Practicing Life







A CIRCLE SCHOOL SAMPLER



Most Americans, most Western nations, and growing numbers in the rest of the world, share in common some basic values about public life. We argue about how to apply them, how to balance them, and what to do when they conflict with private interests. By and large, though, these common values are regarded today as social bedrock.

What are these shared values? Here are four fundamentals:

- Personal freedom
- Mutual toleration
- Public government
- Free, responsible markets

These account for much in human civilization, as the foundation for a satisfying life, and in the gradual perfecting of self and society.

Other cherished principles follow from these four fundamentals. Personal freedom, most would agree, includes protection from arbitrary power, usually achieved through the rule of law. Public government, most would agree, means accountability to the governed, usually achieved by votes, affording every citizen equal voice in public affairs.

You get the idea. If you are an adult, you have quietly enjoyed the fruits of these values. You have entered into an implied social contract in which you give up a measure of personal sovereignty in exchange for social order and access to resources.

The Circle School extends this invitation to children and teenagers—to enter into a social contract, to grow into ever-expanding freedom and responsibility, to forge the future of self and society, and self *in* society.

The school stands for two propositions. First, the purposes of elementary and high school education are to foster personal fulfillment and societal engagement. Second, an excellent way to do so is to immerse students in a school society based on fundamental values. The result is daily practice of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

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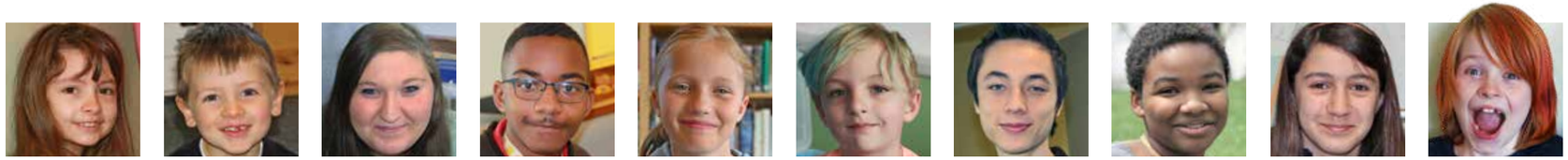

Practicing Life
A Circle School Sampler

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2019 Edition

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The Circle School is a self-directed democratic school, one of dozens in North America and many more around the world. Students practice life in a microcosm of society: empowered as voters, bound by laws, challenged by choice, supported by community, and driven by nature.

With or without special needs or giftedness, The Circle School welcomes every child who can thrive in our community, and welcomes families of every composition. To arrange a no-obligation exploratory visit to the school, call the office at 717-564-6700. New students are admitted year-round.

Founded in 1984, The Circle School is nonprofit and tax-exempt under IRS Section 501(c)(3). Gifts to the school are tax-deductible. Businesses receive 75% to 100% direct tax *credit* for scholarship gifts to the school's Educational Improvement Tax Credit fund.

Most photos are from the school's collection. Photos, illustrations, and text remain the property of their respective creators and authors.

The Circle School admits students of any race, color, national origin, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation to all the rights, privileges, activities, and programs generally accorded or made available to students at the school; does not discriminate on any of these bases in administration of its educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and financial aid programs, and other programs. •

AERO
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION RESOURCE ORGANIZATION

MEMBER
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Practicing Life: What Children Should Be Doing In School

Have you ever wondered about the disconnect between children's experience in school and their later lives as adults? From a child's perspective, standard schools look like rigidly controlled societies run by unelected dictators. Why would we want to train kids to live in a repressive regim e so contrary to our ideals for adult society? Wouldn't it be better for kids to practice life in a school more like the world they are growing into?

The Circle School is a self-directed democratic school, one of dozens across America, in which children and teens practice life in self-governed society: empowered as voters, bound by laws, challenged by choice, supported by community, and driven by nature. Immersed in opportunities and challenges of the real world scaled down, children's nature is to thrive, strive, and grow—to develop knowledge, skills, and intelligence, and find individually effective ways of being and doing.



This publication is an introduction to The Circle School. Founded in 1984, The Circle School aims to demonstrate the success and feasibility of democratic schooling for widespread adoption—bottom-up democracy as an alternative to top-down authoritarianism and standardization.

Why do we need an alternative? What's wrong with schools as they are? These are important questions that have been addressed elsewhere and by others, but here's a quick summary of what's wrong, to put democratic schooling in context.

Standardized education is undermined by two of its most basic principles: coercive curriculum and one-size-fits-all. The system depends on teachers coaxing or coercing students to achieve specific mandatory curricular objectives in a prescribed sequence at prescribed grade levels. The problem is not the teachers, but rather a system that runs counter to human nature and contrary to what we know about how children develop. Coercive curriculum undermines learning because human beings naturally resist being forced and controlled. Healthy children naturally strive for autonomy; healthy schools help them get there. And one-size-fits-all has been discredited by decades of science, scholarship, and classroom experience. Human beings come in infinite variety. One-size-fits-all really fits only a few and only sometimes.

Democratic schooling overcomes both limitations by aligning school with the larger world. Patterned after American government, The Circle School has its own executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Instead of a principal, the school is run by the School Meeting, which includes every student, preschool through high school, and every staff member. Each person has a say in school governance.

Like a chief executive, School Meeting appropriates funds, manages professional staff, maintains buildings and grounds, operates within a budget, complies with government regulation, and efficiently manages many other real-world demands.

In its legislative function, School Meeting enacts laws, following a process that includes advance notice, public readings, open dialogue, and parliamentary procedure. Actions are adopted by majority and everybody gets a vote. Over the years, the school's lawbook has grown to include hundreds of rules, many devoted to safety of persons and property, and many that echo laws in the larger world.

The school's judicial system is founded on cherished American principles of individual rights, due process, and rule of law. In hundreds of cases per year, students and staff together methodically investigate allegations, gather evidence, take testimony, make findings of fact, issue charges, impose sentences, and conduct trials when defendants plead not guilty. Older students sometimes serve as lawyers for younger students. Everyone, youngest to oldest, takes turns serving on the Judicial Committee.

School "corporations" manage activities such as art, cooking, gardening, theater, sports, computers, music, science, outdoor adventures, and so on. Committees meet to conduct school business, such as elections, field trips, staff evaluations, fundraising, public relations, and family social events outside of school hours.

Within this distinctly American milieu, students pursue activities of their own choosing or creation, limited by imagination and compliance with the laws of the school, but not by curriculum or adult demands. They may hang out with friends, build a fantasy world with wooden blocks, organize a math class, work at an externship in a local business, earn money doing extra chores, teach a friend to apply makeup, play Capture the Flag outdoors, attend a Spanish class, make and sell baked goods, prepare to take college entrance exams, put on a play, seek election to school offices, and so on from daily novelty to creative infinity.

By thus aligning school with the larger world, democratic schooling overcomes the limitations of coercive curriculum and one-size-fits-all. Without a forced curriculum, students follow their interests. From the passion of self-determined adventures, we see character and intelligence emerge. Practiced with others in bounded freedom and shared responsibility, we see lively culture and supportive community emerge.

We do not propose exaggerated freedom for children. Democratic schooling simply reflects commonsense truths, both moral and practical: self-motivation outperforms coercion in its power to educate and fulfill; and coercion is generally a moral last resort. Pushing children through a lockstep curriculum is suboptimal as educational strategy, and unnecessary coercion is out of sync with today's values.

Across time and cultures, education aims to elevate self and society, to cultivate personal fulfillment and constructive engagement in the world. Democratic education at The Circle School achieves these aims. Take a close look. You'll see the spirit and sparkle of children practicing life. •

Adapted from the book When Kids Rule the School: The Power and Promise of Democratic Education *by Circle School founding staff member Jim Rietmulder.* *See page 60 for excerpts.*



Johanna, still hiking 20 years later

Mileposts

by Johanna Bodnyk '99

In preschool, and up through seventh grade, I attended The Circle School. I learned that I was supposed to be able to do anything. I learned that I was loved. The Circle School's emphasis on self-direction reinforced my mother's teaching that I was responsible for my own life. I learned reading, writing, arithmetic, and how to respect people. I learned the basics, Circle School style.

The happiest time of my life that I can remember was my early days at The Circle School. I was friends with everybody, young and old. I won an Invent America Award for a lunch box that turned into a stool (in case there weren't enough chairs at the table with my friends). I was enriched by the love and support of the small community. I loved animals. My first chosen profession was veterinarian, with horse breeder as a close second. My parents couldn't afford horseback riding lessons, much less a real horse, but I had plenty of imaginary ones. I remember staring out of car windows and imagining I was on a horse, my hair streaming out behind me, the wind rushing against my face and whatever music was on the radio swelling as the soundtrack to my fantasies.

When I was eight, my interest in language and nature, plus my creativity and imagination, coalesced in an experience that has given underlying direction to my life ever since. I chose an object out of a box and wrote a poem about it. I chose a conch shell, worn and dull on the outside, its nubs worn down by years of little fingers, the inside still shiny shades of pink and white. I don't think I looked at it very long before I sat down and wrote the poem "Shell".

I had written things before, silly little rhyming ditties reminiscent of Shel Silverstein. Of course my parents and teachers had praised me and encouraged me. However, this was the first thing I ever wrote that I knew was good work. When I write a poem now, I can tell by the second line, with a gut instinct, whether it will be a meaningful piece of work with integrity and sincerity, that expresses not only my personal truth, but a sliver of universal truth. Writing "Shell" was the first time I experienced this.

In eighth grade I left The Circle School out of curiosity about bells, homework, cafeterias and the possibility of friendship in classrooms the size of my entire school. I think that after eleven years in a small, sheltered school, I left partly out of a deep yearning to be a "normal" teenager. I was worried about fitting in, and I was worried that I wouldn't do well in class; that never having gotten grades before, I'd get bad ones.

I did fine. At New Cumberland Middle School, where I went for eighth grade, and then at Cedar Cliff High School, where I attended my freshman year and half of my sophomore year, I excelled academically. At our eighth grade graduation assembly, I got awards from my math and science teachers for being the best student in the class. In ninth grade I was ranked 3rd in my class, with a 97.2 GPA brought down only by unavoidable B's in gym class.

In tenth grade, I got a little bored. The only thing I liked about school were the "ahhs" that I occasionally got in class. This is how I describe those moments when the teacher is talking, and suddenly a connection is made in my head, and I understand. It's kind of like the moment when I know a poem will work.



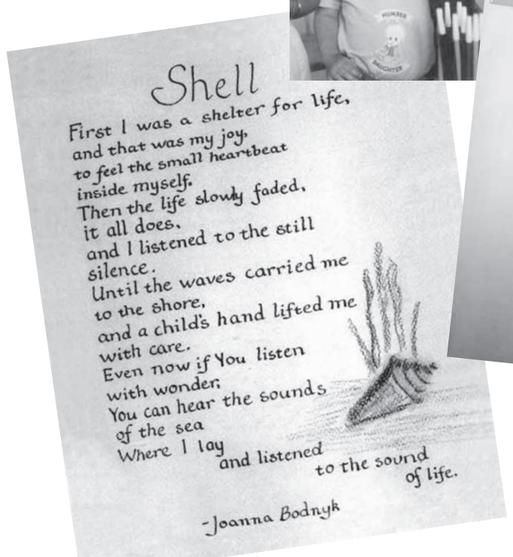
Appalachian Trail
1999

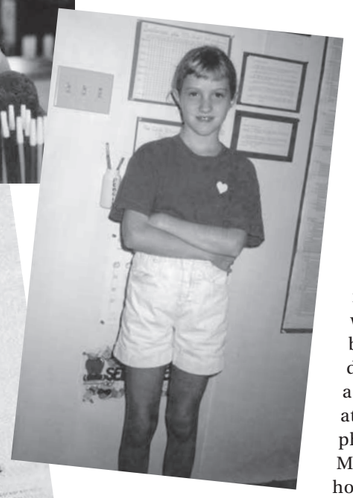
I know that for a while I enjoyed public school simply because it was a novelty, something I had never done before. I liked taking tests and filling in the little circles. I liked getting good grades. I liked doing what the teachers told me to do, and doing it well. Making other people happy made me happy, at first. After two and a half years, however, I got tired of it and realized that I spent a lot more time on that busywork than I did on the "ahhs."

Remembering the freedom of The Circle School, I felt stagnant and stuck. I had A's in every subject, but no idea what I wanted to do with my life.

I decided to go back to The Circle School. In complete contrast with public school, no one told me what to do at The Circle School. Left to my own devices, I didn't know what to do, or more importantly, why I should want to do anything. I stopped living simply to get an A in class, or to make a project look nice. Without these artificial goals, I didn't know what I was living for, and I was forced to examine it. This process has taught me a lot about life, and myself.







Johanna at The Circle School, at four years old, 11, and (top) 18

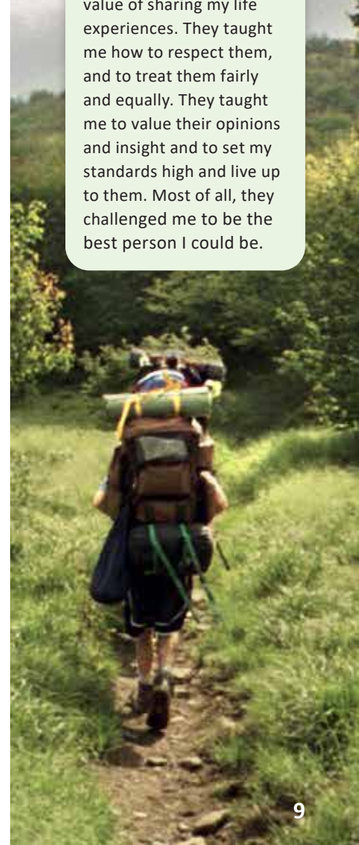
In the spring of my sophomore year, a couple months after I returned to The Circle School, I went on a school backpacking trip. This experience is a close second in importance in my life to my writing of "Shell" and, in a way, a continuation of it. On a basic level, I simply loved it. I discovered what may become a lifelong passion, and an athletic pursuit that has built my physical confidence immensely. More importantly, it taught me how to see beauty in the world. After that first backpacking trip, I came back and stared bleakly at the world. I had felt truly alive out on the trail. Gazing out at an Appalachian vista, or staring up at the night sky from a cozy sleeping bag, I experienced "ahhs" that were more like deep sighs than exclamations of understanding. Eventually, probably as a defense against the apparent dullness of my everyday life, I learned how to appreciate the richness and beauty everywhere, from tiny details to sweeping sunsets.

I am writing poetry again, full of my impressions of the raw beauty and truth of nature and humanity. Ultimately, I believe my poetry, and any art I create, should be about life. I want to learn and experience everything I can, so I can write about it and paint about it—as well as simply for the satisfaction of doing it.

My intellectual development has been diverse and unique. At public school I truly enjoyed the pure academics, when I could tune the rest out. And yet The Circle School has made me who I am, and I would not exchange that experience for all the A+'s in the world. •

Excerpted from Johanna's college admissions essay. Johanna graduated from Bard College in 2003 with a BA in literature and earned a Certificate in Web Technologies from Harvard Extension School in 2015. She is currently living near Boston and working as a software engineer at Vistaprint.

After graduating from college, Johanna joined The Circle School staff for a year, accompanying students on a 10-day backpacking trip in the Great Smoky Mountains, among many other things. Of her staffing experience, Johanna said this:
The Circle School is a family, a foundation, a community, a source of strength and spirit, and a place I will always want to be. Staffing at The Circle School taught me more than I ever learned in college. The students challenged me to communicate at my best. They had me climb trees and chase balls with them, and they taught me about the value of sharing my life experiences. They taught me how to respect them, and to treat them fairly and equally. They taught me to value their opinions and insight and to set my standards high and live up to them. Most of all, they challenged me to be the best person I could be.



Great Smoky Mountains backpacking trip, 2004

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Basics

Q: What's a democratic school?

A: Think of the democratic school as a self-governing society of children, teens, and adults, something like America scaled down. Students and staff together govern the school community and manage school business, including budget, staff, facilities, and more. Each person, youngest to oldest, has a say and a vote. A Board of Trustees preserves the school's democratic stucture, students' civil liberties, and the school's long-term assets. Everyone participates in certain civic duties, such as daily housekeeping chores, service on the Judicial Committee, compliance with school laws, fire drills, and occasional jury duty.

Q: What do students do all day?

A: Pretty much anything safe and legal. Students decide for themselves, prompted by their own interests and abilities—limited by imagination and school laws, but not by curriculum or adult demands. Look through the pictures in this publication for examples, and re-read the paragraph of examples on page 7.

Q: What about "learning"?

A: We learn more and better when doing things we have chosen, rather than just following a teacher's orders. And anyway, the standard curriculum—everyone supposed to learn the same thing at the same time in the same way—only works for some kids, sometimes. Even then, forcing kids to "learn" tends to turn them off to academics and teaches them to ignore their own interests, ideas, talents, and hopes. Forced "learning" and the one-size-fits-all curriculum have been discredited by science, research, and experience. Self-motivation outperforms coercion in its power to educate and ignite kids' joy of life. See also *Frequently Asked Questions: Curriculum and Learning* on page 32.

Q: Do Circle School students go on to college?

A: Yes, most do: 91% of long-term students and 84% of 4-year students. For details and answers to other questions about college, see *Frequently Asked Questions: College* on page 22.

Q: Don't children need structure?

A: Yes. Structure we've got: laws, daily chores, judicial duty, certification procedures, committees, corporations—and lots of daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms. Structure contributes to the stability and security that set children free to explore their world without fear. Structure is important here just as it is in the world beyond school: laws set limits for safety and order, within which we freely pursue self-chosen enterprises.

The difference is in the *kind* of structure: top-down or bottom-up. If children are schooled for 12 years to follow someone else's orders and agenda—top-down structure—then that's what they will be comfortable with as adults.

