice can be professionally isolating. Providing opportunities for the exchange of information and ideas among educational therapists in private practice creates a sense of community and support and fosters continued professional growth and sound business practices.² Second, better multidisciplinary and

¹Although most of The Network’s work is with the learning-disabled and dyslexic population, TTN sometimes provides tutorial services for individuals without these disabilities as well as for those not yet formally diagnosed, or those uncomfortable with labels who still require specialized tutorial services.

²This need was subsequently expressed by the majority of TTN’s registered educational therapists, especially with regard to business practices (e.g. fee-setting, billing, cancellation policies, etc.) where the educators often felt insecure.