



E-BINDER

Parents Council of Washington presents

2015 BEST PRACTICES PROGRAM

Re-thinking Success:

How Schools Define, Recognize and Encourage Students' Diverse Strengths

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

Parents Council President, Joan Levy, welcomed the speakers and attendees and thanked The Langley School for hosting as well as the co-chairs for organizing. She explained that PCW's annual Best Practices program presents a panel of experts to discuss their individual schools' experiences on a particular topic. Ms. Levy noted that PCW has been offering programs for 50 years that are instructive and useful to teachers, parents and the community. She highlighted a variety of features available through the PCW website, Facebook and ListServ pages such as resources, articles and announcements that provide valuable insights, share information and allow for exploration of issues relevant to parents.

Ms. Levy then introduced The Langley School's Assistant Head of School, Kathleen Smith, who also welcomed participants and mentioned that the PCW mission is firmly

in line with the school. Langley was founded in 1942 with a strong child-centered focus and parents have always been an important part of its mission.

Following Ms. Smith, Board Member Kathy Stallings opened the program by stating that success is a current topic of discussion in the news. What does it mean and what is the role of schools in addressing success for students? She then welcomed and introduced the three panelists from the Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, St. Andrews Episcopal School and The Potomac School who represented the Lower School, Middle School and Upper School divisions of their respective schools on the topic of defining success.

1. LOWER SCHOOL PRESENTATION

Mr. Scott Lawrence of Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart

After thanking the PCW for the invitation to speak, Mr. Lawrence indicated that the main focus of educators at Stone Ridge is on children, teachers, staff and parents and as he prepared for this presentation, he had pondered over the fact that he did not think that Stone Ridge did anything different from other schools. Schools are generally all passionate about education and children. Part of what makes Stone Ridge unique, however, is that it is a School of the Sacred Heart and within a network of 200 schools worldwide. That allows schools to view different perspectives and share different experiences. Founded in 1800, all Schools of the Sacred Heart were guided through the vision of St. Madeleine Sophie Barat to educate and empower young women to lead and serve through lives of purpose that integrate five goals of education:

- A Personal and Active Faith in God
- A Deep Respect for Intellectual Values
- A Social Awareness which Impels to Action
- The Building of Community as a Christian Value
- Personal Growth in an Atmosphere of Wise Freedom

Having approached Lower School faculty members about how they might define, recognize and encourage success, he stated that they spoke of the five goals and how the purpose is embedded within the school. In addition, they reflected on how the five goals operate differently at the lower, middle and upper school levels. The faculty felt that respect, response, resilience and resourcefulness also represented a portion of a successful student.

Within those four areas, it is recognized that the definition of success is different for each student and requires the need to understand individual gifts and that strengths and challenges exist. Identifying that while emphasizing personal growth through the individual choice model and curriculum modification can be accomplished through a learning strategy program by:

- Clearly defining learning expectations and communicating them to parents and students. The expectations are grounded in the respect for intellectual values.
- Social Service is emphasized at a young age and is inherent in Stone Ridge's education. Education is for the benefit of others and not just to serve yourself.
- Building community as a learning family and focusing on growth. Traditional grades do not exist in the Lower School, instead it's all about the celebration of how children are growing and changing.
- Coaching teachers to reach and teach all learners, support students who may need remediation and stretch girls at the top to move to the next level.

To encourage forms of success and emphasize strengths and goals, conferences and goal setting help students. They also receive personal attention through small classes translating to a high level of participation in academic areas and other arenas. Questions posted in classrooms guide students and promote self-advocacy: Why are you learning this? Why is it important? What are you going to do if you need help?

A social curriculum is also encouraged where it is recognized that it is as important as the academic curriculum. Lower School classrooms are "responsive" classrooms where

students are held accountable to social interactions. It dictates how Stone Ridge integrates students in school and faculty is trained in Responsive Classroom.

