

Education

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New high school in west St. Louis County helps students with disabilities love learning

By Kristen Taketa St. Louis Post-Dispatch Dec 7, 2016



Chris Holmes teaches a social studies lesson at Miriam Academy at 2845 North Ballas Road in St. Louis County on Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2016. Miriam Academy is Missouri's first private high school specifically for students with learning disabilities, assisting children with language, speech, social, motor or sensory differences. Photo by Cristina M. Fletes, cfletes@post-dispatch.com

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It's normal for Chris Holmes to tear up when he teaches at Miriam Academy. He does so because he sees his 23-year-old autistic son in the faces of his students.

"It was ... challenging to raise him. My gosh, it was so hard," Holmes said. "And he needed a place like this. And it didn't exist."

He could find no school that would teach his son the way he needed to be taught, or had the patience to not give up on him. His son struggled, lost all confidence in his abilities and did no school work from sixth grade to graduation.

Holmes watched his son weep and ask, "Why did God make me this way?" His heart broke.

His son had already finished school when Holmes learned that [Miriam Academy, the region's first high school for students with learning disabilities](#), would open this school year.

It didn't take long for Holmes to leave his teaching job at Hazelwood West High School — where he had worked for a decade and earned the prestigious title of [Missouri Teacher of the Year](#) — to teach at the new, 15-student school that's temporarily operating out of a west St. Louis County church basement.

The school came too late for his son, but Holmes made sure it wouldn't for these students.

"This place provides an opportunity for all those kids to not get lost," Holmes said.

Many of the academy's 15 students arrived here feeling the same way Holmes' son did — like they had no ability to learn, and no reason to.

In three months and with two classrooms, Miriam staff have gotten students to like learning again.

The students' families pay \$28,000 a year for the luxury of a personalized and tiny high school, though about half of them receive financial aid. They pay that price because they believe the small and individualized environment is the only kind in which their children can learn and actually enjoy school.

"Kids spend a lot of energy worrying about, is someone going to bump me into the locker? Is someone going to bully me? Is someone going to say something about me?" said Susan Jackson, Miriam's head of school and former Affton High School principal. But at Miriam, "nobody's going to be unkind to them," she said.

The school has 15 freshmen and will add a class each year to eventually expand to about 80 students.

The school's two classrooms are designed to be dynamic, stress-free workspaces that conform to the needs of the students. Students can take off their shoes and lie belly-down on bean bags or the new blue carpet to relax their bodies while they work. One student even uses the closet as a workspace when he needs quiet.

There are no bell rings or crowded hallways to stress students. Class is sometimes held outside, where any sounds of nearby traffic are muted by canopies of trees and fields of grass. There is time set aside every school day for students to receive occupational or speech therapy or one-on-one counseling, as well as multiple motor breaks.

The academy stresses that it does not shortchange on academics. Every student will graduate with a high school diploma and is expected to attend college. Every student has average or above-average intelligence, it's just that learning disabilities often make it difficult to focus or translate that into writing or math.

That was the case for 15-year-old Austin Sams. He has a math and language learning disability and spent most of his time at Cross Keys Middle School in Florissant fading to the sidelines.

His teacher didn't have time to give him the attention he needed. His classmates were often handed work to complete on their own that left Austin feeling lost. He skipped class because he didn't believe he could learn anything.

"Here, it's a lot easier because we all are having trouble with something," he said. "This is a lot easier because you know that you're not that different from everyone else and that you will be able to learn and make friends without having to worry about other things."

A third of the academy's students come from [Miriam's 60-year-old K-8 center](#), but many come from traditional, alternative and even gifted programs at other schools that didn't work for them. Students came here from Parkway, Maplewood-Richmond Heights, Mehlville and Highland, to name a few districts.

On a recent Thursday, Holmes was helping students complete a photo essay project, using digital cameras, laptops and SmartTVs the school provides.

One boy suggested doing an essay on best friends.

"What specifically are you saying about best friends?" Holmes asked him. "It could be why they're so important, that's an angle. Why they're so important to happiness. It could be..."

"Why friendship is so important?" the student chimed in.

"There you go," Holmes said. "I like that. That's a good idea."

Students here learn how to make friends as much as they learn how to write and compute. For many of them, socializing is difficult and intimidating. For one boy, the school friends he made here are the first he's ever had, Jackson said.

Students begin their school day with 40 minutes of casual socializing in a commons area. Twice a week there is "social circle," where students and staff talk about how to communicate and present oneself, of sitting up straight, shaking hands and waiting your turn to speak.

Once a month, two students attend a Chamber of Commerce lunch to practice these skills, one of the many free field trips the school organizes. To the parents and staff, weekend outings as simple as a trip to SkyZone or to another student's house are small milestones.

"Once you take care of the social-emotional aspect of what's bothering the child, then you can teach," Holmes said. "And then they're ready to learn."



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Teacher makes a difference in young people's lives

Kristen Taketa

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