On the other hand, if children are expected from a young age to direct themselves, mindful of the community around them, then that's what they will do as adults.

The self-directed person more readily finds satisfying purpose and meaning in life, and is also in greater demand today, particularly by colleges, employers, and clients. Personal fulfillment and societal engagement are both advanced by placing children in a school society structured to demand self-direction. That's the kind of structure you find at The Circle School.

Q: What will my child learn?

A: Kids learn fast and well what they need and want, with greater efficiency and satisfaction than if they are forced to "learn" things they don't need or want. Immersed in a scaled-down version of the larger world, students here experience real-world needs to learn basics, and abundant opportunity for more.

Beyond the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the possibilities are as vast as human knowledge. Most children learn about many traditional academic subjects and many other subjects as well. Most learn some things more deeply, joyfully, and durably than is likely in standard schools. Kids learn what they're interested in, what they find they *must* learn in order to achieve self-chosen goals, and—most importantly—how to learn more when they need it. That's education.

Q: What about testing and grades?

A: The school does not require testing or grades, although some students choose it for their own reasons. Forced testing and grades undermine learning, reducing efficiency and retention. For more, see *Frequently Asked Questions: Curriculum and Learning* on page 32.

Q: How will my child do at another school, after attending The Circle School?

A: Families whose children have transferred out of The Circle School into standardized schools often comment that their children's increased confidence and motivation helped them to quickly adapt and excel, contributing to successful transitions. And schools today are accustomed to children transferring in from a variety of educational backgrounds. See "Mileposts" on page 8 for the story of a student who went to a traditional school after attending The Circle School from preschool on.

Q: Can I financially afford the school?

A: The Circle School has always been committed to keeping tuition low. A study showed that the income profile of Circle School families closely matched the income profile of the region, indicating the school is widely affordable. To further increase affordability, tuition can be paid in monthly installments, and financial aid is steeply increased for brothers and sisters. The net cost to families (after financial aid) is substantially less than that of most other unsubsidized schools.

Q: What are the school's requirements for admission?

A: Admission is generally open to children from ages 4 to 19 who are able to function effectively in the school's program. The first four weeks after enrollment is a "Practice Period" to help the family and school assure a good fit. Students can start attending at the beginning of a school year or at any time throughout the school year.

Q: Are there other democratic schools?

A: Yes. There are dozens or hundreds, with various degrees of similarity. For a partial list, visit the website at DemocraticSchools.directory.

Q: Okay, I'm interested. What's the next step?

A: This publication and the school's website (circleschool.org) are the starting point. If you want to go deeper, read the book *When Kids Rule The School: The Power and Promise of Democratic Education* (see excerpts on page 60). When you're ready, call the school (717-564-6700) for an appointment to visit with your family. We'll tell you more, answer your questions, show you around the campus, and help you determine if The Circle School is a good fit for your family. At any time, you may submit a financial aid application (online at circleschool.org/enrollment/tuition-financial-aid) to determine your exact cost. •











I want to fly



DORIS SLADE

At Kampel Airport, circa 1996, age 15

Shaun Slade '97 was 12 years old when he said "I want to fly." Over the next few weeks, he and the External Resources Coordinator talked and brainstormed and decided that a good place to start would be to somehow place Shaun around airplanes and pilots. Sounds like an airport, they thought, so they called one up on the phone and asked if Shaun could be an intern there, working without pay, doing whatever he could do to be useful. *No,* said the airport. *That won't fly.*

So Shaun and the External Resources Coordinator tried another airport—this time a small, privately owned airstrip. *Sure,* said the owner, *let's talk about it.* And what is this *Circle School,* anyway?

Shaun went to the airport once a week, that first year, and Matt and Andy went, too. Shaun remembers that he swept the floor a lot, and he sorted nuts and bolts, and he tightened screws one day for *six hours straight.* Sounds tedious? Maybe so, but the floors he swept were underneath *airplanes,* and the screws that he tightened were on a reconstructed World War II *fighter.* Didn't seem tedious to Shaun. He loved it.

Matt and Andy stopped going, after that school year, but Shaun continued when school started again. He helped assemble an aluminum wing for a Percivil Provost airplane. He learned sheet metal working, machining, welding, woodworking, painting, airplane fabric covering, and on and on. Occasionally on weekends—*Bingo!*—the owner took Shaun flying.

The second summer, Shaun worked at the airport, for pay, and the next year, at age 14, he started flying. At 15, he began formal lessons, which he paid for entirely out of his wages. At 16, he was part of a team that won a "Golden Wrench Award" in a national competition among antique airplane restorers.

After Shaun left The Circle School he went to work at the airport full-time. At 18 years old he got his student license, and at 19—*ta-da!*—Shaun was a licensed airplane pilot. For his last year at the airport, he was the manager of a corporate division of the company that owned the airport.

The story doesn't end there. Shaun attended Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University for a time, and then worked as an airplane mechanic and "got my airframe and powerplant mechanics ratings." For four years he picked up and delivered airplanes around Florida and the Bahamas. He worked for an airplane restoration company, and has his own collection of antique aircraft, including a Boeing/Stearman PT-17. He also worked as a full-time private pilot.

Eventually Shaun returned to Embry-Riddle and finished his bachelor's degree in Professional Aeronautics. He also picked up three more kinds of pilot's licenses and "the highest mechanics rating you can obtain." Recently, from an airport in Chicago, Shaun mentioned that, with the backing of investors, he has just started running a flight school and maintenance shop. For Shaun, it seems, the sky's the limit. •



Above the weather in a Beechcraft Baron G58, 2009

Ten Thousand Stories

Shaun's story is fun to tell and inspiring to hear. But what if his interest had ended after a month? Or after that first year? What if he had never taken lessons and never gotten his pilot's license? What if he had later pursued microbiology instead of aviation? Would Shaun's airport internship then have been a failure? And what about Andy and Matt? Was the enterprise just a waste of time for them?

For every story like Shaun's—a passionate interest, pursued as far as the chase can go—there are *ten thousand* stories of interests developed less deeply, and then apparently dropped, or developed just as deeply but without the drama or outward visibility of aviation.

Those ten thousand untold stories weave the fabric of life at The Circle School. There's the girl who dissected a cow eyeball, and found that she didn't like it. There's the boy who played with a guitar for a couple of months—never to become a rock star. There's the child who wandered in and helped build the new workbench in the art room, exploring an interest in screwdrivers for a few minutes.

And then there's Matt, who tagged along with Shaun. Turns out that Matt learned about tool and die work during that internship, and enjoyed it. Would you believe that today he's a professional tool and die maker? He's *not,* but you found it believable, didn't you? The point is that, no matter what Matt is doing today, he experienced genuine interest, developed it to his own satisfaction, detected that he was through with that interest for the time being, and redirected his attention to other pursuits, having been expanded by his knowledge of tool and die making. It was an experience of self-direction, concentration, acquisition of knowledge about technology—and about himself.

Every interest pursued—for a moment or a lifetime, regardless of the subject—is an educational success. Of course, in today's world, virtually any interest, passionately pursued, can provide not only personal satisfaction but also career possibilities.

So the moral of Shaun's delightful story is *not* that kids should pursue their interests because it might lead to a career, or even a lifelong interest. The moral is that the joy is in the pursuit—at every step—and the education is manifold: expanded knowledge and personal boundaries, learning about resources and how to learn, and love of the chase. •

We asked him, "What do you love about flying?" and Shaun said this:
The peacefulness and the excitement. When you take off early in the morning and it's overcast and drizzly and terrible, and you climb up 10,000 feet, through the clouds, and all of a sudden it's bright and sunny and gorgeous. It's just how quickly it can transform from ugly to beautiful. And I love the excitement of flying some of these antique airplanes, like the Stearman. It's a 1940s vintage airplane. When you get over the open valleys and down low, it's like a time machine—you can envision the cadets flying these antique airplanes—cutting-edge airplanes at the time—with the open cockpit, wind in your hair, and the noisy rush. And when you do aerobatics—loops and rolls—it goes from peaceful to adrenaline-pumping.
















Europe trip planning (weekly for 2 years)


Chairing Judicial Committee


Improv skit in School Meeting












Tallying
election ballots











Quips, Quotes & Anecdotes



I am the father of a Circle School alumnus and have had the opportunity to witness first-hand the extraordinary opportunities that The Circle School provides students for intellectual, moral, and social growth. In particular, the school, and others like it, allows students to develop a degree of autonomy and good citizenship that would be almost inconceivable in a traditional school environment. I began as a very reluctant parent and have become an unabashed and zealous advocate. It is extremely important to me that The Circle School flourish and continue to allow children to thrive. –Richard Schiffrin

I asked my daughter if she wanted to help host an Open House at school, and she said yes, that The Circle School was just about the most important thing that's ever happened to her. –Teenager's mom



If you want to know how I feel about The Circle School, just meet my daughter Rose. The self-reliant, self-motivated, caring, hard working, confident young adult she has become is the best testimonial I can offer. –Frank Plesic

My childhood started when I came to The Circle School. –15-year-old who started at 8 years old

In this place, the rules, instead of being a set of moral codes from above, are an evolving democratically reached agreement. The purpose is to ensure the greatest level of individual freedom without infringing unacceptably on the rights of other members. If I believe a rule is unjust, I may seek to change it and, in the meantime, respect the decision of the community to have that rule in place. Seen this way, the rules are not an imposition but an important trust, to be cared for and protected. –19-year-old boy



What I notice is that I'm being asked to take back the trust I have placed in school as an institution and give it to my daughter. I like that. –Rev Kate Harrigan

You learn from everything. You do learn but in a different way. [From the milkshake project, I'm learning] business, space management, organization in the cramped quarters in the kitchen, how to make milkshakes. I like the freedom and the responsibility. You're responsible for making up your own schedule, so that's kind of a huge responsibility. But it doesn't feel like a burden. –11-year-old girl

At first I worried that my kids would not learn anything. But eventually they began to take advantage of the opportunity to follow their own interests. Much of the basics they learned incidentally through various school committees. They are in their 30s now. [My daughter], with college degrees, is a successful designer. [My son] served in the Navy through two deployments and is now a sports performance trainer. –Anita Braunlich Long



At seven years old, my daughter is more clear and passionate and informed about the freedoms and responsibilities that come with a democracy than most adults I know. Her everyday practice of life and responsible citizenship is the most valuable education she can receive. –Hannah Smith-Brubaker, after two years

It is truly refreshing for me as a parent and educator to get a glimpse at children who consistently appear to be engaged and happy at school (and kids being kids!). –Dr Amanda Thomas, Penn State



My children owned The Circle School so immediately and completely when they first started attending that it scared me to go and pick them up! I [felt] as if I were a trespasser intruding on a world of and for students. I eventually realized that the school wasn't a world of and for children, it was a world of and for children *and* adults… just like the real world. The Circle School doesn't scare me anymore, but I am still in daily awe that my kids get to go to one of the coolest, if not *the* coolest school in the state, and I get to be a part of that as well. –Yasoda Mensah

I went there for two years, an experience I wouldn't trade for the world. I didn't learn much of anything from textbooks. Instead, I learned how to think for myself. –Benjy Eisen



The Circle School taught me how to play again. It also taught me about wanting something so badly that I defied my circumstances to make it happen: I was the first student to pay my own way through The Circle School. This sticks with me still as one of my proudest moments. –Sean O'Neill '00, attended two years



The day is long, but goes fast, which is just what you would want, and what you get when your day is full of things you like and are interested in. –Violet Bing, storybook character, not intentionally commenting on The Circle School

I want to go back to school... summer sucks. I love The Circle School. –13-year-old girl



All my children who have gone on to college have experienced how their Circle School education distinguishes them. They are there learning because they want to be. This translates into their being enthusiastic, participative learners. Their professors *really* notice and appreciate the way these kids are different from kids who have spent their lifetime learning how to resist being taught. –Marianne Tyrrell

I like that the kids and the teenagers have power here, and it's not just some kind of mock thing. This is real. –17-year-old boy



It has been a process to wrap our brains around the philosophy, [and] a freeing experience. Putting trust in my children has allowed them to blossom—making decisions, being responsible, and using thoughtful judgment. We see our kids so happy, with a maturity level beyond their years. I know we made the right decision. –Amy Strawser, 9 years later

[The Circle School] gives you the choice to make your own decisions, and you also grow from that. You get to know what making choices means and it gives you a sense of how you can make decisions when you grow up... I've changed since I've come here. I'm more confident in myself and in making choices I've made... [School] makes a person happy. You just walk in in the morning and think, 'Ah, this is school,' and you're happy about it… You can just be yourself. You can be liked for who you are and not for pretending to follow the crowd or be whoever you are supposed to be. –17-year-old girl

Quips, Quotes & Anecdotes



My only reservation about the school was whether it would be possible to be ready for college without all of the fundamentals they are supposed to have. Since I don't think [my son] opened a textbook at all during his [three years] at the school and [my daughter] didn't do much better, it was only a matter of faith that they would survive their first couple of semesters of college. But both of them are on the Dean's List with a 4.0 average! They both have become intensely competitive. I am not sure where that came from—Capture the Flag? Frisbee Football?

In many ways, the several years of my association with the school were among the best in my life. It not only gave my children a promising future, but renewed my faith that democracy, freedom, and justice can be made real, and that it can work even among people of diverse backgrounds. –Tim Lemke

At The Circle School you can eat lunch whenever you want. –7-year-old on what she likes here



Words cannot express the deep gratitude I feel daily for The Circle School, so fully committed to nurturing all aspects of human beings in a context of love, support, and naturally-inspired empowerment. I thank God for the contribution the school is making to the world community. –Courtney Parks

The teacher is nice, except she thinks I'm a little kid and won't let me play with the big kids, even though I told her I'm five and three-quarters. When is it going to be fall? –Circle School student attending another school for the summer

I went to a private Christian school in grades K to 6, public school for 7 and 8, and a private school for learning disabilities, 9 to 10. The Circle School has given me the support and confidence I need to go on to college. The other schools attempted to fit me into their mold. At The Circle School I made my own mold. –17-year-old boy



Given the ability to dive into just about anything to my liking, particularly photography, I've emerged with motivation and determination I did not possess before. Books are a joy to read, art comes naturally, and bruises from Frisbee mark the end of a good day rather than misery from gym class. I enjoyed heated discussions of everything from science to toppings on pizza. This sort of emotional investment in my post-Circle School life has kept me on the Dean's List two semesters in a row. Without the relentless support of the staff and my friends—often one and the same—I doubt I would be where I am today. –Peter Lemke '08

I put our house up for sale and we moved six counties away [to be near The Circle School]. The first day of school, my [15-year-old] son was sullen and nervous. He didn't trust anyone in a place called "school." At the end of the day, he was a very different person. He loved it! That first year, I watched his confidence grow. I watched him begin to take the reins of his own life. He voluntarily took on responsibilities. He experienced respect and acceptance on a level he'd never known before. "Letting him go" has actually brought us closer together. My only regret is not getting us here sooner. –Kimberlie Hawkins



I remarked to [my son] that I thought he behaved maturely [at a school event] last night and he said he acts differently at school. He told me he is more mature there. I thought that was interesting. –Lisa Brinton-Wilson

Okay, you be the waitress this time and I'll be the monster. –Overheard as two young children walked down the hall together, towards the playroom



[At The Circle School] I have seen confident, creative, happy, and engaged students doing an incredible variety of activities. I have observed growth in my own child that involves increasingly complex levels of planning, decision making, and engagement in challenging situations. These have included administrative groups, leadership positions, college courses, and working with others to help run the school. What I wanted for my son was to have smart people who truly cared about him help him discover himself. I wanted him to learn all the skills that he needed, to express his potential and have fun doing it, and I wanted them to do this in a respectful and loving way. And that is exactly what I got. –Gail Sutton

Ever since I was five or six, my dad and I have disagreed about The Circle School. Not that he didn't like the people or the school itself, but he was afraid that it would not prepare me for my future. We argued about the school a lot as I was growing up. A few years ago, my dad came to a conclusion. He said the school couldn't be all that bad because of how well I turned out. The Circle School has helped shape who I am today. –17-year-old attending since age four



Coming here was the best thing that could have ever happened to [my son]. I am eternally grateful. –Sonja Stroukoff after son attended, 10 to 14 years old

Our son... on Friday afternoons he's like "I can't wait till Monday!" –Richard Price



My prominent memory of my first year was an incident with a young girl named Naomi. She asked me to play dollhouse with her. I was about six feet tall and 230 pounds. I had black hair with red and pink streaks and I only wore black clothing. The fact that a little girl would ask *me* to play house was astounding. I said yes. (What else could I say?) Playing with her, I had a moment of clarity. I was playing *with* her. Naomi was asking my opinions and what I thought we should do. She had no preconceptions about me and no reluctance to engage me. This was the first time I shared an experience with a very young student as an equal. Naomi had a presence of mind that only comes from a Circle School education. –Andrew Horn '06

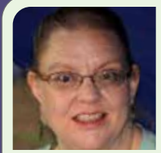
I'm so looking forward to going back to The Circle School this year because summer just feels so empty. I crave the activity that goes on [at school]. I can't vote and make decisions about rules at my house, so I'm really looking forward to coming back and having a say... I love going to The Circle School... I feel so much more empowered by having a vote and a voice at School Meeting, and being equal with the staff members and being on JC... I just love it. –17-year-old girl at a summer picnic at school



Children who take the greatest delight in each moment of childhood grow up to be adults who take the greatest delight in each moment of adulthood. –Jim Rietmulder

I want to help others understand what the move from a public school to a place like The Circle School can mean for a child. [My daughter] left a system where she dreaded going to school. She was intimidated and terribly shy. Now she looks forward to each day in what she's found to be a very supportive atmosphere. You asked how I was able to let go of the worry of what [my daughter] may end up learning. I think the answer is that she probably would have come out of traditional high school having more book smarts, but The Circle School is where she will more likely emerge happy, and becoming the person she was truly meant to be. In this type of environment a child's natural gifts are more likely to be discovered and nurtured. That takes a great weight off my shoulders and makes it a lot easier to sit back and enjoy the ride! –Maggie Shevelew

Quips, Quotes & Anecdotes



During the fall of my sons' first year at The Circle School, I took a wonderful parenting class offered by two staff members. One night, they let us know that they would be keeping their phones turned on: a former student was having surgery in another state and they were waiting to hear the outcome. I noticed that both of the women were feeling some tension as the evening wore on. Finally, the call came. The two staff members locked eyes, and left the room. They came back moments later, both of their faces shining with tears of joy. I thought, "They love that kid. Really love him." At that moment I knew The Circle School was the right place for our family. As hokey as it sounds, the staff and students of The Circle School have created a community of love, and I have seen many ways in which that community has embraced and sustained my sons. As the boys get older, I want them to have adults other than their parents to guide them, care about them, laugh with them—and love them. –Joan Cramer

Many thanks for giving me back the little boy I sent to kindergarten with wonder in his eyes. –Juli Bachman; son attended from 16 to 18 years old

The Circle School has changed my family's life, and I love thinking about all the families who will be better because of our gifts [to the capital campaign]. –Nicole Fortney

I look forward to picking up my children every day, just to see the smiling faces of the other students.



