

11/13/2012

## **MISSION STATEMENT OF THE GRAHAM AND PARKS ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL**

*As voted on during the November 20th, 2008 Steering Committee Meeting. Revised to delete reference to grades 6,7,8 reflecting school district changes effective SY2012 -13, in which G&P became a grade JK through grade 5 school.*

### **Our Mission**

The mission of the Graham and Parks Alternative Public School is to educate the whole child: to help every child in our school fully develop his or her unique intellectual, social, and emotional capabilities. Believing that all children can meet high standards and become lifelong learners, we foster a child-centered learning environment in which children build upon their individual strengths while always being challenged to expand their skills and reach for new goals. Because curiosity and focused inquiry drive genuine learning, we strive for a classroom experience that engages children as active learners who take full ownership of their educations. And we pursue our mission as a democratic school community that values and relies upon the ideas, experiences, and talents of all our members, working together—teachers, students, parents, administrators, and staff.

### **Why “alternative”?**

The Graham and Parks Alternative Public School was launched in 1972 as the Cambridge Alternative Public School (CAPS). Parents and teachers joined together to start the new school, striving to provide a child-centered, inquiry-based alternative to the traditional schools then prevalent in Cambridge. In 1981, CAPS merged with the Webster School, a traditional school in Cambridgeport, and was renamed the Graham and Parks Alternative Public School after Rosa Parks, an inspiration for the modern civil rights movement, and Sandra Graham, a Cambridge city councilor and local activist.

Graham and Parks remains an “alternative” school because we remain committed to a vision of education in which children’s natural curiosity about the world around them, guided and honed by teachers who are themselves passionate about learning, acts as the driving force. We seek out, develop, and apply teaching methods that help children to achieve high standards in ways that fit their individual learning styles and honor the unique experiences and perspectives they bring with them from their homes and families.

Our school's long history as an alternative school within a public school district—meeting the goals and standards prescribed for public schools while our principal and teachers work together to shape the ways in which we meet them—is quite unique and something that we cherish.

### **How we put our beliefs into practice**

At Graham and Parks we put our beliefs about education into practice in three crucial areas: in the classroom, in our community, and in our form of governance. We see these three facets of our school as intimately related to one another.

#### **Classroom**

The blending of children's interests and curiosity and teachers' knowledge and curiosity is where the learning process begins at Graham and Parks. For teachers, child-centered, inquiry-driven learning means a deep commitment to going beyond "the book" and a willingness to continually reexamine and renew the what and the how of teaching, across the curriculum. Along with our democratic and collaborative culture and governance, this commitment drives Graham and Parks' alternative approach.

"Project-based learning" is an example of the kind of teaching and learning Graham and Parks teachers pursue, even though it does not define the alternative approach. Project-based learning is one important method at Graham and Parks because it weaves together different ways of learning (tactile, spatial, visual, verbal, numerate, individual, collaborative, etc.) and different kinds of knowledge (language arts, science, social science, mathematics, music, arts) on a path toward lasting knowledge of an inherently fascinating topic such as ancient humans, democracy, or the native countries and cultures of our students. When done right, project-based learning is not only engaging, joyous, and interesting for students and teachers but also well-planned and rigorous, with finished projects children will remember and be proud of.

Our vision is that every aspect of teaching at Graham and Parks, whether we call it "project-based learning" or something else, reflects this weaving together of the many ways of learning and the many kinds of knowledge, based in the certainty that all children want to learn and succeed. As an integral part of this approach, our teachers consider the individual learning styles of each and every child in designing the curriculum and working with students to adapt the curriculum to each child's needs, in pursuit of success in school for all.

We challenge our students with goals such as “ask good questions and always push your own thinking forward”; “pursue your own understanding rather than receive information”; “push yourself to the highest possible standard through revision and attention to detail”; and “see the complexity of issues, look for multiple perspectives, make connections, ask why.” By setting these goals, we build habits of active learning that will serve our students well throughout their school years, and their lives.

As part of our alternative philosophy, we supplement standardized tests with other forms of assessment including portfolios and presentations. We use all of these assessments to foster intellectual rigor and high standards for all—and to engage each child in measuring the quality of his or her work. Although the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and standardized tests have required our teachers to align the teaching plans they create with these structures, we believe that with careful planning, our teachers can meet the requirements and sustain our innovative, multidisciplinary, child-centered, curiosity-driven approach to learning. Testing tempts us to focus on specific achievements in specific areas, such as math or language arts. The key to the alternative approach is maintaining all the connections between children’s many ways of learning and the kinds of knowledge we share with them.

## **Community**

Our approach to education at Graham and Parks makes it important that we build a strong school community. The atmosphere of a school is crucial to the quality of the learning that occurs there. More particularly, in seeking to create a community of learners grounded in curiosity and inquiry, we recognize that no one of us has all the answers, and that we depend upon one another in the most fundamental ways for achieving our common goals.

This being the case, we see it as vital that all relationships in our school be based on respect, trust, honesty, and caring. This applies not only to the relationships between students and teachers but to all the other relationships that constitute our community: among students, among teachers, between teachers and administrators, between parents and staff members, and so forth. In our classrooms, in staff and parent meetings, at school functions, in the hallways, we talk and listen to one another as if our talking and listening matter—because they do.

At G&P we commit to teaching children to care about and help each other, to treat all people with respect regardless of differences, and to seek ways to contribute and improve society. We realize that the best way for our children to learn to act in these ways is for the adults in our community to teach by example. Together, adults and children at Graham and

Parks seek to build a school community to which all of us contribute in whatever ways we can and in which everyone's contributions are valued.

## **Governance**

Our form of community at Graham and Parks gives rise to, and is strengthened by, a democratic form of governance in which decision making about important aspects of the school is shared among administrators, teachers, parents, and—where appropriate—students. By creating a democratic community in which consensus is formed out of a diverse array of interests, perspectives, and opinions, we model citizenship for our students while practicing values we wish to uphold in our city, our country, and our world.

Shared decision making grows out of, and depends upon, our shared values of trust and respect. Teachers and administrators, and parents and staff, respect one another's knowledge, competencies, and particular forms of responsibility. Realizing that all of us have a stake in the quality of our school and unique contributions to make to it, we trust one another to have the best interests of the whole school community in mind when working together to make decisions. Relying on trust and respect, we are able to accommodate—and even embrace—disagreement and conflict as indispensable elements of life in a democracy.

One of the most significant parts of our heritage is that Graham and Parks itself was founded by both parents and teachers. In our Steering Committee, our hiring committees, and other forums in which parents and staff share decision making, we work together to articulate and sustain our school's alternative approach to public education. Through other vehicles such as monthly all-staff meetings, bi-monthly teacher team meetings, the administrative team, and the Parent Council, staff and parents share experiences and views to support one another in our dedication to the mission and values of the Graham and Parks Alternative Public School.

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