



Another Great Year at ACLD Tillotson School!

"From a boy that I was told may never walk or talk.... To a young man that your staff has made excel on every single level! Love to them all!"

— Student's Parent

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

4900 GIRARD RD
Pittsburgh, PA 15227





From Anxiety to All A's: How Tillotson Transforms Lives

When Christian Nielsen was in 6th grade, his anxiety overwhelmed him. As a student with autism, he had been given accommodations at his public school. But he still struggled to express himself. The breaking point came when his anxiety got the better of him and he punched a teacher. He was told he was 'no longer welcome' in the school district.

But sometimes the most challenging moments lead to the greatest transformations. The student services coordinator offered a list of schools with specialized care for Christian.

"If this was your child, where would you go?" Christian's mom, Megan, asked.

"I'd start with Tillotson," was the reply.

To the family's relief, they found Tillotson to be promising. "We toured the school, and I instantly fell in love with the administration and the staff," recalls Megan.

Fast forward to the present and Christian has completed 9th grade at Tillotson. The past four years have been transformative.

"Christian is a totally different kid," his mom asserts. At school, he is able to appropriately interact with people. And outside of school, socially, he is more comfortable. He knows how to express himself.

His younger brother particularly noticed the changes. "Christian is like a different person," he told his parents. The two brothers are just 2 years apart, and since Christian has been at Tillotson they get along better than they ever have.

Christian chooses to engage more often with his brother.

"He's made his brother a more understanding kid when it comes to disabilities," notes Christian's dad, Rob. "Our younger son respects that Christian likes to be alone sometimes. And now Christian doesn't have to be anxious or strike out or throw things in frustration. He has the tools and skills to say, 'I'm done' or 'I need to be alone.' At Tillotson Christian learned that it is okay to be autistic. There is nothing wrong with that," says Rob.

Megan chimes in, "Tillotson has the proper infrastructure. He can be autistic, and they know how to deal with it. They can see his anxiety and give him the tools to handle it. They know how to influence the kids in a positive way."

When asked what he likes about Tillotson, Christian says, "I get to be myself, and the teachers feel like family."

Christian has done well in school, with straight A's since arriving. "I basically like all of the subjects," Christian says. Megan expands, "Christian doesn't have a favorite class or teacher because they all treat him so well. It's really like a family and community."

"The communication from the school is amazing," adds Megan. "Every day we get an email about what he did in each class." Likewise, if Christian has a bad morning, his parents can let the school know so they

can be on the lookout for ways to help Christian ease into his day.

“I pick Christian up from school every day,” says Rob, “And I see how great the staff and administration are with all of the kids.”

Christian and his family are looking forward to the year ahead. Despite some unease about the future, Christian knows his transition class will help prepare him for life after school. “In the year ahead, we really hope he continues to grow. He can get into the community and volunteer.”

Each new step of socializing and expressing himself is one more step to independence and a bright future for Christian.



Poppy, Tillotson’s therapy dog, is good at sniffing out pup cups from the coffee shop. But she especially excels at helping students process through anxiety while at school.

Addressing School Anxiety

Many students with disabilities have anxiety about attending school. Tillotson’s School Anxiety Program may include:

- Gradual exposure to the school environment, based on student need
- Highly specialized academic curriculum designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities
- Intensive counseling for students and families to address barriers to attending school



What a Fantastic Year

this has been both for Tillotson School and our parent organization! In these pages you will read about students, teachers and collaborators who exemplify what Tillotson is all about. A place of belonging. Academically successful. Student-centered. Our world really does revolve around our students. And we have so many stories to tell! Be sure to check out our website and our Facebook posts for videos, photos and more details about life at Tillotson. As Chief Executive Officer for ACLD, Inc. I get to oversee not just the school, but our expanding programs to address the lifespan needs of children and adults with disabilities. You’ll read about two new and upcoming programs in this report. And you can see our longer-term strategic plan on the ACLD, Inc. website. It has been my privilege and honor to work alongside our board, staff and collaborators as we plan for and deliver on excellent services for this community. Of course, my very favorite relationships are with the students who learn and grow here!

