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Pathlight students having an IT lesson yesterday. The school added design programs such as Adobe Illustrator and Dreamweaver to its IT course in March, and plans are afoot to open the programme to students from other special-needs schools next year.

ST PHOTO:  
RAJ NADARAJAN

## Pathlight expands IT courses for autistic kids

CHILDREN with autism, usually weak in human interaction, are strong in visual learning – and Pathlight School is homing in on this to build up its information technology programme for them.

Since 2005, it has been training all its students in word processing using Microsoft Word and the creation of presentations using PowerPoint.

In March, its IT education programme was expanded to include design programs such as Adobe Illustrator to create graphics and Dreamweaver to create webpages.

Now, all its 600 pupils and students from kindergarten to Secondary 5 go

through a slew of IT and design courses.

At preschool level, they learn how to type using a keyboard; at primary level, they move on to spreadsheets and designing graphics; and at secondary level, they learn animation and webpage design.

The school board's supervisor, Ms Denise Phua, said it is determined that its students with special needs are not left behind and remain employable as Singapore becomes increasingly wired.

"IT skills are not a luxury any more. They are essential skills, even for daily living. Mainstream students are exposed to IT from a very young age. If we don't do the same for the special-needs population, we would not only have a physical and social divide, but also a digital one," she said.

It helps that Pathlight's students with

autism are structured and visual thinkers who pick up IT skills fast, she added – so fast that three months into introducing the IT programme, a student was found to have hacked into the school system.

Ms Phua said: "There are many people with some form of autism working in the IT industry, so we know this is an important employment area for them."

Plans are afoot to open the programme to students from other special-needs schools next year. For now, Pathlight students said they enjoy the classes.

Primary 4 pupil Denzel Loh, 11, said he has tried his hand at a range of programs. He said: "I do many interesting

things – I've used Publisher to make a card for Racial Harmony Day."

JANE NG

### ESSENTIAL SKILLS

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