



Smart Schools

In the 1970s, an astonishingly creative woman named Sally Smith founded a special school to help her bright young son overcome his severe learning problems. She developed arts-infused education, and, as we know, the rest is history. When Sally Smith died in December, she left an amazing legacy: the Lab School of Washington <www.labschool.org>.

When teachers in York, PA tired of stressing unready students with academics, they turned to Harry Wach's model combining Piagetian theory and vision development. A school for thinking was born. (Read *Thinking Goes to School*.)

At Lincoln Elementary, Mt. Vernon, NY Principal George Albano has created a culture that guarantees success for ALL students, in one of the poorest sections of Westchester County. And in Traverse City, MI, optometrist Steven Ingersoll founded a charter school, Grand Traverse Academy (GTA), where over 1000 kids, grades K-12, happily succeed in learning.

Making Schools Smart

What all these schools have in common is that they are safe, loving, high quality learning environments based on current brain research, traditional culture, personal relationships, sound character development, high expectations and ongoing professional training. Rather than teach to the learning style of each under-achieving student, they reach all students by changing the environment. Lincoln, Lab and GTA, all have continuity of staff; most staff members have been on board for many years.

Grand Traverse Academy Stresses 3 Philosophies

- **Choice Theory** emphasizes seven positive habits and de-emphasizes seven harmful ones. On the positive side are caring, contributing, befriending, listening, encouraging, trusting and supporting. The harmful habits are judging, nagging, rewarding to control, criticizing, blaming, complaining and punishing. Consistent applications of the tenets of Choice Theory help students develop the social-emotional stability and sense of belonging necessary for academic success.
- **Integrated Visual Learning (IVL)** is a multi-disciplinary approach to maturation that combines the concepts and procedures of behavioral optometry with education and psychology. According to Ingersoll, unsuccessful students need to learn how to learn. He uses vision therapy with a cognitive finish to change students' learning and attention styles. IVL includes activities to enhance the emergence of visual competence and dominance, and to establish visual learning strategies.
- **The Smart Character Choices** curriculum promotes six traditional positive character traits: kindness, work ethic, responsibility, respect, optimism and cooperation. Students evaluate themselves and receive grades in each of these traits as well as in academics. The traits are woven throughout school protocols, lessons and culture.

Teacher Training

At GTA teachers spend two intensive weeks in late summer, several days in the fall, winter and spring and every Friday afternoon in training. GTA and Lincoln Elementary both hire teachers of high character and professionalism, provide them with professional development, and support them within an environment of choice, accountability and responsibility.

Multi-Aged Grouping and Total Physical Response

Ingersoll believes that delivering instruction by developmental level, as opposed to chronological age, encourages continuity of relationships. Students are grouped in three elementary classes, and traditionally in high school. Lower and upper elementary students stay with the same teacher and classmates for several years. Students progress seamlessly through the curriculum by mastery as opposed to arbitrary annual deadlines.

At GTA all ages learn Spanish with Total Physical Response (TPR), an instructional method that relies more on the association of physical gesture with functional vocabulary than on language theory and structure. The method is so effective that students who begin in the sixth grade can graduate from High School with three years of advanced placement college Spanish credit.

Building Design

The school's layout, including four-classroom-pods, each with individual restrooms, provides a homelike setting, and the right atmosphere to teach social protocols and avoid supervision problems. Because research shows that quantity and quality of light profoundly affect emotion, arousal and attention, paint colors are strategically selected and placed, and lighting fixtures provide plenty of natural and specific spectral quality light.

Customer Service

GTA views students and their parents as customers, and strives for quality in all interactions. Students and staff wear uniforms that promote connection and relationships. Positive communication about each student goes to each family monthly. Staff members daily usher children into their family vehicles with personal greetings to the parents. Frequent thematic car pool events provide entertaining opportunities for additional teacher/parent contact. A special "brief conversation with the principal" parking place allows parents spontaneous access to school leadership.

Class Businesses

In each classroom students learn entrepreneurship, financial management, economics, work ethic, cooperation and all about starting, maintaining and improving a business. Community professionals help students learn lessons about economics. Students frequently extend their business projects into community service. School/community cooperation benefits all participants.

Putting it All Together

According to Ingersoll, emotional stability, visual thinking and character training together enhance frontal lobe function, thus helping students to see future consequences of their actions. With the opportunity to make choices in a framework of belonging, traditional social norms, rules, and protocols that make sense, students learn to choose well. Having learned to make productive choices, they are able to pursue academic excellence.

At Grand Traverse Academy and Lincoln Elementary the message is clear: character, consistency, good science and traditional common sense produce the quality environment that children deserve and in which they can thrive. To learn more about and visit GTA, attend an Open House and workshop May 15-17. To hear George Albano speak on March 1st in New York City, along with DDR Executive Director, Patricia Lemer, e-mail jotis@leadershipinst.org or call 908.389.0016.