I cherish all my days at The Circle School. It's one of the best things that ever happened to me. –Devaki Parks '11

[After 9 years and 3 years,] my kids have social and communication skills that I don't see in other kids their age. They feel more empowered and know that they can control what happens in their life. This is far more important in the real world than the expectations and what you learn in [other] schools. They are important skills that are very marketable. –Pam Moran



For the first seven years at The Circle School, Laura avoided formal studying. She mostly played, interacted, and read voraciously. She was happy and that made me happy, though I wondered if she was missing something without formal studying. But when she was 15, she began to study math. She went on to community college with an emphasis on higher math and was invited into a full scholarship program in academics and leadership at Bucknell University. She graduated in physics with near straight As. Thanks for creating an environment where this happened. –Jon Owens [See more about Laura on page 37.]

[Our son] has become much more confident in trying new things, in his ability to do more, and his communication skills have greatly increased. We have been amazed at his growing problem-solving skills when met with new challenges. He feels like the school is "my family, it feels like home to me." –Julia Tilley

When a small child has a request, even older students pause. This sensitivity to the needs of young children stands out to me. –Kathy von Duyke, PhD researcher after two weeks at school.



I think the aspect of the school I love the most is the respect staff have shown my children. As they've grown up there, they have been treated as equals. They have been treated as peers, and I believe it is because of this they have such a strong sense of themselves. The Circle School has also helped my wife Amy and I to be better parents, hands-down. I can think of a half-dozen ways we've improved because of the school and its staff. We're not perfect... nobody is. But we're better than before. –Kevin Strawser



As a student at The Circle School, my daughter hiked and camped on the Appalachian Trail for three days. She went to months of planning meetings at school to prepare for every aspect of the trip. She learned how to filter stream water, how to choose only the most needed items to keep her pack weight down, and practiced how to deal with any situation she might encounter on the trail. She was seven that year.

Last year, my daughter decided she wanted to be on the Medical Response Team at school. To be eligible, she spent two entire Saturdays and hours at meetings in school to become Red Cross CPR and First Aid certified. She made it. At age ten she was the youngest member of the team.

My daughter knows—really knows—that she can decide to do something, and do it—regardless of her age, her size, or her grade level. She knows that she can overcome obstacles to reach a goal. She is courageous. Her determination and confidence are inspiring. –Stef Mihalcik

My child comes home happy—exhausted and happy.

When I got here, I was kind of a jerk and maybe I still am, but they love me better now. It's such a small environment, there's almost no way you can keep to yourself. –14-year-old boy



One of my fondest Circle School memories is when [my daughter] came home bright-eyed and bursting with pride exclaiming she had learned to climb a tree. It was in her very first week at the school that she learned such a timeless skill. It was also when I knew, with all my soul, that The Circle School was the best place for my daughter to spend her days growing up and practicing life. –Shauna Yorty, three years later

My son is new to The Circle School this year, [and] I cannot tell you how happy and thankful we are for being introduced to the school.



We knew there had to be a better answer. After listening to well-meaning teachers and others, we trusted our instincts and enrolled [our daughter] at The Circle School. She arrived from Michigan leaving behind an aversion to school, but with her curiosity still intact. She was welcomed into an environment where she was compelled to discover her passions and be responsible for pursuing them. Adapting to a self-directed learning environment as a teen is no small task, but the work she did at The Circle School—discovering what turns her on and how to go after it—is the reason she's so fulfilled in pursuing her dreams today. –Rob White & Stacy Kuyk-White



I've told [my son] many times that attending The Circle School is the best choice he has ever made. It is such a joy watching him grow. You've given him a sense of self that no other school could ever match. –Lori Neal



A public school teacher friend and I were comparing our day at our respective schools. I told her of forts being built, outside and in; sandbox digs; tree climbing; dramatic play on the stage; piano and guitar music; talking to teenagers about field trips and internships; serving on JC; sewing a bean bag with a 5-year-old; teaching Spanish to two 6-year-olds; a meeting to work out details of a new chore system; watching bright-eyed 5-, 6-, 7-, 8-, and 9-year-olds avidly play a video game, giving advice to one another, commiserating when things went wrong, and whooping with delight when things went right; cheesecake with blueberries being baked and offered for sale; solving ownership rights questions with the Bear Blocks. All this in one day! –Beth Stone, alumni parent and founding staff member

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

College

Q: Will my child get into college?

A: Most of our students go on to college—91% of our long-term students and 84% of our 4-year students, compared with 60% among same-age peers nationally. College can expand personal horizons and is crucial for entry into many careers. For some students, college follows immediately after high school. For others, a year or two of experience and maturation after high school provide a clear focus for college.

Q: Is The Circle School a college prep school?

A: The school serves young people of all ambitions and supports young people bound for all sorts of adult life experiences. Academics and college are important facets of life, but the school would rather be judged by its graduates' life satisfaction, achievement in self-chosen domains, and constructive engagement in community, culture, society, and technology. With or without college, our graduates enjoy fulfilling careers in self-directed lives.

Q: How do they get into college without grades?

A: Grades are only one of many factors that colleges consider. The absence of grades has not been an obstacle for our students, and may sometimes be an advantage. Most colleges require and rely on SAT scores, and most of our college-bound students take SATs. Most colleges seek students who are well-rounded, inquisitive, and motivated—qualities that blossom at The Circle School. In addition, our students tend to excel at personal interviews—probably because they have spent years practicing the arts of conversation, self-awareness, meetings, collaboration, and public debate.

Instead of a traditional transcript, some of our students compile a résumé, listing their various committee memberships, corporation positions, elected offices, major projects, and personal pursuits.

Q: Are they prepared for college?

A: Circle School graduates tend to adapt to college more easily than peers from other schools. The pattern is striking and we see it often. In conventional schools, students get the message they should sit down, keep quiet, wait to be told what to do, and then do as they are told. These messages are conveyed by the system itself, communicated to students regardless of teachers' best intentions.

In contrast, Circle School students are self-directed and take action without adult direction. They overcome obstacles to reach goals and build fulfilling lives. The independence and self-responsibility of college come easily to our students, because they've been practicing it for years. They adapt quickly, sometimes bewildered by their peers' struggles with self-direction and time management.

Students from every kind of educational background are likely to encounter in college the need to study hard. Circle School students tend to be ahead of their peers in the initiative and self-mastery this requires.

Q: What about college completion and degrees?

A: A 2015 study reported three key findings: (1) Circle School students attend college at greater rates than students from conventional schools, (2) Circle School graduates earn bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at greater rates than their same-age peers, and (3) family income does not explain the higher rates of college attendance and graduation. See the charts below for specifics.

Q: How does this happen without compulsory curriculum and classes?

A: When adults are not forceful or frantic about pressing academic studies on children, when school instead immerses students in self-direction, community, and democracy, two relevant patterns tend to emerge. First, students develop self-awareness and self-responsibility, taking charge of their own lives like a welcome adventure and a birthright not to be passively deferred until adulthood. Second, the social value and natural appeal of traditional academics tend to emerge, untainted by the bad taste of coercion. Building a satisfying life becomes everyday practice and college is often on the path.

Q: What happens when graduates have to submit to authority in a future workplace?

A: Circle School students are immersed in a combination of formal authority, collaboration, and individual responsibility that is typical of workplaces. Daily they work within the school's many formal structures: school government, judicial system, corporations, committees, certifications, and hundreds of rules. Our students develop healthier relationships with authority and better understanding of its various roles and values. They come to know when and how to challenge authority, when and how not to, how to be part of it, and how to share it. From school to college to employment and life, our graduates tend to transition with less turmoil and greater grace. •



This is Lisa Lightner reporting on my first semester at college. Some students and parents, especially new ones, wonder if The Circle School provides proper education and preparation for college. Relax! I'm here to tell you that it does.

On the first day of a seminar for first-year students, they showed us a slide with this caption: "The Difference Between High School and College: Freedom and Responsibility." No joking! The instructor said nobody was going to remind us to be in classes, call our parents when we were in danger of failing, or remind us to do homework anymore. This was "real life" and we had to be responsible for ourselves.

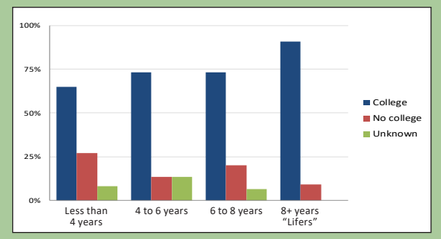
This left me both scoffing and laughing inside. Why would society wait until now to teach us this? It seems strange that we are told what to do, led by the hand, and given instructions for almost every activity of our daily lives… until we leave home!

And if college and work is the start of "real life," what were students doing before that? Fake life?

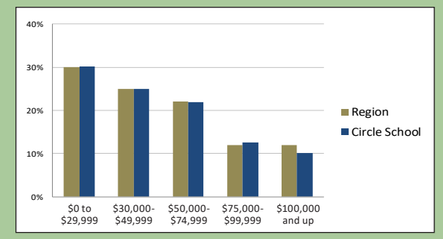
A big question on some parents' minds is whether a Circle School student can produce the grades. Well, yeah! I'm no genius, and I managed to do very well. I got a 3.8 QPA, five As and one B. I did very well and lacked nothing in academic preparedness. Not bad, considering I took no more than two classes in my four years at The Circle School!

I learned so much from reading, conversations, daily experiences, and willing SAT study that I needed no catch-up studying at all. It's a matter of applying oneself. Isn't that what The Circle School is all about anyway?

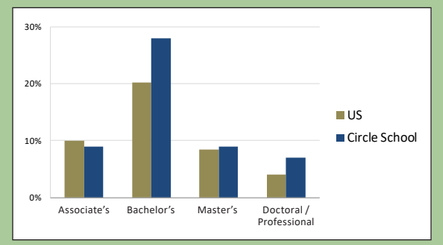
I'm not saying that every student who attends The Circle School will get straight As at college, or go to classes every day, or even remember to eat breakfast. What I'm saying is that there is nothing lacking in a Circle School education. I will testify to its ability to prepare students for college better than traditional schools. I understand how to apply myself little by little each day. This is the classic Circle School lesson. We are all responsible for our own day, and that has definitely stuck with me. –Lisa Lightner '06



COLLEGE ATTENDANCE BY YEARS AT THE CIRCLE SCHOOL
91% of long-term students (8+ years) attended college.
84% of shorter-term students (4+ years) attended college.



HOUSEHOLD INCOME: REGION VS THE CIRCLE SCHOOL
Circle School family income matched the region and the nation, with median income around $50,000.

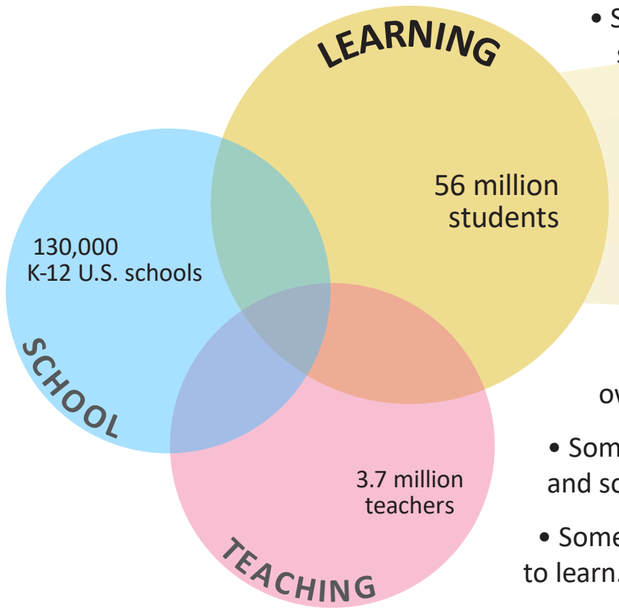


COLLEGE DEGREES AT AGE 25 YEARS AND OVER
Circle School students earned more bachelor's, master's, and doctoral/professional degrees.

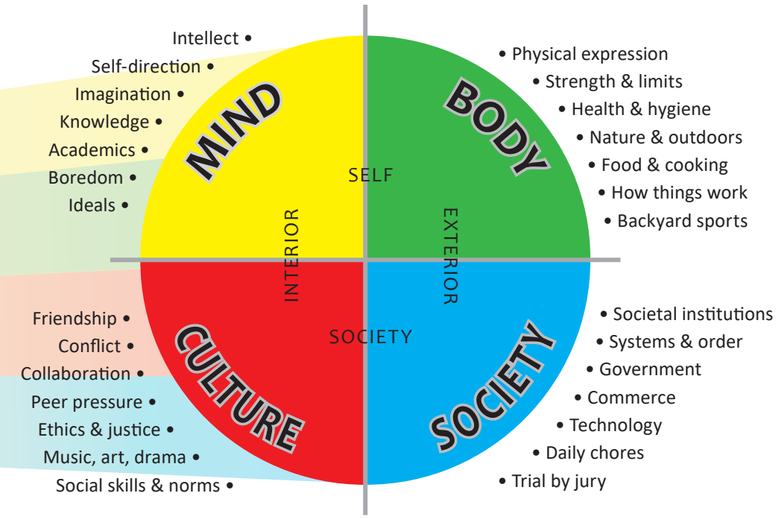


HOUSEHOLD INCOME: CIRCLE SCHOOL VS PRIVATE SCHOOLS
Circle School families' income profile stands in contrast to the profile of independent schools generally.

Learning Happens Everywhere in an Integral World



- Some learning happens in school, and some happens outside of school.
- Some learning happens with teaching, and some without teaching, both in school and outside of school.
- Some teaching results in learning, and some does not.
- Some people prefer to learn with teaching, and some prefer to learn on their own.
- Some things you can pick up on your own, and some you need help with.
- Some learning in school is part of a curriculum, and some is decidedly not.
- Some things take lots of practice or memorizing to learn.
- Some people learn best visually, others by listening, others by doing. Some learn best sitting still, others moving around.
- Learning happens anywhere, everywhere, all the time, in many ways.



It's a big world out there, with much to learn and many ways to grow. Standard schools tend to focus on academic studies, one slice of one quadrant in the diagram above. It is an important slice for many people and purposes. But sometimes academic studies are confused with cognitive development—a crucial line of growth that has to do with increasingly subtle and supple thinking.

Cognitive growth has little to do with *curriculum*, and much to do with *passionate exploration* and *active engagement*. At The Circle School students are immersed in an all-quadrant world.

The quadrant diagram is a reminder of the world's bigness and balance, but beware a shortcoming. Although we can divide the world this way, in reality every moment arises in all four quadrants simultaneously. Read a book, for example, and you are not only engaging your mind, but also your body (curled in a chair, smelling the paper), your culture (values, humor, worldview), and social-technological structures (library card, ebook reader).

It's an integral world, parts and wholes arising together. Kids bask in it at The Circle School, where there's No Quadrant Left Behind.














St. Patrick's Day cake contest winners























Notes From a Newcomer

by JD Stillwater, Staff Member



Are you struggling to make sense of The Circle School? I did. It has taken me some time and effort to shift away from traditional ideas about education that I grew up with. After six years as a Circle School staff member, I can look back now and see how much my perspective has changed. I'm glad I'm part of a school that supports, challenges, and respects children as individuals, and integrates life at school with everything else.

I taught physics and general science for five years in a small public high school in Ohio. I went into teaching with all the idealism, excitement, and can-do optimism we hope for in our best teachers. Like most new teachers, I enjoyed my interactions with students, and was proud of the smiles, positive evaluations, and sincere efforts to learn that I got from most of my students.

But something wasn't quite right. I noticed that even my best students, with the highest motivation levels and the most cooperative dispositions, didn't remember much from my class a year later. There was also the grating indignity of a school rule requiring students, even seniors in my AP Physics class, to obtain my written permission before they could go to the restroom. Too often my freshman General Science class left me feeling more like a warden than a mentor.

So I started exploring alternatives, including The Circle School. At first I thought I would be extraneous in this environment. Why would you need a highly trained science teacher if kids are just going to do what they want? Why would you need someone with classroom management skills in a school where classroom management is up to the students as much as the teacher? And truthfully, I love doing attention-grabbing science demonstrations, and didn't want to give up performing in front of a class.

Still, The Circle School's focus on mutual respect, democracy, freedom, and personal responsibility intrigued me, and my early interactions with students impressed me greatly.

As I considered The Circle School further, I began to get glimpses of a whole new way of thinking about education. I pored over the school's literature. I visited the school. As my interest increased, I talked for many hours with Circle School staff and parents.

