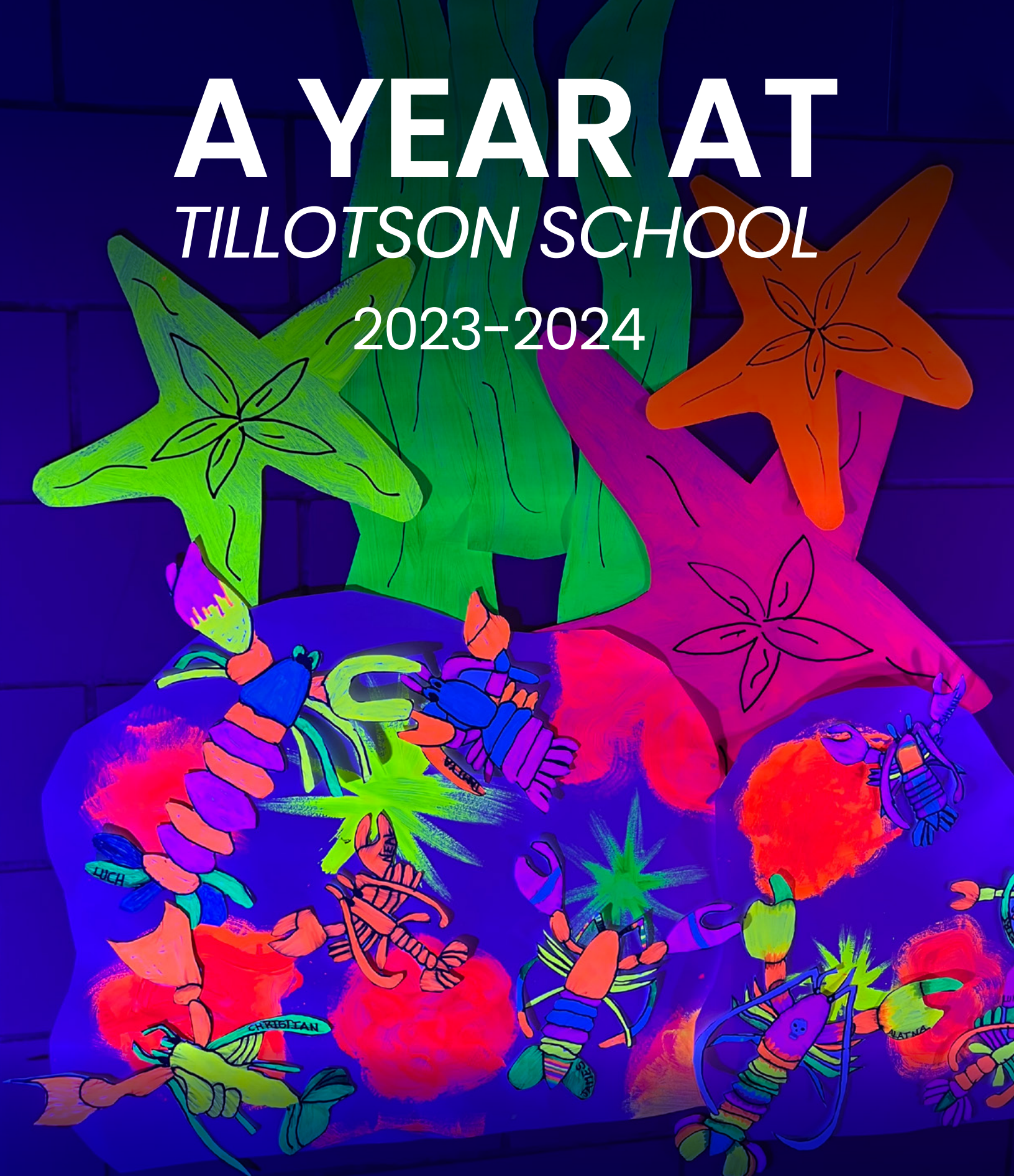


A YEAR AT TILLOTSON SCHOOL 2023-2024



WWW.ACLDTILLOTSONSCHOOL.ORG
(412) 881-2268

4900 GIRARD RD
PITTSBURGH, PA 15227

A place to belong

Fifth grader, Antoine Espiritu was in his new public school in the Pittsburgh region for one hour when his parents were called.