Stone Ridge's work is standards based at a high level of performance. The school wants the girls to internalize the Five Goals and this is achieved in a variety of ways. Mr. Lawrence shared one specific approach called Primes. It is special weekly assemblies that emphasize the Five Goals of a Sacred Heart education by recognizing students for their modeling of the goals.

Primes is a unique, formal assembly tradition that dates back 200 years. It is held each Monday morning where each teacher reads a citation that narrates for the student body which two girls from a classroom has demonstrated adherence to the Five Goals. The students are reminded of what it looks like to make wise decisions and the girls are awarded a "très bien" citation. The certificate encourages excitement for peers, not disappointment for themselves.

Prize day and field day are other events at Stone Ridge that recognize success within the Lower School.

Another aspect of reaching success is through goals to serve Stone Ridge families. Faculty members have opportunities to help families as "balance coaches" to make sure that there is balance in the lives of the children. They spend time with parents to ensure that the community knows that success is also about balance. Efforts are made to meet with parents to connect. Clear communication with parents and the community through regular newsletters and e-mails is key for them to know how the students are growing, where they need support and what they are doing well.

The Lower School encompasses celebration and joy in everything we do. Mr. Lawrence spoke of having the best job in the world. Students come to a place where they will be challenged academically and act as participants in the community to create joyful leaders who can serve with intellect and faith. A Sacred Heart education educates the

whole student and education should be serious in principles and rich in the life of love. Students should grow in wisdom, age and grace.

Mr. Lawrence ended his presentation with the following quote from Janet Erskine Stuart for the teachers. She wrote the first Sacred Heart curriculum, and understood what success in education represented.

“We bring up the children for the future, not for the present, not that we may enjoy the fruit of our work, but for others... Therefore, we must have to do with things raw and unfinished and unpolished... We must remember that it is better to begin a great work than to finish a small one. A piece of unfinished insignificance is no success at all. Our education is not meant to turn the children out small and finished but seriously begun on a wide basis. Therefore they must leave us with some self-knowledge, some energy, some purpose. If they leave us without these three things, they drift with the stream of life.”

2. MIDDLE SCHOOL PRESENTATION

Mr. Rodney Glasgow of St. Andrews Episcopal School

Mr. Glasgow opened by describing what he loves about Middle School: “When you think about Middle School, it is that point of development we all want to forget and we would if we could, but we can’t.”

He enjoys being in the midst of this developmental snapshot and to help parents understand what is taking place in the mind of a middle school student, he created a unique activity. He instructed attendees to think about what made them feel anxious about themselves that they didn’t want people to see upon arriving for the program. While thinking about that one specific anxious aspect, he asked everyone to hold their hand out flat and imagine a golf ball in their palm containing the anxious issue. Staying focused on the ball, he then instructed the audience to move their hand up and down while he began asking a series of questions that everyone answered out loud: $3+2$, 5×7 ,

who was the first President of the United States, who signed the Magna Carta, what is the symbol for iron? As the questions increased and people had more difficulty finding a quick response, he explained that the retrieval for answers becomes slower due to all of the thoughts swirling in our heads and the exercise, he noted, was a strong simulation to what goes on in the mind of a Middle School student constantly worried about many things.

In their own minds, Middle Schoolers tend to see themselves as emerging adults, not as children anymore. They are desperately seeking a need to improve and are afraid of failure. They think they have or should have all of the answers. It is a difficult situation for them and each student needs at least one adult at school who can be a trusted adult to talk to about school or what he/she is going through. Mr. Glasgow told the story of an Upper School student who after making an appointment to talk to him, stopped by and couldn't remember specifically what she had wanted to talk to him about. All she actually really needed was to talk and he happens to be the person at school she talks to. When a Middle School student also stopped by to visit, the Upper School student told Mr. Glasgow that she remembered being in Middle School and thinking she was old because she had reached a double digits' age, but now realized how foolish that looked. This is the way students feel in Middle School.

