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Helping Parents To Select and Evaluate Private Reading/Learning Centers

**Norman A. Stahl
William A. Henk**

For many parents, the various types of reading and learning centers springing up across the country represent a potential answer to their children's academic problems. In fact, commercial tutorial services are opening up on a daily basis in avenue strip malls, in community shopping districts and in local medical buildings. The marketing of these educational support services is part of a growing national trend toward offering private academic services. This rapidly growing service industry caters to parents with disposable income and a desire to help their children improve low grades and test scores, or to move and stay ahead of classmates.

To date the literature on commercial reading/learning centers and franchises has been sparse. General descriptions of the overall franchise operations as well as discussions on marketing issues can be found in popular press pieces like those by Bennett (1990), Bowen (1986), Fiske (1986) and Mummert (1986). Articles that address the unique interactions between business practices and educational ethics have been presented by Bridgman (1987), Cork (1987) and Stahl (1987). Other authors have attempted to trace the growth of

this expansion-oriented field (Kline, 1983; Robbins-Wilf, 1986; Seat, 1983; Committee Reports, 1989). Collectively, this literature demonstrates that a highly competitive, multimillion dollar market exists that is dependent upon a range of market factors for success. Consequently, both Robbins-Wilf (1987) and Stahl (1987) have proposed recommendations for developing future professional policy, as well as a research base for such programs. Yet as long as the literature base is primarily descriptive, and the research base is closely guarded and designed only for internal corporate consumption, educators and parents alike must heed the oft-quoted Latin warning — *caveat emptor*, or *let the purchaser beware*.

Unfortunately, parents and even teachers are unlikely to be fully aware of the types of services available or of many factors that need to be taken into consideration when selecting and evaluating reading/learning centers. This article describes the four primary types of programs and then provides suggestions and guidelines that educators can follow in making referrals, or assisting parents to make better informed decisions about educational support services.

Four types of reading/learning centers

Most of the commercial reading/learning centers are actually franchise operations, where local entrepreneurs offer educational programs approved by, and marketed through, a national company. Three large companies are the primary forces in the franchising movement: the Sylvan Learning Corporation (a subsidiary of Kinder-Care Learning Centers, Inc.); the American Learning Corporation (Britannica Learning Centers, formerly The Reading Game) and the Huntington Learning Centers. These three corporations control much of the market in part because of active advertising and public relations campaigns. While franchise holders do not always hold a graduate degree or have advanced

competencies in education, certified teachers generally serve as the tutors. However, even when franchise holders have a teaching background, there is no guarantee reading or language arts coursework has been taken. The primary requirement for franchise holders is the business expertise to conduct a profitable business.

A second category of service provider is the local for profit or not for profit reading clinic or learning center. These programs are often offered by an individual reading or learning disabilities specialist, an educational psychologist in private practice, or a group of subject matter specialists. In some cases, services are limited to diagnoses. In other cases, traditional tutoring services are provided to support classroom instruction directly. For many years these small scale operations were run by teachers who were either recently retired or moonlighting. Although once very popular, local, independent reading clinics have declined as a result of the mass-marketed franchises.

A third category of service provider is associated with private schools and institutions like hospitals or medical centers. These service providers tend to offer specific programs to a restricted clientele such as youngsters with mild to severe learning disabilities, suspected neurological dysfunction, or unusual visual or auditory problems. In many cases, clients are referred to these programs by family physicians, optometrists, or special education personnel.

The fourth type of program is the college or university reading clinic. These programs, which are usually found in urban areas and college towns, offer both diagnostic assessment and tutorial services at a reasonable fee. Reading clinic personnel tend to be graduate students fulfilling internship requirements for advanced degrees or state certification. In

nearly all cases, a trained specialist who probably holds a doctorate in reading education, educational psychology or special education directly supervises personnel.

As one can see, there are indeed program options from which parents may select. Yet the very fact that there are options can promote confusion and a degree of anxiety. After all, there is always the potential for choosing an inappropriate service provider. Consequently, classroom teachers and reading specialists can expect that some parents will eventually ask for help in selecting a center for their children facing problems in reading instruction. Parents will also ask specific questions about the type of services (e.g., reading tutoring, content area instruction) required by the youngster.

In some cases, an educator may be familiar with a reputable center or clinic and with members of the instructional staff. Yet, in larger school districts, it is rather unlikely that any one teacher can be familiar with all of the services offered in the greater community. The educator or the reading/learning center may also be new to the area, which makes referrals difficult at best. For these reasons, some direct suggestions are provided here for teachers who may be called upon to make referrals to reading and learning centers.

