

# 60% of a loaf is better than none

*Brand new Foothills Academy carries on with partial grants and stubborn parents*

**N**ow receiving final applications for the 1979-80 school year," read the small newspaper advertisement placed this fall by Foothills Academy, Calgary's brand new, and first, special school for children with learning disabilities. \* It hardly needed advertising. Though its fees of necessity still stand at a possible \$4,000 a year, by last week 32 pupils aged six to 14 were hard at work with their eight teachers, and another 30 youngsters have had to be turned away in the last three weeks.

The establishment of Foothills had proceeded with extraordinary speed since educational consultant Hal A. Anderson began it last January under pressure from anxious parents. It was registered as a charity for tax purposes,

Academy in Colorado, where 14 Calgary pupils were enrolled last year. But if Foothills were recognized by the provincial education department, and if each pupil should be assessed by his public or separate school system as needing to attend, the school would receive a provincial grant of \$3,500 each. Education minister David King intervened in early summer to accord it formal recognition and 60% of the grant, however, with or without school board approval. Parents were grateful for the speed that cut their \$6,000 fee to \$4,000.

They would also appreciate the other 40% which depends on individual school system decisions. So far, the Catholic system has agreed to two placements, the Calgary Board of Education to none.

not physically handicapped, not emotionally disturbed (or at any rate, not primarily emotionally disturbed). They are in fact of average or above average intelligence. But either through heredity or minor brain damage, there is something neurologically wrong in their central processing of information which blocks learning. Five to 15% would imply that, in every class of 30, three pupils are thought likely to be learning disabled, but the type and degree of disability covers a wide range.

Some, for instance, cannot remember what they see, even for a day. So one 11-year-old Calgarian with the vocabulary of a 16-year-old cannot read or write words the normal eight-year-old can handle. Another, asked to go to the window, open it and turn around, can only remember auditory instruction well enough to get to the window. Then he needs the instruction repeated. In any normal class such a pupil is inevitably left far behind. There are those unable to co-ordinate eye and hand movements. There are combinations of these problems and others besides.

To try to meet these difficulties the Calgary public board during the seventies has built up seven Learning Assistance Centres within its system, staffed now by 39 teachers. But with a student load of 600 a year, their time is stretched. The pupil, even once diagnosed, can typically receive only several one-hour doses of help each week.

**A**t Foothills, on the other hand, classes vary from four pupils to eight, and a class of eight is handled by a teacher and a teacher's aide. Four of the teachers are specialists in learning disability. The other four are also certified teachers, working only mornings when the most intense work on reading, writing and arithmetic is under way. Techniques of learning to spell a word include drawing it in the air, fingering it on sandpaper, feeling it as raised lettering on flash cards out of sight under the chair, and handling it in the form of plastic letters. This is called multi-sensory bombardment, teaching through more senses than sight and hearing.

Logical patterns, such as phonetic (sound) spelling, are stressed over memory work. These and other methods work well enough that most students at the Denver Academy, Foothill's Colorado prototype, have been able to join the regular system again within a couple of



**A concentrated four pupils per class**  
Foothills teacher Cheryl Meaney works with flash cards.

negotiations were completed for use of empty St. Pius Elementary School in the city's northwest. Mr. Anderson began the search for specialized teachers, and donations were promised — all by late spring.

In June came a real break. Mr. Anderson had announced that fees would have to be as high as \$6,000 per pupil annually and there was no lack of families prepared to pay that much if they had to. It was a full \$3,000 less than the cost of sending a youngster with serious learning problems to the Denver

\* Edmonton's pioneering Evelyn Unger School, first in the province 13 years ago, now receives the full provincial grant for its enrolment of close to 150 pupils. Parents raise another \$200,000 a year, approximately.

The public board must do its own evaluation tests, and not all Foothills pupils have been assessed. More difficult, the CBE must also make up its mind officially about the school, and Mr. Anderson refuses to subject his staff and pupils to detailed and possibly upsetting scrutiny until they have had a chance to settle in. Both public and separate boards, anticipating controversy with parents, have been setting up student placement appeal boards.

Meanwhile the settling in process goes on at Foothills for 32 youngsters belonging to that estimated 5 to 15% of school children who suffer the still mysterious affliction of "learning disability." They are not mentally retarded,