All those things helped me understand The Circle School better, enough to seek and gain a position on staff. But that was just the beginning. My real education about education has happened since then, with students as my teachers: I quieted my adult voice and closely watched and listened to kids, so that I could join them in *their* world. Here are some of the things I was moved by:

I saw a painfully shy student deliver an astounding, clear, forthright, articulate election speech, with fire in her eyes and a granite pillar of resolve inside her. Her speech came out of the blue, with no particular help or encouragement from staff, just her burning desire to get elected in spite of her fears about speaking in front of the entire School Meeting. She won the election handily, and served admirably, but that's not the point. Her success in preparing and giving that speech stands on its own as a great triumph, and an important leap forward in her education.

While driving home one day I watched my daughter completely absorbed in reading *The Great Gatsby*, a book I had to read in high school, and hated. I asked her why she was reading *that*. She said it was because it was really good, and because another student recommended it.

I saw 10- and 12-year-old boys exult outdoors on a warm spring day, and then come inside all sweaty and breathless because they didn't want to miss the arithmetic practice time they set up with Beth.

One day I dropped everything to go see an amazing bug some kids found outside. The insect was using a long tube on its abdomen to bore tiny holes deep into a tree. After it flew away, we looked on the internet and discovered that this rare wasp could actually detect beetle larvae deep inside the tree from the outside, and was boring holes so she could lay her eggs *on the larvae!*

Occasionally the Judicial Committee recommends expelling a student, because of an infraction or a pattern of infractions. School Meeting discussions in such cases are agonizing, empowering, painful—often causing soul-searching and growth. It takes a huge heart and a deep respect to tell someone we love, with our voice and vote, that their choices have led them to a necessary, and permanent, separation from the school they love. Everyone present, including the student in question, must examine their deepest values about community, respect, and tolerance; then weigh them with their personal feelings and aspirations. I have learned that usually the kindest thing I can do for those I care about is to "tell it like it is," even when that truth is painful.

On the Appalachian Trail with students, I crossed a pedestrian bridge over Interstate 81, sunrise just peeking over cool mist on our left, a week's food and equipment on our backs. I watched as a convoy of school buses passed under us. Then, having hours of quiet reflection time on the trail, I thought about all that my students were getting from this week in a forest instead of a classroom.

I quietly listened as a student asserted, "I can't do it, I can't do it, I'm too scared." Then I watched her get up on stage and give her best performance ever. The applause was 100% hers. If I had pressured her to go through with it, instead of simply listening, the outcome would instead have been partly mine. Her growing ability to decide for herself would have been undermined. I saw her victorious smile and knew, more fully than I could have six years ago, that teaching is about maximizing students' freedom, and freedom means being allowed to succeed or fail by one's own efforts.

My journey from a traditional classroom teacher to a Circle School staff member continues. The Circle School allows me to learn and grow, together with students as colleagues and friends. That's as precious to me as it is to our students. •

JD wrote this after six years as a Circle School staff member, thinking of himself as a newcomer. At ten years he remarked that he was "beginning to get the hang of this." Now, at 15 years, we think he's figured it out.



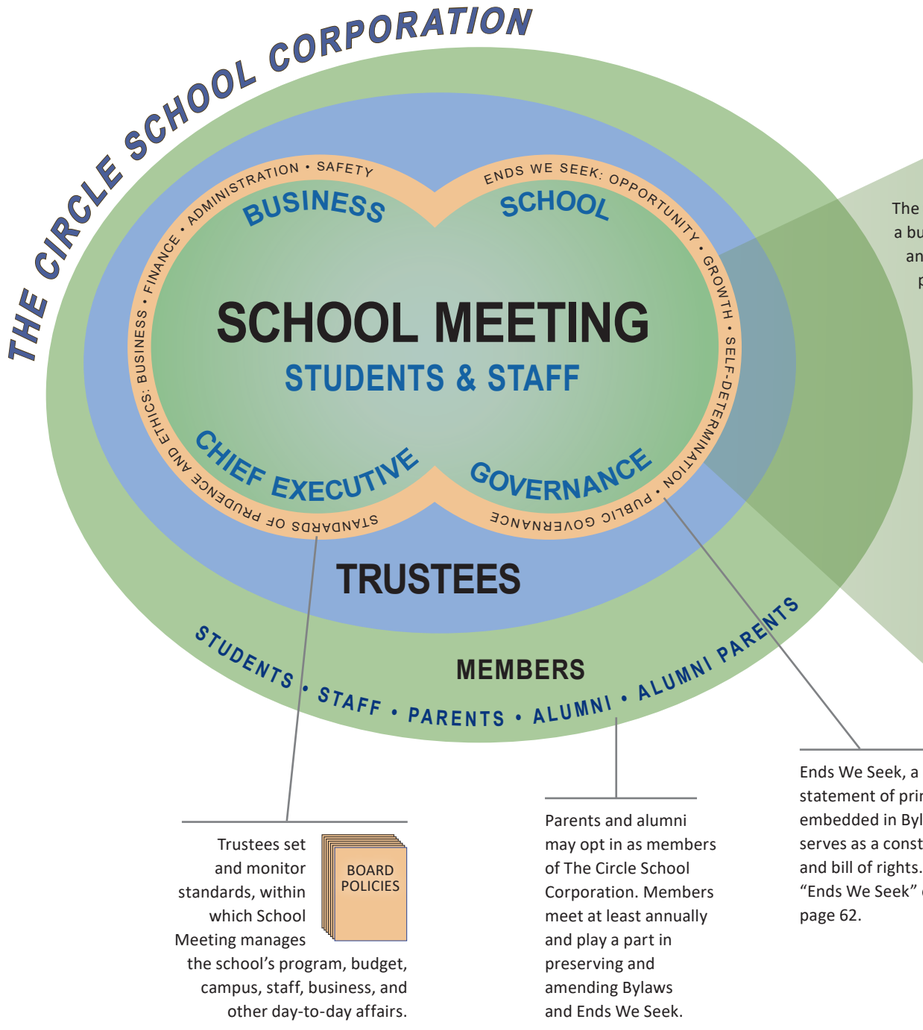








Building rockets for Science Corporation's Rocket Launch event.



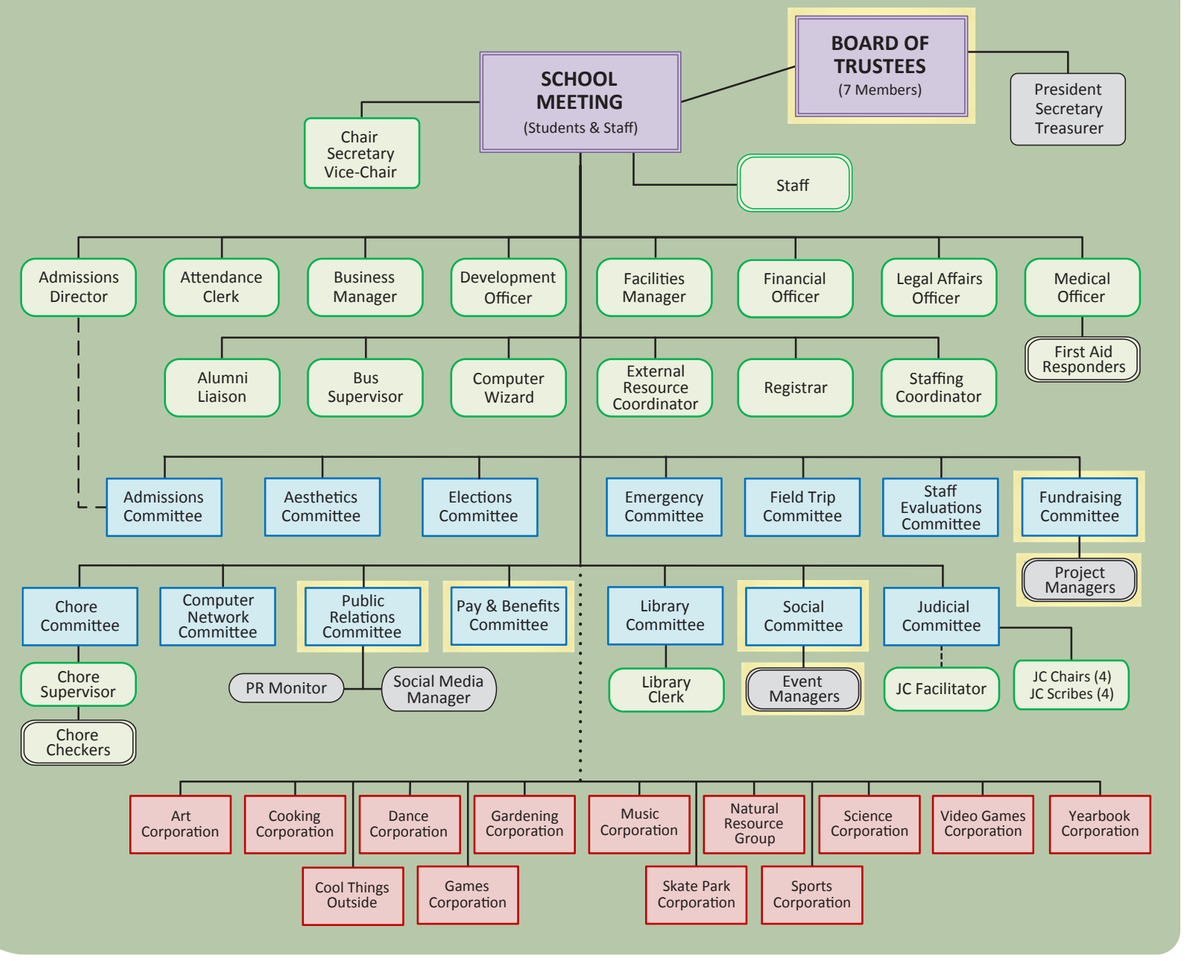
Trustees set and monitor standards, within which School Meeting manages the school's program, budget, campus, staff, business, and other day-to-day affairs.

BOARD POLICIES

Parents and alumni may opt in as members of The Circle School Corporation. Members meet at least annually and play a part in preserving and amending Bylaws and Ends We Seek.

Ends We Seek, a statement of principles embedded in Bylaws, serves as a constitution and bill of rights. See "Ends We Seek" on page 62.

The Circle School is both a business (nonprofit) and a community of people gathering daily. Students and staff together serve as chief executive of the business and governing body of the community.



Individual positions are elected or appointed periodically by vote of School Meeting. All School Meeting members are eligible, though some positions are usually held by staff members.

Corporations are chartered by School Meeting to govern certain activities, space, and equipment at school. Corporations manage their own finances, conduct their own fundraising, and elect their own officials.

Some committee memberships and some chairs are elected or appointed. Others are on a sign-up basis. Standing committees are shown here; *ad hoc* and joint (with the Board) committees are not shown, as they come and go.

Framed boxes indicate special opportunities for parents, grandparents, and other volunteers to be involved.

As chief executive of The Circle School's business, School Meeting manages staff, budget, facilities, public relations, and much more.

School Meeting also governs the daily community, administering all three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial.

As a legislature, School Meeting maintains the school lawbook. Hardly a week goes by without a proposal for a new law, amendment, or repeal.

Most meetings run by *Robert's Rules Of Order*. From 4-year-olds to adult staff members, everyone has the same right to speak and to vote. Majority rules.

The Judicial Committee investigates alleged infractions of laws daily, takes testimony, makes findings of fact, files charges when supported by evidence, and conducts trials by jury when defendants plead "not guilty." Everybody takes turns serving on JC. JC Chairs, a coveted position of trust, are elected.

The table on the facing page shows School Meeting's various agencies. But the world doesn't stand still. By the time you read this, something has probably changed. •

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Curriculum & Learning

Q: No mandatory curriculum? Really?

A: Yes, really. The school imposes no curriculum or schedule of classes. Instead, students manage their own time, pursuing activities of their own choosing and fulfilling civic duties. Students encounter a broad variety of subjects—including much that is part of a traditional curriculum and much that is not. Because students freely choose their pursuits, learning is generally deeper, more satisfying, and more enduring. Self-motivation driven by personal interest makes the difference.

Q: Why doesn't the school impose a curriculum?

A: Three reasons. First, we avoid curricular coercion simply out of basic human respect. Second, because learning is more efficient and durable when self-directed by a person's own interests. And third, because forcing people to "learn" tends, over time, to deaden their curiosity, self-motivation, originality, confidence, and creativity—essential ingredients for highest human achievement. In short, mandatory curriculum is a poor educational strategy, and unnecessary coercion is out of sync with today's values.

Q: What if my child isn't self-motivated?

A: Comedian Phyllis Diller observed, "We spend the first year of our children's lives teaching them to walk and talk—and then 12 years telling them to sit down and shut up." The point is, most children get little opportunity to exercise self-motivation in standard schools.

When children are required to pursue other people's interests rather than their own, it's no wonder they seem to lack motivation. When children's lives are mostly directed by teachers and adults, it's no wonder their self-awareness and self-direction deteriorate or fail to develop.

Every child begins life with high motivation to learn. Among children who begin their school years here at The Circle School, all are motivated. Children who have previously spent years in traditional schools may take some time to recover internal motivation, and the spirit and sparkle that go with it. They'll get there—more easily now as kids than later as adults.

Q: Do most students take regular academic classes?

A: No. Academic studies in formal classes typically make up only a small fraction of activities at school. Formal classes generally happen when initiated by a student or a group. Classes can be organized by anyone at any time, around almost any subject or activity. Some students participate in many classes, some in very few. Math and languages are the most common. Many older students seek formal instruction to prepare for college entrance exams. Otherwise, most students occasionally initiate or join a class, but students of all ages generally spend only a small fraction of their time in formal academic studies. Some alumni who were here for many years say they never took any classes at all.

Q: Are there optional activities?

A: Yes, hundreds. Life at school is full of activities. Most fall into one of four categories: (1) affairs organized by the participants, (2) events offered by corporations (such as Science Corporation and Cooking Corporation), (3) school business conducted by committees and elected officials, and (4) use of "self-service" materials and equipment that are always available.

The Happenings Board displays signs and sign-up sheets—anyone can put one up—for discussion groups, classes, clubs, projects, field trips, special events, sales of goods and services, and so on. Corporations maintain materials and equipment for anyone to use, and conduct activities and events (such as Lego Day, rocket launch, take-apart, cooking contests, music performances, and much more). School business involves dozens of elected officials and committees, offering endless opportunities to manage systems and activities that keep the school running.

Q: How do students learn?

A: Democratic schools include traditional learning methods, such as classes, independent study, and one-on-one tutoring, including textbooks and testing when learners find it helpful. Democratic schools also enable many new learning modes, methods, and mechanisms—16 of them elaborated in the book *When Kids Rule the School* (see page 60). The result is constant growth in multiple intelligences and striking leaps in critical thinking, all in the midst of fulfilling lives in dynamic community.

Q: Does the school issue report cards or other written assessment?

A: No. The school does not do testing or assessment for reporting to parents. Students may seek assessment, including testing, for their own purposes, but the school doesn't keep records of it.

Absence of mandatory assessment makes several wholesome results more likely. First, children develop strong self-assessment habits and introspective skills—self-awarenesss. Second, they more freely seek and absorb meaningful feedback, gaining ability and confidence in their original thinking. Third, children's natural curiosity and motivation are preserved—habits of growth, rather than action to please adults.

Q: What about conferences?

A: During at least the first four weeks of every new student's enrollment—called the Practice Period—the student and parents meet at least twice with a staff member for a "check-in conference" to re-assess the goodness of fit between student and school. The staff member provides feedback about how things are going, and asks the student and parents for their observations, questions, and concerns.

After the Practice Period, the school does not routinely schedule family conferences, although we invite parents to discuss with staff members their concerns related to their children, especially when parent-child communications haven't resolved the concern. In addition, when a student is suspended following judicial proceedings, and on rare occasions when a student's health or well-being are seriously threatened, the school may request or require a family conference.

Q: How will I know how my child is doing?

A: Parents who have paid close attention to grades and report cards in the past are sometimes anxious at first. But after a while, most say they know their children better than ever before and don't miss the school assessments. For some, grades and report cards have been a source of tension between parent and child, even with "good grades." Removal of the tension comes as a relief and the relaxed parent-child relationship flourishes. "I got my son back," as some have said. •













After School

Alumni notes



MIKE ISHMAN

Sarah Ishman ’09, paralegal in 2019
We are our choices

Sarah Ishman ’09 ran the school’s Judicial Committee with great skill, administering due process and rule of law with fairness and compassion. Now she’s a paralegal at the law firm of Perry Shore Weisenberger & Zemlock. Sarah arrived at The Circle School “terrified” in 2004. She remembers:

The summer before ninth grade, I found myself at an admissions meeting at The Circle School. I think most kids find the idea of do-what-you-want-when-you-want fun and exciting. For a girl who was nearly perfect at doing what other people want, I found it terrifying. I couldn’t tell you what exactly I was looking for, but I did know what I didn’t want: I didn’t want my mom to be treated like the customer, instead of me. I took what, at the time, felt more like a plunge than a leap of faith, and enrolled in The Circle School.

I spent the next five years at The Circle School cultivating friendships that will be lifelong; reading; diving into photography; learning about similar schools, and then relocating to Washington (state) for six months to observe a new one; organizing, fundraising, and executing a field trip to Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. From the beginning I took a heavy interest in the day-to-day governing of the school, running School Meeting and the Judicial Committee. I experienced great support, love, community, and respect. I took classes at a local college and read stories to little ones, I laughed, I leapt, I breathed, I made mistakes, and I found great contentment.

The most meaningful thing I learned from The Circle School was that we are our choices. Being given the chance and space to have ownership over mine has made all the difference. I feel the effects of attending The Circle School every day in the choices I make. •



SEAN MEMMI ’09

Robin Stillwater ’08
Nurse, minister, Navy officer

Robin Stillwater ’08 worked for Americorps as a live-in caregiver for adults with developmental disabilities, and then earned a degree in nursing (2013), became a licsensed RN, and worked as an emergency room nurse for two years. More recently, Robin earned a BA in religion and a master’s degree in divinity with concentrations in interreligious engagement and racism (Union Theological Seminary). Her final project won an award from the Islam, Social Justice, and Interreligious Engagement Program (ISJIE).

