



**BANBURY  
CROSSROADS  
SCHOOL** EST. 1979

## **Director's Message**

### *A very different school*

At Banbury, one of our major goals is to address the needs of individual students. At Banbury Crossroads, one of our major goals is to elicit autonomous and self-accountable behaviour from our students. We have set up a self-directed learning environment in order to do this. In practice, this means that all individual students participate in self-directed learning to the utmost of their capability. Some students, both young and old, are self-directed when they enter the school. Others have lost that ability through previous educational experiences, and need to retrieve it. This means that all of our students are at varying places on the continuum of self-directed learning. Our intention is to help each one of them to progress through the stages until they are fully self-directed. At that point, they will demonstrate the initiative and self-responsibility to exhibit all of the following characteristics. We monitor their progress along the continuum throughout their time at Banbury. Banbury is devoted to harmonious living. Harmony is an elixir of life, a catalyst for inspiration, an aid for accomplishment, a spur for aesthetic and emotional delight, and a precursor for positive human connection.

This does not mean that our atmosphere is always harmonious, or that we would even expect that. No social setting is static. I can't actually see how it would even be possible to maintain a harmonious stasis, because social relationships are fluid, changing constantly as each individual's feelings, perceptions, and actions impinge upon the experience of others, in a fascinatingly complicated ripple effect. Any social environment is being created moment by moment. Any life within that social environment is like a unique tapestry that includes not only its joyful, hopeful or serene parts, but also its challenges, difficulties, and dark patches. We need to embrace this richness that life offers, for we learn and grow through every experience.

Nevertheless, Banbury's culture is based on the concept of mutual respect, so our predominant effort is to create a positive, nurturing, and peaceful learning milieu. Although we know that we



are not able to achieve constant harmony, we do need it whenever we can get it. It helps us to clear our minds so that we can get about our business each day. So, our devotion to harmony is partly that we desire and cherish it as a necessary condition for appreciative living and learning, and that we are willing to sacrifice whatever effort it takes to promote it. We at Banbury know that learning is much more efficient, and retains a positive emotional association when people learn without fear and anxiety—when learners can concentrate in a state of relaxation. Indeed, that is the basic value underlying our provision of a peaceable and relaxed atmosphere here. When people feel generally comfortable—when there is mutual understanding and respect between the people they deal with, when they are able to solve conflicts, when they are engaged with their activities and pursuing knowledge about topics they find meaningful when they can see their skills developing, and when they feel accepted as a

unique person—then they are much more likely to have goodwill towards others. We are devoted to creating the conditions that promote empathy so that people can get along with others in the first place.

Then, the next step in our devotion is that we are ardent in our efforts to bring moments of crisis, of emotional upset and misunderstanding, back into balance. We are devoted to the intervention necessary to assist people when they are flailing around in social misery so that they can learn to examine the causes of harmony's disappearance, to reestablish relationships, and to learn lessons for the future. Life for all people on earth is one big, on-going lesson that builds ever-more-complex layers of understanding that may, or may not, come in handy in future days. In some ways, we are learning machines, because curiosity is built into our modus operandi, and so, we cannot help but learn from every new relevant experience that touches our emotions, that enlightens our understanding and awareness, that increases our skill and that defines our place in our social environment. This process of learning to achieve understanding, to develop intrinsic motivation, and to create deep change occurs repeatedly over a lifetime.

It is the pursuit of harmony that underlies what I can call our approach to tackle “kid-social-politics”. Learning how to establish and maintain social harmony is one of the major tasks of school-age youth. Each age group deals with conundrums particular for that stage of

development. We all have to go through the process. This is why is it important for adults—for people who are relatively older all along the life continuum—to be patient with those who are still going through their learning curve. Just because we have already dealt with our childhood demons, doesn't mean that we should be dismissive of children's emotional struggle and social confusion when they encounter these necessary learning experiences for themselves. We need to understand that children, from toddlers through elementary school age, are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of life experience. They haven't yet learned that they are worthwhile people, so if someone threatens their space, their possessions, or their position, they feel the threat deeply. Once they have lived a while, they will realize that these threats are not necessarily real, and will probably not devastate them. Once they have built a reservoir of personal accomplishments and cherished interpersonal connections, then they will be more resilient. They will have come to realize that, being both lovable and capable, their foundation is strong enough to counteract and survive external onslaughts. They will have better chances to thrive, despite the vagaries of life's improbabilities. They will know that they are visible and valuable.

