

# Riverside School Expands Campus, Continues Growth from Modest Beginnings

by Cynthia Davis, F/AOGPE and Andrew Blair, Riverside Communications and Marketing Coordinator

For more than 40 years, Riverside School, an independent day school based in Richmond Virginia, has fostered a tradition of academic excellence for children with dyslexia and similar language-based differences. Riverside's founder, Pat DeOrio, who rose above dyslexia herself, personally understood what it took to unlock the potential of students like her.



Riverside School, early 1970s

Riverside School was conceived in Pat's basement, where she tutored children from all over Richmond who were "falling through the cracks." The parents of one of Pat's students encouraged her to expand her outreach, and he offered to sell her property on which she could start an official program.

In 1972, Pat took a leap of faith and formed a Board of Directors who helped her to purchase the property and modify its old schoolhouse to suit their purposes. The 30 students who attended Riverside in 1974 surely did not know that they were attending one of the first schools in the nation to specialize in services to children with specific learning disabilities.

Ruth Harris joined Pat DeOrio in 1976; she brought the Orton-Gillingham Approach to Riverside School directly from June Orton. Ruth was trained in the OG Approach by June Orton after Ruth's 12-year-old son was diagnosed with dyslexia in the 1960s. In 1974, when Ruth's husband, Dr. Lou Harris, got an offer to work at Virginia Commonwealth University, the Harris family moved to Richmond. Ruth found Pat, and they partnered together to turn Riverside into a premier school for children with dyslexia.

When Ruth, an Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators Fellow, passed away in 2014, she was respected by many for her selfless dedication to sharing her knowledge of the Orton-Gillingham Approach with hundreds of teachers. For years, she worked tirelessly to train and

equip classroom teachers and tutors at Riverside. Ruth also established Riverside's Language Fundamentals program, which provided each student with 45 minutes of daily, one-on-one language therapy.

Ruth celebrated with founder Pat DeOrio when Riverside's first capital campaign successfully raised funds for additional space. In 1989, Riverside opened a new building with an additional 5 classrooms, 11 tutoring rooms, a kitchen, a commons area, and office space.

Although she had reduced her role to consulting and providing formal OG training in the summer, Ruth later encouraged Pat and the Riverside staff as they pursued AOGPE accreditation. Carolyn Webb, Nancy Spencer (both now Fellows with the Academy) and the visiting Marcia Mann, a Founding Fellow, led Riverside through a self-study as part of the accreditation process. Riverside's training program was awarded accreditation from the Academy in 2001, and the school was accredited in 2002.



P. Buckley Moss, Pat DeOrio, John Purcell, and Ruth Harris at the November 19, 1989 Ribbon Cutting ceremonies at Riverside School

Ruth was finally able to hand over all training responsibilities to new Fellow Carolyn Webb because she knew that the school now had strong standards in place. "I feel very confident in turning over the program to you," she wrote to Carolyn. Regarding this accreditation, in July 2018, Carolyn said, "One reason Riverside has reached excellence is because when we had an Accredited Training Facility, we attracted high-quality teachers."

Riverside was excellent, and it was again bursting at the seams. A second successful capital campaign ending in 2006 made a new Intermediate School building possible. This building provided two more classrooms, a gymnasium for PE (and for AOGPE training!)

continued on page 10...

## Riverside School Expands Campus, Continues Growth... | (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9)

and an art studio. It allowed the school to accommodate up to 72 students.

In 2015, Gena Fairholt F/AOGPE and former Head of School at The Schenck School in Atlanta moved to Richmond to be with her new husband. Luckily Riverside's Board of Directors was able to convince her to postpone her retirement plans so that she could take on the role of Interim Head of School. Gena led a search to find Riverside's current Head of School, Hal Waller, who became Riverside's Head of School in July 2017.

Through the years, Riverside's mission has remained constant: to provide remediation of language skills for students with dyslexia and similar language-based learning differences in grades K-8, so that they can return to mainstream education fully prepared to realize their highest potential.

One-on-one OG tutoring continues to be a hallmark of Riverside's educational approach, as the close teacher-student relationships allow for continuous feedback, positive reinforcement, high success rate, increased self-confidence, and a bright future for students. Riverside's teaching approach continues to prioritize small classes; an individualized, structured and multisensory curriculum; and a nurturing environment.

Riverside School is proud to be the only school in Virginia to have their instructional and training programs accredited by the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators. While there are other schools in Virginia that assist children with learning differences, Riverside is the only one that is AOGPE accredited.

New Head of School Hal Waller has been putting his experience in educational leadership and development to work at Riverside. In June 2018, thanks to his hard work and his partnership with Gena Farinholt and the Board, Riverside received full accreditation from the VAIS (Virginia Association of Independent Schools) and SAIS (Southern Association of

Independent Schools) - two of the most prestigious private school accrediting bodies on the East Coast.

In August 2018, Riverside took the next step in its ability to serve more families. The school signed a lease for classroom and playing field space from St. Michael's Church, adjacent to its campus, which allowed it to expand its enrollment capacity to 80 students for the 2018-2019 school year.




Hal Waller, Head of School, working on the path between Riverside and its newly leased property, Ticer Hall.

The extra space allowed Riverside to move from seven to eight homerooms, and to keep its small student ratio; only the two intermediate homerooms have more than 10 students. Riverside also gained extra ability to organize math groups according to individual student profiles. Eleven math teachers now have a place to teach, and the average math group size is seven students. The additional space also helped to accommodate the new one-on-one OG tutors hired to instruct the extra students. Now intermediate

students have larger homerooms in which to spread out and learn, and younger students are delighted by the extra playground. All students receive a minimum of three movement periods a day, so they enjoy the new blacktop area, basketball court, and soccer practice field.

Riverside truly has more room to flourish in a number of ways thanks to the new property. The school expectantly looks forward to continuing its legacy of instructional excellence for many years to come.

“One of the strengths of Riverside School is our rich history and our dedication to our original mission. Riverside has been using the Orton-Gillingham Approach to help students with dyslexia and other language-based learning differences for more than 40 years—almost to the date of the school's founding,” says Mr. Waller. “Very few schools can boast of such a consistent mission and vision for its students and families, and the longevity of our success is truly remarkable.” 



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