In 2017 Robin was commissioned as a U.S. Navy officer, and is now in a Clinical Pastoral Education Residency with the Veterans Administration.

While here, Robin was a Medical Responder, Judicial Committee Chair, Cooking Corporation officer, and member of Chore Committee and Natural Resources Group Corporation.

Robin says “Going to The Circle School has given me the strength and self knowledge to do what is right for me, even if it is against the norm.” •



Jesse Bert ’96 worked at three different internships during his last three years at The Circle School, all related to metalwork. He earned a BFA from Rochester Institute of Technology and a master’s degree (MFA) from East Carolina University, both in Jewelry and Metalsmithing. In addition to his studio work (which you can see at left and at jessebert.com), Jesse is Adjunct Professor of Jewelry and Metals Design at Technological Institute of Monterrey. Jesse’s primary work format is sculptural jewelry incorporating recycled and found objects. About living in Mexico, Jesse says “When I’m not teaching or working on new pieces, I love to be outside. I tend to my cactus collection or spend time exploring the Mexican countryside and hiking in the mountains.”



“NOLA” (2018) Boxwood, copper, silver, ebony, maple, applewood, eggshell, hand-stamped, die-formed

Jesse says “one of the most enjoyable and influential things” he did at The Circle School was a three-day sailboat expedition on the Chesapeake Bay, at Echo Hill Outdoor School. •

Jesse Bert ’96
Metalwork in Mexico





Austin Vogt ’02 and Felix, 2018
Dad, PhD, medical researcher
Played cards a lot at school

Austin Vogt ’02 enrolled when barely out of diapers, stayed for 16 years, and later served as a school Trustee. After leaving The Circle School, Austin studied at Allegheny College on a merit-based scholarship, majoring in biochemistry with a minor in English.

Now with a master’s in biomedical sciences and PhD in biochemistry and molecular biology, Austin is a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, “working on the structural biology of a protein complex involved in chromatin maintenance (protecting and storing DNA). The research has implications in aging and cancer.”

How did The Circle School prepare him for college? Here’s what he wrote from graduate school in 2010: *At The Circle School I played cards, attended School Meeting, talked with friends, hung out with my brother, took math classes, played role-playing games, and played and worked outside as part of the grounds crew.*

Graduate school is itself a reflection of The Circle School’s philosophy of self-directed learning. More so than undergraduate work, I’ve spent the majority of my time here designing my own course of study: choosing both what I want to research and how I want to approach that research. The critical thinking skills, self-motivation, and time management that are all inherent to The Circle School’s program are essential to the work I’m doing now, and I can’t think of a better way to prepare for graduate school.

In 2019, Austin writes: I am also now married and have a child. Felix takes up a lot of my free time at the moment, but before Felix, and on occasions even now, I have dabbled in calligraphy, carpentry, and growing an orchard. My latest projects were a built-in dresser/wardrobe/desk for Felix’s room, re-doing fencing around four apple trees, and staking up some raspberries. •



On a field trip 1989



Jamie Tyrrell ’00 in 2010
Stage and stethoscope

Jamie Tyrrell ’00 attended The Circle School for seven years, and then went on to Franklin and Marshall College on a full merit-based scholarship. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa and *magna cum laude*, with a double major in neuroscience and theater, and spent summers paid to study Shakespeare in England. Returning to Harrisburg, Jamie worked in theater as a director, stage manager, and actor. More recently Jamie worked in the chemical engineering department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, taught MCAT classes (medical school entry exam prep), and entered medical school at the University of Rochester.

Assembling an excavated dog skeleton, 1996



Jamie’s mother, Marianne Tyrrell, comments: *In public school, Jamie excelled at everything, yet she was bored, frustrated, and learning bad lessons about gauging her success by her ability to jump through hoops created by others. At The Circle School she was set free to find her own boundaries, free to fly, free to be challenged. That is why I chose The Circle School for my children when they were little.* •



In his “closet office” at school, January 2005

Kyle Boran ’05 attended The Circle School for three years, and then went on to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, graduating in 2009 with a degree in Management Information Systems. A year later, Kyle was a software engineer at Cisco Systems, where he is “entrusted with ensuring the quality of software that is used to secure an estimated 150 million computers worldwide.”

Kyle traces the theme of trust to his Circle School days: *What I remember most from The Circle School is trust. Even before I was enrolled, I expressed an interest in computers. Before long I was working on improving systems at the school. I mustn’t have been enrolled for more than a month before I was given the password to the school website.*



Kyle Boran ‘05 at Cisco, circa 2010
150 million computer users trust him

At many schools you would find the computers locked down, available to students only for approved uses. The idea of a teen-aged student being in nearly full control of a school computer network is an unusual one. Yet, this relationship worked. In my time I tried to rebuild and improve nearly every system in the school, physically and virtually. I learned a lot and benefited both myself and other students.

In many ways I’m given flexibility in my job, because software engineering requires innovation. There is no textbook for innovation. You need to find things out as you go along and figure out how to do things better. You may need to take risks sometimes. In both school life and work life, this requires trust. •



Laura Owens ’13 in 2019
Associate Scientist
Energetiq Technology Inc

Laura Owens ’13 enrolled when she was eight years old, stayed for ten years, and then went on to college. Reflecting now on her Circle School experience:

I recognize profound opportunities I’ve had, and character traits I possess, thanks to my time at The Circle School. Most notable and appreciated in my recent college experience is my insatiable intellectual curiosity and sense of responsibility for my own education. When I take classes, I approach them with the mindset of wanting to get the most out of the learning experience, regardless of whether that class relates to my major or career goals.

In my last semester at college, I took a math proofs class intended for math majors, even though I’d never taken geometry. It was the most challenging course I undertook. I also took a world politics class where the professor assumed I was a political science major until the final day of class—and was offended to discover that I was a chemistry major. Although I wasn’t required to take either of these courses for my major, I approached them as opportunities to broaden my horizons. I have The Circle School to thank for these personally fulfilling academic experiences, because I grew up in a culture where we explored topics not because there was an expectation that students must learn them to be successful, but because we were genuinely curious about these subjects. This resulted in me having little training in traditional topics like mathematics and literature previous to college, but a keen ability to follow my passions and seek out answers to my own questions. •



Studying gravity in 2003 (above) and at the Hanford LIGO gravity wave detector in 2017



Sheridan Zivanovich enrolled for three middle school years, with homeschooling before and after, followed by a computer science degree from University of Pittsburgh and a job with Google as a software engineer. Sheridan writes about useful skills he cultivated at The Circle School:

Self-management. At The Circle School I managed my own time, with priorities dictated by my interests, often learning to play the drums, serving as a medical responder, and performing physics experiments. Despite my lack of background in academic subjects, I excelled in these classes during my undergraduate studies, because I understood how to manage my time and efforts. This continues to serve me in my career as a software engineer.

Self-efficacy. I became confident that I could succeed at previously unfamiliar tasks, like writing a college-level paper, taking a final, or planning a project.

Communication. Discussion with friends wasn’t limited to lunchtime gossip (though there was plenty). We proposed and discussed changes to the lawbook, monetary appropriations, and certification processes. Participation in school governance necessarily caused me to develop an appreciation for careful wordsmithing and precise communication. Being able to clearly and precisely articulate yourself, and understand the articulations of others, is an invaluable skill in any aspect of life that requires interpersonal interaction—which, as it turns out, is most aspects of life, even in highly technical workplaces. •



Sheridan Zivanovich, software engineer at Google
Second-place medalist, September 2018
First-place, February 2019



Connor Tyrrell '04 in 2019
Business & Technology Consultant
Marathon to Athens

Connor Tyrrell '04 started at The Circle School when he was seven years old. Having heard there was no dress code, on his very first day he wore pajamas. The funny part is that nobody really noticed. Near the end of the day someone asked if that was pajamas he was wearing. Connor said yes, and that was the end of it. That must have been fine with Connor, because he stayed for 11 years. As he says, he was "one of many students who truly grew up at The Circle School."

Connor was an entrepreneur from early on, starting with sales of origami at school when he was eight years old, and progressing to an online tee shirt business at 16 years old (doing about $25,000 in sales over a few years). He also got a job as a ski instructor at Ski Roundtop.

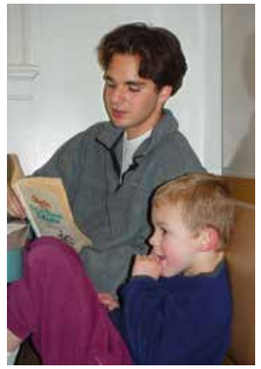
From The Circle School, Connor went on to Babson College, which is internationally renowned for entrepreneurial leadership. At Babson, Connor was a four-year varsity athlete and graduated *magna cum laude*. He double-concentrated in Economics and Information Technology Management, in which he was named as Babson's top student.

After graduating from Babson, Connor setttled in Boston, where he is currently a Principal Consultant for Slalom Consulting, a business and technology firm. He has run three marathons, including the "authentic marathon"—in Greece, from Marathon to Athens. He is also founder of the website BrewGene.com—you tell it what beers you like, and it suggests others.

At The Circle School, Connor was often kicking a soccer ball, throwing a football, playing Capture The Flag, hiking the Appalachian Trail, or "doing anything else my friends wanted to do." As he got older, he became more involved in school government, at various times serving as School Meeting Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary, and as a member of the Admissions Committee and Computer Corporation. With the Natural Resource Group, a school corporation, Connor planned and went on many hikes, including some major expeditions lasting a week or more.

While loving life in Boston, Connor says he hasn't forgotten his "true roots at The Circle School." From Boston, Connor participated in a Circle School committee to redesign the school's governance structure in 2007, including creation of a Board of Trustees. Connor was elected the first President of the Board, a position he held for 11 years.

Inventing a new adjective, Connor reflects in 2019 on something he describes as particularly "circle-schooly:" *I love learning new things and I'm very good at teaching myself things.* •



2002



In the sandbox, 1993



Somers Compton in 2018
Why I send my children to
The Circle School

Somers Compton, enrolled in 1996, tells her own story: *I have to be honest when I say that to the outside observer I didn't do grand things during my three years at The Circle School. I spent my middle school years there mostly basking in the community and loving the feeling of having control over my own destiny. I was able for the first time in my young life to make deep connections to friends and feel secure in my place in the world. I often spent my days writing in my journal, drawing, reading, and getting very into role-playing pretend games with my friends. I was much more concerned with the joy of these relationships than with anything academic. I didn't take a single class. I didn't join any groups or corporations. What I did do was take the lead on my own individual self and got to know what things I enjoy doing. I came to find I was a natural leader, even if just of my own life.*

My passions became dreams, those dreams became goals, and those goals became reality. For example, at age 13 when my parents could not afford to send me to The Circle School any longer, I paid my own tuition by fundraising and working at the school after hours.

A belief that I can make things happen, and an understanding of how to sustain a community, stayed with me into adulthood and has helped me be successful in the many ventures that I have been part of. For five years I ran a music venue out of my home, booking local, touring, and international acts. I never could have imagined doing it without the knowledge and interpersonal skills I developed at The Circle School. For many years I helped run a church outreach project—a free store, a place to come and "shop" for clothing and other needs. Eventually I crowdfunded and planted the Free Store in Harrisburg. I found a passion, made a plan, raised the money, and made it a reality. Just like I had learned to do 20 years earlier at The Circle School.

I also started Harrisburg's first and only long form improvisational comedy theatre. My passion there is on the connections and community made through our adult improv training. Those many hours of playing pretend with my friends, and the value of collaborative make-believe play, make me uniquely qualified to teach improv to first-time improvisers. It's my job to tap into their inner children and gently push them to unlearn the parts of growing up that make life boring and encourage them to cut loose and have fun.

I make connections with people and I make my passions happen. These are two common threads among the school's alumni, and that's why now, as a mother, I send my children to The Circle School. •



At school in 1997
Unlearning and improvising



In the Art Room, 1996
Somers is at the back on the right



Amy Zecha '02 attended for three years. After The Circle School, Amy earned an associates degree at Harrisburg Area Community College, and a BA and MA in International Economic Relations at American University. With a specialization in East Asia and China, Amy worked in Beijing for the US Agricultural Foreign Service. She then returned to Harrisburg where she worked for Pennsylvania's Office of International Business Development as an International Business Marketing Executive.

Working with international companies considering relocation to Pennsylvania, Amy says she uses "the skills I honed at The Circle School on a daily basis. I am thankful for my inquisitiveness, flexibility, and communication and teamwork skills, which I learned and used while at The Circle School."

Remembering her Circle School years, here is what Amy wrote:

My first year was a period of intense growth. The freedoms and holistic approach of The Circle School were not only new and unusual, but also frightening. I had been taught that to succeed, one only needs to follow orders and work hard. At The Circle School, the lack of direct orders was initially overwhelming. However, by the end of my first year, I had come to appreciate and even to thrive in my new environment. I had learned to appreciate the opportunities The Circle School offers, and I was determined to become an active member of my school community and take control of my education. I was Chairperson of the Art Corporation (after reviving it from a dormant state), School Meeting Secretary, Judicial Committee Chairperson, and member of the Admissions and Office Committees.

During my years at The Circle School, my confidence soared and my curiosity and thirst for learning blossomed. I felt like I could do anything. I had transformed from a shy, quiet girl who worked hard and listened to her teachers without question, to an empowered, strong-willed person, ready to break conventional boundaries and pursue my education as I saw fit. •



Hladini Mensah '09 in 2010
Costa Rica to Colorado

Hladini Mensah '09 was homeschooled through 8th grade, and then attended The Circle School for four years. In fall 2009 she entered an environmental design internship program in Costa Rica, where she lived in a small village while studying green building techniques. There she helped build a house using the wattle and daub technique (a mixture of clay, sand, straw, and cow manure built onto bamboo frames), and was a volunteer teacher at the local elementary school. After a bookstore job to raise some college money, Hladini earned a degree at University of Colorado, majoring in Environmental Design.

At The Circle School, Hladini says she "did what I enjoyed." She joined and held leadership positions in various committees and corporations, including the Music and Art Corporations, and the Library and Aesthetics Committees. She was one of a small group who worked for two years to study, plan, and fundraise for a two-week field trip to Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. Hladini also helped organize groups to study Spanish, mediation, and fashion design.

Hladini reflects that "The Circle School taught me how to learn, and helped me discover that I am creative, dedicated, responsible, hard-working, and community-oriented." •



Cabinetry, 2008



Dan Schiffrin '04 in 2009
The art of finding happiness

Dan Schiffrin '04 attended The Circle School for four years and earned a BA in literary arts at Brown University. Dan proposes that a true education is "the art of finding happiness." His reflections:

The Circle School gave me the time to figure out who I needed to be, to be happy. See, the thing that people don't understand is that education isn't about facts and theories, techniques and viewpoints. It's about learning who you need to be, to be a happy, fulfilled person. The Circle School gave me the gift of time to figure out how to exist in a satisfying way. And because the facts and theories are neither spoon-fed to you, nor forced down your throat, you learn how to learn. This, far more than history, science, and literature is useful because it is adaptive. And everything I learned, I learned because either I wanted to know it, or because I needed to know it to get what I wanted.

Really, what else is worth knowing? What you want to do and what you will need to do to get what you want—this seems to me, complete. Perhaps you want a story—learn to read. Perhaps you want to meet a girl—learn to flirt. Perhaps you want to carry a friend—learn to lift. Perhaps you want to go to college—master the SATs. At any moment I have the power to transform my entire life completely, irrevocably, and instantly. I get to choose who to be, what to do. I think The Circle School facilitates an understanding of this truth, while traditional education seems to undermine it.

My education at The Circle School was a product of the freedom of time and choice. Time and choice seem like inalienable rights, because they are completely indispensable for a true education, which I believe is the art of finding happiness. •

At school 2003





Taylor Kuyk-White '06 in 2018
Life based education

Taylor Kuyk-White '06 attended for four years "after a number of turbulent years in public school, struggling with school authority." Now she reflects:

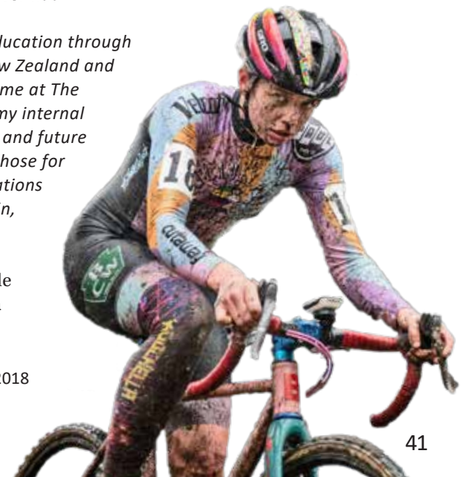
Being immersed [at The Circle School] where an inherent trust of children and youth is a guiding value was a bit of a shock! I could not believe that I would be permitted to spend my days playing video games should that be my choice. I did so, in fact, and The Circle School passed the test. Shortly after, the appeal faded and I spent my time exploring a budding passion for photography, discovering new music, planning and participating in overnight backpacking trips, and immersing myself more deeply in the joy of friendship than I had ever had the opportunity before.

After The Circle School, I continued my life based education through solo travel, sailing, and outdoor adventure. Time in New Zealand and Australia crystallized many lessons taught during my time at The Circle School, the most significant being deep trust of my internal compass that allows me to make choices about my life and future with confidence and joy. My next chapter brought me to Prescott College, an institution I chose for the similarity of values and environment. For four years I pursued adventures and conversations that sharpened my sense of purpose and understanding the world I wanted to participate in, graduating with a degree in social justice and outdoor education.

