
THE CENTER FOR LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

A HISTORY OF INNOVATION
AND COLLABORATION

BY MARIA BUTEUX READE



*Ted Kneeland with
students in the 1980s*

Shortly after arriving in the fall of 1972, Ted Kneeland noticed he had a hard time reaching some of the bright, under-achieving students in his English classes. Later that term, he attended a reading conference and heard the word 'dyslexia' for first time. He met with the Director of Studies John Lloyd-Owen and Headmaster Phil Smith who agreed that Ted should do some research. Ted reached out to Diana King, a pioneer in the field of dyslexia, who eventually moved her well-established Kildonan School from Pennsylvania to just north of Pawling. She took Ted and Carol Kneeland under her wing and pointed them to the Carroll School in Lincoln, Massachusetts, where the Kneelands learned the Orton-Gillingham approach in the summer of 1973.

The Carroll School's summer program operated under the auspices of Massachusetts General Hospital, epicenter of dyslexia research at that point. "The Carroll School experience was invaluable," Carol Kneeland explains. "There were twelve of us in the class, and we learned the basics from the best brains in the business. That summer gave us the confidence that we were heading in the right direction, so we went back to Trinity-Pawling and, with the support of some campus women who became the first tutors, formalized the spring's pilot program and launched the Language Retraining Program in the fall of 1973." From there, Ted developed a structured approach to grammar and Carol, a curriculum designed to move students beyond the basics of Orton-Gillingham to college-level work.

Fifty years later, the Language Retraining Program — now expanded and operating as the Center for Learning Achievement — is still going strong, fine-tuned to meet the needs of students today. Though the name may have changed, the goal remains the same: starting with the Orton-Gillingham approach, teach students

with dyslexia and other language-based learning differences how to read, write, and think. "The 'think' was a feature that distinguished our program from others," Carol notes.

Since its inception, the program has served a small percentage of students whose educational testing of potential verifies their candidacy. In 2024, 52 students were enrolled in the Center for Learning Achievement. Although the students take three unique classes designed to enhance their writing and reading, they partake in the same other academic courses as their peers. The smaller tutorial style classes fulfill a student's English and modern language requirement for the year.

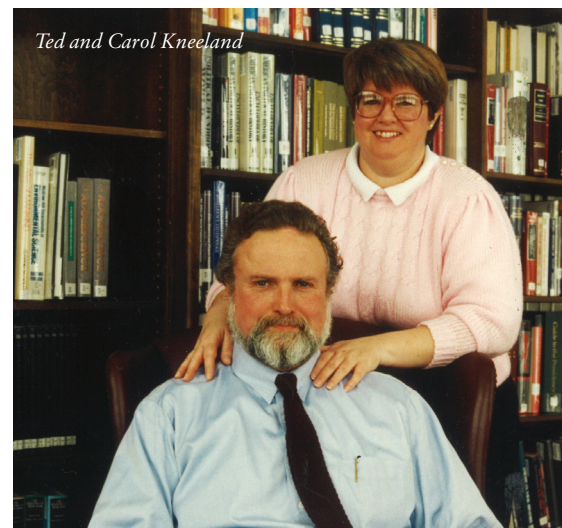
Head of School Bill Taylor has been a staunch advocate of the program since he arrived as a history teacher in 1988 and witnessed its transformative power. "The Center for Learning Achievement evolved out of the highly innovative program that the Kneelands established in 1973, and that subsequent directors and learning specialists have honed over the last 20 years. Trinity-Pawling has always been a student-centered school. Our DNA is to help students develop their self-awareness and confidence. The Center for Learning Achievement flows in perfect conjunction with the School's emphasis on effort. We recognize that certain students have different learning styles and needs, and these programs help students achieve their highest potential both in and out of the classroom. Many graduates rise to become team captains, mentors, prefects, and trustees. They're creative and innovative thinkers, and that neuroplasticity is a true gift."

Individualized Attention, One Step at a Time

The Orton-Gillingham approach is a multisensory, structured, sequential, and diagnostic way to teach literacy. Focus on one piece at a time, in a

direct and systematic way. Learning specialists trained in Orton-Gillingham design lessons and materials to work with individual students at the level they present by pacing instruction to their unique strengths and weaknesses.