"We can't manage your child. You need to come pick him up."

"We were devastated," says Antoine's mom, Donna Espiritu. "Shocked!" affirms his dad, Voltaire Espiritu.

Donna had accepted a job at UPMC Magee-Women's Hospital, and the family had moved to Pittsburgh from Texas with hopes of finding a better education for their only child.

Antoine could read at age 2 and was doing multiplication and division at age 4. But his social, emotional and communication skills did not develop as quickly.

In Texas, Voltaire left his Physical Therapy job to be Antoine's full-time classroom aide. "My presence wasn't just encouraged there," he says. "It was expected." Despite the sacrifice, Voltaire was positive. "I would do anything for my son."

The family's first year in Pittsburgh coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic so Antoine attended cyber school. Eager to get him back in a classroom setting this year, the Espiritu's approached their local public school. "We tried to explain the situation with Antoine ahead of time. We couldn't believe it when they proposed home schooling after his first hour of school."

"I was crying," says Donna. "It was so traumatic." Then, a coworker suggested Tillotson to Donna.



"We came for a tour. We saw the classroom where Antoine would be and met Miss Kacie. We met several of the other teachers and talked with Ms. Skalka. "I was crying again after we met Ms. Skalka," says Donna. "Ms Skalka said 'Antoine is going to be okay.'"

The year had its ups and downs. The start of the year was challenging. After being on his own schedule for more than a year in cyber school and isolated during the pandemic, Antoine had to adjust to the classroom expectations, to instruction, to hearing more than one voice at a time.

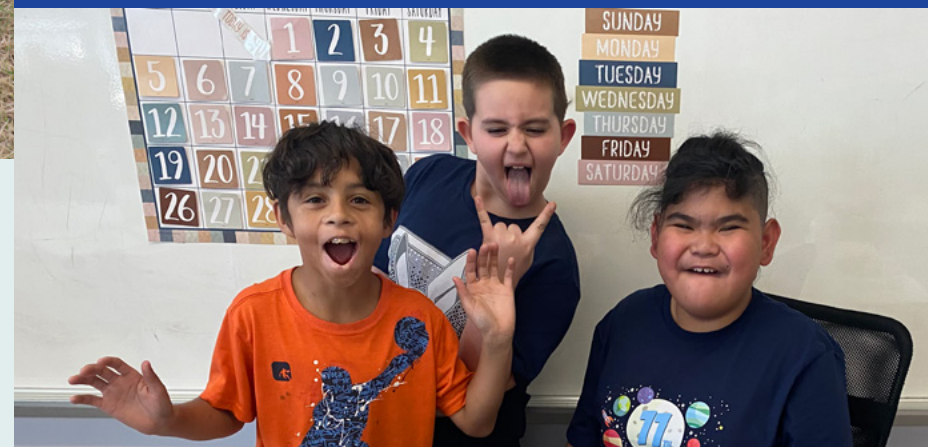
"When Antoine would have a meltdown, I was worried he would be suspended, and we wouldn't be able to come back," Donna recalls. Sometimes he was sent home. But always with encouragement. "It's just a bump in the road," Mrs. W. would say. Or "We all have our moments," Mr. Victor would encourage.

"In Texas, it was up to us to have the answers for the teachers," says Voltaire. "Now the educators and administrators work as a team and try to solve the problem before they even bring it to us. It's a team helping my son to thrive."

Antoine is participating in the Extended School Year program (ESY), which is helping to maintain some structure in his days. "How was your day?" his parents ask. "Playing with friends," Antoine says.



"Finally, we belong," says Donna with a smile.