In 2019, Taylor now lives in Philadelphia where she has runs a cycling program for youth, "guided by the same principles that helped me build a path as a teen in The Circle School." With the Bicycle Coalition Youth Cycling Program, Taylor says she has found a way to combine her passions for competitive cycling, learning through adventure, and mentoring youth. •



First Place, Pro Womens 30+
2018 USA Cyclocross
National Championship



Competing in NBX Gran Prix 2018



Jyles Yates ’00 in 2010
Vermont adventures

Jyles Yates ’00 attended The Circle School for seven years. In 2002 he “moved to Vermont and married my true love, Peg.” He works “40 hours a week as a carpenter and 80 hours a week as an outdoor adventurer.”

Jyles’ reflections, excerpted from a letter to the school community: *Vermont is a place known for people who are very independent, and full of do-it-yourselfers. Peg and I call our house YOU-University. You think of something you want to try and you try it. Sound familiar?*

I’m at a point in my life where I’m confident with who I am and content with my past experiences. I was raised to take life and its many possibilities, dangers, and wonders, and run with it.

I received the best education available. I was taught how to live by my own choices, and was accepted and respected by my peers and teachers. I wasn’t afraid to live outside the box. I believe my childhood was the best it possibly could have been. •

Think of something and try it





Michael Wenzel ’99 (top left)
with classmates in Cairo

Michael Wenzel ’99 attended for three years—“one of the primary building blocks for who I am today.” After The Circle School, Michael attended the Culinary Institute of America and Harrisburg Area Community College, “paying his bills” by working as a preschool teacher, nanny, personal chef, and tutor.

After graduating from Temple University with a degree in Anthropology, Michael entered a linguistic anthropology program in Cairo, Egypt, where he studied “the maintenance of Upper Egyptian identity [despite] mass emigration and NGOs.”

Michael reflects: *[My Circle School years] are a constant influence on my life. My drive to succeed, as well as my internal strength and confidence, were built [there]. Those elements are more valuable to me now than anything I learned in a classroom. I spent my days [at The Circle School] flipping pancakes in the kitchen, being coerced by younger kids into playing football, attending meetings, and engaging in countless discussions. I miss the serious talks, the goofing around, the silly jabbering, and the good old-fashioned foolishness that everyone enjoyed regardless of age.* •



Cole Lightner ’07 in 2009
1st Battalion 9th Marines

Cole Lightner ’07 attended for five years and and then enlisted as a U.S. Navy Corpsman attached to the 1st Battalion 9th Marines, part of a quick-reaction Marine Expeditionary Unit. In the first of two deployments, Cole visited Haiti, Spain, Djibouti, Dubai, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Greece, and Croatia. Cole’s favorite memories of The Circle School are practicing and teaching martial arts—“still my passion.” Visiting school on leave in 2010, Cole said:

The Circle School was the first place where I could stand up on my own two feet. I learned to make a choice and accept what came from it. It has helped me attain things that others would consider unattainable, especially in difficult conditions—like 135 degrees in Kuwait with a hundred pounds on my back. Military life is a wake-up call for most people, but for me it was a natural stepping-stone after The Circle School. •

Leading martial arts
training at school, 2006





Jancey Mallory ’04 and family, 2019
What I want for my daughter

Jancey Mallory ’04 enrolled at three years old in 1988 and stayed for 16 years. After leaving The Circle School, Jancey earned a BS in Applied Developmental Psychology and a Master of Social Work degree from University of Pittsburgh. Later, after years of professional practice, Jancey became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW).

Jancey has worked in a variety of settings, including Western Psychiatric Institute, with “children and families facing enormous challenges due to poverty and trauma.”

In 2010, Jancey wrote: *One of the most important skills I learned at The Circle School was how to solve problems. At work, I engage in problem-solving all day long. Each family I work with comes with a unique set of factors—strengths, weaknesses, values, goals, resources—that I need to consider to create a solution that works for them.*

At The Circle School I got plenty of practice solving problems. For example, when I was 11 years old, my friends and I made up a game called “Medieval Times” that involved building forts and sword fighting with sticks. Pretty quickly after the game started, someone pointed out that stick-fighting was dangerous and we had to come up with a safe way to do it, or stop playing. I remember thinking, “There is no way to make stick-fighting safe.” But we did. We created detailed safety rules including things like how many feet away from bystanders stick-fighters had to be, and how many inches the diameter of the sticks could be. We engaged in the same process that I do at work today as an adult: we considered the unique factors of the situation, developed potential solutions, tested those solutions, and then analyzed their effectiveness.

In 2019, Jancey says: *I recently became a parent, which led me to reflect on my education and think about the kind of education I want for my daughter. Having completed college and grad school, and having a career, I’m living proof that kids who grow up without grades, tests, or being forced to take classes, can achieve at least the same outcomes as their peers who went to traditional schools. Knowing that, I would rather my daughter get to spend her childhood doing the things she loves and finds satisfying, over a childhood of mandatory classes and homework that for the most part she doesn’t enjoy.*

Besides, it seems impossible to know now what subjects and skills are going to be most useful and relevant by the time my daughter is an adult. Will it be machine learning, or sustainable agriculture? Or maybe something that hasn’t even been invented yet! It doesn’t make sense to me to try to guess what subjects will be important, and then spend 12 years teaching her things that might be irrelevant by the time she grows up. What does make sense to me, is for my daughter to spend her childhood discovering and exploring things that interest her, and participating in a democratic community; and through those experiences, developing skills that I am confident will be relevant to her life after school. •



Ready for Medieval Times 1997
Stick-fighting rules remain
in the lawbook today



Jancey, 5 years old, is in the front row,
2nd from right, 1991

The Lawbook... What's in it?

If it's not in the Lawbook, it's not illegal. That's called "rule of law." All of us—students and staff—must follow the same rules, and nobody can make up new ones on their own. Only School Meeting can make laws, and only after discussion and majority vote. Once it's in the Lawbook, JC (Judicial Committee) will enforce it. Everybody takes turns serving on the Judicial Committee.

Many laws are common sense, but they are in the lawbook just in case someone ever shows up without common sense. Some make sense only after you hear why it's there. Some are there because somebody once found a whole new kind of offense. Maybe they got away with it that first time. And some rules, alas, you may think are just not sensible. But you will probably follow them anyway, to avoid getting in trouble with JC. Does that all sound like the world outside of school?

There are hundreds of laws in the Lawbook. (Don't worry: you will learn the ones you need as you go along, just like adults in the world beyond school.) Here's a very small sampling (with the "short title" in parentheses), taken from the Lawbook as it was in June 2019:

1206.09 (Official goodbye) Shortly before departure, each member shall personally notify a staff member that they are leaving. Saying "official goodbye" to a staff member shall satisfy this requirement. Bus riders may say their official goodbye to the Bus Supervisor, even if the Bus Supervisor is not a staff member.



2000.08 (Individual obligation to promote school welfare) All School Meeting members are responsible for the running of the school community. It is the individual obligation of each School Meeting member to help promote the general welfare of the school, through actions that contribute to maintaining the air of freedom, respect, fairness, trust, and order that is the essence of the school's existence.

2403.13 (Use of Facilities Manager's tools) Only the Facilities Manager and crew members under the FM's supervision may use the tools and equipment belonging to the Facilities Manager.

2056.17 (Sound levels) Sound levels must be kept low enough so as not to interfere with activities in other rooms or areas.

2023.11 Excessive vulgarity is prohibited. Vulgarity is language, behavior, and other forms of expression that are crude, indecent, profane, scatological, obscene, or otherwise violate the norms of decency of the school community and the general community beyond the school. Vulgarity is "excessive" if a reasonable and mature person would probably find it disgusting or offensive, and any one or more of the following conditions is met: [list of conditions, such as "occurs in a high-traffic public location"].

2403.10 (Natural objects stay at school) Fossils, bones, sticks, rocks, bird nests, arrowheads, and other natural and archaeological objects found on campus shall not be removed from campus, except with direct permission voted by School Meeting. Exempt are tree leaves incorporated in works of art.

2417.08 (Calling "after" on computers) If you've been on a general use computer for 30 minutes or more within the last hour, and someone calls after you, you must yield the computer immediately, provided that you may take a few minutes to finish what you're doing.

2419.03 (Report damage) If you damage school property, whether accidentally or not, or if you observe the damaging of school property, then you must report it to the Facilities Manager within an hour of when the damage occurred.

2455.36 (Library: Silent) During the school day you may use the library only for silent, still activities, except for occasional, brief whispered interactions. Library Committee business is exempt from this rule. The Aesthetics Committee may make other occasional exceptions to this rule. You may not hide or seek in the Library during games.

2479.18 (Water containers must be empty indoors) Water guns, water balloons, bottles, tubs and any other object being used to hold water to squirt, dump, toss or otherwise propel through the air are to be completely empty of water when in the building.

2479.41 (Ask before watering a person!) No one is allowed to throw or squirt water at a person who doesn't want water to be thrown at them. You must ask permission first.

2800.19 (Illegal to throw food) It is illegal to throw food inside.

2853.02 (Food delivery acceptance/payment) If you order food to be delivered, you must be at the front door to accept the food and pay the delivery person when he or she arrives.

2853.05 (Paying for food) If you order food for delivery, you must pay the full amount plus a tip of at least 15% or $2, whichever is greater.

3200.08 (No lying to JC) Lying is prohibited in Judicial Committee testimony, in trials, and in School Meeting consideration of judicial cases (including sentencing).

3653.09 (Mess rule) Before going on to something else, clean up your previous activity. Littering or leaving messes is not allowed anywhere in the school or on the school grounds.

4406.14 (Hostile physical aggression prohibited) Hostile physical aggression (hitting, kicking, biting, pushing, etc.) is prohibited.

4409.16 (Stealing and found money) Stealing is when you take something that doesn't belong to you without permission or legal right and do not intend to return it, including if you take it from the Lost and Found. If you find money or other high-value property at school, you must promptly give it to the Business Manager or other office staff, and if you don't, that's stealing.

4412.43 Bullying is prohibited. Observing bullying and taking no corrective action is considered a form of bullying. Corrective actions may include writing a complaint, telling the bullier to stop, reporting the bullying to someone outside the bullier's peer group, physically intervening, or going for help.

4415.04 (No disrupting) No one may knowingly disrupt people's activities while at school or while participating in school sponsored functions so long as said activities are legal and within the rules of the school.

4415.30 (Protecting privacy at school) You may not post or publish stuff about or depicting another School Meeting member without their permission, and their parents' permission if they are under 13.

4800.07 (Intervene in unsafe behavior) You are expected to intervene up to and including physical intervention, to stop any behavior that you believe is imminently dangerous.

4822.17 (Fire drill protocol) When the fire alarm sounds or a fire drill is called, you must immediately leave the building by the nearest exit, and go to the end of the soccer field nearest the building (east end). You must remain silent except as necessary or helpful for safety. While gathered, you must remain attentive, still, and silent except as necessary to comply and cooperate with the official in charge.

4853.50 (Door safety) You may not push or pull on any door so as to prevent another person from opening or closing it.

4862.08 (Use of skateboards inside prohibited) While indoors, you may not ride, stand on, or otherwise use roller skates, roller blades, skateboards, scooters, bikes, roller shoes (such as Heelys) with the wheels attached, and other wheeled devices that move you with your feet off the ground.

3653.29 Paper airplane makers must write their names on the airplanes they make. •



Vignettes

by dee Holland-Vogt, Founding Staff Member

While I spent an hour on paperwork, three little ones, around six years old, played with the castle and blocks under the round table beside me. Imagination was flying high. All three were contributing to describe the setting and their characters, with a richness to rival J.K. Rowling. There were frightened exclamations made with impish grins. There were whispered confidences. And giggles galore. One exchange went as follows:

A [with joyous terror in his voice]: What would you do if a real ghost walked in here right now?

[Pause]

A [again with joyous terror]: I'd clean up and then I'd run right out of here and close the door.

B: Hmmm. I think I might run out and not clean up.

C: Yeah! But let's really clean up now and go outside.

And clean up, they did. Every last block, every character, every last teeny tiny accessory for play. And away they went to find outdoor adventure.

I love this place. •

2:10pm on a Thursday afternoon. It's raining here. Lightly. And overcast, but fairly warm.

Two older teen boys are in the backyard. They're sparring with long sword-like implements wrapped with padding that's festively colored. The sparring is intense yet friendly.

Four little girls aged four to six are covered with creamy colored mud as they dig together in the sandbox. A group of teen and young teen boys have a large handmade map spread over the art room table. They are rolling dice and talking about conflict, breaking, monsters, hit points, and AIs.

The JC is investigating a complaint from this morning. They're using digital photos submitted as evidence to track down mess makers.

A new 5-year-old is lunching in the kitchen booth with an oldster who's seven. They are taking a break. The 5-year-old was drenched from head to foot ten minutes ago. Now she's sporting a new dress, courtesy of the 7-year-old who knew to bring extra clothes in her backpack.

Sounds of laughter float down the hall from the library. Smells of a late lunch of scrambled eggs being created in the cooking kitchen fill the upstairs hallway.

I'm told that the cooked eggs are a gift from an active 12-year-old chef made for a super-hungry-today 8-year-old. The smile on the 8-year-old's face would melt ice. •

At 10:55 this morning, Chelsea Howard-Foley, our School Meeting Chair, rang the bell to announce the beginning of a School Meeting. I was sitting in the conference room at the time. The bell alerted me to the fact that I needed to finish up what I was working on and head to the meeting. I'm always appreciative of that reminder as I have a tendency to forget what time it is.

Today though, there were two young boys, 5 and 6 years of age, playing with blocks at the table behind me. As the bell was ringing, one of them said to the other, "School Meeting!" Both continued playing, while I smiled with delight. They know what it means and they could choose knowingly to attend the meeting or not. I love that. •

9:54am, January 29. "Want to play football?"

It's 25 degrees outside. There is a light snow falling and it is beginning to accumulate. Eli (15 years old) travels the building: "Want to play football?"

He repeats the question with each person he meets and in every room that he travels to. Some say Yes, some say No. Slowly a group begins forming outside on the lawn—the Yeses.

He leans into the Sci-Fi room where two rather new boys (11 and 13) are in their usual spots, ensconced in front of a video game terminal. "Want to play football?" The older boy, rather fragile in build, pauses and then responds hesitantly, "I'll probably get killed, but okay. I guess I'm willing to give it a try."

"We're meeting outside," Eli replies.

The younger boy, larger but somewhat physically awkward, now says, "I don't think I'll get killed, but I don't have any idea what I'm doing. If someone can explain things to me, I'm willing to give it a try."

"See you outside" is all Eli says.

It's a given that anyone is welcome to play. A given that whatever level of expertise or physical prowess, every person can surely play some part in the game. Rules are learned as you play. Accommodations are made on the spot. The hush of falling snow has an overlay of laughter. Lots of laughter.

Two teams face off across an imaginary 50-yard line. One is 5 boys and a girl; the other is 6 boys. The players range in tenure at The Circle School from 13 years to one week. All are actively engaged. Shouting plays to one another. Running. Passing. Catching. Tumbling. Laughing. There are little ones doing snow angels on the sidelines. And others cheering it all on.

Me, I am smiling. Feeling deeply satisfied to be part of this community. •

I'm working at my desk.

She (4-year-old): Look at this!

Me: WOW! I see a tower. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.... 7 blocks high!

She: Yep [huge grin] AND now I'm gonna make it 8 blocks high!

A little while later

She: Look now. Let's count them...

She and me together: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8!

She: If I add just a couple more blocks, it will be 10 blocks high.

Me: Yep. 2 more blocks added to your 8 will make it 10 blocks high.

She: How many blocks do I need to make it 12 high?

Me: 2 more than 10. 4 more than 8.

More block building. Singing. Soliloquy about towers and blocks and frustration when towers fall, while I type at the computer. Much time passes.

She: You can look now!

Amazingly complex double tower. Short and long blocks are not at the same place in each tower, yet both are the same height. There was definitely attention to the laws of physics to keep it from easily falling over.

She: Count the blocks and see how many it took to build this one.

Me [With her grinning from ear to ear]: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15!

She: And look at this. This block helps to connect them so they stay together.

Me: I like the way this crown block is not at the same place in this tower as it is in the other, and yet, both towers end up being exactly the same height. It's a kind of pleasant asymmetry.

She: Yeah. I used different blocks but made it end up being the same tall. Now I'm gonna build something for some little people.

I go back to typing and she continues building. She gets out the little people. She sings and talks to herself and her little wooden friends as she plays.

She [singing out gleefully]: This is definitely the best day of my life.