Elementary school sees children growing in their awareness of the real world. They start to worry about real threats—about robbers and gangs and bullies and environmental threats. They start evaluating their friendships in more adult terms. Instead of seeing friends as peers who live next door and have good toys, they start realizing the importance of honesty, trustworthiness, kindness, gentleness, goodwill, and shared interests. The hotbed of social growth is within this age group because the children are still so open, so overt with their wishes, and so honest about their hurts. It is in this age category that most of our social meetings occur at school. They occur within the classroom and within my office. They occur on general topics like “compassion”, or “why talking behind people's backs is not helpful”. They occur on specific topics generated from actual events. We have found wide variation within our student population of maturity levels, empathy, insecurity, and the ability to speak what is in their hearts. It takes a lot of courage for young people to speak out if they disagree with their peers—it takes courage for adults to speak up if they differ from the general consensus of their peers! School is a place for children to safely practice these important skills that develop their character. This time period can be very tumultuous, for both the students and the teachers. Yes, those emotional ups and downs can be exhausting for adults, until they realize that they may simply need to empathize without going through those peaks and troughs sympathetically. Sometimes, children just need an ear to listen intently and kindly to them. They need someone to understand the confusion, the upset, and the challenges that they face. They need people to listen actively (those old P.E.T. listening skills again!). We need to remember when to listen, which turns out to be—almost always. We need to be sensitive enough to realize when they are asking for advice—usually after they have ranted about their problems in the heat of the moment and have already felt understood. Parenting is a real rolling-up-the-shirtsleeves and diving-right-into-the-analysis type of experience. It is not for the faint of heart. And really, it ought not to be avoided, because if we, as primary adults in these children's lives, do not participate in their intellectual

understanding of their emotional/social lives, then where are they going to find their insights? Within discussions with their peers? I don't think so. Their peers are struggling too.

So, the meetings that occur here between teachers and students add that adult element to the discussions. We feel very proud of these meetings, and the time and effort they represent. Some years at the school, we have been blessed with very kindly, philosophical, and sociable students at this age. Some other years, though, due to the presence of one or more students with various issues, we have spent hours within the classroom and my office, having meetings. In fact, some of the most beneficial effects of being at Banbury over the years have come from students' participation in those meetings! Due to this invaluable experience, kids learned to bravely bring up their issues, to speak honestly and logically, to hear others' points of view respectfully, to brainstorm ideas to solve problems, to negotiate solutions, and to expect that, if you actually sit down to speak to someone who shares a problem with you, **YOU WILL ULTIMATELY SOLVE IT**. It may take time—that is true. That is the hard part—knowing that the solution may not be instantaneous. The important thing here is to cultivate the belief that life's challenges can be met and overcome, rather than merely endured. It means that it is worthwhile to try to deal with them, rather than to simply complain, or to give in to quiet desperation. We need to live life actively, not passively, by seizing our own power to do something to make our lives better.

Meetings have provided our students with a glorious learning opportunity, and, for decades, I have seen them go up into Junior High with more knowledge about how to get along with others, how to be generally friendly and not cause social problems, and how to go beyond that into high school and the world itself with well-developed soft skills and fantastic communication ability. I have kept in touch with alumni who range now from 30 to 41 years of age, and they have spoken about the skills they gained—the initiative, the straight talk, and the ability to present information and negotiate. I know that the effort is worth it. There is no escape from the effort if we really want kids to take responsibility for their decisions and actions, and if we want them to have the capability for smooth interpersonal relationships and, even beyond that, meaningful and intimate adult relationships. So, the ironic thing is that, through the tumult, chaos, and fear, comes tranquility. When it comes to complex human interrelationships, perhaps that is the only way it does.

On May 10th, 2013 Banbury Crossroads hosted Alfie Kohn to lecture at the University of Calgary on the topic of "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing". We were thrilled to present him to our city for the fourth time, and we enjoyed a dynamic evening. Early in the presentation, he asked the audience to pair up with a stranger and discuss the question, *Why doesn't homework work?* Immediately, a deep-throated rumbling of animated conversation began and didn't let up for around 10 minutes, only stopping when Alfie asked for people's attention. This is a topic of immense personal importance in households where families are occupied in this school-directed activity. We requested that Alfie speak about this issue, not because we need direction on it since our philosophy on homework is aligned with his, but rather because one of our identified goals over the past 5 years has been to educate the public

about schooling issues we hold dear. There is a lot of work to be done in the world, just generally speaking. What we can offer to the world is a fresh viewpoint derived from our work with children over the past 42 years. This conversation that we hold with the public during lectures such as this, or during the P.E.T. (Parent Effectiveness Training) classes that we hold each year, is a means of extending our impact upon the wider community.

