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At **Center School** in Abington, students such as Jojo Jarema discover a supportive community and gain the tools they need to thrive in and out of the classroom. page 14





# Center Stage

by MINDY TORAN

photography by JODY ROBINSON

At Center School in Abington, children with language-based learning difficulties discover a supportive community and gain the tools they need to thrive in and out of the classroom.

**Jojo Jarema spent years struggling with reading, writing, and math. He couldn't keep up with his peers. He was afraid to raise his hand in class because he didn't want to become the focus of the teacher's attention. As a result, he dreaded going to school every day.**

His mother, Kate Jarema, says his mounting anxiety made the simple task of getting him out the door every morning a challenge. "We were worried about his future," she recalls.

Jojo had been evaluated for learning difficulties in kindergarten and was later diagnosed with dyslexia, a learning disability characterized by difficulty reading. Even so, he was able to make it through the first few years of grade school. By fourth grade, however, Jojo began struggling and was diagnosed with a vision disorder that further complicated his reading and writing difficulties. In addition, he was diagnosed with ADHD, as well as dysgraphia, a learning disability that impacts a person's fine motor skills as well as their ability to organize their thoughts in writing, and dyscalculia, a learning disability that impacts an individual's ability to learn math skills.

One day Kate caught wind of a school in Abington that specializes in helping children with language-based learning disorders and other learning disabilities. She hoped it would be the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. After reaching out to the school, Kate was able to have Jojo "shadow" some students at the school for two days.

"We had nothing to lose," she says. "Our child's future was at stake."





This marked the beginning of Jojo's journey at Center School, a private school with more than 30 years of successfully supporting students with language-based learning differences in grades one through eight. Students attending the school have been diagnosed with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, ADHD, visual and auditory processing disorders, and executive function disorders.

"I was nervous at first," says Jojo, 14, who began attending Center School in fifth grade. "I still didn't like school when I first started here, but now I enjoy coming to school every day. I have a lot of friends, and it's a very supportive community."

While he had to make some adjustments early on, Jojo found himself thriving at his new school. He started at Center School right after Thanksgiving, and by January he was writing paragraphs in his journal in cursive writing. Kate describes it as "a truly amazing transformation."

### 'I Can Be Myself Here'

Center School provides children who learn differently with a personalized education in order to realize their potential and change the way they view themselves and their future. Small class sizes enable students to understand their learning style so they can advocate for themselves both in and out of the classroom. Students also receive explicit academic instruction and a strong social-emotional curriculum so they can become independent, confident learners.

"Our kids may always have trouble with

reading and writing, but we give them the tools and strategies they need to help them succeed," says Derri Benbow, a certified secondary English teacher, reading specialist, and middle school teacher who has been with Center School for more than 30 years. "Our goal is to demystify the learning process to help each student learn in their own individual way. We follow both academic and social-emotional curriculums, but can tailor what we're teaching to each student's individual needs."

One of the major benefits for kids attending Center School is the realization that they're not alone.

"The kids get here and realize there are other kids just like them at school," Benbow says. "They're no longer pulled out of classes for reading and math support, and they learn that it's OK to make a mistake. That takes away a lot of the anxiety and allows them to relax and learn in their own way."

Center School uses specialized reading programs, including the Wilson Reading System and Wilson Foundations, designed to help students learn the decoding and encoding skills necessary for reading and spelling. In addition to this specialized phonics instruction, students receive two periods of reading per day, focusing on word recognition, comprehension, and fluency.

"We take a multimodal approach toward learning," says Mindy Wawrzyniak, head of Center School. "Students are able to work at the level at which they can understand. There are no more than six students in each reading group, and students are taught at their individual levels. This helps students

build confidence and provides them with the tools they need to succeed. We help students identify their strengths and realize that they are not defined by their learning differences."

Jojo expects to go to public high school next September. As he prepares for the transition, he says he feels "a lot more confident" than he did three years ago when he first came to Center School.

"I've learned strategies such as note-taking in class and using a graphic organizer to help me study," he adds. "I've learned to be flexible and to use my tools to work around obstacles when I get frustrated. I can now raise my hand in class and ask questions without feeling nervous about being wrong. I feel like I can be myself here, and I don't have to try to be someone I'm not."