Me: I love my job, too. •

Signs of Life





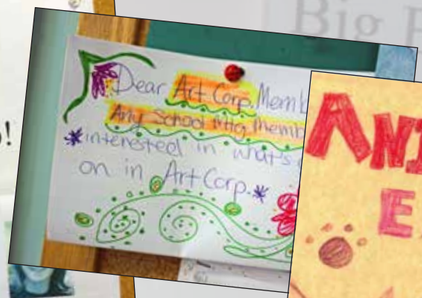


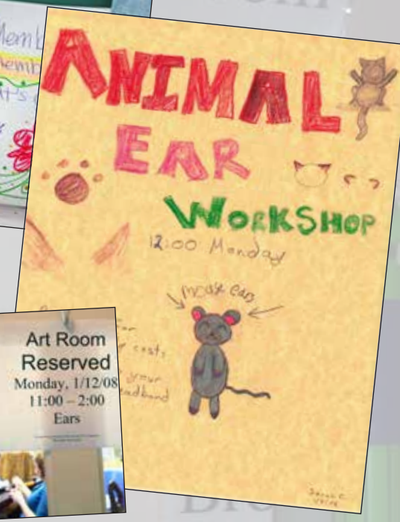












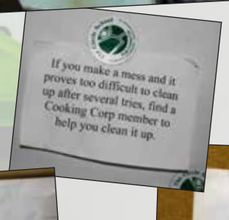






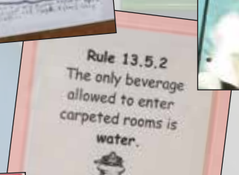




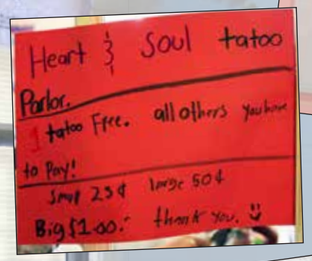




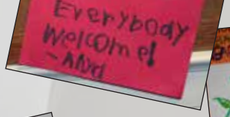




















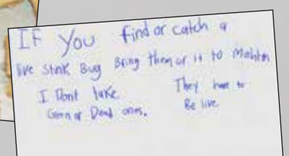






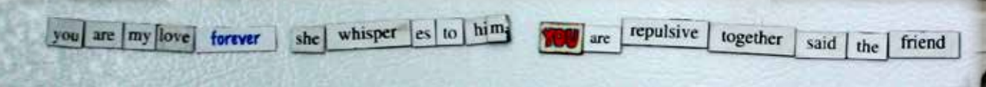










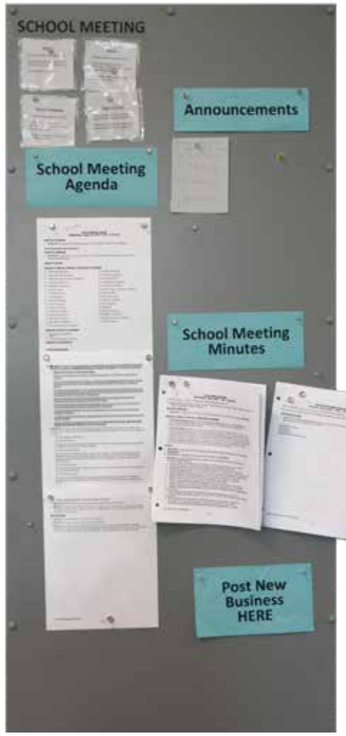


School Meeting... What does it do?

School Meeting runs the school, like a principal, headmaster, or chief executive. Students and staff (but not parents) are members of School Meeting, each entitled to one vote. Some members attend most or all of the weekly sessions. Others attend only when required and when there's something personally interesting. School Meeting hears reports from its officials and committees, and considers proposals from any student or staff member for executive and legislative actions. School Meeting also hears appeals from sentences given by the Judicial Committee (JC), and occasionally hears recommendations from JC to suspend or expel.

Some business is tedious administrative detail, some is juicy policy making, some is high-stakes judicial affairs—and most is somewhere in between all that. Proposals are usually discussed in at least two sessions, a week apart, but the second reading is waived for some, and others may be referred, postponed, or discussed for months before a final vote. The dialogue usually continues until broad agreement emerges or at least everyone's views have been heard and considered.

Here is a sampling, taken from School Meeting Minutes between January and June 2019, representing only a small fraction of business conducted.



School Meeting business is conducted with posted notice to School Meeting members before and after

MOTION: To certify the attached results of the Spring election, and to declare the following winners: [list of names and offices]. ADOPTED

MOTION: To hold a storytelling event with [the neighboring retirement community] residents in the Library on Wednesday, March 27, at 1:30pm. All School Meeting members will be invited to participate. SECOND READING WAIVED [because of schedule and absence of opposition]. ADOPTED

MOTION: In order to prevent damage to walls and injury to people, to adopt the following new rule: 4853.65 (No drones indoors) You may not operate a flying drone indoors. ADOPTED

MOTION: In case #2018100403 to vacate the excessive vulgarity charges for [name] because the findings do not support the charge. ADOPTED [School Meeting reviews all actions of the Judicial Committee and occasionally overrides.]

MOTION: To add a paragraph to rule 5208.02 (Video games, Rated and Unrated) that reads, "If playing a particular video game is prohibited at school, it is also prohibited to view videos that include gameplay of that game on YouTube or otherwise." ADOPTED [Closing a loophole]

MOTION: To adopt The Circle School 2019-2020 Calendar (draft dated 02-27-2019, attached). ADOPTED

MOTION: To permit the Cool Things Outside Corporation to fundraise and draft plans in pursuit of School Meeting's purchase and installation of a swing set on campus. ADOPTED

MOTION: To amend rule #2455.07 (Quiet Zones) to add a fourth bullet as follows: "[In Quiet Zones] you may not rough house, play fight, or make quick movements." ADOPTED

MOTION: In order to avoid issues rampant in other local schools, to create new rule 2011.20 (Vaping and paraphernalia prohibited) Vaping, vaping products, and vaping paraphernalia are prohibited. ADOPTED

MOTION: To set 2019-20 school year salaries as follows: [staff names and salaries]. ADOPTED

MOTION: To hold a social event called "Improv Night: Dinner and a Show" at school on Friday, April 5, from 6 to 8pm. Improv performances will be by the Magic Fairy Pirate Monkeys and the Aesthetic Dying Ducks (Harrisburg Improv Theatre troupes). Cool Things Outside Corporation will sell dinner by donation before the performances. Members of the school community and their friends will be invited. The event will be managed and conducted by the Social Committee. ADOPTED

MOTION: To amend rule 4847.05-SM (Energy drink rule) to read as follows: Energy drinks are prohibited at school. DEFEATED [This defeat leaves the rule as is: you can only consume energy drinks you have brought with you from home.]

MOTION: To approve an overnight campout in the East Woods from 4pm on Saturday, May 4, to 12 noon the next day, to include the following: [names of six students, ages 8 to 12, and three adults, plus several conditions]. ADOPTED [The plan was discussed, negotiated, and amended over a period of about five weeks before voting. It was the first campout on our new campus; next time we'll use this as a template.]

MOTION: To ban the possession, sale, and consumption of ramen noodles [for two months], in order to reduce persistent noodle, wrapper, and dish messes. Free eaters and Ray H. may still prepare and consume their own ramen! ADOPTED [The temporary ban solved the problem... well, mostly.]

MOTION: To allow students and staff to be at school after hours for an online video conference with education majors at University of Delaware who are studying democratic schools in their coursework (EDUC 470)... [more details]. ADOPTED

MOTION: To suspend [name] for one day for an escalated pattern of deliberate annoyance, unwanted forceful physical contact, and rowdiness indoors. ADOPTED

MOTION: To elect Lily C and Nora S to the Medical Officer's Response Team in accordance with section 8277.19. ADOPTED [This follows Red Cross training and certifications, and other training with the Medical Officer.]

MOTION: To hold a school dance at school on May 17 from 8:00 to 10:00pm, managed by the Social Committee, their designated Event Manager, and the following organizers: [8 names]; to be called "Flashback Friday". [Many more details included.]

MOTION: To appropriate up to $150 for van rental and hiring a sub, for 10 students and two staff to visit Arts and Ideas Sudbury School on May 3. This represents half the cost, with participants paying the other half. The group is authorized to rent a van under a contract subject to the approval of the Legal Affairs Officer. ADOPTED

MOTION: Because the school gets advantageous pricing when we purchase natural gas through our energy broker, and because the broker will need a signed contract with only a day's notice of pricing, to authorize the Facilities Manager, SM Chair, and Business Manager to commit the school to a contract for up to 36 months of natural gas pricing. ADOPTED

MOTION: To request Board of Trustees approval to overspend the Grounds budget to fund two improvements: (1) aeration, over-seeding, and fertilization of the mowed grounds ($1,300) to fill in bare spots and improve density; and (2) extension of the sidewalk at the north entrance ($1,000) to accommodate foot traffic and eliminate chronic mud at the North Entry. ADOPTED

MOTION: Because she is a champion of maturity, a paragon of responsibility, and a pillar of the community, to designate Amelia a Free Eater. ADOPTED [Playful language. A cherished status, Free Eaters can ignore food rules and eat anywhere they like.] •



One Day at School

by Stef Mihalcik



Every time I have the privilege of being at school for several hours as an occasional sub, I observe countless activities, conversations, interactions. Some just astound me, such as young boys playing house with girls, very naturally. I once saw kids of all ages playing tug-of-war out in the snow—how did they figure out how to make the teams so evenly matched that it was a real "tug" with all those different ages? I saw a 12-year-old intervene in a smaller kids' dispute to help them—not to decide the issue for them, but to help guide them. I saw a 5-year-old explain the complexities of the chore system to a new 10-year-old, each one giving and taking information without regard to age or status, just as two equal people.

Such respect and acceptance. I have never known such a place in my life. On one particular day, here's what I saw:

A "new kid" lead a group of same-age peers through a book of monster secrets that adults were not allowed to see—"Nothing to see here! Nothing to see here!" was the chant when an adult came near.

A 7-year-old feverishly write a complaint because she was harassed (her words) by someone when she got a math problem wrong. She needed to cite the law, but before I had the opportunity to assist, a 10-year-old had the lawbook in his hand, paging through the table of contents to find it: "11.3," he said. She asked him to read the law out loud, to ensure she picked the correct one.

A group of seven playing football in the 30-degree outdoors, for an hour and a half.

A group of young women practicing to master some dance choreography, for four hours or more. Four hours of dancing!

A 5-year-old leave the JC room in tears with the thought of completing his sentence of sitting at a kitchen table for half an hour… and three students stopping to find out the trouble, and help him with ideas to make the time pass. "You could eat your lunch," was one, which he did.

A group of eight or so, across the age spectrum, sitting in the Kitchen as others baked; having tea, sharing food, and joyously coming up with word teasers, riddles, and jokes.

Three under-10-year-olds discussing the merits of vegetarianism, and the meaning of being a vegan.

A young man reading in the Library for much of the day.

Intensity at the computers… intensity… a girl under ten getting a score so high on a Webkinz game that it made the game malfunction, and didn't award her any KinzCash. "Oh, well," she said, and continued on.

An undercurrent whispering of "Kyle's here" (a Circle School alumn) throughout the building, and people leaving rooms to seek him out as he worked on the computer network.

Staff and students in meetings, meetings, meetings—the Holiday Mystery Maker club and the Halloween club?

The hustle and bustle of chore time: kids with mops, brooms, vacuums, rags, Simple Green, a pouring of items into lost and found.



More Legos than I've ever seen, spread out all over the science room table, and several under-10-year-olds negotiating with one another about sharing the Lego people. Miraculously, an hour later they were all put away.

A young man making cookies as he listened to opera.

An impromptu hallway discussion of geography at the world maps, involving several folks for ten minutes or so.

Two 5-year-olds playing at the chalkboard for at least an hour.

A few times I observed something that seemed a bit much—too loud or a bit too rowdy inside—and before I had time to comment, another student commented on it, and the behavior stopped.

I'm sure I witnessed only a tenth of the day's activities, at most—all day long, people of different ages interacting, interacting, interacting; busy with the business of living their lives. I saw a thriving community. I am grateful my daughter is a part of it. •

Judicial Committee taking testimony from three witnesses (foreground)



Chore sign-up help with the elected Chore Supervisor



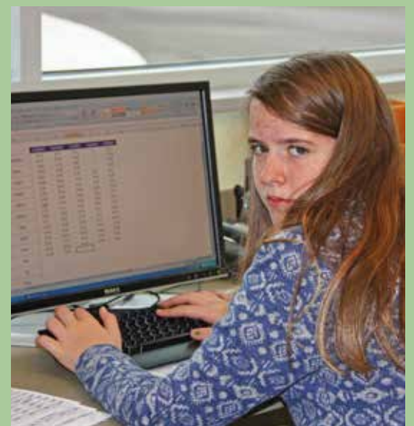
Chore time



Washing dishes after a cooking project



Attendance data entry in the office



Leaving on a 16-day outdoor adventure after two years of planning and fundraising





Talking Points

Everyone agrees on the need for education reform. Designed for a bygone era, most schools are based on a tired paradigm of *curriculum, classroom, and control* that doesn't satisfy today's needs. Half a century of fads and fixes have failed, and some of the reasons are in plain sight. Here are a few topics to consider. On the left, thoughts about standard schools. On the right, see how evidence, reason, and common sense point to The Circle School.

The Circle School

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY & SELF-DIRECTION

Standard schools are adult-directed, telling kids what to do most of the time, day after day, hindering children in developing their self-direction, interests, and talents, and teaching them that their own hopes and aspirations are not important. Worse still, constant adult direction and preset curriculum promote the breathtakingly false and dangerous message that "If you do what you are told to do in school, everything will work out well for you."

Being in charge of yourself and your life shouldn't be postponed to adulthood. Personal responsibility and self-direction are essential at The Circle School, just as in adult life beyond school. Students here are citizens in a scaled-down version of the larger world, subject to legitimate school government in which they share real authority. Students are free and responsible for their actions and their community, learning to create and navigate life's opportunities, challenges, disappointments, and joys. Responsible freedom builds a productive life filled with meaning and purpose.

COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY

Standard schools segregate children by age, and fill their days with prescribed curriculum in preparation for frequent testing. There is little or no time for meaningful engagement in society, community, and collaboration. Today's social complexity demands negotiation, cooperation, and balance of many perspectives—vital knowledge, skills, and experience that are neglected in standard schools.

At The Circle School, students and staff together make the rules, administer the budget, hire the staff, and so on. Committees manage the library, the computer network, the use of rooms, and more. Corporations—art, science, cooking, music, and more—manage certain activities and space. Everyone takes turns on the Judicial Committee and on trial juries. Overlapping and conflicting interests mean constant dialogue. Social demands of the "real world" bear on all of us here. Like all true communities, ours is the product of intense discussion, debate, collaboration, and cooperation.

SAFETY, TRUST, RESPECT

Grading, ranking, and incessant testing lead to feelings of shame, inferiority, pride, and superiority—based on superficial values and senseless requirements. Some children take it tragically to heart, but the cynically savvy know it's not real, and cheating is just part of the game. Many get painfully stuck as bully, bullied, or bystander.

Shame, cheating, and bullying are often rooted in alienation and powerlessness—feelings that are understandable in a coercive regime, even for those at the top of the pecking order. The Circle School's essential practices of self-determination, community, and democracy tend to reduce alienation, empower children, and foster a climate of social safety and mutual respect. When conflict occurs, the school's court system affords children access to fair and true recourse.

INTEREST & SELF-MOTIVATION

The best learning begins with curiosity. When you are interested in something, you learn about it more easily, more deeply, with greater satisfaction—and it stays with you longer. In standard schools, teachers start with a prescribed subject and try to present it to a roomful of students all at the same time, even though many are not interested. That makes for efficient *teaching* but inefficient *learning* that has to be repeated year after year.

At The Circle School, learning begins with the student. Interest ignites intinsic motivation—the internal fire that leads a person to do something for its inherent value, rather than to earn a reward or avoid a punishment. Here, students pursue activities, knowledge, skill, and achievements based on personal interest and attraction. The byproducts are habits of initiative, passion, persistence, and confidence—great preparation for making a living and a life.

MANY KINDS OF SMART

Standard schools are designed for an industrial era, to be government-run factories churning out standardized children. Even as science has recognized the amazing breadth and depth of multiple intelligences—such as cognitive, linguistic, musical, spatial, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, introspective, and naturalistic—schools continue to limit children in a lockstep one-dimensional curriculum.

Life at The Circle School is a lot like… life! Free to explore widely, and driven by innate impulses to grow and thrive, children here discover their unique interests and talents, their strengths and weaknesses, and their most effective ways of navigating the worlds of people, culture, technology, and nature. In standard schools, the curriculum is a tiny subset of important skills and knowledge. Here the curriculum is divergent, open-ended, and as infinite in variety as children are.



Reading Changes Your World

by Beth Stone, Founding Staff Member

The elusive magic of how people learn to read is endlessly fascinating to me. In 38 years of helping students learn to read, one discovery I've made is that the process is unique to the learner. There is not a one-size-fits-all story.

Some people see letters and words, and memorize the look of them on the page almost instantly. Others have great difficulty remembering the names of letters, let alone trying to memorize the way words look. Some people respond best to phonetics and easily learn the sounds represented by letters. Others are lost when words are decoded that way.

Some people think in images or pictures, as opposed to sounds or abstractions, thus making it difficult to read words like "any" or "which." Others see absolutely nothing when asked to visualize an object that is not right in front of them.

Movement is the key that unlocks reading for some. Associating certain body movements with sounds and images works for them. For others it is meaningless.

Do you remember when you learned to read? Recently I've asked that question of many people of all ages, looking for patterns. Not surprisingly, the answers vary tremendously from person to person, not only in method, but in the age at which reading clicked.

Few people can remember exactly how old they were when they learned to read, but most report figuring it out when they were somewhere between five and ten. The youngest I've heard of, and witnessed, was three years old. The oldest I've heard of was 38.

Very few people remember much about the process. People of my generation often mention the "Dick and Jane" books of first and second grade, which incorporate sight words. Others mention gradually recognizing letters and sounds as they watched and listened to Dr. Seuss books being read aloud.



Some say it was easy, some say it was a struggle. Some say it happened effortlessly on their own, and others say they had a lot of help. Some people can't remember a time when they couldn't read. I even heard of a person who could read music from an early age, but did not learn to read language until he was 16.

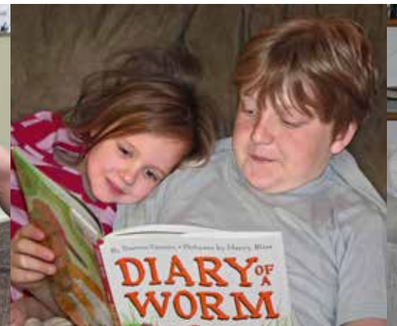
Hardly anyone remembers having a "Eureka" moment when they suddenly realized they could read.