"Tillotson is completely student-centered" says Kacie Knetzer, the elementary classroom teacher. "With not more than 8 students in my classroom, I can work one-on-one or with small groups on the exact lesson each student needs. I can connect with them, and I see the impact of their growth over time. We are all in this for the kids," she asserts. "We want each student to succeed. If the program or curriculum isn't working for them, we will find one that does. We want them to keep growing."

'Ms. Skalka said 'Antoine is going to be okay.'



Safe. Comfortable. Heard.

Imagine entering school each day and being greeted by smiling adults who call you by name. They might ask how your dog is today, or about your younger brother's T-ball game.

Imagine being in a classroom and starting to feel stressed, ready to burst. But then, a familiar adult walks by your desk, drops down to look you in the eye and asks if you need a break.

The morning greeting by Mr. Victor is clearly a moment Tillotson students enjoy. Smiles and laughs begin the day. Some days, though, Ms. Allie and Miss Ryan observe a student who may be a little "off". They might seem anxious or frustrated. That quick morning assessment can go a long way in preventing a behavioral or social skill issue later in the day.

"We spend a lot of time in collaboration as a team," notes school social worker Victor Carter. "Together we can assess what a student needs and provide that support." Mr. Victor, as the students call him, has been at Tillotson for 16 years. With experience as a family therapist, case manager with gangs, probation office and school-based social



Therapy dog Poppy is a favorite member of the support team. Petting her or just being in her presence can ease a student's nerves.

"Our focus is on the kids, and making sure they have what they need."

worker, he is adept at crisis intervention, conflict resolution and coordinating therapeutic services.

Licensed counselor Erin Ryan says the small student to staff ratio allows for strong relationships and individualized support.

"We had a new student come to Tillotson later in the year, and individual counseling was part of his IEP," Miss Ryan explains. "It took him a while to build trust. I had a game on my table with suction cup darts. We started by just playing the game together. It became our thing. He started talking while we were playing. And every time he threw a dart he shared more."

"Our approach is collaborative," notes Ms. Allie, also a licensed counselor. "Sometimes a student has a preferred person, but if they need something, they still feel comfortable with any one of us. Our diverse backgrounds and training really help us to provide a supportive and welcoming environment."

Tillotson's Calming Corner is used in a variety of ways. Students can sign up for a time slot on their own. Or a small group can gather to discuss a topic they choose. "They might want to talk about getting a job or handling conflict or discuss the upcoming prom," Ms. Allie notes.

The Sensory Room is used for true sensory breaks, allowing the kids to swing or listen to music or sit in dim lighting.

Autism Support Teacher Mrs. Palus makes use of both spaces as well as the Autism Support room equipped with other sensory items. Mrs. Palus and paraprofessional Miss Amy are active participants and observers in the classrooms.

"One student might need prompting to stay on task. Another might need to take a break in one of our sensory spaces."

"Because I'm in the classroom, I can alert the rest of the support team or teaching staff about any issues that come up with a student, even if that student isn't assigned to me," notes Mrs. Palus.

"And I can remind the staff about specific behavior plans. We are in constant communication within the school and with parents. We do communication really well!"

"Devin said that the support that he received from Mr. Victor, Ms. Allie and Miss Ryan really helped him. It is wonderful that ACLD Tillotson has a support team to help children through hard times at home and at school. It is very much appreciated. Thank you so much for all you do for Devin."

— Thirza Cichowicz



"From the moment our child stepped into ACLD Tillotson, the staff took the time to really get to know him and understand his individual learning style. We have always valued and appreciated that the Student Support Team fosters an environment that allows for well-rounded student growth. Without their expertise and guidance our child would not be thriving nor be as independent as he is today."

— Jennifer



School is "IN" for summer

Think about the very best parts of school: friends, field trips, favorite subjects – and the very best parts of summer camp: meeting new people, exploring new interests, gaining new experiences. These come together for Tillotson's Extended School Year (ESY) program.

