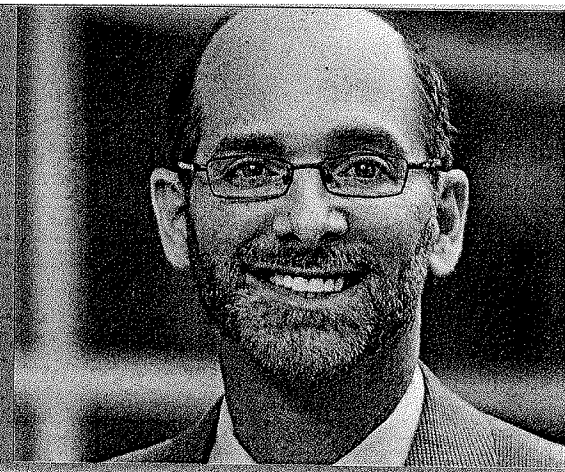


A REPORT
FROM THE
HEAD OF SCHOOL
Neal M. Brown



A parent of one of our graduates came to see me recently. She had attended her daughter's Back to School Night at one of the local high schools and wanted to share her thoughts about it. While the 9th grade teachers seemed capable, their presentations focused heavily on testing, grading, and homework. At Green Acres' Back to School Nights, she recalled, teachers' presentations demonstrated their excitement about their subjects and their approach to teaching. Green Acres teachers, she felt, were both inspired and inspiring. The contrast that she noted reflects a large problem in schools nationwide today—a problem that has garnered significant media attention recently. This attention is a cause for some measure of hope that change may be on the way.

In a September article in the *Washington Post*, superintendents from five school districts responded to the question, "If you had the power and resources to make one change in your school system, what would it be?" My favorite response, one unlike all the rest, read simply: "I want for our students what I want for my own children's education: I want them to be excited about learning and have fun in school. I want them to come home every day and say 'Guess what we did in class today?'"

While many schools across the country may not be catching on, a cadre of educators and researchers are beginning to ask the right questions. David Allyn posed in a recent *Huffington Post* blog, "Can Students

Love School?" His definitive "yes" emanated from his own experience growing up in a progressive school:

The school was dedicated to creating a warm, nurturing environment. . . . The arts flowed through every aspect of the curriculum. . . . We read novels in history, learned music in English, studied philosophy in math class, produced plays, made music, and had classes in painting every year that I can remember. . . . it was a magical place. We worked hard because it was rewarding to do so.

One could say that David Allyn experienced the difference between rigor—something we read a lot about these days—and vigor—something we typically see in progressive schools and desperately need in all schools. The Common Core State Standards, which are driving our nation's educational reform, are built upon the premise that rigor is what we need most.

Valerie Strauss, the past President of the National Council of Teachers of English, argues that what we want instead are vigorous classrooms. Her description of such classrooms could have been a description of our classrooms at Green Acres—"throbbing with energy, growth, and life." According to Strauss, students need "more than academic skills and knowledge, more than generalities and hypotheticals found in textbooks and workbooks." They need "activities that allow them to demonstrate learning in real contexts" in order to develop "intellectual intensity, precision, critical

alertness, expertise, and integrity"—habits of mind and character that we value and practice daily at Green Acres.

A recent *New York Times* article "Why Can't School Be More Like Summer Camp?" takes this argument to a new level. Why do so many children look forward to camp yet dread the beginning of school? Is it simply because school is hard and camp isn't? Or is there more to this equation? Author Barbara Rowley anticipates a common response by arguing, "This is not the stretch it may seem to be. While it is true that summer camps have some obvious inherent fun advantages over schools. . . . the real differences that set summer camps and schools apart have. . . . to do with attitude and approach." After all, camps routinely ask campers to accomplish difficult tasks, whether learning to swim or climbing a mountain. Yet camps are happy places, led by enthusiastic counselors who tend to inspire joy in others. In contrasting camp and school, Rowley writes, "Camps say to children: You are going to love this. Schools tell children: This is work, and work is not supposed to be fun. Not only is this a depressing life lesson, it is an uninspiring one." In my first year as Head of School, I bristled at hearing some students and parents say that Green Acres School felt more like camp. Now I embrace this comparison, because it reflects the joyful engagement our students need to learn.

