

The Carroll School: Its mission is to be a center for learning and teaching, a support system for school districts nationwide, while holding firmly to its roots as an advocate and support system for families and children with learning disabilities.

---

## **BACKGROUND**

The Carroll School, located in Lincoln, Massachusetts, offers the gift of learning to children “who have language-based learning disabilities and/or dyslexia, and have experienced frustration and difficulty at their former schools.” The school is recognized internationally for its innovative programs and highly respected as an advocate and inspiration for students with language learning disabilities.

To understand the Carroll School, its contribution to children with language learning disabilities and their families, and to education in general, including mainstream students, look at its leaders.

Sharon Lloyd Clark, the current Head of School, is a graduate of the famous Bronx High School of Science with a graduate degree from Cornell. She arrived at Carroll by way of a senior academic position from the prestigious college preparatory school, Concord Academy, to “the place where my son reclaimed his love of learning, not to mention, the place where he acquired the ability to read.” Caught up in her enthusiasm for the children and learning, it is easy to forget that you are in the presence of a savvy professional with thirty years experience and a razor-sharp intellect. With an engaging smile, her conversations start in overdrive and envelop the listener as she talks about her love for her work and the Carroll school.

Clark views her responsibilities and the Carroll mission well beyond the critically important day-to-day teaching. She believes the “Carroll way” is fundamentally “good teaching”, and capable of making an important contribution in a much wider educational field. “We see a larger mission,” she observed, “to be a center for learning and teaching, a support system for school districts nationwide, while holding firmly to our roots as an advocate and support system for families and children with learning disabilities.”

The Carroll School philosophy evolved from a focus on strictly language skills and remediation to a more holistic approach, an approach that is dedicated to educate students, and provide them with a foundation for life. It goes well beyond providing tools for survival in a mainstream environment, and encompasses four simple ideas.

The first idea is delivering comprehensive education with a complete curriculum and a total learning experience including math, history, science, art, music, and the other appropriate courses. Second, is the goal of building confidence in students, inculcating self-esteem so that children become advocates for themselves at Carroll, and more importantly, in a mainstream

environment. Third is learning must be multi-sensory, where the information must be provided in the following multiple modes: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (hand/eye). For example, a history lesson would include music and art, as well as written text and symbolic text, all related to the same ideas. Finally, the teachers engage in explicit direct teaching, explaining concepts through direct instruction that enable students to carry out the assignments. Teachers help the students develop logical methods in how to go about the preparation of their assignments.

## **THE APPROACH**

This approach to learning works. One reason for its success is the reading program. In order to understand the reading program, it is necessary to understand some of the issues surrounding reading and the Orton-Gillingham approach used at Carroll.

It is widely recognized that the education our children receive must improve markedly. Nowhere is this more evident than the lack of reading proficiency demonstrated by public school students. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that only 28% of fourth graders and 34% of eighth grade students in the United States are proficient in reading.

In its seminal 1998 research report, "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," the National Research Council concluded that reading education in the US should always include "explicit instruction that directs children's attention to the sound structure of oral language and to the connection between speech sound and spelling sound." In other words, all students need instruction using a teaching system that incorporates the structure of the oral and written language to teach the decoding of words.

One of the most effective remedial teaching approaches, and the foundation of learning at Carroll, is Orton-Gillingham. Samuel Orton, a neuropsychiatrist and a pioneer in the field of dyslexia, and Anna Gillingham, a gifted educator and psychologist, developed this approach. They collaborated in creating a multi-sensory, highly structured approach to the development of basic word decoding, the skills essential to achieving comprehension and fluency.

The success of the Orton-Gillingham approach was based partly on the recognition that reading is a complex learning process that must be taught. Some children do not learn to read intuitively, and must acquire skills by developing an understanding of phonemic awareness and sound/symbol correspondence. Students create associations as they see symbols, the letters or clusters of letters, and hear the corresponding sounds. Practice is also essential. Orton-Gillingham sessions are action-oriented where the auditory, visual and kinesthetic (hand/eye) elements reinforce each other to optimize the learning experience. Previously, this approach was used with some special education students who could not benefit from any other approach. The system required a highly trained specialist, and was generally taught one-on-one. As a result it was extremely expensive, and unavailable to most students who needed it.

## **REINFORCEMENT**

Technology has enabled us to lessen this financial burden. One very important attribute of the Orton-Gillingham approach is that, unlike traditional phonics instruction, reading and

spelling are taught simultaneously with this system to reinforce the structure of language. A computer is very effective in this reinforcement, and is a tool unavailable to Orton and Gillingham when they developed their approach

A small Lincoln software company, **Lexia Learning Systems, Inc.**, located a few miles from the school, adapted the Orton-Gillingham system for use on the computer. Since 90% of the work is practice, the software system that Lexia developed reduced the average per pupil software cost to \$7-10, bringing an extraordinary teaching methodology to the wider community. The software takes the structure of the techniques, and presents them to a student in a non-threatening, flexible way, so they can work independently, learning new concepts from the teacher and getting reinforcement from the software through examples and practice.

