

ONE SCHOOL'S JOURNEY TOWARD LOVING EVERY STUDENT

by Denise Hollidge, Rockbridge Academy

In Matthew's Gospel our Lord tells the story of the sheep and the goats. There He points out that our virtue is not shown in how we treat those who can repay us a debt, but how we treat those who cannot. It is our care for "the least of these my brothers" that expresses the life-giving reality of our relationship with Christ.

This can be a complex issue to wrestle with for Christians whose calling it is to aid parents in teaching their children. Admissions officers, administrators, and teachers who face decisions about admitting and retaining students with learning differences, may find the demands on time, expertise, not to mention finances, often appears to be a bridge too far. Christian schools should never be satisfied with giving preference to students who need less intervention and are, therefore, less costly to instruct. If we are excluding students, do we have a biblical basis for that decision? If not, are we making strides toward inclusion of all children who benefit from a classical Christian education? All children are complicated. And all children need to be loved and taught as the unique human beings they are.

This is a story of one school's journey toward loving every student. The story has ups and downs, and it is unfinished. I hope this story helps you and your school love all the students that God brings to you.

Twenty-five years ago, the founding board of Rockbridge Academy committed themselves to offering a classical, Christ-centered education to families who were desirous

of that end for their children. Rockbridge Academy opened its doors to children with disabilities, in part, because God in His good providence had provided a special educator as its first head of school. Additionally, the first director of instruction equipped teachers to level the playing field for students who demonstrated challenges with speed drills like math facts. Teachers were approved to give accommodations to students when they were warranted. The administration worked with parents who engaged specialists to administer psychoeducational evaluations. These administrators labored with the standards of the College Board to find ways to bring SAT accommodations to students who desired to attend college. With disabilities on the rise nationally, the administration continues to seek out resources to assist in the inclusion of all students who desire to attend Rockbridge.

In 2011, I joined the administration at Rockbridge. I had no special education background but had 10 years of experience teaching third grade at Rockbridge and among many other duties, I set my focus on solving a perennial reading problem. In third grade all the reading and writing skills come together. Often third grade was the place where a previously suspected disability became obvious to parent and teacher alike. Frequently, one child in a family would need a different school as a result. Some struggled with dyslexia, others with dysgraphia, and many times these reading and writing struggles were layered with attention challenges. Although we used an Orton-

*Since arriving at Rockbridge Academy in 2001, **Denise Hollidge** has filled the position of third grade teacher for ten years, director of instruction (K–12) for five years, and currently serves as the grammar school principal. Rockbridge Academy is an ACCS-accredited school in Crownsville, Maryland.*

What *if*
you were prepared
to *teach* effectively
and to truly
disciple?

July 21-24 | near Annapolis, MD
www.rockbridge.org
Educating the Heart and the Mind since 1995



2020 SUMMER
TEACHER
TRAINING

Gillingham influenced reading curriculum, we moved along too quickly for those with reading delays. Many of these students needed more than accommodations—they needed remedial instruction and/or specialized assistance. Because we were unable at that time to offer remedial instruction, this often meant that I recommended the dissatisfying solution of a parting of ways or separation of families between two schools. After all, children must learn to read! After reading *Simply Classical, A Classical Education for Every Child* by Cheryl Swopes, I was inspired by the fact that classical education *was* for every child, but perhaps Rockbridge Academy was not.

Since the school did not have the expertise to assess students beyond a basic academic fitness, requiring parents to get a psychoeducational evaluation for their children before we were willing to approve accommodations became a requirement. Once these evaluations were in hand, both the school administration and the parents had guidance for next steps. I was growing in my ability

to point parents to remedial therapies outside the school, and I was more confident in establishing accommodations that were helpful and reasonable within the classroom. This allowed us to retain a few more students, but some still struggled to read and write and would eventually leave us by fifth grade. Despite baby steps forward and dogged disappointments, I continued to persevere. As Winston Churchill said, “Sometimes it is not enough that we do our best; we must do what is required.”

Over the years, God has brought professionals into the life of the school who have equipped me to think about student challenges better. These included parents who have pursued learning some of the best reading strategies for students with reading delays. Sometimes this was their calling or vocation. Sometimes this was due to their own children having learning challenges. Some were special educators. One was a speech and language specialist. Others were orthopedic therapists, educational psychologists, and even an educational therapist qualified

through the National Institute of Learning Development (NILD). This confluence of events has led to more success in identifying student reading delays as early as kindergarten and has given our staff the ability to offer not only accommodations, but remedial help within the very walls of Rockbridge Academy!

In the last few years, Rockbridge has required its grammar faculty to read *Reading Reflex, The Foolproof Phono-Graphix Method for Teaching Your Child to Read* by McGuinness and McGuinness in preparation for 10 hours of training by a specialist. This training involved teaching various reading skills such as phonemic awareness, blending, segmenting, manipulating, and comprehension. We have sent one of our administrative staff for certification in Phono-Graphix. This is an Orton-Gillingham influenced program, and we adapt their evaluation tool to assess all our K–2 students each trimester. Tracking each student's progress aids in determining K–2 students with reading delays. These students will receive one-on-one remedial reading lessons twice or three times weekly with our certified faculty member. This is exciting because delays are now being identified so much earlier. It takes data to help parents see the need for help. Last year, out of five identified kindergarten students with delays, four were able to catch up with their classmates with grade level work within the kindergarten year!

God also provided an educational therapist qualified through the National Institute of Learning Development (NILD) to work with some of our students in older grades. Through her, I became aware of a tool that, combined with the Phono-Graphix assessment, would add more helpful data for parents. The one student identified as making insufficient progress last year was offered the Search & Teach Scan. This NILD assessment measures pre-reading skills and gives parents the data necessary to understand their child's need for immediate therapies to assist them with their weaknesses. For the first time, I was able to identify students' challenges in reading before they finished kindergarten!

Moving into our newly purchased facility provided space to offer this therapist an office within the school building. Now she is our newly added, self-employed, independent contractor, and we can identify needs for accommodations and remediation, as well as refer parents to a godly Christian therapist housed within the school. This allows students to participate in therapy during the school day. This gives these early learners what they need by leaving the reading class that is currently at a frustration level to attend the therapy for reading at their instructional level. We can determine growth through the regular reading assessment we give our K–2 students each trimester. Some students catch up within the school year. Others need further therapy into the summer, while others need therapy with retention. All of this is done two or three years earlier than previously. We now have a vision for developing a small pool of specialists who can combine efforts to provide the remedial help students need at the earliest possible time.

Many, many opportunities the Lord gave us at Rockbridge to help students ended in what we might call “failures.” Students were identified late, received no remediation, and needed to go elsewhere, but we are making strides toward eliminating these roadblocks. Wherever you are in your school's journey toward serving every child, do not allow the difficulties to keep you from moving forward. Even the world understands something of the need for persevering in kindness toward others. Roman philosopher, Seneca, in his treatise *De Vita Beata* (*On the Blessed Life*, chapter XXIV) states, “Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for a benefit” (or kindness). Make time for reading, researching, and growing to offer more benefit to your families. For a time, the costs may be insurmountable, your facility too restrictive, your personal knowledge base too limiting . . . keep going. The Great Teacher will help you. He is looking for servants who will feed the hungry and offer a cup of water to the least of these.