

Innovative Education at the Village School by Rise Richardson Director

Massachusetts prides itself on progressive education. Independent schools are incubators for innovative ideas and new directions in education. Small independent schools like the Village School are instrumental in trying new ideas, developing new curriculum, piloting new programs and putting in the many extra hours required to evaluate and refine new methods and curricula.

Many of today's new ideas in education have been pioneered by independent schools first. In the last 25 years, the Village School instituted the following programs and ideas that are beginning to take root in education today:

- **Outdoor play.** Studies prove that children think better with physical exercise and outdoor play. The Village School provides over 60 minutes of uninterrupted open-ended outdoor play every single day in all weather.
- **Differentiated instruction.** Teachers tailor instruction to meet individual needs. Small class sizes are always a priority, with the average class having a 1:8 teacher ratio and small group work is a daily occurrence in all subject areas.
- **Formative assessment.** Teachers conduct a range of formal and informal assessments, including the students' evaluations of their own learning, so that teaching can be modified on the spot as needed. Standardized tests are replaced with in-depth progress reports, work sampling, formative assessment and frequent conversations with parents.
- **Mixed age classrooms.** Two grades or more are combined, resulting in many opportunities for children to learn from each other and move at their own pace.
- **Experiential learning.** This is learning that sticks. We go hiking or cross country skiing or swimming every week. We go to local farms on a regular basis. We visit museums. As part of a year-long study of the Middle Ages, a class visits Great Britain, sleeping in castles, visiting Stonehenge and more. Older children perform in an annual play that they write together based on their immersion in a historical time period.
- **SE: Social-emotional learning: Kindness and responsibility.** These are embedded in the social curriculum. Children are taught beginning in preschool to be aware of their own feelings, to be aware of others, to learn how to express their feelings kindly and how to negotiate conflicts.
- **Cooperation.** Instead of focusing on competing against each other, children work in small groups and confer with each other, problem solving in math and science and discussing ethical questions that show up in fiction, non-fiction and history.
- **Growth mindset.** Carol Dweck's book *Mindset* elaborates on a strong tenet of the school: No one is born "smart," but we can all grow our brains' capacity to learn and to solve by making efforts, making mistakes, learning from our mistakes, and moving on to the next level of mastery.

- **Creativity.** Believing that all children are creative, we try to discover what moves each child, encouraging children to find their own passion. Examples include creating dances, artwork, poetry, and music, and writing and acting in an original play.
- **STEM and STEAM.** Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math are the foundation of the math and science curriculum, with pond and stream studies, year-long tree studies, chemistry, biology and physics woven in, work with local scientists, dance, small group math instruction, scale timber frame building and more.
- **Environmental awareness.** The school has a compost bucket in every classroom. We do recycling, gardening, car pools, and have direct connections with local farms and CSAs.
- **Mindfulness.** This is taught in the classrooms, as a way to stay focused in the present moment, and take regular stock of oneself. All age groups do yoga weekly.
- **Brain plasticity.** Scientific research shows that the brain is elastic and can grow with all kinds of learning. All children learn Spanish. All children learn to play recorder. All children learn to knit. All these skills develop different parts of the brain.
- **Direct contact with nature.** Children derive a strong sense of self and place from climbing trees, playing in mud and spending plenty of time in nature. Getting back to nature? We never left.
- **Hands-on.** It's how we teach because it's the best way children learn.

In teaching children, we seek a balance of physical, emotional and mental development, careful not to overemphasize one aspect to the detriment of another.

Some of these ideas were new 5 to 10 years ago. Local public schools have adopted some of these in the last 5 years, or are beginning to adopt them.

At the Village School, we have always been at the forefront of progressive education. We are gratified that trends in education are moving towards teaching children through hands-on, experiential and social based instruction, because that is how children learn best. The Village School continues to strive to find new ways to reach children and help them grow harmoniously. And our hope is to see more and more effective innovation woven into education in general for all Massachusetts children. The rising tide of educational progress lifts all boats, schools and children, for a better future for all.