At St. Andrew's, Middle School isn't all about the academic achievement, but about knowing child development and what is in the minds, bodies and spirit of the Middle School child. Being open to all that is going on in the students' minds, bodies and spirit means they can be open to being educated. There is a focus on the brain and the school counselor reminds parents that students are growing faster and more than any other time in their lives aside from their first three years. Middle School is an exciting time and the moment when everything has clicked in.

St. Andrew's lets the students know that it is ok to be who they are and that they are at confusing times in their lives. Skills are not matched up yet and it is the teachers' jobs to prepare young students for the Middle School classroom with the skills to complete

tasks they need. They can do things, but not everything they think they can do. Mr. Glasgow added that it takes time coaxing some students to understand that they might not have actually turned in homework they thought they did. In their minds, they completed it and handed it in, but in reality, they didn't submit the work. The organizational and follow-through is key to academic success in Middle School. They are not yet too worried about grades and college, but make mistakes and begin to learn from them.

For most Middle Schoolers, there is the general idea that teachers are people that are "different." St. Andrews encourages students to see the teachers as approachable, as real people to make the students more comfortable with reaching out to them to get the help they need. One way the school tries to achieve that is by having the teachers sit with the students at lunch. It helps them stand out as real people to the students; they can relax with each other, meet with each other and get to know them better.

Because some students will require more help at times, Mr. Glasgow created an academic plan for all students with three Cs or a D. The plan is in place to recognize that the students can do better and will receive the help to do better. Even though teachers felt Cs were fine, Mr. Glasgow expressed that 70% of the material in three classes is not acceptable especially when parents are paying a lot of tuition. He wants to raise the bar for the students, but in a way that is achievable. The plan means "we are watching and caring for you" and trying to determine what is going on in that student's mind. Stronger grades could be a simple matter of adjusting or implementing a routine for a student and helping them understand the concept of time and time management. Mr. Glasgow assisted a student who was not turning in homework and whose grades were impacted. He set the student up to access the school's online system with his parents on Sunday evenings to check assignments submitted and bring any missed work to class on Monday. The student was able to move from an academic plan to honor roll by the end of the following trimester and knew that someone had been watching over him to make sure he was improving.

To recognize success in students, St. Andrews holds honor roll assemblies during the year. Students are honored academically, but some are also recognized on a numerical scale for the efforts they make. This allows more students to feel successful on different levels. The “effort grade” can consist of day-to-day learning, participation, note-taking and self-advocacy efforts. The school mandates that all students from A to D+ develop strategies to improve in these areas in every class. Each report card comment addresses a child’s strengths as well as weaknesses or challenges. With more students on the academic honor roll than the effort honor roll, the school realized that a student can display exceptional work, but output average effort. The effort honor roll idea is that students should also be proud of their efforts of sitting still, paying attention or being on schedule. It is an important achievement to recognize and encourage. Mr. Glasgow loves that St. Andrews defines success for honor roll in different ways.

One last success factor within the St. Andrews Middle School includes the social curriculum. Teaching content and community are equally important. If one is not addressed, the other falls apart. Mr. Glasgow spoke of an introverted student who didn’t like to speak but was very snippy when he did upsetting many around him. The school worked with him to own his insecurities and to learn how to work with teachers and others. One day on a tour, he introduced himself to a stranger and that was a big step for him. Mr. Glasgow made a gratitude circle and the student pointed to him and said thank you. He was an A+ student, but needed work on the social side.

For parents, the home-school partnership is most important to maintain in order to not lose students. Parents need to know that the school is keeping an eye on the students and the students need to know that there are adults who value them as individuals and will be there to help them fix what is not working.

3. UPPER SCHOOL PRESENTATION

Mr. Alex Thomas of The Potomac School

After thanking PCW for the invitation to speak, Mr. Thomas noted that Upper School intensity ramps up with grades and college expectations. At Potomac, the focus is less on those two things and more on learning and learning who you are.

While working on his presentation topic, Mr. Thomas thought of five essential questions:

1. What does the road to success look like?
2. How do students and parents talk about success?
3. How do we approach teasing success out of students?
4. How do we help identify students' strengths and goals?
5. How do we help students who are not the straight A students feel successful?

