



**BANBURY
CROSSROADS
SCHOOL** EST. 1979

Principal's Messages

A very different school

During February, we celebrate human relationships. Valentine's Day highlights the joy inherent in loving someone, and Family Day sets time aside to focus on creating positive bonds within family groups. We are wise to recognize the merit in this most elemental of human organizations the family. It is through the intimate sizes of these small units that parents and other elders are able to provide the nurturing and instruction that children need, in order to participate successfully in our complex culture. Families are very efficient in this regard because family members usually care about each child individually, and they care about intellectual understanding, moral reasoning, physical development, creative exploration, and emotional growth that occur within each child individually. It is for this reason that our school is based upon the structure of the family. This decision in effect means that we provide a learning environment for children that challenges the practices in more institutionalized schools.

It may be helpful to realize that the structure for our typical Western educational institutions was created according to the model of the factory system that was developed during the Industrial Revolution. Mandatory public education was only instituted around 1854 when the Factory Act in England was issued. It was set up to deal with the youth who ran loose on the streets of the factory towns. They were not allowed, according to the child labour laws, to work yet in the factories, but at the same time had no useful work or occupation to do in an urban environment. Some factory owners had realized before this time that it would be helpful to provide an education for the children of their workers because it would be training for that setting. (Remember also, that the children of the affluent received tutorial instruction in their Banbury, before setting out for university.) It was a stroke of genius for the factory owners to create schools like factories because the children learned to obey the teacher (the boss) and to value conformity through such elements as mass punctuality, uniformity of instruction, and uniformity in expectation of the product. They also learned to solve problems that other people gave them,



on their desks, according to other people's organizational plans. This experience would prepare them to handle their tasks more efficiently on the assembly lines. In our era, enlightened people have complained about the pitfalls of this approach, the major ones being that it does not satisfy the needs of individuals and that it does not allow for big-picture, creative and critical thinking. These problems are actually very significant, especially in a democratic political structure. These problems also create many of the social ills that our society is beset with, and which keep social workers busy, very busy. The ideas that bigger is better, that education must revolve around economic bottom lines, that the organization of activity is more efficient for the teacher if it involves children all of the same age (and thus with the same expected ability to understand instruction) are all extremely problematic. These ideologies have produced huge schools and classrooms wherein students cannot possibly care about all of their classmates.

This, in turn, leads to reasonless bullying and the impracticability of showing them how to solve problems or deal wisely with their feelings. The isolation felt by many, many students in thousands of schools across the Western world also comes from the connotation felt within classrooms that students are supposed to learn how to be alone in a crowd. They are told, - Pay attention to your own work, not to your neighbour's! The ostensible purpose for saying this is to promote concentration, and that is a useful object. However, it ought not to happen all the time, since this solitary focus does not promote cooperative learning, a skill very suitable for work in the adult world. Another problem is that the minute adults organize children by age, instantly, competition is introduced to the group because you cannot avoid seeing the differences that are there in children of the same age. Competition amongst young children is not helpful in their quest for self-esteem, since it leads to frustration and performance anxiety. Furthermore, it promotes selfish behaviour, and it reduces moral reasoning to its lowest ebb with the belief that winning at others' expense is not only justifiable but honourable. As you can see, there are many and sundry reasons for encouraging educational reform in our culture, especially as our culture particularly reveres the idea of liberty, and liberty cannot exist without mutual respect. Our school is a living example of this principle, and we are very proud of it.

There are several practices employed at our school to specifically promote a family style of interaction.

Here are a few:

- ▶ Small class sizes of approximately 6 students in Pre-School and 10 to 12 students in older classes;
- ▶ Individual and small-group instruction responsive to the needs of both students and teachers, in order to encourage quality endeavours;
- ▶ Employment of a constructivist perspective to learning, which is committed to the position that knowledge transfer does not occur directly from one knowledgeable person to a learner, but rather is actively built by the learner as he or she incorporates new sensory information into current patterns of understanding.
- ▶ Academic progress that is student-paced, in order to be respectful and efficient in regards to students' time and energy. We offer stimulation and encouragement to all children, but we do not push them beyond their interest, motivation, or abilities;
- ▶ Emphasis on developing self-esteem, mutual respect, initiative, and self-responsibility, suitable for life within a democracy;
- ▶ Focus on effective communication within carefully nurtured relationships, wherein negotiation and problem-solving are pursued with an expectation of win-win solutions to resolve differences;
- ▶ Multi-aged grouping throughout the grades, being more typical of life outside schools, and providing opportunities for peer instruction, social compassion, and nurturing. Multi-age grouping also allows children to progress academically at their own rate without social penalty.
- ▶ De-emphasis on competitiveness that creates performance anxiety and distorts cooperative action;
- ▶ Development of individual potential in a cooperative atmosphere as the crux of our efforts;
- ▶ Recognition and support are given for interdisciplinary study;
- ▶ Relationships with mentors nurtured as crucial for developing effective logical and moral reasoning skills within children, as they process the information input and skill development that is typical of academic learning; and

- ▶ Operation according to the belief that it is preferable to create change by exerting one's influence through logic and empathy, rather than by manipulating and controlling others by rewards and punishment.

Every person's experience of life is multi-dimensional since different aspects of life occur together. We are social beings at the same time that we experience our inner emotions and values. We crave recreation and creative outlets, and at the same time, we need to find productive work. We need to care for the fulfillment of our own needs, and yet we also need to develop an unselfish empathy towards the needs of others. Life in schools is still life. We need to celebrate the great gift we have received in being alive, and in being able to learn about the world around us. By designing our school environment and our practical methods around the ideal of an effective extended family, we are most likely to encourage children's growth in a holistic manner, to assist young people in their intellectual awakening, and to comfort them in their social grief. By providing diversity in the developmental stages encountered within each group of children, we thus offer them resources among their peers to provide comfort or ideas for resolving problems. In this way, we may teach children how to handle their emotions, as they deal with the disputes that inevitably do occur between children as they are discovering social possibilities and altruistic behaviours. Through the input offered by their peers and caring adult mentors, young people learn that it is both helpful and wise to search for relevant causes of life's daily challenges and to come to understand how else they might respond to such situations in the future. This results in a more peaceful atmosphere, wherein children intuitively learn that they deserve to be listened to, to be accepted for their own unique selves, and to be affectionately cared for and respected during all moments of their days. Indeed, within our school, there is a myriad of changes we have wrought in the way children are presented with opportunities to grow. I am very happy about that.

Karen Harrison