Above all, Center School aims to help students understand "who they are as learners and how to identify and address their challenges," as Wawrzyniak says. "Our goal is to create a community of successful, lifelong learners who realize their own potential each day."

That's exactly what Jojo Jarema believes he found at Center School—a compassionate community that helped him obtain the "strategies for success" he needed to thrive.

"The school has given me so much support and taught me how to advocate for myself," he adds. "I feel like I'm ready to move on to high school. I'm looking forward to learning new things and pushing myself to succeed." ■

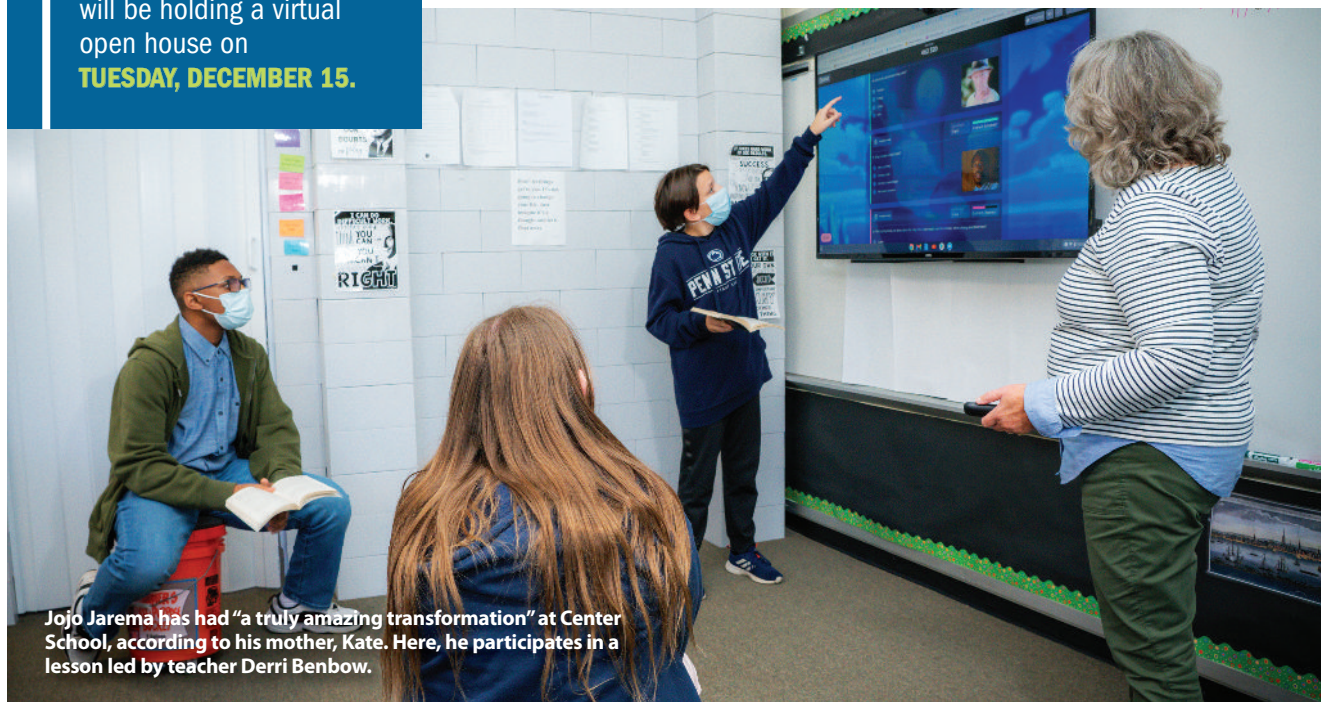
## Center School

will be holding a virtual open house on **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15.**



### CENTER SCHOOL

2450 Hamilton Ave. | Abington, PA 19001 | (215) 657-2200 | [centerschoolpa.org](http://centerschoolpa.org)



Jojo Jarema has had "a truly amazing transformation" at Center School, according to his mother, Kate. Here, he participates in a lesson led by teacher Derri Benbow.