Learning to read is a rite of passage, for certainly the world changes when you start reading. At The Circle School, when and how a child learns to read is uniquely personal. What remains constant is the importance and usefulness of reading at school. Even the youngest students must sign in and out each day, and sign up for a chore. They want to be able to write a JC complaint, read the posted JC sentences to see how many days they are banned from the playroom for making a mess, recognize when the sign on the door means "Keep Out" or "Enter Quietly." When they see a tray of brownies, they want to be able to read the sign that says "Free."

Signs are everywhere. Books are everywhere. People are reading everywhere, including outdoors at the picnic tables, on blankets spread on the grass, on the porch chairs, and even up in the trees. People are reading to themselves and to each other. "What are you reading? Is it good? Do you like it?" are questions asked daily.

Reasons to read are everywhere. That's true at The Circle School, just as it is in the world beyond school. Here, learners are in charge of their own learning. They are given the space, the time, and the choices to find their own reasons, and to act on them, in a community of resources, helpers, and learning companions. I believe this is the best way for children to acquire a skill they will value and enjoy for a lifetime. •







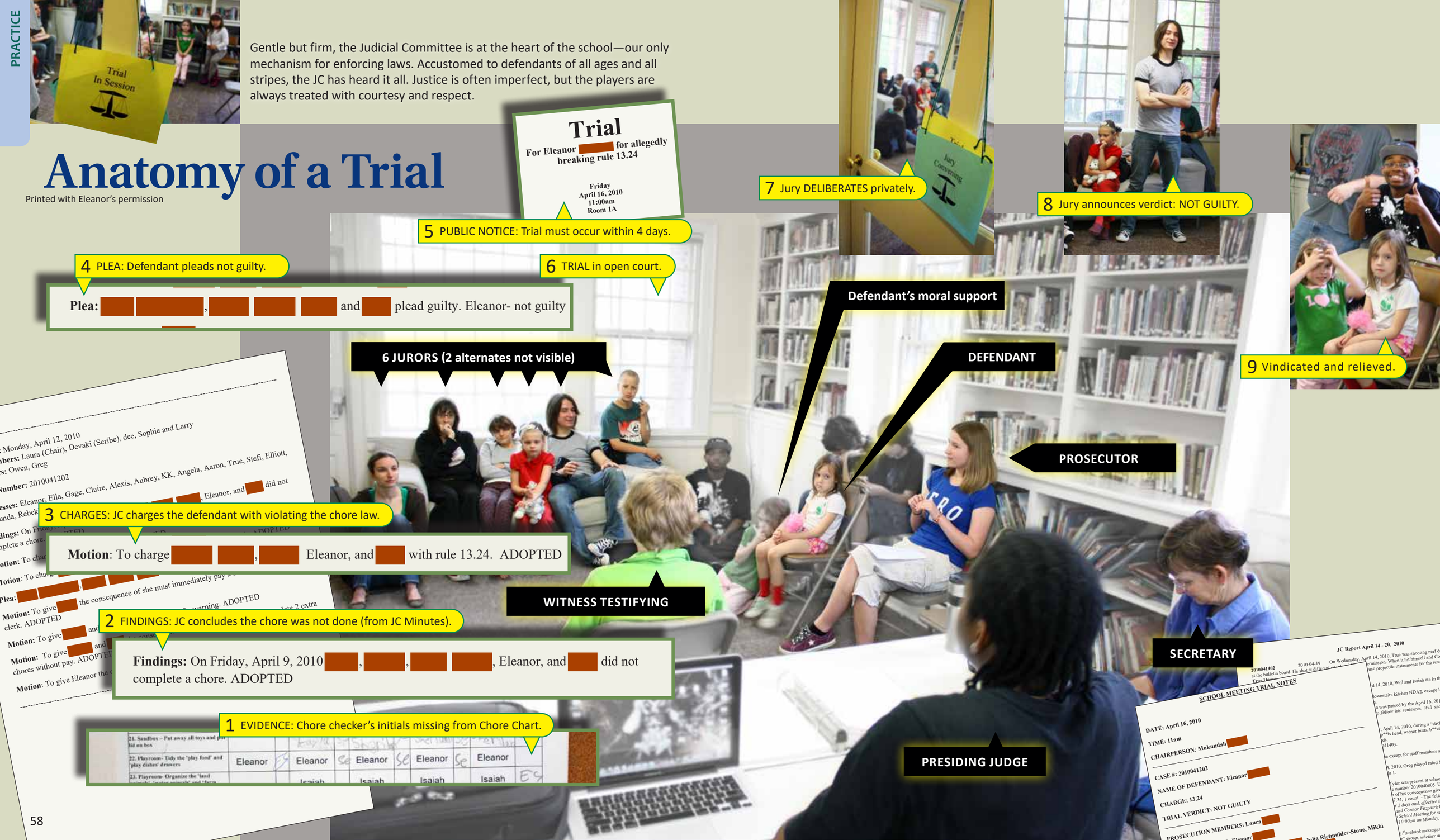




Gentle but firm, the Judicial Committee is at the heart of the school—our only mechanism for enforcing laws. Accustomed to defendants of all ages and all stripes, the JC has heard it all. Justice is often imperfect, but the players are always treated with courtesy and respect.

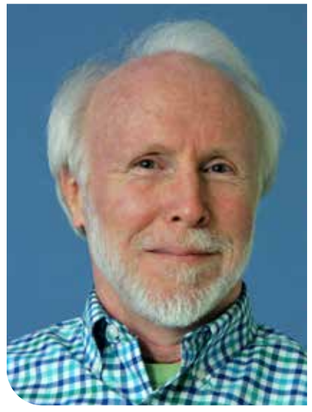
Anatomy of a Trial

Printed with Eleanor's permission



When Kids Rule the School

Excerpts from the book by Jim Rietmulder, Founding Staff Member



As I write this sentence, nine of our students and two of our staff members are making their supper over a campfire far away from here, anticipating an extraordinary event tomorrow. In their nearly two years of preparation, they conducted more than a hundred meetings. Meticulously they planned every detail of their 16-day adventure on America's west coast. They conducted dozens of fundraising efforts and raised almost the entire $10,000 cost of the trip. Now they are poised to see something most people never see. Tomorrow morning, under a cloudless desert sky in Oregon, they will see, in its path of totality, the Great American Eclipse of the sun.

Watching young children figure out IOUs is entertaining. In the classic first encounter with a vendor's offer to take an IOU, the child is amazed and confused: All I have to do is write "IOU," some numbers, and my name, and you'll give me an ice cream sandwich! How cool is that! But a day or so later, when the vendor tries to get them to pay up, the child has no idea what they are talking about. Why should I give you money? I already gave you the IOU. If the child remembers that much, the vendor just might collect the payment. But sometimes it's too late, the price of an ice cream lost in the dreamy fog of a 4-year-old's yesterdays.

Q: What's wrong with mandatory curriculum?
A: Mandatory curriculum harms children's learning, intelligence, and joy of life in many ways: displaces better developmental opportunities, promotes shallow learning, turns kids off to academics, undermines introspection and self-awareness, deadens initiative, fosters passivity, disempowers, alienates, and normalizes coercion. Ouch.

It gets worse. The educational theory of standardized curriculum has been discredited by science. Aside from broad patterns, each child's development is unique and unpredictable. The idea that a standard sequence of learning steps will lead every child from kindergarten to college and economic prosperity would be laughable if it were not so deeply entrenched in our institutions of mass education.

What's wrong with coercive curriculum? It doesn't work and it causes harm.

Self-powered and immersed in community, rather than goaded by teachers, children's lives and learning in democratic schools are more fulfilling and meaningful from day to day. Life satisfaction is not postponed until tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, nor subordinated to a curriculum that may or may not be relevant in an unpredictable future. Furthermore, the knowledge and skills acquired while building a satisfying life in school extend seamlessly to a lifetime of fulfillment and engagement beyond school. Democratic education integrates school and life.

I was in a bathroom at school. There was a knock at the door. Immediately I called out "Occupied." A few seconds later, another knock. Louder I called out "Occupied!" Two seconds later, yet another knock. Louder still, and beginning to suspect a prankster, I called out "OCCUPIED!!!" As I opened the door to leave, a sincere 5-year-old looked up at me and said sweetly, "What does occupied mean?"

Modern schools introduced modern teaching-learning methods but also employ traditional methods, such as drill and practice, when those methods best address the needs at hand. In similar fashion, democratic schools employ traditional and modern methods when they best address the needs, and also add powerful new modes and methods, previously unavailable in schools.

In a world tilting towards narcissism, nihilism, and alienation, community may be crucial. Community tends to socialize people to societal norms, such as by mitigating raw impulses and curbing antisocial behaviors. But there's more to community than its civilizing influence and its practical training in life skills. Immmersion in community is a primal state, with roots as deep as humanity itself. Absence of community is surely a root cause of today's political antagonism, resurging tribalism, and violence born of alienation.

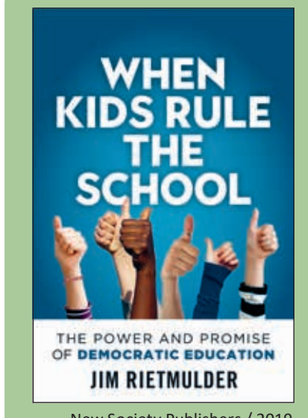
Like earlier attempts at Artificial Intelligence (AI), conventional schooling tends to program children with specific knowledge and skills, instead of creating conditions for original discovery and individual development. And like those earlier AIs, "programmed" children are limited by what the programmers thought to include, and less able to discover, originate, and surprise.

Deep play congeals experience into visceral clusters of meaning. Words crystallize clusters of meaning into intellectual units of communication. "Use your words" is the classic admonition to connect the visceral to the intellectual. If you can make meaning from the visceral, and tag the meaning with words, then you enable satisfying communication of internal experience. If your knowing is nuanced and your vocabulary spare, deep play helps you use your words.

I want children in school to find happiness. Not momentary fireworks, but the saturating joy of purpose and meaning in life. Not someday, but now, as children. Wishing happiness for children is not sentimental or starry-eyed. I've noticed that kids who live fulfilling lives as kids tend to build fulfilling lives as adults [...] I draw a line from children's self-determined adventures to their fulfilled potential, and from there to society's collective advance: fulfilled individuals lead to fulfilled society.

What does all this mean for school? It means we don't need to force children to learn and grow. Nature endows the impulse, and kids take it from there. They walk and talk and then keep going. They make meaning and find purpose. Schools can enhance this power of nature by creating the conditions, holding open the space, and promoting children's agency in community. It's good for kids, families, society, and humanity. So take a look at self-directed democratic schooling. You'll see the spirit and sparkle of kids practicing life. •

Lightly edited excerpts from When Kids Rule the School: The Power and Promise of Democratic Education. *Printed with permission of New Society Publishers.*



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When Kids Rule the School

The Power and Promise of Democratic Education

In self-directed democratic schools, kids practice life in a microcosm of society: empowered as voters, bound by laws, challenged by choice, supported by community, and driven by nature.

Proven in schools around the world, the outcomes are win-win-win: children strive, thrive, and grow; families find satisfying harmony; and society gains active citizens productively engaged.

When Kids Rule the School is the first comprehensive guide to democratic schooling. Through heartwarming stories and hard-headed details, this book covers:

- Democratic schooling philosophy, theory, and practice
- How the school is governed by students and staff together
- Student self-direction and day-to-day life
- Deep play and critical thinking
- Dozens of personal stories
- College and degrees
- FAQs (32 questions answered)

Created for parents, educators, and scholars, this book will immerse you, heart and mind, in a clear vision for children's education, and stretch your thinking about what school can be. •

Ends We Seek

Do the ends justify the means? You be the judge. Here are the Ends We Seek, stated in the school's bylaws, our equivalent of the U.S. Constitution. The preamble says this: "Integral education: Children and youth practice personal fulfillment and engagement in society, in a school program of respect for self-determination, and trust in an inborn tendency to self-actualize."

Opportunity

Students have abundant opportunity for personal fulfillment and societal engagement.

Community	Students experience fellowship, common culture, collective self-governance, and shared responsibility.
Order	Students experience safety, order, and access to community resources.
Knowledge	Students have opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in self-chosen domains.
Staff	Students experience adults who dependably steward the program's facilities, finances, and business; facilitate student access to resources; exemplify mature practice of personal fulfillment and societal engagement; and anchor school culture to values of interpersonal respect and trust in the natural impulse to self-actualize.

Growth

Students grow in many dimensions, such as physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual.

Personal fulfillment	Students increasingly actualize personal potentials, and seek satisfaction in self-chosen domains of activity, knowledge, and skill.
Engagement in society	Students develop increasingly fulfilling ways of participating in culture, community, and society.

Self-determination

Students enjoy natural rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, paralleling adult experience in the community beyond school.

Civil liberties	Students enjoy civil liberties such as freedom of speech, press, thought, attention, religion, privacy, movement, association, and peaceable assembly.
Curriculum	Students are free of curricular coercion.

Governance

The daily school program is self-governing, with authority and responsibility shared among the governed, students and staff alike.

Voice	All members of the daily school program—students and staff—enjoy equal rights of voice and vote in matters of governance and the common good.
Rule of law	All members of the daily school program are subject to the authority of school government according to duly adopted laws that are publicly disclosed in writing.
Responsibility	All members of the daily school program share responsibility for the common welfare.
Protection	All members of the daily school program enjoy equal protection and due process under school law.

Blue Sky Thinking

A conceptual framework for understanding The Circle School



Personal fulfillment



Engagement in society

PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

Education is about perfecting self and society. Across time and cultures, scholars and thinkers have said so in many ways. The Circle School agrees, stating its ideal this way: "Children and youth practice personal fulfillment and engagement in society..." (from Ends We Seek).



Respect for self-determination



Trust in an inborn tendency to self-actualize

IDEALS IN SCHOOLING

There is broad agreement about purposes of education, but not so for values or ideals to be reflected in the schooling of children and teenagers. Although the ideals of respect and trust are not themselves unusual, The Circle School is unusual in building its program around them. The school strives to respect both personal and collective self-determination. The tendency to self-actualize has also been called "nature's imperative to seek infinity" and "the subtle compulsion of the incomplete."



SCHOOL PROGRAM

Education's purposes are about perfecting self and society. The Circle School's ideals include respect for self-determination and trust in the inborn impulse to grow. To achieve these purposes in a program aiming for these ideals, The Circle School applies the metaphor of practicing life in a scaled-down version of the larger world. "Self in society" is the natural human condition. The Circle School's program immerses students in it from an early age.

SECONDARY IDEALS

These are secondary not because they are less important, but because to a large degree they follow from primary ideals. Look for them in The Circle School's program.



Self-satisfying expression in all directions and dimensions

In mind, body, society, and culture; along multiple lines of intelligence; through all waves of development



Openings to higher orders of development

No upper limits on development, where the impulse to grow will go; bottom-up structure comes with no ceiling



Self-organizing community

Groupings based on interest and attraction, not age, make for expanded opportunities and accelerated growth



Social structures for co-existence

Balance differing needs and aspirations; widely differing worldviews in different waves or levels of development

DAILY PRACTICES

Much of what you see in the daily program falls into one of two categories of practices. Both are direct expressions of ideals.



Freedom & responsibility

Endowed at birth with inalienable rights, students here enjoy life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. 4-year-olds to adults, all share responsibility for safety, order, and public governance.



All-quadrant opportunity

With neither status nor stigma, pursue at The Circle School safe, legal endeavors in any field: academics, athletics, government, arts. Know yourself, nature, the public sphere, and human fellowship. No quadrant left behind.

Your turn

Join The Circle School community.
Choose a part to play and a move to make, today!

STUDENT You are the school's lifeblood. Imagine yourself at The Circle School. What do you love to do? Be here.

PARENT Invest your children here for a wholesome return. From about 4-1/2 years old through high school.

GRANDPARENT Your understanding and support of the school enhances your grandchildren's experience here.

DONOR Tuition does not cover the costs. Your tax-deductible generosity and the school's unusual financial aid program make The Circle School available to families across the socioeconomic spectrum.

BUSINESS Corporation or partnership, Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit reduces your tax bill by 75%, 90%, or 100% of your contribution. Ask your accountant or the school's Financial Officer.

ADMISSIONS VISIT Talk and tour to explore the fit for your family. Call for an appointment. No cost, no obligation.

OPEN HOUSE Hear students, parents, alumni, and staff. See video presentations. Tour the building. About three per year for all who are curious. Educators welcome.

CASH GIFT Online, by phone, by mail. Check, credit card, or PayPal. Tax-deductible, used to great effect, vital to the school. Ask about business tax credits.

GIFT OF STOCK or securities. Call the school or check the website for routing data to give your broker or agent.

GIFT PLANNING How can the school help meet your giving goals? Call or email the school's Financial Officer.

The Circle School • 727 Wilhelm Road • Harrisburg PA 17111 • www.CircleSchool.org
Voice 717-564-6700 • Email hello@CircleSchool.org



The Circle School

Top of the world. Circle School backpackers after the longest climb of their 10-day hike in the Shenandoah Mountains. Photo by dee Holland-Vogt








Jyles was ten when he first came here. After a day or so, he thought it was like kindergarten: no required classes or homework, lots of things to do, busy children moving about, and friendly adults.



Time passed and Jyles changed his mind. It's not like kindergarten, he thought. It's like college: demanding rules and requirements and voluntary commitments, but no nagging parent types; each person accountable for their actions; groupings based on interests and attraction rather than age; diversity in kinds and levels of skill and ability, freely mixing; scholarly respect for each voice and point of view.

More time passed and Jyles changed his mind again. No, it's not like kindergarten, he thought, and it's not like college either. It's like life: we're free and accountable citizens in a democratic society. We make laws and we live by them, change them, or get taken to court for breaking them. We make our own decisions about what to do today, and we find our own ways of dealing with the world, with all kinds of examples to learn from.

That's it, thought Jyles:
I just come here and
I live my life.



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