Another presentation we are going to host next year is a showing of the film, *The Race to Nowhere*. This movie is a series of interviews with parents, students, and teachers across the United States, and it is a stark illumination of what happens when children's school experiences are stressed and frustrated through an anxious focus on accountability and performance, high stakes testing, over-scheduling in extra-curricular activities, large and impersonal groups in classrooms, not enough choice in how schooling is delivered, restricted access to preferred schools, and too much homework. It is an eye-opening expose of how stress and fear inhibit learning. It leaves a strong impression, and I thought that people need to be aware that this is the end result of schools being huge institutions bent upon their own political goals, and unable to be responsive to individual student needs for health, appropriate stimulation, and accomplishment.

My husband and I saw this movie last spring, at the University of Calgary. I thought, "Yes, that is the way it is in many schools...but not at Banbury! Our students are not stressed like that. There is a pervasive atmosphere of peacefulness in Banbury. That fact felt wonderful to acknowledge. There is a clip at the end of the movie that shows a small school in New York that looked a bit like ours. At one point, the Director throws wide his arms and exclaims, "Why shouldn't school be fun?!" We agree, and not just for the immediate joy that children would experience. The benefits extend into the future because people remember the emotional context around their learning. If something is learned with pain and hardship, that negativity will become attached to the concepts themselves. On the other hand, if young people experience pleasure in learning, then they will enter adulthood believing that learning is beneficial and possible. In this way, they will persist in learning how to handle and surmount their life's challenges.

Then, yesterday, I noticed that I had received an email from the "Race to Nowhere" team that began by saying, "Did you know experts have concluded the link between homework and academic achievement is limited? Yet despite the research, our students are spending more time on homework - often at the cost of health and engagement." I thought to myself, *What do you know'? They are taking up the homework topic. I should let them know about Alfie Kohn.* Then I read down a few paragraphs and found out that they already know him. They have together joined with other homework experts, Sara Bennett and Etta Kralovec, to launch a petition asking the American National PTA to support healthy homework guidelines to better support learning and a spirit of engagement in our classrooms, and to remedy the academic stress and anxiety that accompanies current homework practices all across the continent.

For those of you who attended the Alfie Kohn lecture that we sponsored, you will recognize the goals that this coalition promotes. They believe that "homework should always:

- ▶ Advance a spirit of learning  
Educators at all grade levels should assign homework only when assignments demonstrably advance a spirit of learning, curiosity and inquiry among students.
- ▶ Be student-directed  
Educators at all grade levels, but particularly in elementary and middle grades, should limit take-home assignments to at-home reading or project-based work chosen by the student.
- ▶ Promote a balanced schedule  
Educators at all grade levels should avoid assigning or requiring homework on non-school nights, holidays and breaks, on nights of major school events, when a child is sick or absent, or when it conflicts with a child's family or religious obligations.”

They continue, “The ongoing debate about homework-how much, for whom and to what end has picked up momentum in parenting and educational circles, as recent research studies continue to question the relationship between time spent doing homework and academic engagement among students.

Experts who have conducted or synthesized research on the links between homework, learning, and test performance agree that the relationship between homework and school achievements limited.

In a study released by the Economics of Education Review, homework in science, English, and history was shown to have “little to no impact” on eighth-graders’ test scores in those subjects. Harris Cooper, Duke University, surveyed 15 years’ worth of homework studies conducted across the country and found diminishing returns for middle and high school students as the hours spent doing homework increased.

Moreover, homework has also been linked to stress and academic disengagement among both young children and teens.

In a study by the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health, 70% of Bay Area parents reported that their 9- to 13-year-olds suffered “moderate to high levels of stress,” and that schoolwork or homework was the most significant contributor.

Similarly, a Scholastic study of 500 children and their parents found that reading for pleasure decreased dramatically after age 8 (the age after which only 29% of students read every day). Parents identified homework as the number one reason their children didn’t read more.

*Change is possible!*

Aren't you happy that change is already in place here at Banbury Crossroads?

*Diane Swiatek*