In the road we travel to success, the twists and turns induce anxiety, self-doubt and questioning. The destination is unknown, but it can be rewarding when you learn something from it. How did people in our lives react when we took our turns? Did they have perspective? Our reactions help determine how our students will gain resiliency. We need to remember that our own journey towards success worked out even when we did not see the path forward. The Upper School tries to provide students with the ability to allow flexibility as they change and discover new interests, to navigate the road. In the end, everything will work out even if it might not be exactly how they dreamed it or what they aspired to. The students need to be in the center of the discussion, not fitted into a pre-formed block.

When Mr. Thomas asks the 9th grade students how to define success each year, the responses are: high grades-get into college-know all the answers. When he recently asked the juniors, the first answers received were: perfect scores with a 4.0 GPA and 2400 SAT/36 ACT score-getting into a good college-getting into a good college with a

program I want. Mr. Thomas noted that the replies from high grades to perfect grades saddened him. One response of being happy and having stories to tell my children was laughed at until other students added discovering oneself, knowing who you want to be, what you want to do career-wise or what you do not want to be, discovering something new or something that you do not like. By the end of the conversation, they were talking about a successful student knowing who he or she was and not related to perfect scores.

How would Potomac define success? Academic achievement is one component, however the school is focused on graduating students prepared to lead exemplary lives and who value life-long learning. The intensity of academic learning is necessary, but trying to keep their attention off of the letter grade is also important. Potomac's goal and vision is to internalize learning independent of outside influences and ensure the students know how to handle it. Students need to understand and practice the point of learning in order to invest in long-term learning throughout their lifetime and one way to accomplish that is to help students understand how to deal with learning challenges and how to grow. Grades will follow.

How do parents define success? Mr. Thomas mentioned an article in *The Atlantic* entitled "Why Kids Care More About Achievement than Helping Others." [[web link](#)] The article pointed to the work of the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, which surveyed 10,000 middle and high school students about what was important to them. The study found that almost 80% of students ranked achievement or happiness above caring for others. The study authors found a "rhetoric/reality gap" between what adults tell children they should value and what adults show they should value through their behavior. The survey found that 96% of parents said they wanted to raise ethical, caring children, but 80% of young people said parents were "more concerned about achievement or happiness than caring for others."

The achievement message above all others is what is getting through to children. The happiness part was interesting to Mr. Thomas. He spoke of the tendency to fix problems and even out challenges rather than letting children grow through challenges and

supporting them with additional resources. Failure and struggles are necessary steps to achieve learning and success.

How do we tease success out of students? Potomac reinforces that (1) the work we do together is important, (2) the adults believe in students no matter what they do and (3) they can do what is expected of them if they invest in learning and put in the time.

By moving away from grades as markers of success, students can be fully present and prepared for learning. They get it in sports, music, drama, etc., and it is expected that they get it on the academic side. Taking care of the little things feeds the big things. The mind-set makes you better. Anyone can improve with guidance. Potomac addresses what happens when things do not go well, talks to the students about how to deal with challenges, failure, changing procedures and how to work smarter with the required effort-not just harder. Honing in on different ways to achieve a goal.

How does Potomac teach students to seek help if they run into difficulties? Resources are in place for them to tap into. The learning center, writing center, faculty, deans and advisors are all available, but the students have to actually move down that path on their own.

How does Potomac develop and identify strengths and goals? The school's messages spin and are organized around grade level retreats, grade level meetings, sports, clubs, etc. The advisory piece is the most important piece where students are at the center, one-on-one or within groups working together towards the goal of life-long learning. Teams of adults are in constant communication with parents and every student is known and known well by at least one adult on campus. Potomac seeks for students to want to share the great news and the difficult news. The trust from these relationships helps to guide the students, promote self-advocacy, identify the objectives of why they are doing what they are doing and whether it is working for the student. Success is a constant discussion, not the grade. Success at any given moment might be limited in space and time. How do I perform this solo next week? How do I learn this? How do I speak before that audience? The school helps the child define the milestones even as

those may change over time. Potomac wants the student to be able to develop the capacity to define, move the process forward and take ownership over the process of getting there. It is a skill set they will take with them beyond school.