Warmly,
Donna Westbrooks-Martin
Chief Executive Officer
 ACLD, Inc.



Partners for Progress: When Districts and Families Find the Right Fit

Great partners recognize when specialized expertise can make all the difference.

Public schools are well-equipped to address the needs of students with autism, neurodivergence and learning disabilities. Schools complete Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and work on creating and sustaining those education plans to foster academic and social success for each child.

Patricia (Patty) Kelly, Director of Pupil Services

at Peters Township School District, knows that sometimes the best way to serve a student is to connect them with the right specialized environment.

“Sometimes a student needs more services or a different environment to help them grow. If I think a child is having difficulty, I’m looking for a wide range of things: the appropriate services, specialized programs, expertise of staff, what is the structure, class size. We try to help our students stay in the district, but when we must place them out, Tillotson is one great school.”

“The leadership at Tillotson is outstanding, and that shows through in all aspects,” notes Patty, who has witnessed changes since Donna Westbrook-Martin took the Executive Director position in 2016. “The building, the staff, the

curriculum have all changed to be kid-centered and focused.” She cites the school’s bright, welcoming hallways and innovations such as the Sensory Room, technology program, music and art, its therapy dog and the PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) in place. She adds, “The curriculum is top notch, and it’s a school that has trusted adult mentors. The adults truly, truly care about the kids, and the kids know that.”

Sometimes a student spends a year or two at Tillotson and goes back to their home district where they now have the skills to thrive.

“We had a student who had gone through an accident. Tillotson worked with them and helped them come back to school. Another student received the support needed and is now back in the district at their home school and doing well,” explains Patty. “Other students wouldn’t have made it through high school in their district, and at Tillotson they graduate and are prepared to enter the world.”

Tillotson offers school districts and families options for students with learning disabilities, autism or emotional disturbances. Students who are approved for admission can attend either on a full-time or part-time basis in conjunction with their home school district or another approved program. The partnerships with school districts are built on trust and student-centered placement decisions.

Student success is always the goal.



When families find the right fit, students thrive.



Families are an important component of student success. Events like Bingo allow families, students and staff to connect.



Four Decades of Dedication

Celebrating 40 years of service, Mrs. Patti Kulzer has witnessed not just changes in buildings and programs, but transformation in hundreds of young lives. “When I walk through these halls, I see how the building keeps being transformed. I see how the kids change when they come here.”

Patti Kulzer remembers when the school building was purchased and Tillotson moved in. Since then, the entrances and hallways are brighter, more welcoming, encouraging and inviting. The administrative wing has been added and so have modern technologies, sensory rooms and even a climbing wall.

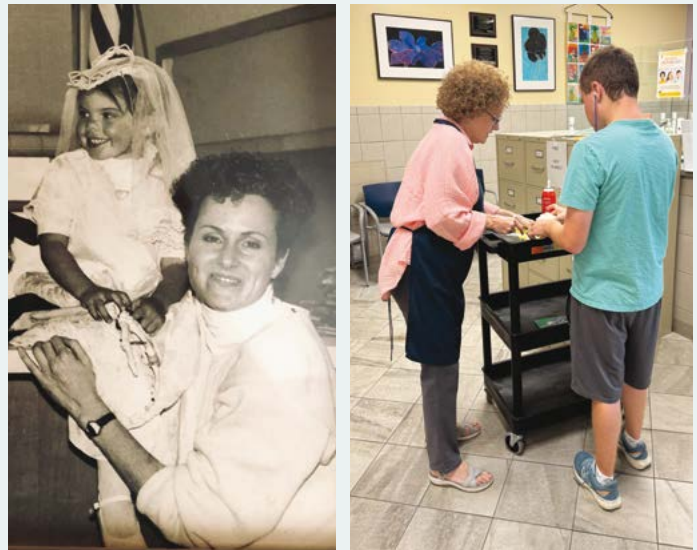
The students, too, have changed over the years. School districts tend to keep more students, and Tillotson now sees those with more specialized needs. The need for emotional support is especially evident. “Today’s kids are aware, and their emotions are part of the conversation. Because it’s upfront, we can provide – and they can learn – ways to cope with the challenges,” says Mrs. Kulzer.

