



Lower School Forum Summary

Tuesday, October 26, 2021
Zoom Webinar

Theme: Differentiation in Learning

Welcome and Opening Remarks

PCW Board Member and event co-chair Suzanna Kang introduced the event and announced that there are poll questions to complete. PCW President Elizabeth Savage opened the event, providing a brief background of PCW and welcoming attendees. Cara Hur, PCW Board Member, introduced the program moderator, Cindi Gibbs-Wilborn. Cindi Gibbs-Wilborn provided brief remarks and an introduction of the three panelists:

- ❖ Cindi Gibbs-Wilborn, Head of School, Beauvoir School
- ❖ Andrew Kutt, Founder and Head of Upper School, Oneness-Family Montessori School
- ❖ Amy Oswalt, Head of Elementary and Head of Global Division, The Lab School of Washington
- ❖ Jordan Love, Co-Head of Lower School, St. Andrew's Episcopal School

Cindi Gibbs-Wilborn, Moderator

- Today's discussion focuses on the importance of the art of classroom differentiation and instructional differentiation.
- Most students receiving differentiated services in the school environment take place within the mainstream classroom with skilled teachers making sure learners are supported based on their strengths and lesser strengths.
- Differentiation truly does work best when students are not divided and assigned to like-ability classes, but when they work together so that strengths and lesser strengths can be supported.
- We know from experience that individuals can identify with a variety of learning styles or preferences depending on the activity.
- In the words of Maria Montessori, always remember to *Follow the Child*.
- Every child comes to school with a brain. It's the one equalizer that continues to grow until we leave this earth.

- Productive struggle and/or making mistakes are key to the learning process.

Andrew Kutt, Panelist, Social Emotional Learning and Character

- Connectedness is an integral aspect to social emotional well-being and health. The first level of connectedness is our connection with our feelings and inner world, the second is with our immediate community, and third is to our larger purpose in the world.
- Social emotional well-being lays the foundation for academic progress and success. Well-being means that students are in touch with who they are, feel good about themselves and are accepting of others. Well-being means physical, mental and emotional health. It also means work-life balance.
- A classroom / school environment where everyone is supporting each other is best for social emotional well-being, and also builds other skills like empathy and collaboration. When the focus is on each student's progress and self-improvement – rather than competition with others – students feel less stress.
- Each student has gifts and is on their own developmental pathway. Students need a balance of challenge and support. Too much challenge creates stress and the brain shuts down. Too little challenge and students become bored. Little successes release brain chemicals that make us feel good.
- Neither punishments nor rewards are effective in motivating students. Students do best when they are internally motivated. According to Daniel Pink, the three main motivations for humans are Independence, Mastery, and Purpose. Research shows that people are not actually motivated by short-term rewards, and that punishments are also not effective.
- Overcoming failure builds resilience and grit. As parents (and as educators) we often want to protect our children from failure and we can sometimes want to do our children's work for them. But our children benefit the most when they independently do their work, learn from process, and move through the ups and downs.
- Character means how you want to show up in the world. Character is something that is learned. Attitudes such as inclusion or exclusion are formed at a very young age (preschool). We all play a role in the development of positive character traits in our children. Character is best taught through stories of lives well-lived and through positive reinforcement.
- Sources mentioned include: *Dan Siegel - The Whole Brain Child / The Teenage Brain / Mindsight*; *Alfie Kohn - Punished by Rewards*; *Daniel Pink – Drive*; *Angela Duckworth – Grit*; *Linda Kavelin-Popov - The Virtues Project Educator's Guide*.

Amy Oswalt Panelist, Language Literacy

- A learning difference is something unexpected in a particular area of learning given the overall cognitive profile. The brain and body can require non-traditional, unique, or individualized methods of instruction to maximize their learning potential.
- Developing relationships with students is a key way to support their learning. We want students to feel comfortable and safe to take risks in their learning environment.

- Systematic, scientifically based reading instruction benefits all learners not just students with identified learning differences in reading, e.g., the *Science of Reading*, Orton Gillingham Approach.
- A learning difference does not mean that a child is not smart and capable. It means they may need to be taught in non-traditional ways.
- Make fun a habit. Fun is not the opposite of rigor. Fun does not equal frivolous. Fun is a necessary component in learning.

Jordan Love, Panelist, Math Literacy

- All students can learn mathematics to a high level and benefit from mathematics instruction that is visual, concrete, and modeled in multiple ways.
- Our brains are designed to think visually about mathematics and spatial thinking is one of the central building blocks to success with mathematics and science. Evidence suggests that spatial ability can be built at all ages of education, and doing so can improve a range of STEM-related factors. Spatial relationships start very early in development.
- Support “grappling” and value struggle by having your child explain their thinking and prove their approach to promote deeper understanding and brain growth. Making mistakes is critical to growth. If you’re not making mistakes, you’re not growing.
- Memorization, or fluency with foundational facts, helps free up active memory to work on more complex problems. Memorization should not be prioritized or replace instructional approaches that are multi-modal and focus on conceptual understanding.
- Early instruction and early intervention is key. Differentiation matters because we know we can change the brain. In doing so, we can be better designers of our classrooms. We can create a better learning environment for all children by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression. There is a range of motivation building on children’s unique interests and truly knowing each child. Multi-modal and multi-sensory experiences speak to all learners.
- Effective scaffolding and support is at the heart of differentiation. The scaffolding for one child will be different from scaffolding for another child.
- Math talk is a language, a vocabulary, and a syntax that must also be taught along side logic. The idea is to have children move deeper, not faster. Fluency and automaticity are important, but being fast is not as important as having depth.
- There is a distinct link between emotion and cognition. A student’s sense of belonging and connection is a necessity for learning. *Belonging mindset* > growth mindset.

A question and answer session followed the presentations.

PCW Board Member, Sharon Bahador, thanked the moderator and panelists and shared PCW’s mission.