

## Joyful Learning



Reflecting on how I might capture the discovery, growth and joy in learning that I am privileged to witness, spanning our early education through fifth grade classes, a metaphor came to mind, and it is one for which I can take zero credit. My colleague, Kristen Sutich, and I recently attended an inquiry-based teaching training led by Kimberly Mitchell, an education professor at the UW. She likened student-centered classrooms to rivers. They are free-flowing, dynamic, and empowering. There is an urgency to them, and yet they are peaceful. They are inspiring. However, she reminded us, a river is reliant upon its banks to flow. Paradoxically, a river's banks are liberating structures. Environment matters a great deal.

As I extended the metaphor to GHA, wondering what the environmental distinctives that facilitate inspired learning might be, a few ideas emerged. One is a literal interpretation of our environment: our campus. We sit on this idyllic slice of Gig Harbor with endless opportunities to use outdoor places as provocation for learning. Second: our community. We are uniquely intimate. Your children are seen. They are known. Yet, this sense of belonging is matched by a sending. Our world is in desperate need of compassionate and critical thinkers, and the formation of these habits of mind is the call we heed as educators. Finally, I think of our craft. What I am picturing here is the sweet spot where the art and science of teaching meet, imbued by a shared set of values and vision held by our faculty and staff.

Linger around GHA on any given day and you are going to get glimpses of this. From our youngest learners romping around the wetlands trail, reading a story with pages that have been hung from the limbs and branches of trees lining our magical trail, thanks to the ingenuity of Diana Nold ...

to the opposite end of the developmental spectrum ... the other day I saw a fifth grader who had identified a real problem and was encouraged by his teacher, Jeff Funk, to freely explore it and search for solutions. For context, the student was troubled by a puddle of rain that gathers after heavy downpours where the ramp meets the covered pavilion. "Breaking from curriculum" enabled this child to experience the gifts of time, space, wonder, curiosity and relevance, as he applied a whole host of analytical and evaluative thinking skills. I could, of course, highlight what happens in my corner of GHA in first grade, as I have come to determine that six and seven year olds are the bravest and brightest thinkers, but you will have to find me one day and I will happily share stories of their hysterical and insightful antics.

*-Megan Snow,*

*First Grade Teacher, Gig Harbor Academy*