“It can be hard at first for students to leave their school district. They aren’t in their home community. The ride to school may be longer. It’s harder to get together with friends. They might

start out guarded. But I watch them gain comfort. They feel safe in these walls. And here at Tillotson, they will learn more than academics. They learn to be more respectful and tolerant. They see that everybody’s different. And that’s okay!”

Mrs. Kulzer’s work centers on helping kids to succeed after high school. From elementary through 12th grade, she helps students find out their interests and skills and explore career possibilities. Of course, some students wonder, “Why do I need to be thinking about this?” but they need to know how the world works. Some may head to a college setting, some to career and technical education, others may need extra time developing life skills. The school’s ShYFT program builds skills for daily living for students who are 18–21.

To help with career readiness, the school offers on-site jobs where students fill real needs completing something purposeful in the building. In elementary school this might include folding laundry, emptying



Whether Patti is introducing her niece to the school or working with students on the coffee cart, she’s all-in!

the dishwasher or sweeping the floors. Older students help with the lunch program. Students clock in and clock out and are paid for their work. They begin to understand the process of work and income.

“I watch the students gain confidence, and that really motivates me,” shares Mrs. Kulzer. “The thing I love most is when they say, ‘Mrs. Kulzer, I got a job!’”

“We have a few students whose parents went to Tillotson. I get to see where the parents are today. Some will email me. I’m one of the few people they recognize on the website!”

Over 40 years, she has certainly seen teachers come and go. But one theme seems to be constant.

“So many people have had a passion for working with the kids we serve. It’s always interesting meeting new staff, learning and working with them.”

One new staff member is especially dear. Years ago, Patti’s niece came to visit her aunt in her Tillotson classroom for a Halloween Parade. Today that niece, Tara Valentine, is teaching history in that same classroom.

“When I think about all that’s come before, it’s been an evolution. Some changes have accelerated in the last 8 years and come to fruition. And we continue to evolve.”



Year book photos highlight Patti’s 40 years at Tillotson School.



Changes and progress to Tillotson have occurred both inside and outside over the past 40 years.

Heart of the Classroom - Every Student Matters

Kim Daharu has the unique perspective of being both a Tillotson parent and a staff member.

“My foster daughter went to Tillotson 11 years ago, and my younger daughter graduated and has been in the ShYFT program for two years. So, I’ve experienced what Tillotson offers from the parent end, and I’ve wanted to work here for a while.”

Kim has been a co-teacher and paraprofessional for several years in other schools and joined the staff at Tillotson in the 2024–2025 school year.

As a parent, Kim experienced the one-on-one support her children received, the friendly administrators, and the caring staff. Now, as a staff member, she contributes to that environment that has enabled her own daughters to better communicate, care for themselves and hold jobs.

“I notice a lot of teachers are here to make sure they are helping the kids. They care. The parents and paraprofessionals definitely care. I see that too.”

“When my younger daughter was here, she had a great speech teacher who taught her to slow down and speak clearly. She no longer needs speech therapy. She can read and tell time. She is so much more independent.”

As a paraprofessional in the 6th grade class, Kim is helping to make sure the students understand the lessons, that they stay on task, or that they get individualized support when needed.

With one child, she might use flash cards to help with math or spelling. With another she’s helping memorize vocabulary words. Some days, when the routine is thrown off – say by a weather delay or a teacher being absent – her role is to anchor the students in familiarity.

