



A YEAR AT ACLD TILLOTSON SCHOOL

"With all of my heart,
thank you for investing
in and pouring love and
truth into our child and a
myriad of other children
as we all work to teach
our children to be kind,
ready, respectful, and
responsible!!!"

— *Student's Parent*

www.acldtillotsonschool.org

(412) 881-2268

4900 GIRARD RD
Pittsburgh, PA 15227





“We have been so thrilled to engage in a very rewarding partnership with ACLD Tillotson School for many years now. All participants – students, teachers, and library staff alike – benefit greatly from the volunteer work that the students complete while here. It’s always uplifting to observe ACLD Tillotson School staff expertly guiding students to develop work skills through patience, humor, and clear and gentle direction, and it’s inspiring to watch students grow into independent workers over the arc of their stint at the library. We deeply appreciate the help provided by the teachers and students and look forward to a continued partnership in the future.”

— Tracy O’Neill, Manager, Library Services, Brentwood Library



Students are exploring

“What type of job might I get?”

“What skills might I need?”

“What level of math or reading might I need for that job?”

Community partnerships bridge gaps

Starting the year a student turns 14, Lacey Kovacik, ACLD’s transition coordinator, helps that student develop goals for independent living, employment and post-secondary education. Students can and do learn job skills within the building. They learn to clock-in, follow directions, take constructive criticism, and work with supervision or independently.

“The students are pretty comfortable with me, because I’m familiar. Some call me, ‘boss’, which is kind of cute,” chuckles Mrs. Kovacik. *“That’s why volunteer opportunities with community partners are so valuable.”*

“With the external partners they are learning real job skills in a real environment from real people that are new to them. They learn to develop relationships with an employer and co-workers. It’s uncomfortable and hard. And what better place to learn than from the work environment itself.”

Partnerships include the Brentwood Library, Whitehall Library, Brentwood Meals on Wheels and Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Solely or in small groups, students take on a variety of volunteer activities to learn basic job skills and understand what potential employment might look like.

“We are so grateful for these partners,” says Mrs. Kovacik. *“We all learn from them about what the community expects from employees. The volunteer*

work bridges what it is like to go from school into the world of work. The community partners allow it to happen in a supportive setting.”





ShYFT prepares young adults for successful independence

Vincent Benson completed Quaker Valley High School with good grades and a 1200 on his SATs. His guardian grandparents recognized his need to develop more vocational and interpersonal skills. Through diligent searching they came upon ACLD's new program for 18 – 21 year olds, ShYFT.

"We are so grateful this program started right when we needed it," says his grandmother Linda Benson. *"Vincent had some great experiences this past year developing in the various domains of the program. He's more at home with himself."*

Those domains are the eight domains or dimensions of wellness promoted by mental health experts around the world for holistic personal wellbeing. Through activities of daily living, ShYFT intentionally addresses each of these over the course of the learning program.

This past year, Vincent was one of four students who came to the ShYFT house each day. The house, fully equipped with kitchen, laundry and living spaces, offers students the unique opportunity for hands-on activities of daily living.

Students begin each day making themselves breakfast and discussing current events. Twice a week they work on their personal finances, setting a budget and using a cash envelope system to manage their money. Brentwood Bank showed students how to use a ledger and make deposits and withdrawals.

At the Brentwood Library, students gained social and occupational skills volunteering in the book sales room; they also catalogued over 2000 items in a web app they developed and won an award for creating a second library!

Students were onsite weekly at Angora Gardens, working in the greenhouse and preparing for community events. *"We loved having the students here!"* says Julie Pecora of Angora Gardens. *"They were a huge asset getting ready for our annual Easter Egg Hunt, and helping with greenhouse tasks to prepare for our annual Spring Plant Sale. They were exposed to a variety of staff, volunteers and community members, established new relationships and learned new skills."*

"One of the best things for me about ShYFT," says lead teacher Brittany Spara, *"is how we can adapt the program for student interest and to fulfill their individual needs. They've finished 12th grade, now it's time to work on their independence and employment."*

One of the four students from the inaugural year has graduated and will attend CCAC and work part-time next year. Vincent will be among three returning students and three new students for the 2023-24 program. Vincent is looking forward to another year to solidify his social and work skills.