"We had to figure out what each student was capable of, which meant a good deal of individualized attention



and tailoring approaches and methods to each student's needs," Carol says. "We had a specific curriculum to follow, but we were nimble enough to adjust accordingly. The small classes allowed for this individualized attention. Every evolution in the program or method arose from finding a way to help a specific boy tackle a specific problem. The Language Retraining Program was truly a partnership with the students."

"The program has always taken an instructional, not supportive, approach," she continues. "Students are held accountable and have to be independent and proactive. We taught kids how to rely on themselves, with the steady support of their tutors and teachers. Many kids had experienced failure or felt defeated when they arrived. They were skeptical at first, but most of them learned quickly. They saw themselves change and grow as they learned how to learn. They flourished."

Holly Smith, Phil's wife and one of



Ted Kneeland in the Dann Building's original computer lab

the original tutors in the program, conveys it best: "We taught them confidence. We helped the boys believe they could believe in themselves."

Embracing Technology

The Kneelands were early adopters of technology. "We saw that computers would allow students to type, make corrections, and check spelling. We knew that computers would be the future and that kids would embrace the technology."

Trinity-Pawling was the first school to use computers to teach language skills. "We created a computer lab and installed 'fancy' TRS-80 Radio Shack computers in 1977," Carol recalls with a laugh. "Brad Abbott,

math department chair, was a great resource. One of his salesmen introduced us to the first iteration of a laptop in the early 1980s. We ordered three and gave them to a few graduates of the program. Once kids saw those three guys using the machines, more people wanted to get on board. It became the cool thing to have."

"The father of one of our students worked at IBM. When he saw how his son had flourished in the program, he sent a load of IBM computers to the School as a gift of gratitude. Later that year, we took a group of students on a field trip down to IBM's Thomas J. Watson Research Center in Yorktown Heights. Developers met with our kids and picked their brains

for input on what worked and what they wanted a computer to do. Many of our boys' suggestions and ideas made their way into subsequent models. Ted was named an IBM Fellow and met monthly with specialists from IBM. That was some serious professional development and helped Ted realize computers' possibilities and potential." Trinity-Pawling was one of the recipients of the first six LAN's (Local Area Network) that IBM installed. Two other sites were the Army and MIT.

Helen Hauser taught in the program from 1984 onwards and served as director from 2001 until 2014. She ushered in Kurzweil software, the next wave of innovation. "Kurzweil proved to be a breakthrough technology in the mid-2000s. Kurzweil's highly interactive innovations included text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and interactive bubble notes. Students could scan their books and have the text read aloud. This technology allowed more students to take Advanced Placement classes because it assisted them with the reading comprehension; they could pay attention to what was being read aloud rather than spend all their energy trying to decode words. These new tools gave kids incredible independence, and nothing is more important for adolescents."

Dedicated Learning Specialists and Advocates

Helen praises the dedicated teachers who worked tirelessly as advocates of their students. "The program succeeded because of the tutors. They were warm, wonderful, and willing to work with the kids and see their potential." Carol adds, "Many other faculty were terrific about

Nearly 2,000 Trinity-Pawling students over the past 50 years have graduated from what is now known as the Center for Learning Achievement. Their heartfelt testimonials convey the same gratitude for the program's life-changing impact. While the teaching systems can be in place, the ultimate responsibility rests squarely on the student's shoulders: he must be willing to put forth the effort, have faith, and work in partnership with his teachers. Together, they will chart the course to his success. Here are some representative testimonials from graduates across the decades.



1983

ROB IX '83

"The Language Retraining Program's ability to rebuild my foundation was transformative, and I'm proud to say that I'm now a strong writer. Ironically, I went to Kenyon, a writing college, and I'm sure my folks would never have dreamed that possible when I was in eighth grade. The Kneelands did an extraordinary job. Holly Smith was my LR teacher my freshman year; she taught me that I could do anything. I took that to heart then and now. An extraordinary program."