We know from experience that we learn best when we are interested—

A Report from Head of School continued

when a topic or a teacher has sparked our imagination. John Dewey explained that “thinking follows interest,” and today a significant body of research is following suit. In Madeline Levine’s new book, *Teach Your Children Well*, she laments that today’s schools “throttle creativity.” In a particularly depressing passage, she writes, “Take a room full of five-year-olds and you will see creativity in all its forms positively flowing around the room. A decade later you will see these same children passively sitting at their desks, half asleep or trying to decipher what will be on the next test.”

That image is not what you will see at Green Acres. Here, you may see students riding across the Big Room on hovercrafts built in science class, using their iPads to create movies, developing their own photos, releasing Monarch butterflies that grew in their classrooms from chrysalises they collected, building robots they designed on their computers, composing original songs, designing bridges to withstand load-bearing tests, rehearsing original Greek plays in the Gully, building geodesic domes, or designing a system to stop erosion into the campus creek. There is no end to such examples of exciting and engaging learning at Green Acres School. Some of these examples may be familiar to you, and some may be new. What is consistent throughout our curriculum and our history, however, is that we do all that we can, every day, to nurture creativity and to inspire engagement so that graduates leave Green Acres School not only still thirsty to learn, but also equipped to pursue their learning in high school and beyond. Even if their next teachers and next programs are less inspired and inspiring, our graduates have the ability, desire, and habits of mind to sustain their excitement for learning.



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CREATIVITY*

An integral part of our children's educational process is the nurturing of "creativity". What is "creativity?" How important is it in the developmental process? How do we, as parents, find the appropriate blend of fun and enrichment that excite our children to become involved actively in the act of creating something new and uniquely their own!

In order to express themselves, be inventive, original, unique children need experiences in which they can use their imagination: to experiment with situations where there is no pre-ordained outcome, where there are not specific "right" or "wrong" answers.

In a sense all children are naturally inquisitive and creative. There may be differences in various talents and skills that each child possesses, but each can respond to the opportunity to explore materials and enjoy creating with them. Making things and making believe is an important part of the play process and fantasy, therefore, is a natural outlet for the imagination.

The creative process takes place when the child is faced with a wide variety of materials and has the opportunity to decide and choose how they will be used: simple and familiar objects can be combined inventively and unpredictably and lead to surprising outcomes and solutions. Most importantly these kinds of materials require a minimum of instruction or pre-conceived planning. Parents need to encourage this kind of play, and try to refrain from directing the project too explicitly! Uncritical appreciation of the attempt is more important than the finished product!

This kind of creative work is really problem-solving and specific skills can be taught during this process, but expecting too much of a child or asking a child developmentally not ready to master a complicated skill or task is inhibiting and a detriment to the spontaneity inherent in the creative process. The standards of our adult world should not be imposed on our children. Nor should art be used as a means to learn how to follow directions or to develop self-discipline. Creativity means breaking the rules and letting go! (There will be time enough later and in other circumstances for the development of these kinds of learning skills).

Children also should be allowed to make their own mistakes. Trial and error is often the best way to learn about the limitations and possibilities of materials. It's okay to suggest ways to work, but too many directions or warnings can inhibit the creative spirit and squelch the uniqueness and fun of the activity. Again, children get as much fun out of the process of this kind of creative play as that of the finished product.

As parents we can do a lot to encourage imagination and creativity in our children. The kinds of toys and materials we help select for them and the kind of non-judgmental, and at times non-directed, encouragement we offer are perhaps the most important ingredients.

* Extrapolated from a brochure included in a "creative activity kit" for children from:
CREATIVE ART ACTIVITIES, INC.
1600 East 23rd Street
Cleveland, Ohio 4411