

This special school is mainstream too

Pathlight prepares autistic children for PSLE and O levels

By TANIA TAN

HE FIDDLES with his glasses as he speaks to *The Straits Times*. Noah Si, nine, is clearly uncomfortable talking to strangers. He suffers from Asperger's Syndrome (AS), a type of autism, and children with AS find socialising hard.

Noah would recoil even when his mother tried to embrace him — splaying out his arms and legs "like a starfish", said Mrs Florence Si.

"It's heartbreaking to know I'll never be able to reach out to him," said the mother of two. "It was tough to come to terms with." Her daughter, seven, is normal.

However, AS children often exhibit extraordinary talents. Noah, for example, has a photographic memory. He can memorise the entire street directory easily.

However, despite his enviable talent, mainstream schools were "unsuitable" as large crowds made him "very anxious", explained his mother. He was also bullied for a year in kindergarten.

"I needed a place where he could learn and be happy," said Mrs Si.

She has found just the place for him.

Pathlight was set up two years ago by the non-profit Autism Resource Centre (ARC) to fill the gap between mainstream schools, which do not cater to autistic children, and special schools, which offer only basic functional academics.

The school in Ang Mo Kio provides mainstream education to autistic children.

There, about 300 students, aged between six and 16, are prepared for the Primary School Leaving Examination and O levels, studying the full mainstream curriculum with the exception of the mother tongue. Instead of taking mother tongue classes, they learn social and independent living skills, explained school supervisor Denise Phua, who is also an MP for Jalan Besar GRC.

Students pay monthly fees of \$500 but about four out of 10, mostly from low-income families, receive subsidies.

The school has been a blessing for Noah and his mother. Mrs Si gets invaluable support from other parents and the Pathlight teachers. They have taught her how to cope better with Noah.

"It was so comforting to know there were others before me experiencing the same thing," she said. "They're not a school, they're family."

Apart from giving frequent, detailed updates on Noah's progress in school, his teachers have often gone the extra mile — even lending him pocket money once when he had to stay late for extra activities after school.

Part of the pioneer batch of students, Noah has come a long way from his days in a mainstream kindergarten.

Although visibly nervous as he



PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK

GOOD BUDDIES: Noah Si (right), who suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, has become firm friends with classmates (from left) Kum Kah Wee, Daniel Ong and Ng Li Jie at Pathlight School.



Charity facts

Name: Pathlight School

What it does: It is the first autism-focused school here to offer the mainstream curriculum to children with autism. Students can sit for the PSLE and O levels, as well as learn life skills for independent living.

Money it needs each year: \$5 million. Pathlight functions as a public school and its operational costs are covered by the Ministry of Education and the National Council of Social Service.

It needs an additional \$3 million

to build a new school. Its current premises play host to 300 students — 100 more than the school's capacity.

How it raises funds: It holds events like the Very Special Walk, which takes place today at Pasir Ris Park. Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam will be the guest of honour.

The school also receives funding from corporate and individual donors, and the sale of merchandise such as T-shirts and student art.

Premises: It is in Ang Mo Kio Street 44.

How much in the kitty? \$96,718

How many staff? 81, including teachers and therapists.

How many volunteers? 61. They help to man the Pathlight Cafe — a community project established by coffee chain Starbucks — and the student library, and they lend a hand during school outings and events.

Is it online? Yes — www.pathlight.org.sg

Are its financial records online? No.

Why you should donate: Children with autism should not lose out in life, says supervisor Denise Phua.

tried to avoid eye contact with me, the Primary 3 maths whiz chattered enthusiastically about his favourite topic — learning.

He can already solve Secondary 1 algebra problems.

He has also made fast friends with his classmates.

They gladly sacrificed their recess playtime to keep him company when he was recovering from a minor leg operation.

Now in its second year as a President's Challenge beneficiary, Pathlight wants to expand to include a more extensive communication development programme. This programme will feature a special curriculum and have more speech therapists and language educators.

Last year's donations were used to establish an IT faculty for students gifted in graphic design.

With plans for a new, bigger campus, Ms Phua hopes the school will help brighten the way for more children like Noah.

"They have so much talent. It would be a waste if we didn't help them use it."

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