1996

JAY PHILPOTT '96

"The Language Retraining Program for me was less about retraining, and more about heightened calibration. In an age of expedience and knee-jerk reactions, this program was countercultural; the program encouraged and trained students to slow down and examine content more deeply. It is a program that fundamentally improves all teaching and learning at Trinity-Pawling, as students who finish the program participate in the dialogue in other unrelated classes - making every Pride student better. I have profound admiration for the big ideas and the program that calibrated my thinking."

2008

KEVIN KENT '08

"I came to Trinity-Pawling with very little academic confidence. One year into the program, my confidence returned as I began to internalize the clear rules of the previously mysterious art of reading and writing. Writing clearly and thinking logically soon became my strongest skills. After college, I taught high school math and then transitioned into education research, driven to understand how students with language-based learning differences process information. I'm now a data scientist at Microsoft, working on speech recognition technology for medical professionals. One of the companies I work with created Dragon Naturally Speaking, the dictation software I first encountered in the language program at Trinity-Pawling. Life comes full circle."

2010

KEEGAN FLYNN '10

"The program was pivotal in reteaching the fundamental rules of the English language in a style that actually resonated, providing the skills I needed to thrive in a mainstream academic system that wasn't 'built' for my learning style. I achieved what I didn't think was possible: taking multiple Advanced Placement and honors courses, graduating from a respectable college and earning my graduate degree. Today, I consistently rely on those skills I learned more than 15 years ago in my daily work life. I wouldn't be achieving the success I am today were it not for the reading program."

2020

RICHARD BOLDING '20

"I was no different from other kids on campus - I just had a different way of learning. The more I utilized the skills I had sharpened in CLA, such as clear thinking, organization, and self-discipline, the more successful I became in everything else I did."



Present Director of the Center for Learning Achievement Chris Gilman '05

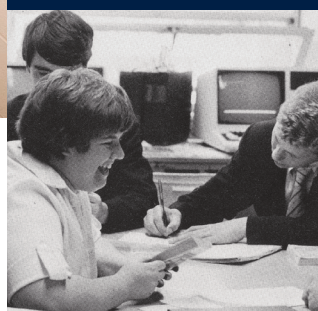
tweaking or incorporating the methods we used in the program into their own teaching. They saw the benefit of varying the type and format of lessons and assignments. They met kids at their level.” Bill Taylor credits the program for making him a more adept, empathetic teacher. “By differentiating my modes of instruction to accommodate the different learning styles of my students, I became a more dynamic history teacher.”

Greg Carpiniello arrived in 1992 and remained a cornerstone of the department for 23 years. He succinctly conveys why the program succeeds. “We work with boys who often were underserved in their previous schools and teach them to be confident and productive. We start with the building blocks of language: phonics, words, reading, and writing. It’s not sexy but it’s effective. The coursework imposes disciplined rules and structures of language that help students begin to express their thoughts in clean, linear fashion. Those organizational and study skills transfer to success in all other areas of school life.”

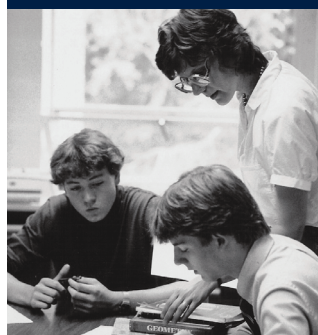
A Culture of Collaboration

Faculty at Trinity-Pawling broaden their knowledge and enhance their skills through meaningful professional development experiences. “Starting with Phil Smith in the 1970s, the School was always supportive in providing whatever funds we needed for equipment, supplies, and professional development,” Carol recalls. “People in the field are so kind, helpful, and willing to share. We

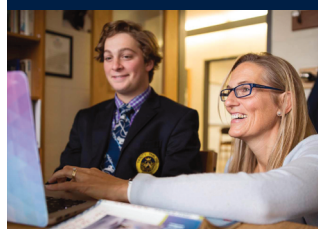
From the Language Retraining Program in 1973 to the Center for Learning Achievement today, four extraordinary directors helped the program evolve for 50 years. In closing, the directors express their own gratitude.