Each summer, students who qualify for ESY can continue their learning for five weeks. The three-hour school days include individualized and group activities, specifically designed to reduce the social and academic regression that can happen during the summer.

Research indicates that well-designed summer learning opportunities can support both academic goals and emotional and social skills. For Tillotson students, ESY addresses student IEP goals while still evoking "summer" and "fun."

"Each year the activities are geared to a

theme and to each student's IEP goals," explains Tillotson teacher (and now principal) John Chmiel who coordinates the program. "This year's theme was 'Explore the Unknown,' and our classes for elementary through 10th grade students included English Language Arts, Math and Music." Speech therapists and student support team staff are also onsite.

Students in 11th and 12th grade gain work experience in the community. This year, one group worked at Verland Foundation, on office tasks, in the equestrian center, and groundskeeping. A second group shadowed park rangers at South Park, clearing litter, working on trails and learning about plants, animals, birds and insects. The experiences allow the students to develop skills and interests and explore future employment opportunities.

On the last day of each of the five weeks, all students come together for a field trip or activity. This year's events included a visit from the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, an outdoor field day of games and snacks, and field trips to Point State Park, the Carnegie Science Center's Pixar Exhibit and Century Square movie theater.

"It's very important to remember that all kids need to refresh and regroup over the summer. We work on academic goals and provide work experience and keep it fun. They need a break," says Mr. Chmiel.

Yet the field trips are more than just fun breaks. "Through the field trips we can challenge kids to move outside their comfort zones, but at their own level," notes Mr. Chmiel. "We have a lot of students with anxiety. They may be comfortable, confident and outgoing at school. But they might be overwhelmed ordering for themselves at a fast-food restaurant or movie theater. Or they might struggle with loud noises. We help them to develop strategies to cope with the things that make them uncomfortable."

Planning for ESY begins in February, with school administrators grouping the qualified students appropriately and planning carefully what will help each student to thrive. Not all students opt for the program, and the teachers, curriculum, and partner sites for student work all vary by year.

"With the appropriate accommodations and supports, we believe our students can achieve anything and do anything in society," Mr. Chmiel asserts. "The small class sizes and detailed attention to individual students' strengths and needs are keys to success. We can do that because we know our students so well."



Tillotson's ShYFT (Shaping Youth's Futures Today) program also provides an ESY experience, allowing students to continue to develop life skills such as cooking, shopping and managing personal finances. ShYFT provides 18 to 21-year-olds with experience in activities of daily living to work toward independence and employment.





Making the future less scary

"What do you want to do when you grow up?"

It's a common question posed to students, especially as they get into middle school and high school. They begin to consider what they like, what they are good at, what kinds of jobs they might get.

For kids at Tillotson, those questions can be accompanied by anxiety.

"A lot of our students don't want to talk about the future," notes Tillotson's Transition Coordinator Lacey Kovacik. "The future may seem scary or stressful. So we seamlessly factor transition planning into the curriculum."

This cross-curricular inclusion of transition skills means that classes like English, Geography, Math, Economics and Science are all building skills the kids will need for future success.

For example, in English class, students learn to write letters. They learn to summarize important tasks in sentence or bullet form. These skills will help them to write a cover letter and prepare a resume.

In Geography, they learn about their communities. They understand the local, regional and state resources that are available. This foundation will help them know where to go for services or assistance when they are on their own.

In Math, they learn about taxes and pay stubs, and balancing checkbooks.

Skill-building happens in all grades. Then, beginning in 9th grade, Kovacik helps each student to focus on their own specific plan. And she offers elective classes to help them.

The Entrepreneurial Skills Class curriculum changes based upon what the current cohort of students need. Sometimes the seniors already have jobs and want to focus on how to problem-solve or communicate on a job.

"This year a chunk of my kids wanted to work or volunteer for the summer, so we focused on resume writing, interview skills, and awareness of their own skills and any accommodations they might need," explains Kovacik.