The software system breaks the English language into its hundreds of discrete skills which build upon each other and can be taught in a sequential fashion. This is also extremely effective. Reading is not intuitive; it requires practice to achieve fluency. The software affords the student the opportunity for that practice. This tool gives the Carroll School a highly user-friendly, multi-sensory reading training tool with real-time feedback, enabling the students to absorb new skills and advance at their own pace.

To facilitate the teaching process, the school uses a powerful diagnostic tool to measure student reading proficiency level. This 5-8 minute computer-based test works by separating the Orton-Gillingham hierarchy of skills into a set of scales. The student examines words or combinations of words, and attempts to sound them out correctly. The teacher records on the computer whether the answer is correct or not. From this test three reports are generated. First, a student report is created that lists student skills and reveals precisely which skills the student has mastered, which skills require practice, and which skills require further instruction. The second report is a class report to aggregate groups of students according to required area of instruction. Finally, a comparison report measures student progress during the year or across years.

Yet, without one more critical element, teacher acceptance, the software could not succeed. It was designed specifically for teachers, with an approach that builds on the ebb and flow of the classroom. That means the first step has to be an accurate assessment; the teacher then provides focused instruction, the critical second step. In step three, the student practices with software, independent from the teacher. In step four, the software provides progress reports, specific to each child, to guide the learning process and to keep parents informed.

“At Carroll, all the teachers are trained in the Orton-Gillingham method. That means the math teachers, science teachers, history teachers, know what the language teacher is teaching,” noted Isabel Wesley, director of curriculum. “The children that come here have a diagnosed language-based learning disability. And it is essential everyone who is involved in the academic side teaches reading in one consistent way.”

This unified approach, which holds every student in every class to the same set of standards, is considered a crucial foundation to ensure academic success. "I am responsible for the curriculum," concluded Wesley. "But I am also responsible for making sure these children really learn."

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

The people at Carroll are acutely aware of the magnitude of their challenge. Wesley and the teachers deliver the learning; however, they know that in order to adequately prepare students to enter the mainstream population, which is their primary mission, there is another essential step. They need a systematic way to build confidence and self-esteem. This is crucial to long-term success because children must be able to understand and communicate to others that their own learning is different. They have to be able to advocate for themselves. Coping with their learning disabilities and succeeding in the learning process goes a long way to accomplishing this goal. At The Carroll School, the Bounders program provides a further boost.

Started as an extra-curricular activity, the Bounders program is now part of the core curriculum. This unique approach heightens self-esteem and enhances skills in problem solving, cooperation, team building, responsibility and risk-taking. This undertaking, tailored to the intellectual level and experience of each student, is based on a series of increasingly challenging outdoor activities that build on one another to foster both individual and group development. Canoeing, animal tracking, outdoor construction, various games and a host of other creative physical activities form the core of the program. The goal of the instructors is to help each group get comfortable with a project and then encourage students to individually push beyond their perceived limits.

"We succeed in building self-confidence in each child," observed Clark, "by using the Carroll community for encouragement and support."

Leah Gessner is one of many Carroll language tutors. She focuses exclusively on reading skills development, which means strengthening phonemic awareness and coding and decoding strategies using the Lexia software. She works one-on-one with students to ensure that each step is mastered along the Orton-Gillingham road, where mastery means speed and fluency in addition to understanding.

"The children move at their own pace," she noted. "But they move forward, sometimes dramatically. The software is patient and objective, and the students know they can't move on to the next level until they have become fluent with their exercises."

A broader view is supplied by Wesley. She explained that the aim is achieving grade level and measurable results with year-to-year gains. Many of the children come to Carroll four or five years behind. As the children with learning disabilities move up through the grades

without remediation, the more difficult the remediation becomes when they finally get to the Carroll School. In addition, many parents want their children mainstreamed as quickly as possible. All that said, when asked about results Wesley smiled, "Sometimes it is a Herculean task," she acknowledged. "In small steps, sometimes in large steps, we make progress."

Finally, it is important to mention outreach. It is impossible to spend time with the staff at Carroll and not feel the missionary zeal that permeates the organization. When Clark commented that the Carroll way is good teaching, she must have had the recently organized Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Garside Institute for Teacher Training (GIFFT), in mind.

Along with providing a strong in-house academic program for children with learning disabilities, Carroll School is also committed to reach outside the classroom to provide teacher training, parental support, research and a host of joint developmental programs. The Director of the Center is Dr. Sandra Jones, a former middle school principal and expert in "at-risk" children, curriculum development, and education research.

The primary mission of the Center, according to Jones is, "to identify the issues that impact learning and look for ways to apply them to the Carroll School, as well as share them with the community through educational outreach." Another way to reach out is through the Garside Institute.

Angela Wilkins, Director of GIFFT, and a twenty-year veteran of Carroll describes her responsibilities as "sharing Carroll programs and providing training for teachers administrators, and parents."

Since its establishment, GIFFT has trained more than 8,000 teachers in the Orton-Gillingham approach, plus a host of programs designed for students with reading and language difficulties, including mainstream students in public school systems.

The Carroll School has made a tremendous contribution to individual children and families as well as the general education community. Its staff has inspired and touched many by their dedication and commitment as educators. Clark concludes that "we cannot deny children their dreams, and so we must educate them in the best way possible. My educational journey has allowed me the privilege of making choices. And so I followed my heart to Carroll School."