Paraprofessionals are integral to the Tillotson experience. They encourage the students, work one-on-one with those who need extra help, and collaborate with the classroom teacher to support

student learning. Last school year, Tillotson had 12 paraprofessionals on staff.

“One of the biggest differences about working at Tillotson is the smaller class sizes. I’m really able to get to know the kids better. We talk and build relationships quickly. It’s all about the kids for me.”

“The kids here are really learning. You can tell because when you are with them the next day, they remember what they learned the day before. We are following their IEPs [Individualized Education Plans] and that helps the teachers and paras to really understand that child’s needs. If you want your kids to learn, Tillotson is the place to be!”



Kim Daharu (“Miss D”) fosters learning with the 6th grade students.

Building Bridges: New Playground Connects School and Community

An inclusive playground doesn't mean designated areas for children with disabilities or certain spaces for special needs playground equipment. Inclusive means that children of all abilities can interact and play – together!

Tillotson's new playground boasts areas for quiet play, a swing propelled by full body movement, spinning devices and sensory-rich activities that are excellent for its students -- and also a welcome addition for the community members who use the playground after school hours.

Located in Whitehall Borough, Tillotson school has a unique relationship with the community park adjacent to the school. The Borough owns Highland Park of Whitehall next to the school. When school is in session, Tillotson has exclusive use of the park during the day for recess, gym and other activities. The school owns the parking lot and shares it with the community outside of school hours. In the evenings and weekends, the lot is used by community members visiting the park for sporting events or other recreational activities.

In 2024, Tillotson proposed a new playground for the park to replace the outdated equipment.

"The borough already had a master plan for our parks, and the school's proposal fit right in," says Courtney M. Wertz, Whitehall's Borough Manager. "They came with a full proposal for the inclusive playground set. And they had a relationship with the vendor and funding to pay for it.



We were delighted to collaborate with them!"

Hannah Bower, the borough's recreation director, was especially thrilled about features that would make the playground inclusive to kids with learning disabilities or sensory needs. With swings, a turnaround and spinning carousel, the playground provides options for various levels of energy, ability and sensitivities. As a former teacher, Hannah appreciates how important it is for kids to be able to play alongside those who may be different from them.

"The things that make the playground inclusive might be a rubber surface, ramps, swings with headrests and sliding boards that kids can easily access," notes Hannah. "The kids don't really know all of the reasons for these features. They're just having fun and playing together."

Highland Park of Whitehall is the borough's most-used park for baseball and soccer. Now, people attending those sports can entertain siblings and friends on a fully inclusive playground.

"This playground is a gift to the school and the larger community" says Courtney. "We've been really thrilled with the whole process and hope it has just opened the door for more communication and collaboration with the school."



Evaluation Center is Our Newest Step Toward Lifespan Programming

The vision of ACLD, Inc., the parent organization of the Tillotson school, is to support individuals with learning disabilities across the lifespan.

The new Evaluation Center will first address the need for more frequent and thorough evaluation for school-age students. It later can serve individuals from birth through adulthood.

Typical school districts have two or three psychologists for 1000 students or more. When a student needs an assessment, the timeline can be long, and the assessment may not be comprehensive. (It might only address academic or behavioral and not neurological or psychological needs.)

ACLD's Evaluation Center can assess a student's academic, cognitive, behavioral and emotional status. The resulting documentation can capture a diagnosis to identify the best interventions.

The need for this service has been on the ACLD, Inc. radar for several years.

"We've had calls from school districts, advocates and pediatric and adolescent health professionals," explains Tara Skalka, Tillotson's Executive Director. "Maybe a child's school hasn't completed an evaluation or that parent feels the



Jeremy Armann, School Psychologist

"Once a family visits the evaluation center, I would love for them to feel that they understand themselves or their family member better and know what is needed to be successful."

current assessment does not best represent their child and his/her experience at school."