What about those who are not as academically successful? Can they be successful? Yes they can, but it is tricky for all kinds of reasons. Mr. Thomas stressed that the school wants them to feel successful too and discussed six traits that make it work for them:

- Partner well with adults (seek out those who can help them) whether coaches/teachers or mentors;
- Accept working very hard for less robust results, do their best and do not measure themselves by their grades;
- Stay sharply focused on what it takes to learn and to acquire skills – focus on how to learn the growth of the progress not the grade;
- To stay positive, these students need to be celebrated and acknowledged for something outside of the academic grade – something for them to look forward to;
- Learn to be organized and match the study habits to their learning needs;
- Have caring parents who push them to do their best and who love them for who they are, not what grade they receive.

Mr. Thomas concluded that when alumni are asked what contributed to their success at Potomac, many reported that (1) finding an adult to talk to in high school was so important, (2) taking advantage of every opportunity, (3) taking care of each other, being invested in learning and being collaborative and (4) taking advantage of opportunities to reinvent yourself and giving your friends the space to change. Everyone has a shot of being successful; figuring out who you are and becoming that person is what makes a successful student.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: As a parent, how do you balance the importance of grades and growth with children while recognizing personal gifts and understanding challenges?

LS: Mr. Lawrence answered that from the lower school perspective, Stone Ridge tries to help parents understand it is about personal growth and responding to the challenges as learners. Growth and expectations should be celebrated over attainment. What are areas of difficulty for the child and what are not? The message for very young children should be focused on growth, individual gifts and purpose - not grades.

MS: Mr. Glasgow agreed and added that at the middle school level parents should set the bar accordingly. The student should define the upper bar. There was a student celebrated at St. Andrews this year who was receiving Ds and Fs because she did not have a routine at home. I needed her to get to a C level as a start. After working with her to make her understand that her transcript did not reflect her talent, she has now reached all Cs and continues to move up. I celebrate those Cs and what it means to her. She can now define her success since she was held accountable of her own expectations at the lower bar and reach much higher. Talk to your children and see where they think they can honestly be and discuss how to get there.

US: Mr. Thomas spoke that students are more mature at the Upper School level and that we want to make them reach the point where they can seek out and identify the resources they need to help them meet tangible goals.

Q: What is the impact on academic success given the social media our children face?

US: Mr. Thomas noted that some things have not changed. There were similar issues impacting us just as when we were in school. That factor has not changed, but the ideas have been amplified by social media. We try to get the kids focused off of what everyone

else is doing and make them understand that it is not relevant to their journey. I sit with my advisees and talk about accepting their individual trajectories through school, that they will be different from someone else's trajectories and try to get them to not compete against each other or what they think the other is doing. Someone may have more free time while you are in study hall or meeting with a teacher or in sports. Hurt, anger and frustration exists from social media. Instead of only five people hearing something that was said in person, now 2 million people hear it.

MS: Mr. Glasgow replied that in Middle School, they admit defeat because the students live in social media and it is not going to go away. In the past, if we did not get together with people we were missing out. Now if students are not on Facebook for 20 minutes, they feel out of the loop or talked about. In school buildings, students are not allowed to text or Google chat. Phones need to be in lockers. They can use his phone if they need to call a parent and we are trying to place value on face-to-face interaction and help students understand that privacy does not exist on social media and they need to treat it as such.

Q: You spoke about the importance of kids having a relationship with an adult at school that they can talk to, but how do more introverted students make those connections and seek out adults?

MS: Mr. Glasgow responded that 90% of the time at his school, the adults are talking and 10% are the students. Students know they are being seen and not being ignored. I check up on them every time I see them. By continuing to talk to them, they will turn around and talk to me when they need to. It's important that they do not feel invisible. The student trying to be invisible is the one who needs attention. I have to stop and listen to how they are doing.