Three of those students were competitively employed for this summer.

"A big part of transition planning is being realistic," says Kovacik. It's helping the students and their parents to understand what is required for their desired path."

For example, if a student wants to go to a trade school after graduation, they need to know what type of math skills they need to have mastered, what grades will be required, and what type of course load they will need to maintain.

Parents are involved throughout the process, and, yes, sometimes the transition planning is for the parents as well as the students. Some parents may not realize how capable their students are and how independent they can be.

One mom recently emailed Kovacik about her son, "I don't know what happened in the last few weeks. But he has a new level of independence." Previously content for his mom to arrange things, this student scheduled his own interview with a potential employer and arranged for a way to get there.



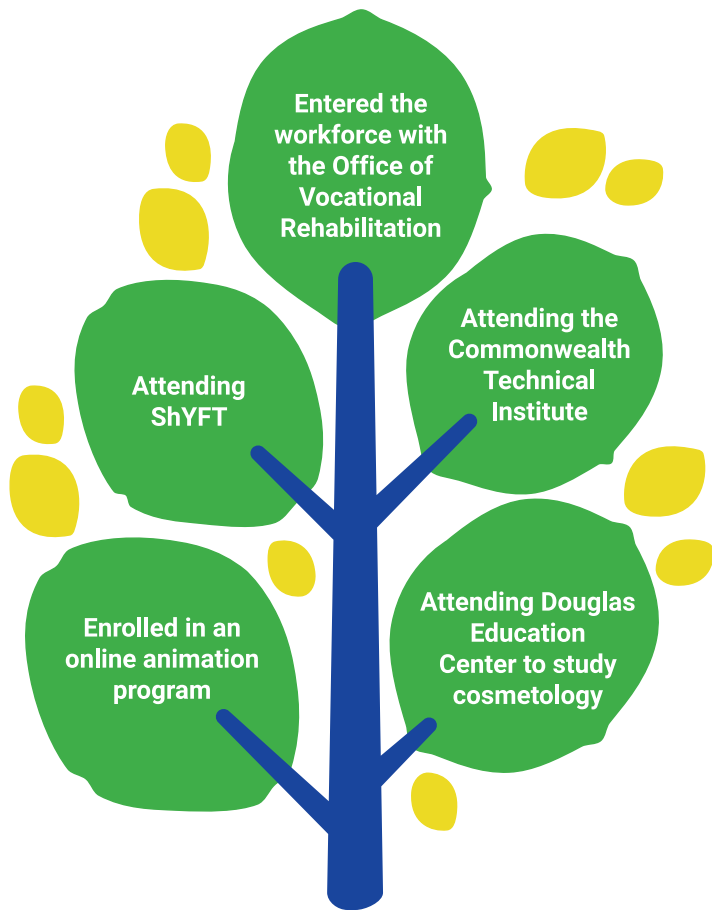
Another student, Aaron, was a hard worker at school and really motivated to get a job. He has autism and special needs and had applied for several jobs that didn't pan out. His parents suggested he apply at Dick's Sporting Goods where his siblings had also worked. Aaron asked Kovacik and the Speech Therapist to help him prepare for the interview. Together they developed questions and practiced his responses. They helped him work on his resume. A few weeks later, when Aaron announced, "I got the job!" Kovacik squealed in delight!

"Aaron is a real success story," Kovacik notes. "He is motivated beyond just doing what he is told."



The school's coffee shop builds skills in customer service, budgeting, marketing and teamwork.

"The future may seem scary or stressful. So we seamlessly factor transition planning into the curriculum."



Tillotson Grown Results

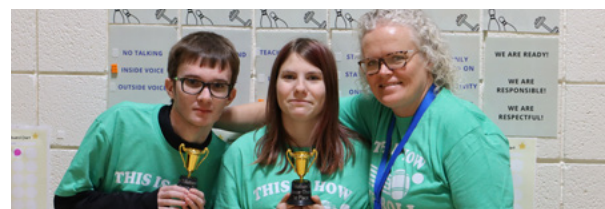
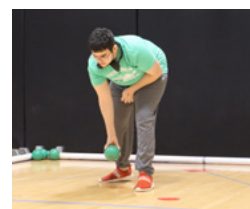
Each leaf represents a success story for our 2023–24 graduates.

