



The Community School
of Bergen County

For the child whose
potential exceeds performance

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Language Training at Community High School : It's Never Too Late

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Since its inception, Community High School has specialized in working with students whose disabilities affect the reading and writing process (dyslexia), as well as the acquisition of effective study and organizational skills. Over the years, students who experience attentional problems (ADHD & ADD) have also achieved success within our program. Our goals are the development and refinement of the basic skills necessary for success in post-secondary placements. Therefore, the educational program for each student is planned to meet his or her unique abilities, needs and interests. Our students *can* learn—*high school is not too late!*

In the last decade, we have seen an increase in the number of students coming to us with severe deficits in reading. In fact, it is estimated that reading disabilities affect at least ten

million children, or approximately one child in five. According to G. Reid Lyon, neuropsychologist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, longitudinal studies show that, of the children who are reading disabled in the third grade, seventy-four percent remain disabled in the ninth grade. Fortunately, current in-depth research and updating of methodologies have led to a clearer understanding of the needs of the student with dyslexia. In our own backyard the New Jersey Branch of the Orton Dyslexia Society has worked quite hard in the development of the most operational definition of dyslexia, which was included in the Governor's proclamation at their October 1995 annual conference:

Dyslexia is a specific language based disorder of constitutional origin character-

ized by difficulties in single word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing abilities. And, whereas, in spite of average or above average intelligence, some people with this disability cannot learn to read, write or spell by conventional methods. When a proper program is put into place, such as a highly structured multisensory phonetic approach pioneered by Dr. Samuel T. Orton, dyslexia can be overcome.

Within our High School, students with dyslexia present quite a challenge. They are the intelligent disabled readers who work hard and require special teaching techniques. The word dyslexia is derived from the Greek — *dys* (difficulty with) and *lexis* (words). It is characterized by problems in language—both expressive and receptive. We have found over the years that many students with dyslexia come to us with vastly different learning abilities. Often gifted and creative, they have suffered greatly from their language processing problems. Though try as they may to break the code and to translate language, they continue to demonstrate a major gap between their learning aptitude and overall achievement in school.

The profiles of our students with dyslexia may include deficits in the following areas: phonological awareness, word identification (decoding), spelling (encoding), reading comprehension, written expression, oral expression, directionality, sequencing and handwriting. As one can see, any area of language processing can be affected. It was with this group in mind that our language training program was developed. Our language training curriculum has its roots in the early works of Dr. Samuel Orton, a neuropsychiatrist and pathologist, who along with Anna Gillingham, noted educator and psychologist, developed the Orton-Gillingham approach.

Together they joined the neuro-scientific information and educational practices upon which their philosophy is based. Their principles state clearly the need for a multi-sensory approach to reading based on building a network of sound-symbol associations of vowels and consonants. As these skills develop, students will begin to read and write words, sentences and eventually paragraphs.

Nancy Esterman, faculty member, therapist and dyslexia specialist has been instrumental in the development of Community High School's language training curriculum. She has effectively worked with many of our disabled readers—ultimately enabling them to “break the code” and move into reading independence. During daily structured sessions, she guides students through a multi-sensory, phonetic reading program that includes instruction in word identification, spelling and writing. The Orton-Gillingham method integrates reading and writing for the student with dyslexia. For some of these students, it will be the first time they are able to read and spell words as simple as *cat* or as advanced as *illustrate*. As they progress, comprehension strategies are offered and continually strengthened .

Each of our students is unique, each coming to us with his/her own strengths and weaknesses. Each must work his way through the language training curriculum at his or her own pace. Consequently, we have found that most students who participate in language training will do so throughout their high school experience. They all share a common goal—the development and refinement of their skills for use within a post secondary placement and ultimately in a career. Successful outcomes are usually seen when basic skills of literacy are brought up to at least a minimal level and can be coupled with compensatory skills.

One young man who comes to mind demonstrates a successful progression through the curriculum and into college life. Andy was an attractive, athletic young man of 14 when he entered Community High School. His reading comprehension was at 3rd grade and his spelling level was approximately 2.0. He had just completed 8th grade at a small private elementary school that specialized in educating learning disabled students. He demonstrated solid intellectual abilities with many strengths noted. Oral expression was in the high average range, as was comprehension. Testing, as well as his intake interview, revealed good social reasoning ability. Attention problems were described in all reports. Weaknesses were noted in auditory memory and processing, and in the visual motor areas. Initially, Andy needed plenty of time and support for his adjustment into our departmentalized program. In fact, Andy did not know where to begin to incorporate the written word into his daily routine. Our language training program would prove to be his salvation. Early sessions with Nancy Esterman focused primarily on establishing a rapport, the bonding so necessary for the personal commitment of the adolescent with dyslexia. Diagnostic testing indicated Andy's need to start from the beginning, as he lacked even the most basic phonemic awareness. Andy had no understanding of language structure at all. He could not order or organize letters and sounds and, because of a history of reading failure he was unwilling to risk, instead demonstrating avoidance behaviors so commonly seen in adolescents who fear reading. Though Andy had sensitive teachers and highly supportive parents, it took a solid year of mostly individualized instruction before he realized his progress and truly vested himself in the program. Andy's language training was on its way. Throughout Andy's second year his interest was inconsistent, however, he was encouraged to be persistent and

by the end of the year he was testing at an early 5th grade level in decoding, with stronger comprehension potential beginning to surface. As a junior, he continued to mature and he began to pursue and broaden his interests. He was elected to student council, became a key member of our varsity basketball team and earned his life guard certification. With self-esteem now intact, he embarked on a more deliberate course of action. Homework quality improved, as did daily classroom production. He was recommended for more advanced courses such as chemistry and psychology. These subjects are offered at our High School with accommodations such as taped textbooks, homework support and tutorial with our learning consultant. At the beginning of his senior year, Andy was astonished by his acceptance into a major university which would be able to provide a comprehensive support program. Andy's high school training, motivation and social ability so impressed the university that he was accepted on the day of his interview! Andy is now in the homestretch. We recently saw his mother at a conference where she related that she cannot believe "how hard he's working." He is a determined young adult with a goal. The big difference now is that Andy believes he can achieve his goals.

Andy typifies in so many ways the profile of adolescents with dyslexia. Our students have shown us that intervention can never come too late. Through sequential, multisensory training we have seen that we can lead a teenager to reading independence.

In an effort to expand our language training program we have trained additional faculty members in the Orton method and currently include 25 students in the program. Also, Mrs. Esterman has been instrumental in the integration of multisensory techniques across the curriculum. Ever mindful of Community School's

mission and the many “Andys” in our future, we continue to seek the best and most innovative techniques for teaching students to read. We

believe that it is through the development of independent reading skills that our students can realize their educational and vocational potential.

The Professional Monograph Series

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