Making referrals

When making a referral, teachers need to keep in mind that a program meeting the needs of one individual family unit (e.g., the parents/caregivers and youngster) will not necessarily meet the unique needs of another family unit. As a result, the selection of a learning center will be a very private and personal decision based upon academic, philosophical and financial considerations. At the same time, when called upon, teachers should recommend centers having certain fundamental professional characteristics. Such professional

characteristics are options that parents would be unlikely to consider without the counsel of a professional educator.

First, teachers should refer parents to reading/learning centers where the instruction is offered by qualified personnel. Ideally, reading tutors will meet the qualifications for reading professionals as suggested by the *Standards for Reading Professionals* (International Reading Association, 1992). As an example, center staff providing basic educational services should meet the standards set for either of the two classroom teacher categories (e.g., preferred six to nine credits in reading and literacy related coursework), and remedial services should only be offered by individuals meeting the requirements for the reading specialist (e.g., a minimum of 18-24 graduate credit hours in reading education courses). Second, parents should be directed to learning centers where staff supervision is conducted by the qualified reading coordinators or supervisors as described in these same IRA guidelines. In situations where tutors are student interns, supervisors should also meet the recommended requirements for consultant/coordinator or a teacher educator/researcher.

Educators should refer parents to clinics that operate under the basic ethical standards of professional organizations such as the International Reading Association. This recommendation is important because such private clinics are not yet accredited, licensed, or evaluated regularly by professional organizations or state agencies. The basic standards for operating, evaluating, staffing and funding clinics as specified in *Standards and Indicators of Quality for Clinic Preparation in Reading and the Operation of Reading Clinics and Clinics With Reading Components* (College Reading Association, 1987) can provide another benchmark for potential referrals. Programs should also follow guidelines for testing and assessment issued by the American Psychological Association

(Davis, 1974). If content area subjects are tutored, the center should adhere to the appropriate guidelines issued by the professional organizations that focus on the respective content specialties.

Another point to consider is that referrals should probably be made to programs that will work cooperatively with the child's teachers to develop the best possible educational experience for the youngster. For example, the tutor from the reading/learning center should provide the teacher with up-to-date progress reports, while the tutor should be informed of the school's expectations for the child. This is particularly important if the parent(s) believe that the school's learning program is not benefiting the child. School personnel and learning center personnel alike should be careful not to be manipulated into a position of competition with each other. There is always the possibility that parents might use the center's assessment or educational plan to challenge decisions made by the teacher or other members of the school staff. A long-term working relationship between the center and the school should transcend any one particular case and, over time, positive interactions will benefit many children. Making referrals to cooperative, time-proven centers and clinics that adhere to accepted professional standards will be a relatively easy task. On the other hand, making referrals to new or unknown programs may be difficult. Therefore, it is important that reading professionals extend an invitation to all individuals operating or serving with private programs to be part of the local school community (e.g., parent-teacher organizations, school advisory boards) and the local professional community (e.g., the local IRA reading council, the local Learning Disabilities Association chapter). Through such interaction, knowledge of programs can be shared, and reciprocal activities may be undertaken — all of which will make the task of appropriate referrals easier in the long run.

Guidelines for assisting parents

The referral is only the first step in securing the appropriate tutorial services for the student. The parents must still visit the center(s) and evaluate their various instructional programs before entering into a legal contract. Since visiting a program can be challenging and stressful, parents may find it helpful to have a set of questions or prompts to guide their evaluation. With this in mind, we have prepared a reproducible narrative influenced, in part, by the professional standards and guidelines that were mentioned earlier as well as ideas based on our own experiences (see Appendix A). This narrative of generic questions and concerns can be given to parents before they meet with any reading clinic or learning center director. While this narrative deals primarily with the language arts and reading in particular, it can be adapted to focus on other content areas as well. Additionally, we have prepared a visitation checklist that consists of both direct questions to be asked at site visits and questions the parents will want to be able to answer based on their own observations. This checklist provides a structure for evaluation and comparison across visitations. It is extremely important that the guidelines and visitation checklist (see Appendix B) not be simply handed over to the parents. Rather, the teacher should take the time to go through the materials with the parents to clarify meanings of any technical terms and to explain the basic rationale behind the suggestions. It may also be necessary to revise the guidelines to fit the specific backgrounds (educational, social, etc.) of the parents of the children currently being served in the classroom.

