

Learning to Love

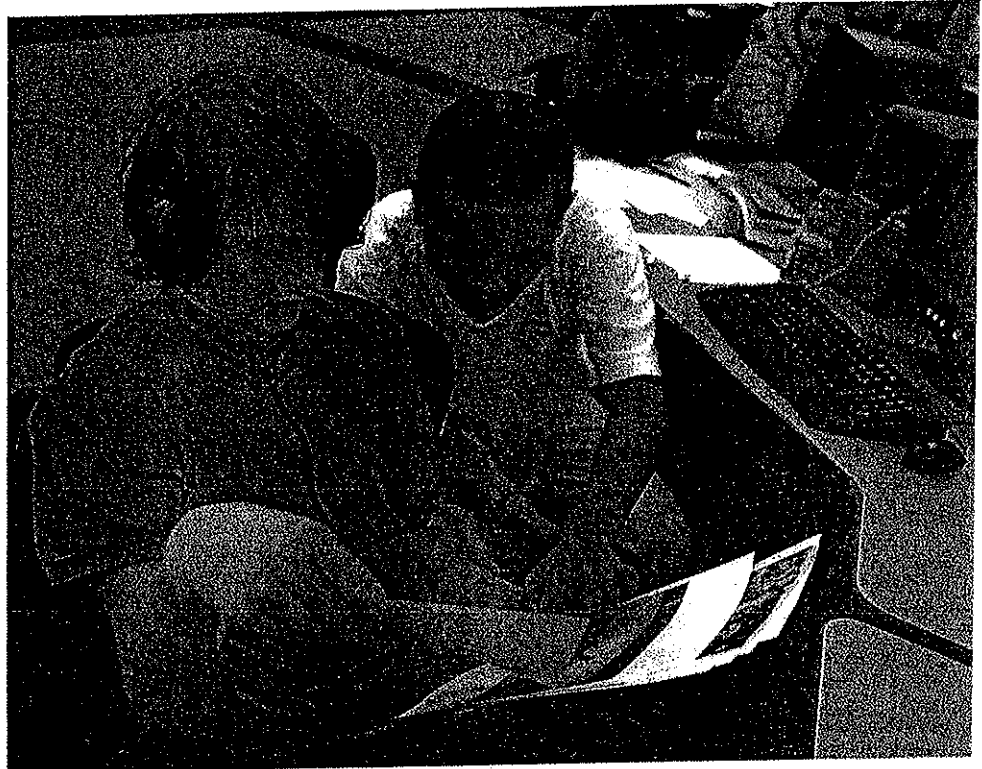
The Met School meets students' needs by building a holistic education experience around each individual student's passions.

**Ben Castleman
and Dennis Littky**

Joe looked attentively at his textbook while the teacher lectured about Spanish verb conjugation. But Joe wasn't really paying attention. Instead, he was absorbed by the *manga*, a Japanese comic book, tucked neatly between the pages of his textbook. Joe wasn't causing a disruption, nor was he particularly behind in class—everything the teacher was lecturing about was covered in the previous night's homework.

Joe was so absorbed in the comic that he didn't notice the teacher walking around the classroom. When she saw what he was reading, the teacher confiscated the comic and would only give it to Joe at the end of the day. Next class, when Joe again read the comic instead of following the lecture, the teacher ripped it up. Joe finally realized that he could neither win his battle with the teacher, nor afford to keep paying for new mangas.

Joe received several messages from this interaction:



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MET SCHOOL

For the good of our children, we need to start with the student, not the subject.

■ There is no room for my individuality. I must do what all the other students are doing, even if I am ahead of the rest of the class.

■ What I am interested in does not matter. I am responsible for learning only what is presented in the teacher's lecture.

■ I do not get a voice in designing my own education. I learn what the teacher and school say I need to learn.

■ The teacher is the instructor. I am the learner. The relationship does not

extend beyond that.

Joe's Spanish teacher was by no means at fault. She had 45 minutes to teach 25–30 students. After one group left, another came in. This happened several times a day. Next year, she would have an entirely new group of 150 students. Her department chair and principal were evaluating her on whether students learned Spanish grammar and syntax, not on whether they were motivated, independent learners.

