

School: Program serves as a refuge

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the 5-year-old M'silot program (pronounced mis-ee-lote) for children with learning disabilities. The program originally started with first grade. Students who did poorly in kindergarten despite high intelligence were identified for the special class.

Phyllis Rosenthal, director of the program, saw a need to catch kids sooner, before they suffer low self-esteem.

"We looked for children who were not reaching their potential," she said.

Metro Atlanta has several private schools for children with learning disabilities. The Schenck School announced plans recently to expand its program for dyslexic children to kindergarten, saying psychologists and preschool teachers have gotten better at diagnosing children early.

Dyslexia is a neurological disorder that makes it hard to process letters and words into meaningful language. Experts estimate as many as one in



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Christine Oertle teaches a Greenfield Hebrew Academy kindergarten class for dyslexic pupils.

five people may be dyslexic.

Other common learning disabilities include problems hearing sounds over background noise and grasping the meaning of what one hears.

Deborah Berger did not want her son, Bud, to feel inferior to his classmates just because he has trouble with sounds and letters. In preschool, "Bud was not able to connect each letter with a specific sound," his mother said.

Yet Bud, 5, has a rich vocabulary. He once grabbed his shoulder and told his mother he hurt his scapula.

In his small kindergarten class at Greenfield Hebrew Academy, "he's just going great guns," Berger said.

The kindergarten program at Greenfield costs \$12,000.

Public schools are required by law to provide a free and appropriate education to all

children, but disabilities often are not diagnosed until at least second grade. By then, many children feel like failures.

"They're like little wounded wildlife," said Berger, whose daughter, Parron, is a second-grader in M'silot. A program like Greenfield's serves as a refuge, she said.

School leaders got a grant from the Jewish Community Endowment Fund, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, to start the M'silot kindergarten class.

The M'silot program was started with a donation from Jerry and Elaine Blumenthal, whose son Matthew attended Greenfield Hebrew Academy. He died in 1995. Elaine Blumenthal, a former special education teacher, wanted Jewish families to have an option for children with learning disabilities in Jewish schools.