

SCHOOL NEWS

The latest on the private education front



Shawn Tolliver with
instructor Patti Hamilton

Multisensory Learning

Using the Lindamood-Bell method, Northstar Academy has found success teaching kids with learning challenges to read

Shawn Tolliver's parents had just about given up. "She was diagnosed with dyslexia when she was in the fourth grade," her mother, Shawnya, a Henrico County resident, says. "It was primarily reading and some mathematic concepts."

She and her husband took their

friendly, socially active 13-year-old daughter to several learning centers and even hired private tutors, but Shawn still couldn't read. "We sent her to another private school," Shawnya says, "but it was too fast-paced for her, she was so far behind."

Finally, the family tried Northstar Academy and Lindamood-Bell.

"Here, we get kids who have been in other programs in other schools, and nothing has worked. So we're sort of the last resort in a way," says Patti Hamilton, a teacher at Northstar Academy, a private K-12 school that specializes in teaching children with learning disabilities. Northstar also maintains a Career Academy to help challenged young adults, and it's the only Richmond-area school to offer >



◀ MULTISENSORY LEARNING |

year-round instruction in the Lindamood-Bell method of learning, which breaks reading and math skills into sound-specific components, assessing how a student handles each aspect.

"The teaching is multisensory," Hamilton says. "Students can feel, air write and wrap their mouths around specific sounds. You incorporate the touch, the feel, the sound of certain words, and specific sounds associated with certain vowels are acted out."

Lindamood-Bell was developed 50 years ago in California by Patricia Lindamood, a speech language pathologist, and teacher Nanci Bell. Over the years, it's become an alternative when other learning methods don't work. The Lindamood-Bell company now has dozens of full-time schools, mostly on the West Coast, with the nearest to Richmond in Fairfax County. "Lindamood-Bell was created for children with dyslexia," says Lauren Gwaley, Northstar's marketing director. "But we've found that it helps children with many other obstacles to learning."

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Northstar, while not officially a Lindamood-Bell affiliate, is the only area school that teaches the method year-round, with two full-time instructors and the rest of the 35 educators incorporating specific elements into lesson plans. For years, Northstar employed another reading system that had been developed for adults. "As you might imagine," Hamilton, one of the full-timers, says, "it didn't fit in well with fifth-graders."

According to school outcome data, 79 percent of Northstar students have jumped two or more grade levels a year in reading — 67 percent for math —

through the Lindamood-Bell method. "The results are magnificent," Gwaley says. "Students have come to Northstar unable to read, and within a year, they read at grade level. One student came after his parents were told he would never read. But he was reading 'War and Peace' before he graduated high school, just because he could."

Shawn Tolliver finished her first year at the school, where she is one of 91 K-12 students. (The school is housed in the former Victoria Station restaurant, which retains its quirky railroad-themed fixtures and British phone booth.) Shawn will be back, says her mom, who's noticed a remarkable change since her daughter first stepped through the doors: "I've seen my child light up, read street signs, follow along with reading at the church. Before, she was not initiating reading on her own. She'd ask us to read things to her."

"It was tough," Hamilton says of Shawn's struggles. "She just couldn't read, and it was worse than most. She couldn't decode anything, and was so shut down with tears and frustration. And then, one day, she read a whole paragraph to herself, and she looked up and said, 'It's working.'"

— Don Harrison

For more on Northstar Academy, call 804-747-1003 or visit northstaracademy.net.

For more on Lindamood-Bell Summer Learning Camps, call 703-261-6902 or visit lindamoodbell.com/location/richmond-va-learning-center.