Learning

The structure of school often does not allow for a holistic approach to education. For 45 minutes, students learn math. Then a bell rings, math learning stops, and students learn science for 45 minutes. There is little integration between subjects, nor is there much effort to connect what students are learning with the real world. Will this fragmented approach to education prepare our children for the realities and demands of the workplace and life?

A Child-Centered School

Decades ago, A. S. Neill sought to develop schools that would allow young people to flourish. Neill, writing in *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (1960), said, "We should allow children freedom to be themselves . . . my view is that a child is innately wise and realistic" (p. 4). At Summerhill, students had the freedom and flexibility from an early age to explore what interested them. Neill esteemed student

happiness as a primary educational goal and created a culture of love and approval that would encourage students to thrive.

As a 14-year-old, Joe would not have been able to put this desire into words, but freedom, support, and approval were the very things he wanted from his school. He is full of creativity, curiosity, and passion for learning, but in 9th grade his school provided him no opportunity to explore the things he was passionate or



curious about. He grew weary of going from class to class and lost interest in coming to school. As Joe put it,

My school wasn't trying to deal with students at all. I was studying things that people felt I should study, not what I had an interest in. When I worked really hard on an independent project and did a good job, the teacher refused to believe I had done it on my own.

Joe and his parents recognized that if he were going to graduate and go to college, he needed a new school environment, so Joe came to the Met Center (www.themetschool.org) in Providence, Rhode Island. The Met is a public high school that operates with the same funding as other schools in the city. We are organized quite differently, however. Every student has an individual learning plan that outlines an entire high school education centered on that student's interests, strengths, and areas that need improvement, both academically and personally. Starting in 9th grade, every student spends two days a week at a real-world internship connected to a personal passion. Under the guidance of their internship mentor, students learn all their academic content through projects that tackle authentic problems the mentor is actually facing.

Individualized Attention

When students come to the Met, they join a 15-student advisory with whom they stay throughout high school. The group's advisor is responsible for every aspect of these students' education and personal growth. Of course, advisors do not know enough about every student's interests to teach everything students want to learn, nor do they have the clinical skills to help them address the personal obstacles in their lives. The advisor's role, therefore, is to gather as many resources as possible to help

students explore their interests and grow.

When Ben, who was Joe's advisor, first noticed Joe reading a manga in advisory, he asked Joe to tell him about mangas. Joe was a quiet person by nature and until this time had only offered a word or two in response to Ben's questions. When asked about his mangas, Joe looked Ben in the eye and told him all about his family friend who lived in Japan and turned him on to the comics. Ben could hear in Joe's voice a passion



that he had not heard before. This eagerness to learn is the force the Met strives to harness in students.

Japanese became the passion on which Joe's entire high school experience was centered. Joe and Ben worked together to find a Japanese class being taught in Providence. A teacher at a local high school let Joe sit in on her class. Six weeks later, she reported that Joe knew more than her students who had taken Japanese for an entire year. Joe then audited a year of intermediate Japanese at Brown University and received a letter from the professor saying he would have received an A and was one of the best students in the class. Ben and Joe also found online pen pals Joe could correspond with to practice his Japanese.

Joe's parents and church community helped him raise \$10,000 to go to Japan and live with a host family for a year when he was in 11th grade. During his

senior year, he was hired by an online comic book company to translate Japanese comics into English. He is now a junior at Brown University, where he has studied several languages and is majoring in anthropology.

The teachers at the Met are neither better teachers nor more patient people than Joe's Spanish teacher at his first high school; they just have the benefit of working in a school designed to create an education for each student as a

holistic person. Joe was one of only 15 students Ben worked with for four years. Ben had the time to really get to know him, as well as the flexibility to adapt to Joe's interests and abilities. Thus, Ben was able to create a high school experience for Joe that deeply engaged him and sparked an interest that he has passionately pursued on the collegiate level.

Joe's story is not unique at the Met. Other students who come to the Met disillusioned with school find ways to explore their own passions.

For example, a student who wanted to be a marine biologist got to design an experiment assessing the effect of alkalinity on salmon growth at a fish hatchery. This project opened the door to an internship at the New England Aquarium in Boston. A Latina student who wanted to become a doctor collected donations of thousands of dollars worth of medical supplies and took them to a hospital in the Dominican Republic for her senior thesis project. Because we provide tremendous care and attention to individual students and give them the opportunity to meaningfully connect with adults and explore their interests in the real world, students learn to love coming to school.