US: Mr. Thomas said to find the person the child is most connected with to help whether a teacher or coach. At the Upper School level, we are constantly observing unobtrusively. Parents expect that we are watching and acting when needed.

Mr. Glasgow agreed that it can be any adult and to ask your children who that one person on campus is that they know they could easily talk to.

One parent attending the program added that she had similar problems with one of her children and worked on getting the child to reach out to teachers first by e-mail, then in person as the child became more comfortable with being her own advocate.

Q: In an increasing quantifiable world, the “mathematics” of success are more widely disseminated. It is hard to walk away from parents talking about college or other issues in an ambitious community. How do you address parents?

US: Mr. Thomas noted that Potomac tries to make sure parents accept that kids change, understand that their children’s path will not always be predictable and that it’s not a bad thing. Without that understanding and when parents are solely invested in the achievement culture, there is tension and it is more difficult. The message to be delivered is that a C in 9th grade Biology is not the end of the world. Maintain the focus on the long-range goal. It’s about the journey. However, the transcript and the student should match. If they don’t, there is a problem that needs more discussion. Keep asking if the goal is appropriate for the child. Let’s look at the better fit, the growth and the improvement. My message to seniors is that the college selection is not about a once in a lifetime event that will mark you forever. It may feel that way, but it’s not. You can always transfer.

Q: What are some ways that your schools celebrate alumni beyond where they go to college or after the next level?

LS: Mr. Lawrence stated that Stone Ridge sees alums as people to offer connections and provide a legacy – the scholarship, commitment, accomplishment. We celebrate alums for the experience, how women serve. Not the development side. We can roll out the honor roll of where they went to school, but we focus on what have I become and how I got there.

MS: Mr. Glasgow mentioned that St. Andrews' alumni are still in college, but they do come back to discuss what at St. Andrews makes them successful in college. We celebrate and like to hear what the alumni do with what we gave them.

US: Potomac has a robust alumni office that is tightly tapped into the alumni community. Past students return multiple times as there is a remarkable connection that is cultivated after they graduate. We want them to talk to current students about their journeys and show them how accomplished they are. It's not necessarily the big alumni names, but past students who took untraditional routes to show how different paths can lead to similar results.

Q: Meditation plays an important role today. Is this a strategy your schools are using to keep students grounded?

LS: Mr. Lawrence indicated that Stone Ridge offers yoga in Kindergarten with blocks and mats. We practice Espacio that allows children to find space within themselves first giving them the permission to be silent and not engage.

MS: Mr. Glasgow mentioned yoga and mindfulness are built into the classroom at St. Andrews.

US: At Potomac, Mr. Thomas stated that a yoga after-school program is in place and they are exploring mindfulness. We also try to teach the students moments of extended reflection.

Q: Are there policies or procedures for balancing the athletic success and academic success?

MS: At St. Andrews, Mr. Glasgow said that they understand the need to balance these two areas. People sometimes see the academic and athletic as separate, but they are not. We make sure the students realize both are related. All Middle School students play on a competitive sports team. That works for 90% of them, but for the remaining 10% it's a

challenge. If they are not performing academically, they are removed from a sports team. Sports are viewed as a part of the curriculum.

US: For Upper School students, Mr. Thomas spoke that they are mindful of the time and commitment needed for athletics and for academics. It's a balance to integrate athletics into the curriculum. The school recognizes that sports will get some into college so it's important to understand the whole perspective. We believe in trying new things and that may be stretching to some. Most important things is the question of identity – those who identify themselves as a soccer player, for example, cannot just identify as that. If something were to go wrong, it would be devastating. We try to get the kids to understand their identity holistically. We will celebrate your athletic talent, but we are not going to let you off the hook on the academic side simply because you are a good athlete. Academics, athletics and community service are all equally important. It's very important that students don't match with only one aspect of his or her identity, but that all parts are necessary to flourish.