In adults, a person may be a junior in college and find they don't perform well academically or socially. An adult evaluation may suggest accommodations in their jobs, post-secondary education or with their family. Evaluations can diagnose a learning disability, autism or other exceptionalities that impede learning. The psychologist has the expertise to recommend strategies and supports for various ages.

For the first year, the newly hired school psychologist will evaluate current students. Overtime, the goal is for the Center to open the door to testing for the very young through adults.

"We want to be a service for the community," states Mrs. Skalka.

Coming Soon: An Expansion to Grow Our Youngest Learners

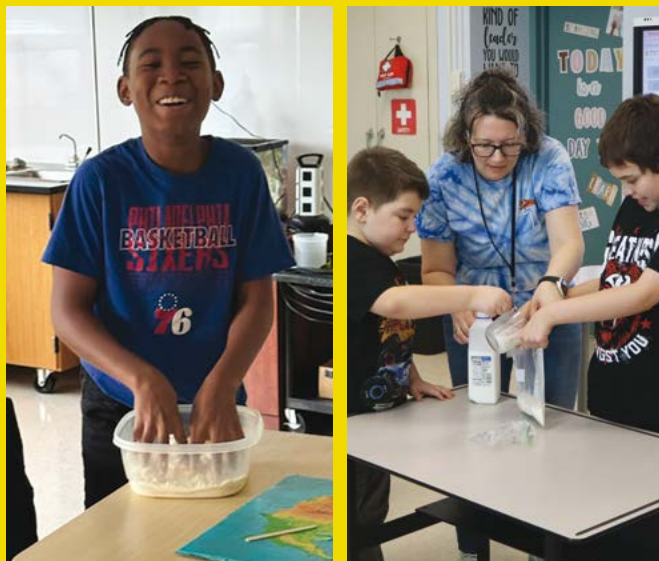
When Tillotson school was established, the highest needs for the individualized student support the school provides were in the 9th through 12th grades. In recent years, the school has had an increase in referrals of younger students, especially those in kindergarten through second grade. “We’ve had to turn away students because we don’t have a classroom for them,” says Tara Skalka, Tillotson’s Executive Director. “We surveyed school districts, and the need is real for the kind of support Tillotson can provide.”

In 2024–2025, Tillotson had one classroom of 3rd, 4th and 5th graders, with 8 elementary students. The school is currently in the planning stages for an additional classroom of Kindergarten through 2nd grade, ideally to be added in the 2026–2027 school year.

“One of the most common things we hear from students and families is, ‘I wish I had found Tillotson sooner.’ Our goal is to help these young ones at an early age to improve their outcomes and independence,” notes Mrs. Skalka.

One of the biggest factors for young children with disabilities is language and communication. Often, behavioral issues are because the child can’t communicate well.

“The younger they learn to communicate their feelings and needs, the better the outcome will be for them,” states Mrs. Skalka.



One of the most common things we hear from students and families is, “I wish I had found Tillotson sooner.”

“Success for a Lifetime is more than just a motto for us,” says Donna Westbrooks-Martin, the Chief Executive Officer for the school’s parent organization, ACLD, Inc. “We have a thoughtful strategic plan that outlines a clear path to adding more services at both ends of the lifespan spectrum beyond the school. Our desire is to truly serve the needs from birth through adulthood.”



Thank you to our Community!

Tillotson School is the shining jewel in what the ACLD, Inc. Board of Directors plans to be an ever-expanding range of services addressing the needs of children and adults with learning disabilities. We salute the work of our teachers, administrators and support professionals for their “students first” dedication. We are truly thankful for the students, families, school districts and community members who collaborate toward positive outcomes for every student.

Our new strategic plan encompasses growth for the school and organization. With the ongoing support of our donors, community partners, local businesses and families, we expect to realize our vision: *to create a continuum of services that support individuals with learning disabilities, and their families, across the lifespan.*

With gratitude,

Michael E. Weber,

Outgoing Board Chair 2024–2025

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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