"There is a regard to which Tillotson is held in the education community," says Linda Benson, *"and the ShYFT program really upheld that standard. This is a far superior experience to what other programs we explored offered. Vincent is learning how to avoid drama, be professional and know that he is lovable!"*

Learning to be active for life

Physical education (PE) often seems to be associated with a sport, and many students can be intimidated or end up with a negative feeling about PE class. *"I want my class to be one they want to come to,"* says Amy Donley, Tillotson's PE teacher.

Mrs. Donley set a goal this year to get kids interested in something that keeps them active. *"It doesn't have to be a sport or a competition. I want them to enjoy something that gets them moving."* The focus has been on activities they can enjoy for life. Bocce, badminton, walking and general weightlifting were all part of this year's curriculum.

"Options are amazing. I like to help each student find something they can enjoy outside of school," asserts Mrs. Donley. *"We change things up frequently and often have multiple activities going on at the same time. I want them to try new things, and I focus on connecting to the students on a one-to-one basis."*

The introduction of bocce has inspired Mrs. Donley to create a bocce team for the coming school year that will compete with other AAPS in the Pittsburgh area during school hours. *"I'm most looking forward to coaching the bocce team and excited for the kids to explore the new climbing wall!"*



Shaping Youths' Futures Today



"Tillotson has one-of-a-kind staff that makes fundraisers fun. They make you want to be involved..."

I want to do everything I can to support the school so they can continue to offer special events for the kids."
— Brandy Vay

Raising funds while building community

Brandy Vay's son Cole once cried every day he went to school. Five years ago, he started attending Tillotson, and the entire family was transformed. *"Cole would never look you in the eye. Now he has graduated and will go to St. Vincent for a transition program. He has so much confidence. He's gotten his driver's permit, plays on a baseball team, went to the prom."*

Brandy participated in each one of Tillotson's fundraisers this year and brought family and friends along. *"My friends and family have seen what a difference Tillotson has made for Cole. They ask to support the school after seeing what the school and staff have done for my kid. I can't even tell you which one is my favorite,"* she says of the three fundraisers. Because more than raising funds for student activities, each event is building community.

The first annual Pumpkins and Purse Bash was a "girls' day." It included brunch, pumpkin making and a designer purse raffle. AR Workshop and Walnut Grill helped to create a day filled with lots of fun and laughter!

"As a parent of a special needs kid, you don't get a lot of girl time," explains Vay. The Pumpkins and Purse Bash raised \$7,200!

Bingo involves the students and their families as well as the staff. *"The Bingo event gives us the chance to talk to other parents and socialize and get their insights. As a parent, you don't know about everything that is out there. This lets us get together."* A staff member serves as the Bingo caller and the staff donates baskets that are *"out of this world. Usually everyone goes home with something."* While raising \$1100, families bond and meet their children's friends.

The golf outing gets more people exposed to Tillotson and what the school does. Organizations and businesses donate gift baskets, money and prizes for the Silent Auction. On a rainy Saturday morning, over 250 people gathered to play golf, have lunch, win prizes and learn more about the school, raising \$13,500!

"The school has changed our lives," says Brandy Vay. *"They have given me more than I could ever pay back."*

Progress is fueled by passion

Lydia Lent credits Tillotson's English Language Arts curriculum and small class sizes for helping students progress in their reading levels. Her own passion and contagious enthusiasm for reading are quite likely another factor in student success.

"What I love is getting students to be really passionate about reading. Those who struggle may have a notion that they will never get it. Maybe they've been told by an adult that they are not a good reader. Once they begin to see that they can make progress, they start to get excited. Even 5% progress is progress. We celebrate that and focus on what they are doing right."

The unique culture of Tillotson, its small class sizes, individualized attention and positive attitudes of the teachers, all enable students to progress at their own pace. Each student masters one skill before moving on to the next.