Bocce league on the horizon

“Bocce is a very strategic team sport that can develop confidence,” says Andrew Fee, Vice President of Special Olympics in Pittsburgh. “Tillotson really stepped up to the plate to show other Approved Private Schools in the area how a bocce league might work.”

Tillotson pioneered a bocce team after students learned the sport in physical education class. In the 23–24 school year, the Tillotson team visited other schools to teach bocce, with the goal of developing a bocce league for the schools. Two teams are competing competitively, and another six to eight schools have expressed interest.

“We really hope a school bocce league will take off next year.” Fee explains, “Bocce is one of the most popular sports for Special Olympics athletes. It is strategic, social and accessible to people of varying abilities. School leagues can feed into continuing the sport into adulthood. The goal is to foster friendships and connections that last beyond the duration of the program.”



I can't wait for next year!

“I’m excited to see all my kids again and be a part of this great community.”

After one year of teaching math at Tillotson, Shane Spencer is hooked. Working with students in 7th – 12th grades, Mr. Spencer appreciates how Tillotson’s small class size of five to six students enables him to know each one and provide individualized attention. “The curriculum is broken down to add steps as each student is ready. We also connect to other supplementary materials. In Pre-Algebra, for example, you might learn an equation from a book, and then use Excel on the computer to put it into practice.”

This year, Tillotson held its first “Pi-Day” math-themed event. Held on a Friday, the family event included a scavenger hunt that involved solving equations (each of which was a digit of Pi). Bingo, small math games at each table, and math-related card games appealed to all levels of learners. And of course, pie was the featured dessert!

In addition to teaching math, Spencer leads one of the school clubs. Each Wednesday, the school runs an abbreviated schedule to allow an extra period at the end of the school day. Students choose a club to join for nine weeks. Spencer’s club was Dungeons and Dragons. “I am a total geek for D&D and was excited to find a group of kids here who share my enthusiasm. It’s a great strategy game, and the clubs give the kids a wind-down time mid-week while they are still learning – both academically and socially.”

Parents of special needs kids are used to fighting for their students. “At Tillotson, all of the teachers and staff are fighting for your kids, too. We want the best for each student. We believe every student has the chance for a bright future. It’s our job to make sure they have the supports to get there.”



30+ Districts and seven counties

ACLD Tillotson School serves elementary, middle, and high school students (ages 5 through 21) from more than 30 school districts and charter schools in a seven-county area.



"We are so pleased with the progress that our students have made in such a short period of time. Tillotson gives our students exactly what they need and has given their parents and caregivers reassurance that their children are in the best place!"

Carla Antoniades, Director of Pupil Services and Federal Programs, Cornell School District



"I've been in my role for 23 years. Tillotson has been one of the top options when we are looking for a more structured placement. I encourage any parent or special education director to consider Tillotson for a student who has a unique learning profile and needs a highly technical approach to their academic instruction." **Michael Haslett, Director of Pupil Services, Moon Area School District**



"I think special needs kids need attention, education, discipline and love — and all of that is here."
Yaritza Lugo, Parent

Meet your school leadership

A new staffing structure for ACLD Tillotson School is in effect for the 2024–25 school year to improve administrative efficiency and support student outcomes. Staff and their new roles are:

Donna Westbrook-Martin, MA

Chief Executive Officer

Tara Skalka

Executive Director

John Chmiel

School Principal

Samantha Schmitt

*Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment
and Professional Development*

Rachael Fike

Director of Special Education

Charles Scharbo

Business Office Manager

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!

www.acldtillotsonschool.org | (412) 881-2268

