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The Park Parent

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Educational Trends: Park's Place in the Big Picture

BY PAM MATHEWS, *Park Parent Editorial Board*

In August, I sat down with Jerry Katz for a wide-ranging conversation about the broader issues in the world of education and how they impact what happens at Park School. Jerry identified four areas for discussion: the continuing challenges facing many public schools, the legislative and political response to these challenges, opportunities to learn from best practices at other schools, and the evolution of the teaching profession.

CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Many public school systems in the United States are working hard, but struggling to meet the needs of the students they serve. Jerry strongly believes that "we are all impacted by the continued

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Park Community Forges Connections with Local Schools

BY STANLEY SHAW AND SARAH KEATING, *Park Parent Editorial Board*



Park's 2010-11 Steppingstone Scholars pose in the library.

Karen Snyder Photography

Budget cuts. Achievement gaps. Child poverty and hunger. As parents at Park, reading about the litany of challenges buffeting Boston area public schools brings mixed emotions.

We may breathe a collective sigh of relief that our children learn in an environment largely buffered from these forces, but may also wonder if our kids' experience could become too insular.

The vast majority of our children's peers – their future friends, colleagues, and even rivals – attend public schools. And for every gleaming, well-funded suburban school, there

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challenges facing the public schools; we should all be concerned.” Each of us in the Park community lives among the 99 percent of children and adults who are educated in public schools. Jerry sees Park as very much a part of a bigger web, rather than “in a cocoon.” In the words of the National Association of Independent Schools, Park must seek to be “a private school with a public purpose.”

A goal of the Park community is to raise a generation of kids who care about the broader education of the country. Jerry thinks that a good way to do this is by getting involved with schools and organizations that are working to provide new opportunities to public school students. Several current relationships are addressed in this issue with the article, “Park Community Forges Connections with Local Schools.” “Park will self-consciously seek out additional partnerships,” says Jerry. He sees a specific opportunity to partner with public charter schools around professional development and possibly sharing interns.



LEGISLATIVE AND POLITICAL RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The struggles of public school systems have resulted in a demand for accountability from communities and lawmakers. To date, this has primarily played out with an increase in standardized testing to measure both student achievement and teacher performance. While Park has always worked to continuously improve student assessments and teacher evaluations, the school has so far remained free of a barrage of testing and a “teach to the test” mentality. However, according to Jerry, “the demand for accountability will continue to infringe on Park. It will become more important for us to document our ‘added value’ in academics. We will need more than ERBs and secondary school placements statistics to do this.”

Jerry also thinks it is likely that the United States will adopt a national curriculum in the near future and that this will influence curriculum development at all independent schools, including Park. It is easy for an independent school to have a unique, flexible curriculum when there are 50 different sets of state standards. However, in the event of a national curriculum, independent schools will need to pay attention to and measure their offerings against the national curriculum. Park also needs to pay attention to global curriculum development, especially in countries that demonstrate strong academic results. In Jerry’s view, “Our kids need to be prepared to move about the country and the world.”

LEARNING FROM BEST PRACTICES AT OTHER SCHOOLS

It is important to note that there are many successful schools and that Park can and will continue to learn from best practices outside of its own walls. When Jerry came to Park School from the Newton public school system in 1993, he saw opportunities to improve the strength of the curriculum in some areas, to increase community diversity, to further integrate technology, and to improve teacher training and instruction through more professional development. This assessment was based on his experience in Newton, and many of his initial ideas and plans came from his network of colleagues and mentors in the public schools.



Park’s current strategic plan is focused on continuing to look outward, both locally and globally. Jerry encourages Park to seek more partnerships and greater collaboration with successful schools of all types. These “cross-overs” bring adults in education together. Jerry explains: “In the past, ‘independent’ could mean both autonomous and isolated; self-satisfied and not focused on continuous improvement. Park does not want to be insular, not paying attention. Looking outward reflects the current desire of the world of independent schools; we are all measured on this during the accreditation process. Competition and cross-fertilization are important.”

EVOLUTION OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

In the United States, with state and local budgets under growing pressure, there has been increasing discussion about the value of public service in general and about the value of teachers specifically. Jerry discerns two competing messages:

- Bad teachers are the cause of bad education; we need to hold teachers more accountable for poor results.
- In order to improve education, we need to treat teaching as a real and valued profession, with higher compensation and more opportunities for continued learning.

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EDUCATIONAL TRENDS

Jerry notes that in countries with very strong public schools like Japan, Korea, Finland, and Germany, there is a real investment in teachers and their professional development – not only during out-of-school time but during the school day. Elementary school teachers in these countries have, on average, ten hours for collaboration, visits to other classrooms, and visits to other schools during school hours.

Park values teaching as a profession, and Jerry feels this is critical to our long-term success. He also notes that perhaps due to negative talk about teachers

and definitely because of the lower pay scale for teachers (as compared to other professions), the number of young people going into teaching continues to decline. Over the next decade, schools will face pressure to attract and retain teachers. By creating an attractive place to work, paying attention to compensation, and investing in professional development, so far Park has been able to grab

“the cream of the crop” of teachers and plans to continue doing so. However, the increasing scarcity of teachers will require a sustained commitment by Park and is likely to create significant challenges in the larger community of all independent and public schools.

As I was putting my notebook away, Jerry asked that I close this article with these thoughts and a request to parents: “Each generation has its mix of educational trends to deal with. All present their own challenges; all present opportunities. This is an exciting time to be in education; we know more about

how the brain works and how students learn; we have the support of amazing technology. It is also an exciting time to be a parent. I encourage parents not to wring their hands when faced with the bigger societal problems. Instead, be aware, and join Park in leaning into the challenges.” 🌱

// **Our kids need to be prepared to move about the country and the world.”**

– Jerry Katz