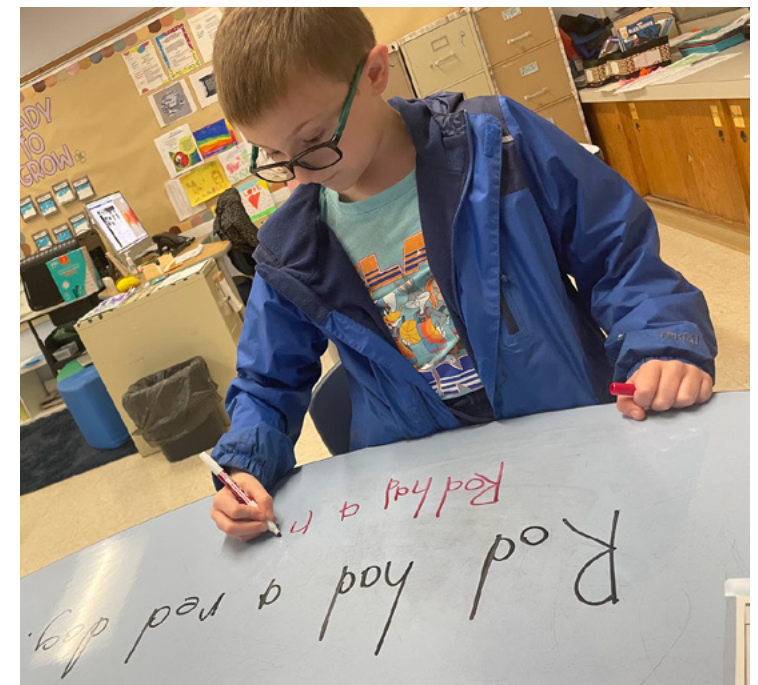
Miss Lent had one student who began the year reading at the 3rd grade level. Within two grading periods the student mastered her 5th grade goal, and is now working toward the 7th grade goal. *"She is making tremendous progress,"* enthuses Lent. *"That student wrote me a note at the end of the year saying she is 'so excited to be a better reader now!' So many students just need a supportive environment. They are capable of more than they even know."*

Family members play an important role in the education at Tillotson. Every quarter, parents get progress reports with their report cards. Included along with the grade, are the goals and milestones achieved. *"When I came to Tillotson it was very clear that communication with parents is important. If a student masters a goal before reporting periods, we*

call and celebrate. So often parents get a call about a problem; at Tillotson we want to communicate about things to celebrate, too!"

In addition to phonics and explicit reading instruction, Lent's classes include independent reading time, poetry writing and collective class reading and projects. (This year, the class read Roald Dahl's *The BFG* together and ultimately created characterization sheets for their own giants!) Students also took part in "reading games" to compete in number of pages read. The reward was a trip to Barnes and Noble Booksellers with a gift card to purchase a book of their own.

"This is such an enjoyable place to get to go every day," Says Lent. *"It's really special."*





Self expression through art

Natalie King joined Tillotson mid-year to fill a staffing vacancy and found herself enjoying the work and the students beyond expectation.

"Tillotson offers a one-on-one learning opportunity that I myself never had. This educational track allows students to get the most out of each class and every subject."

"Music can really bring out a lot of positives from these students. If they struggle in math or English, they may excel in music. I see them progressing in their skills and gaining confidence in their abilities. It is really cool to see them focus and connect with the music even when they may not connect or focus in an academic area."

Art teacher, Laura Shore has been working with Tillotson students for a number of years. The students' repertoire of visual arts is quite extensive. Together, Mrs. Shore and Ms. King brought the arts alive through Winter and Spring Showcases. Parents and families were blown away by the skill and creativity they witnessed.

In addition to displays of visual arts, students performed on all different instruments, including piano and drums. One student presented music he had created with a digital audio workstation (DAW).

The arts are a way for students to show who they are as individuals. Their capabilities, passions, wants, likes and desires shine!

Thanks to the support of our donors, community partners, local businesses and families
ACLD Tillotson School has much to celebrate!
With your ongoing support the coming year has even more promise!

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