



PCW Spring Speaker, Glenn Whitman

April 12, 2017

Holton-Arms School

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) Spring Speaker Event featured a discussion with Glenn Whitman, Director of the Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning at St. Andrew's Episcopal School (SAES), where he also serves as the Dean of Studies and teaches history. Mr. Whitman addressed an audience of 185 PCW member school parents, administrators and teachers, as well as members of the general public. Susanna Jones, Head of School, welcomed attendees on behalf of our host, Holton-Arms.

Whitman is the co-author with Ian Kelleher of *Neuroteach: Brain Science and the Future of Education*. He spoke to the PCW audience about research, learning and the child's brain.

Whitman began by demonstrating how different tools or exercises can affect learning. He played Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run" as the audience walked in, and passed out dollar bills to all. He challenged participants to avoid checking cell phones for the next hour (and if successful, they could keep the dollar). He made the point that he was using novelty and setting a happy mood through the use of music. Both have been shown to enhance learning. He said that attention + engagement + memory = learning. He argued that multitasking is a myth, and that it cannot be done without impacting efficiency and effectiveness.

Whitman said that 10 years ago SAES asked "What is the next frontier for teacher training, to taking great teachers (and their schools) and making them exceptional?" The school decided to look at "Mind, Brain and Education Science" (MBES) – a field incorporating cognitive science, developmental and behavioral psychology and educational theory. The goal was to make SAES the destination school for research-informed teaching, learning and leadership development. Now all teachers at SAES have gone through training in MBES. SAES also established the Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning. Whitman made the point that students will not reach their full potential unless teachers develop knowledge, skills and mindsets in MBES. He stressed how important plasticity is – the lifelong ability of the brain to change as a result of experiences. A key way to do this is to introduce struggle and challenge into the learning process, finding the "zone of proximal discomfort".

Whitman then turned to the idea of mindset. He emphasized that teachers need to encourage more than just a “growth mindset” in students. They also need to foster a “belonging mindset” (children must feel like they belong) and a “purpose mindset” (the belief that school work is valuable because it is relevant and connected to a higher purpose).

Whitman stressed that teaching needs to be tailored to the individual student. Teachers should not teach to the average, but rather the edges. Teaching should also engage multiple modalities to engage students.

Whitman said that schools must address the social and emotional components of learning. Negative emotions can cause the brain to “downshift” and lose focus on higher order thinking. Stress causes students to engage the reactive part of their brain, which hijacks their ability to learn. Whitman said that great teachers know that the amygdala is the gateway to learning.

Studies have shown that having a good relationship with a teacher is extremely important for learning. Whitman said “my teacher likes me” is the cheapest intervention in education. He urged schools to avoid labeling students with terms such as “smart,” “dumb,” “quick” and “lazy.” This can create a fixed mindset. In addition, schools need to consider the cognitive load (transitions for students during the day) and the amount of homework.

Whitman had the audience engage in an exercise to highlight the breadth of research in MBES. He said that research shatters several myths and in fact shows the following:

- Girls and boys do not learn differently.
- Left and right brain differences do not determine how much or what a child will learn.
- Multi-sensory instruction helps all kids. It is important not to pigeonhole children as “auditory, kinesthetic or visual” learners.
- Handwriting notes (when possible) leads to better memory consolidation.
- Reading hard copy (versus online textbooks) is also preferable, as it minimizes distractions.
- Peer relationships matter less in learning than the relationship a student has with his/her teacher.

Whitman closed by saying that 100% of teachers should be trained in brain science (most schools now are at about 30%) in order to allow teachers to maximize their effectiveness and students to achieve their highest potential. SAES is now at 100% due to the creation of and the work of the Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning.

To see slides from Whitman’s presentation, go to www.parentscouncil.org or for additional information go to www.thectl.org or contact gwhitman@saes.org.