

# An Expensive Safety Net

*Because public schools are not teaching the basics, the for-profit sector is taking up the slack.*

**By Andrew Nikiforuk**

Last fall, Mary Willis, a single 37-year-old Calgary mom, pulled her sons Blake and Brandon out of public school. At the time, neither one of her 10-year-old twins could read. Not knowing what to do, she asked the local home schooling association for help. She was directed to Susan Nordean, a private tutor.

Each week, the boys visit Nordean's busy centre in the basement of her house. After several months of instruction, the boys are reading near a grade 2 level — something public schooling couldn't achieve in five years.

Willis and her twins are part of a remarkable revolution in education that sees nearly 17% of all parents seeking help outside the school system — either from independent tutors like Nordean or from popular franchises such as U.S.-based Sylvan Learning.

The growth in private tutorial services and supplementary education in Canada has been nothing short of spectacular. According to a McMaster University survey, the number of private tutoring businesses grew by between 200% and 500% in Canada's major cities in the last decade.

Much of this growth has occurred in small tutorial services run by former teachers like Susan Nordean. Since opening last year, she has added three more teachers — yet has many students on a waiting list.

Her customers include kids from both private and public schools who have fallen through the cracks. Nordean attributes her business's rapid growth to inadequate school funding, over-crowded classrooms, and poor teacher training. The universities now graduate teachers who don't know how to teach reading, spelling, or even handwriting. Most of them have never taken a methodology course.

The most dramatic growth in private supplemental education has occurred in the franchises. Consider London-based Oxford Learning.

It started in 1986 with one centre serving 35 children with the goal of improving their thinking skills. Today, Oxford operates 78 centres across the country that offer 10,000 children distinctive reading and math programs loosely based on the pedagogy of Maria Montessori.

Nick Whitehead, Oxford's founder and director, credits part of the franchise's amazing growth to globalization — recent immigrants who are looking for an educational edge.

As well, Whitehead points to huge changes in public expectations for the school system. There is a resignation among parents that the public system can't do it all — at least, not basic reading, writing, and mathematics. These parents are just saying, "Let's get on with it!"

Kumon, which offers highly-structured math and reading programs, is another booming franchise. Originally established as an after-school math program in Japan, the firm has branched out worldwide, now offering highly-sequenced instruction with a strong emphasis on mastery and rote learning.

Since 1997, Canadian enrolment has climbed from 26,500 to 38,000 in 340 centres. Kumon hopes to boost enrolment in its after-school programs even more, to 50,000 by the end of 2003.

With larger class sizes, higher standards, and changes in the curriculum, parents are looking at getting their kids into a program even before they get into trouble, notes Lefky Alexopoulos, former manager of Kumon's Toronto East Branch. There are now approximately 12,000 Kumon students in the GTA.

Canadian parents, of course, aren't the only ones turning more and more to private supplementary education and tutors. In Japan, home of the infamous juku after-school programs, more than 70% of all students now receive private tutoring.

A 1999 UN study concluded that these shadow systems have a variety of social and economic implications for education. On the positive side, private tutors can help expand knowledge, fill in gaps, and make communities intellectually richer.

But not everyone, of course, can afford these services. As a result, the shadow system can and does exacerbate class and social inequalities in many regions around the world.

Scott Davies, an associate professor of educational sociology at McMaster University, believes that ordinary people have sought out tutoring as an affordable or default form of school choice.

Most educators and parents feel the shadow system is here to stay. Education is a top priority for 50% of all parents, and those who have the disposable income will take advantage of the services,

If American trends are any indicator, Canadian tutorial programs could expand dramatically and become more accountable over the next decade. In 2002, the U.S. government passed the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires under-performing schools to pay for independent tutoring of the parents' choice.

Focused educational assistance based on a child's academic needs would definitely appeal to Mary Willis and thousands of other parents. Last year, Willis had to start her own flyer business to help pay her education bills. She regards Nordean's service as a godsend and points out how successful her boys now feel.

"Oh, I just wish this could happen for other parents. The government needs to change when it comes to the school system."

*(Adapted with permission from Canadian Family Magazine. Mr. Nikiforuk is the author of If Learning is so Natural, Why am I Going to School?)*