Carol Kneeland: “The Language Retraining Program was always a partnership with the students. In addition to teaching kids how to read, write, and think, we were teaching kids to be proud of themselves. They learned to work hard, make the most of what they were given, and persevere.”



Helen Hauser: “My job was to help equip my fellow teachers with the skills they needed to educate their students. The program has succeeded all these years because the School’s structure and ethos of effort complement the approach: individualized attention, accountability, empathy, and advocacy for young men.”



Roberta Lidl: “Every day, I was humbled by the commitment of my team and the gratitude of the students and parents. The program has always had a life-changing impact on the students fortunate enough to participate.”



Chris Gillman '05: “I try to uphold the high standards my predecessors established as I care for this program. I have great faith in our curriculum and approach, and I’m proud of the boys who continue to rise to the challenge.”

developed a network of supportive professionals that helped us and the program evolve.”

Teachers involved with the CLA in particular benefit from learning from and collaborating with their peers in other schools, programs, and institutions. All learning specialists are fully trained and certified in the Orton-Gillingham approach. Many attend and present at conferences and workshops including the New England Association of Learning Specialists (NEALS), neuroscience conferences at Harvard, Columbia Teachers College, New York University, and elsewhere. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) offers annual conferences, workshops, and trainings that Trinity-Pawling faculty attend.

Helen Hauser adds, “Professional development kept us stimulated and current with new technologies and studies. Sharing and learning with colleagues strengthens the work we do with our students.”

The Center for Learning Achievement Established

A hallmark of the language program is its ability to adapt to student needs while adhering to the curriculum and maintaining fundamental approaches. Faculty had observed that some international students would benefit from additional language instruction while other students could use coaching with executive function and self-regulation skills — the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember, and juggle multiple tasks.

Roberta Lidl started teaching in the program in 2002 — she became director in 2014 after Helen Hauser retired. “During my tenure, the option and understanding of learning differences grew dramatically. In 2016, Bill Taylor charged me to restructure and update the program to meet the evolving needs of our students, including the challenges of ADHD and executive function. That led to the creation of the Center for Learning Achievement, the umbrella to the three primary programs currently in place: LEAD, English Mastery Program, and Executive Skills Program.”

The LEAD program serves students with language-based learning differences. The English Mastery Program (EMP) is designed to help international students fully engage with the English language so they can excel in academics at Trinity-Pawling and in college. The Executive Skills Program (ESP) is a one-year course for students who need additional support

with planning and organizing. Small classes allow teachers to develop individualized strategies based on each student's specific needs.

Chris Gilman '05 has taught in the CLA program since 2016 and became its director in 2021. He explains how the LEAD program works. “Students take three classes over the course of two years. In Reading Comprehension, the first course, students work on mastering the English language from the fundamental level and up. Using a modified Orton-Gillingham approach, students study phonics, linguistic terminology, rote memorization, and spelling rules. In addition to word attack skills, students work on vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening skills, study techniques, and organizational skills. Students are placed into sections of two or three students, and their progress is based on their mastery of the material. Importantly, students who do not require phonics work are placed into groups where that section is replaced by intensive vocabulary work.”

“The second first-year LEAD course is Composition One. This course teaches the fundamentals of grammar and writing. Students learn the parts of speech and various sentence constructions and master how to compose topic sentences, thesis statements, paragraphs, and essays.”

“Analytical Writing is the second-year course. Students develop their skills through reading works by Steinbeck, Hemingway, Socrates, and Plato. They learn to master the five-paragraph essay. Additionally, students are taught to recognize symbolism and figurative language in literary works.”

Chris emphasizes another essential component that distinguishes the program. “Every CLA student is assigned a point person, a learning specialist in the program, who serves as his expert and advocate. The point person coaches the student to develop a deep understanding of his learning process, and together they create strategies that lead to his success. This enhances the boy's self-awareness, confidence, and his ability to self-advocate.”

Small classes. Individualized attention. Access to teachers. These bedrocks built into the Trinity-Pawling experience guarantee a young man's success. If you believe in a boy — and stick with him — he will believe in himself.