

The Woodlynde School Difference

September 14, 2022 by Mark Cohen, Senior Vice President, Independent School Division, Malvern Bank, National Association

As the Director of Malvern Bank’s Independent School Division, I have the privilege of getting to know some of southeastern Pennsylvania’s top independent schools and their key leaders.

I recently spoke with a Malvern Bank client, Christopher Kramaric, Assistant Head of School for External Affairs at Woodlynde School in Strafford, Pa., and MaryBeth Spencer, the school’s Head of Middle School. I wanted to learn what sets Woodlynde School apart from other schools in the region.



Mark Cohen
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Mark Cohen

Christopher and MaryBeth, Woodlynde School’s website notes that the school “welcomes and serves students who learn differently and empowers them to become strategic thinkers and self-advocates ...” Does this encapsulate what makes Woodlynde School different from other schools that serve students who learn differently?

MaryBeth Spencer

In part, yes. We believe what makes Woodlynde School different from other schools that serve children who learn differently is our commitment to those children. That commitment is “baked” into everything we do. Accommodating children with learning differences isn’t an “add-on.” Every program we design, every class that we teach is built through the lens of students who have some learning needs, such as dyslexia, ADHD, or dysgraphia. We come from that perspective first rather than building a curriculum and then adapting it to students who learn differently.

Mark Cohen

There are similar schools in the Philadelphia area. How would you say your mission and the manner in which you operate are different than those schools?

MaryBeth Spencer

Parents in the Philadelphia area are fortunate that there are a handful of school options for their children who learn differently. There are parts of the country where there are no such schools. Another differentiator for Woodlynde is that while we have our area of specialty, we work to make that area as broad as possible. Some similar schools in this region want their area of specialty to be as narrow and specialized as possible.

Woodlynde has always taught the “whole student” – even before the “whole student” became a recognized academic movement. We acknowledge that learning differences almost never come in a vacuum. For example, many of our kids have previously had negative school experiences. A lot of them come to us with social emotional learning (SEL) needs. Again, before SEL was a recognized educational method, Woodlynde had been providing more robust guidance in SEL programming than most other schools in the area.

One of our big pushes over the past couple of years has been focusing on “executive function” - the way that a person prepares to do a task, envisions the final task, initiates the task, and then maintains stamina throughout the task. Executive function is relevant whether you’re doing a homework assignment or going to the grocery store. Pre-planning and visualization are both key to completing these tasks. Take grocery shopping for example. Is this a “big shop” or a quick run to the store? How many items are you going to purchase? How much are you going to spend? Where are the items located in the store? The same applies to a homework assignment: How long will the assignment take? How much effort will it take to complete the assignment – and what will the completed assignment look like?

Some children develop these skills easily and naturally, but children who don’t will have a hard time completing a task because they don’t know what it’s going to look like when it’s finished. These same children often have difficulty with other important tasks – things like organization, study skills, building and maintaining friendships, interacting with others. All



MaryBeth Spencer
Head of Middle School

teens and “tweens” need to learn these skills, and it’s particularly difficult when you have a learning difference. We believe in not only supporting our children when they have a learning difference, but matching their differences and their lagging skills with direct instruction.

Mark Cohen

Woodlynde is a Wilson® Accredited Partner School. How important is that designation for your students?

MaryBeth Spencer

The Wilson Reading System is a multi-sensory instructional program used to help struggling readers, particularly those with dyslexia. The system uses visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile senses to help kids make connections between sounds and words. Instructors help students recognize different syllables and teach students how to use syllables to read and spell.

The Wilson System is very highly regarded among K-12 academics, and Woodlynde is one of fewer than 10 Wilson Accredited Partners throughout the United States. That certainly sets us apart from most other schools serving children who learn differently.

Christopher Kramaric

Woodlynde’s status as a Wilson Partner School is a big differentiator for us. But what makes Woodlynde different is a confluence of areas of expertise – from being a Wilson Partner to social emotional learning to our focus on the whole student to the way we integrate these lessons into our classrooms. We encourage parents to bring their children to Woodlynde not just so they can learn how to read, but that we can teach them to be self-advocates and strategic thinkers. The lens through which our students understand the world is their learning difference. We don’t address learning differences in isolation, but holistically, because those learning differences impact a child in every way – from making friends to completing tasks.

If a student needs help working through issues of rigidity or anxiety over socializing, we have the resources to help them, guiding them through counseling or small group sessions. We also have recently added to our staff a social and emotional learning specialist and a clinical psychologist.



Christopher Kramaric, Assistant Head of School for External Affairs



We're a small, tight-knit school where it is easier to develop a sense of belonging and community.

Mark Cohen

How has your relationship with Malvern Bank helped advance Woodlynde's mission and philosophy?

Christopher Kramaric

Woodlynde recently completed a \$12-million campus transformation. Malvern Bank was critical in that project, helping us secure the funds we needed and advising us through the entire process.

This was a huge undertaking for Woodlynde. We're a 45-year-old school, and we had never attempted such a project in our history. Our campus looked dated. The original building, which still stands, is a mid-20th century cinder-block elementary school. The campus transformation project included new learning centers, which gave us the ability to bring all our learning specialists together with students in active, small-classroom settings that were designed for more personalized learning. Inasmuch as Woodlynde competes with a number of other schools in a Philadelphia market crowded with schools for children with learning differences, the transformation/modernization project enables us to better promote ourselves as a modern, progressive institution.

If your school has a much-needed capital project but you're struggling with the best way to finance it, Malvern Bank can help. Please contact me, and we'll discuss the best financing tool for your school's specific needs.

Mark Cohen

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