How this information helps

For the parent, the child and also the teacher, the careful selection of a program could lead to a very successful experience. Benefits could be felt for years to come. Consequently,

teachers should find it useful to share the reproducible narrative and the visitation checklist with parents. It has been our experience that parents seeking counsel are appreciative of this type of guidance particularly when both parents and teacher review the guide together before the selection process begins. When problems arise, it is often when parents, for whatever reason, believe that the school is not serving their child in a proper manner. In such a case, it is unlikely that they will ask for the counsel of a member of the school staff. On the other hand, they may very well listen to the guidance of another parent. One recommendation is for the school's parent/teacher association to hold a session each year on community resources that support learning. At this session representatives from creditable centers can discuss the services provided at each respective center, and a teacher or PTA officer can advise parents how to evaluate and select a private learning center by using the ideas put forth in the narrative provided.

By reading the narrative carefully, parents will gain the preliminary background necessary to make an enlightened decision about a learning center. In addition, by taking the visitation checklist to the center, parents can make a more systematic and effective appraisal of the services being offered. The checklist further serves to keep the center honest and delivers the message that the parents are knowledgeable consumers who expect quality. Clearly, the guidelines that cut across the narrative and the checklist do not guarantee that the proper decision will be made; however, when used together, they do increase the chances dramatically. Parents who might otherwise make uninformed judgments can now be positioned to enhance their child's academic and personal well being.

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Single copies of the Standards for Reading Professionals can be obtained at a cost of \$3.50 by writing to Standards, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark DE 19714-8139.

Single copies of the IRA Code of Ethics can be obtained at no cost by writing the Public Information Office of the International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark DE 19714-8139.

Single copies of the Standards and Indicators of Quality for Clinical Preparation in Reading and the Operation of Reading Clinics and Clinics with Reading Components can be obtained at a cost of \$6.00 by writing to the Publications Business Manager, College Reading Association, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Pittsburgh State University, Pittsburgh KS 66762.

***Call for Manuscripts for the 1994 Themed Issue:
Literacy Through University-School Collaboration***

The 1994 themed issue of *Reading Horizons* will be devoted to efforts that promote literacy through university-school collaboration. Guest editors are Janet Dynak and Ronald Crowell of Western Michigan University. Contributions in the form of research reports, commentaries, case studies, and articles discussing the area of literacy relating to university-school collaboration are welcomed. Preference will be given to manuscripts co-authored by classroom teachers and university faculty. Manuscripts should be submitted following *Reading Horizons* guidelines appearing on the inside cover of this journal. Manuscripts intended for the themed issue should be postmarked by **March 1, 1994**. Address all manuscripts to Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, Editor, *Reading Horizons*, WMU, Kalamazoo MI 49008.

Appendix A
***A parent's guide for selecting a
reading/learning center***

Now that you have made the decision to get academic help for your child, the next step is to pick a reading/learning center that will meet your needs. In looking for the best learning center, ask for guidance from either your child's teacher, the reading specialist at your child's school, the reading supervisor for your school district, or a faculty member of the reading program at a local college or university. Then as you evaluate the learning centers, ask the questions and raise the concerns that are discussed in the following guide. For your convenience, the questions and hints are organized into four sections, *Evaluating the Environment for Learning*, *Evaluating the Educators*, *Evaluating the Educational Program*, and *Raising Practical Questions*.

Evaluating the environment for learning. Before signing any contract, be sure to visit the center while it is in operation. As you walk through the learning center, ask to see where the instruction will take place. Make a mental note of whether the space is large enough for the staff to conduct the educational program and also note if the facility seems to be safe. Look for several exits, fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and first aid kits.

Check the supply of instructional materials and equipment such as books, magazines, newspapers, textbooks, audio equipment, video equipment, computers, and computer software. Don't assume that because the site has a row of computers or other appealing learning aids that all of the pupils will be able to use them. This equipment may be part of another program at the same site; ask upfront which learning materials and computer hardware will be used in your child's educational program.

As you observe activities in the center, look to see if the youngsters appear to be enjoying the experience of learning while working in a

comfortable, relatively quiet setting. Ask yourself if your child would fit in with the other children and be comfortable in the setting.

Evaluating the educators. Check to see if the staff members of the learning center appear to enjoy their work and if they are enthusiastic about teaching. Then ask the director about the professional experiences and backgrounds of the staff members. Ask if each of the tutors has a teaching certificate, and make sure that your child will be assigned to a qualified tutor.

Since not all clinic directors have a background in education, ask about her/his degrees or credentials. Evaluate whether the program's supervisor answers your questions in a straightforward and honest manner, or on the other hand, whether you seem to be receiving a well-tested sales pitch. Remember that you are dealing with a fee-generating service; profit making is the bottom line. Be sure to ask whether the center is licensed by the state, or if it is accredited by a reputable professional organization.