Success That Shows

Over the past 10 years, the city schools in Providence have had an 80 percent daily attendance rate and a 55 percent

graduation rate (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2006). The Met, however, has had a 94 percent daily attendance rate and a 95 percent graduation rate. Over seven graduating classes, 99 percent of Met graduates have been accepted to college. Eighty percent have enrolled immediately after high school; of this group, 70 percent have graduated or are still studying. Yet 75 percent of our students are low income, and 75 percent are the first in their family to go to college. For three consecutive years, we have achieved adequate yearly progress, and in 2006, we were commended by the governor for our state assessment scores (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2006). In 2000, the Gates Foundation gave the Big Picture Company, the nonprofit that started the Met, funding to start and sustain personalized high schools around the United States. There are now 45 schools in the Big Picture network (www.bigpicture.org).

All seniors at the Met give a senior speech in which they reflect on who they have become in their time at the school. Joe had this to say in his reflection about his Met experience:

It seems as though the advisor's job over the past few years wasn't just managing the advisory team but slowly and steadily molding us into all around better people who'd be ready for whatever the future was scheming behind our backs. My work was important, sure, but so was how I was feeling, how I was coping with the world around me. The bottom line wasn't that the looming mountain of work needed to get done; it was getting me back on track and satisfied with myself to the point where I could tackle that looming mountain of work and the fast approaching real world as well.

When we start with students' interests and create an education that considers how students best learn and who they are as individuals, we cannot help but achieve far greater outcomes—the most important of which is our students' happiness and love of learning.

For me, the child is a veritable image of becoming, of possibility, poised to reach towards what is not yet, towards a growing that cannot be predetermined or prescribed.

— Maxine Greene

Making Local Changes

Too many schools are not set up to give students an education that teaches them to love learning and takes their individual needs into account. Schools continue to apply a one-size-fits-all instructional method, despite the growing evidence that suggests students learn in many different ways (Gardner, 2006; Sternberg, 1996). If our belief in supporting the whole child speaks to you, here are some actions you can take to improve education in your community:

- Build in structures that personalize learning. Create an advisory system in which students spend time each week with the same advisor and group of students throughout high school. Make learning plans for each student. Give students a voice in what they would like to learn and provide flexibility in the school schedule so they can explore these interests.
- Enable students to explore their interests in the real world. Start with summer or senior-year internships, where students explore an interest with a mentor in the community.
- Find like-minded people in your school or community. Reach out to parents, community groups, and college students. Start a reading and discussion group.
- Attend a conference where you can

meet like-minded people from other areas. Big Picture, for example, hosts an annual conference in April that focuses on personalization.

- Start a school. Many communities, both rural and urban, are looking for models that will engage students, make learning relevant, and prepare students for life after high school.

The Schools We Need

Business leaders are increasingly complaining that high school and college graduates are not being taught the skills that they actually need to lead successful professional lives. These leaders are less concerned about whether graduates know Spanish grammar, geometric proofs, or what year the Boer War was fought than they are about whether graduates have other, far more holistic skills. To be successful in the 21st century, students need to know how to establish a work ethic, communicate verbally and in writing, work directly with and influence people, synthesize information, and creatively solve problems.

For the good of our children and our future, we cannot continue to fragment education, reducing it to disconnected individual parts. We need to start with the student, not the subject. ■

References

- Gardner, H. (2006). *Multiple intelligences: New horizons*. New York: Basic Books.
- Neill, A. S. (1960). *Summerhill: A radical approach to child rearing*. New York: Hart.
- Rhode Island Department of Education. (2006). *Infoworks! Measuring Rhode Island schools for change*. Available: www.infoworks.ride.uri.edu/2006/default.asp
- Sternberg, R. J. (1996). *Successful intelligence*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Ben Castleman (bcastleman@metcenter.org) is Director of Curriculum and Innovation at the Met Center. **Dennis Littky** is Codirector of the Met Center and the Big Picture Company, 325 Public St., Providence, RI 02905. Littky is the author (with Samantha Grabelle) of *The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone's Business* (ASCD, 2004).