Besides proper certification, make sure the tutor who is going to work with your child has the proper background (i.e., he or she has worked previously with other children from the same age group, grade level and/or subject field). If your child has a specific learning problem or disability, try to determine if the tutor has the proper knowledge (generally a specialist's credential or advanced degree) and the relevant experience to meet your child's learning needs. You might want to discuss your findings with trusted and knowledgeable school personnel to get alternative opinions.

Evaluating the educational program. Try to determine the center's philosophy of learning. Decide if it agrees with what you believe and whether it seems to fit your child's needs and learning style. Also decide how this philosophy of learning matches the one found in your child's daily educational setting at school. This is rather important if you believe that current educational placement is not meeting the child's needs. While a perfect match is not always necessary, the center and the school should at least be supportive of each other's endeavors on behalf of your youngster.

You will certainly want to ask if the center will give your child a thorough educational assessment if you enroll your child. In addition, be certain that the center will schedule a conference with you after the testing to give you a written copy of the diagnostic report and to provide you with an explanation of their findings. The center should also be willing to submit a copy of the report to your child's school at your request. If you do not want the school notified, be sure to tell the director of the center. If tutoring sessions will follow the assessment, you should determine if there is a planned educational program for your child. You may get this information at the assessment conference. Insist that the tutor fully explain this plan to you and that he or she keep you notified of your child's progress as long as tutoring continues. Of course, you'll probably want to have a copy of the academic plan sent to your child's school as well. The tutor might even be asked to attend the next parent-teacher conference to help include the plan into the school's program.

The instruction program should be customized for the academic needs of your child, and it should then be evaluated and revised as necessary across the tutoring sessions. There are other questions about the plan you should think about as well, such as: Will the educational program help your child to function adequately in a range of subject areas? Will the program offer opportunities, if appropriate, for integrating all of the language arts (i.e., reading, writing, spelling, listening, speaking) as opposed to placing the child in a step by step, rigid workbook or workbook via computer approach? Will the service not only promote the learning of concepts, but also the process of independent learning? Above all, the program should use a variety of instructional approaches rather than one proven or innovative package for all pupils.

Consider whether the tutor's plan for your child will help to develop independent reading skills. Ask how the reading instruction will relate to your child's interests. Will the prescribed instructional plan include your child's ideas, hobbies, and interests into the more directed instruction? The service should certainly promote the youngster's curiosity, satisfaction in

learning, and positive self-image. Try to judge if the instruction will lead to initial success for your child as well as to ongoing success. In other words, will the tutor have a specific plan that builds upon academic and personal success and then transfers that success to both the classroom and the home. The director of the center should be willing to give you the names of several former clients who could provide information about the long term effect of the center's services.

Check to see that the center provides for a range of both group and individualized activities. Inquire about the tutor-to-student ratio (i.e., one to one, one to three). While one to one attention is generally desirable, check to see if your child would also receive valuable social experiences while learning. Many learning experts recommend that educational programs should provide some opportunities for youngsters to work in groups of two or three to take advantage of cooperative or collaborative learning.

The program should assist you in developing a home reading/writing program. Family members can share the joy of reading materials such as newspapers, magazines, books and varied reference sources. Find out if the tutor will also help you to develop a set of home-based activities. These activities might help to expand your child's realm of knowledge and his or her enjoyment of learning. You might also ask whether the center offers parent workshops. These workshops can help you to increase your child's academic performance and use of study strategies.

If the program uses a reward system, be sure that it matches your personal philosophy. That is, some centers provide rewards for progress like books, pencils and other learning materials, while others use informal rewards like direct praise to the learner and positive comments to the parents. Check to see how this system compares to the system of rewards used in your child's school. If the reward structure used by the center differs greatly from either your values or from the school's system of rewards, your child might begin to expect the type of rewards given by the center for all learning endeavors. Remember, rewards should come from satisfaction associated with the experience of reading. In the long run, praise, personal enrichment,

and success should serve as the primary rewards for learning. Ask whether the tutor will assist your child with school assignments. Although the services provided should be more than merely a homework center, assigned homework from the school must not be overlooked. This is particularly true when homework assignments are in subject areas in which your child generally encounters difficulties.

Raising practical questions. For practical reasons, be sure to ask about the days and hours of the program's operation, the schedule for any specific academic services, and any other special services such as transportation to and from the center. Ask about the fees for the services, and ask how these fees must be paid (i.e., cash, check, charge card). Also ask whether the fees must be paid before services begin or if there is a payment plan across the period services are being provided. It would also be helpful to learn if there are scholarships or partial tuition waivers based on financial need. Do not agree to a contract that does not permit you to stop payment for services if you believe that your child is not benefiting from the tutoring. Check to see if you are entitled to a refund or a credit if your son or daughter is ill and cannot attend a session or if you withdraw the youngster from the program. Ask how soon in advance you must notify the center of your child's inability to attend a session because of illness.

Check to see what records will be kept on your child and whether they remain confidential. You should make sure the center will allow you to examine all of your child's academic records upon request. Ask if you can obtain a copy of these records, and if so, what charges might be involved. It is also important to know if the program will send a copy of these records to your child's current or future school if you request it.

Final thoughts in selecting a learning center. Remember that identifying your child's learning center is as important as trying to find the right doctor for your family. Do not be fooled into believing that one center is better than another simply because it has the endorsement of a national celebrity, the backing of either a large, highly respected corporation or an affiliation with a college or university, the promise of a quick-fix

guarantee, or the atmosphere of a medical office. Although some of these aspects can be positive indicators, each is only a single factor in selecting a center. Remember, in some cases, these may be forms of deceptive marketing.

The parent's role after enrollment in a learning center. Once you decide that a particular center is right for your child, talk to the youngster and explain why the tests or tutoring will provide benefits. At the same time be careful not to overemphasize the possible positive effects as you might develop unrealistic expectations in your child. Let the student visit the center before services are to begin. Of course, the cost of the services must never be used as pressure for the child to perform or to excel in the program. The center should not be used as a convenient childcare service or as an enrichment program. Traditional activities such as library visitations, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Little League, social clubs or family outings should be encouraged instead. These activities enrich your child's life and help to build a firm foundation of knowledge and experience that promote school success.

Finally, do not push your child to be a superachiever. Allow the youngster to act in a manner appropriate for his or her stage of development (age, sex, grade level, etc.). A child is an individual with unique strengths and weaknesses; together with the child's teacher and tutor you should strive to build upon these strongpoints while overcoming weaknesses.

Appendix B
A parents' evaluation checklist for
learning center site visitations

Evaluating the environment for learning

	Yes	No
Is there enough space to conduct a quality education program?	-----	-----
Does the facility appear to be safe?	-----	-----
Are the instructional materials and equipment adequate?	-----	-----
Is the setting comfortable and conducive to learning?	-----	-----
Is the tutor-to-student ratio satisfactory?	-----	-----

Comments:-----

Evaluating the educators

	Yes	No
Are the staff enthusiastic and positive?	-----	-----
Are the tutors properly certified?	-----	-----
Is the center accredited, licensed, or evaluated regularly?	-----	-----
Do tutors have the background to meet my child's needs?	-----	-----

Comments: _____

Evaluating the educational program

	Yes	No
Is the focus appropriate for my child?	_____	_____
Will my child receive thorough testing?	_____	_____
Will the results of the testing be shared with me verbally at a conference <u>and</u> in writing?	_____	_____
Will the center send a copy of the report to my child's school?	_____	_____
Will the center provide a planned, personal educational program for my child?	_____	_____
Will the educational program for my child be evaluated by staff on a regular basis?	_____	_____
Will the tutor share the educational plan with me and consistently keep me apprised of my child's progress?	_____	_____
Is the center willing to share the educational plan with my child's school?	_____	_____
Will the plan promote my child's independent reading skills?	_____	_____
Will tutoring in reading also stress the related fields of writing, listening and speaking?	_____	_____

Will the educational program help my child
succeed in other school subjects? -----

Is the educational program offered by the
center flexible? -----

Will the program teach my child how to learn on
his/her own? -----

Will my child's interests be considered? -----

Will the educational program be tailored
to the needs of my child? -----

Are opportunities available for my child
to work in small groups in addition to
one-to-one tutoring? -----

Will the center give me help in setting up a
positive learning environment at home? -----

Are parent training workshops offered by
the center? -----

Will my child receive help with homework? -----

Comments:-----

Raising practical questions

	Yes	No
Do the center's operating hours fit my child's needs?	-----	-----

Does the center provide any special services
such as transportation?

Can I afford the cost of instruction, and are
there payment plans that fit my budget?

Is financial assistance available if we
qualify?

Are there specific conditions within any contract
that I must sign?

Will the center keep records on my child?

Will all records of my child's work be kept
confidential?

Will I be able to review these records
upon request?

Will the center send a copy of the records
to my child's school upon request?

Is there a charge for sending out my child's
records and is it reasonable?

Comments:-----

