



Students learn important core values along with the three R's

Newtown Friends School embeds a unique community service program in its curriculum.

By Brenda Lange / Photographs by Andrew Wilkinson



Happy sounds of singing children waft from the music room. In another, light from computer screens reflect off young faces. Still other youngsters troop toward the auditorium and a special concert. These scenes are repeated every day in schoolhouses across the region, but at Newtown Friends School, the differences between this house of learning and others lie just below the surface, where they are subtle but important—creating an environment in which children are actively engaged in their own learning.

Founded 61 years ago, Newtown Friends teaches about 300 students in grades Pre-K through 8th. It operates from core Quaker principles demonstrated by the acronym SPICES—Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship. Add to that a healthy dose of respect—for self, others and the school—and classes in Latin and Ethics, and it becomes apparent that Newtown Friends is not your typical school.

“Quakers believe there is that of God in everyone,” explains Rebecca Niszczak, director of admissions. “We welcome children of all faiths, and teach these values, which we

think of as core human values.”

Part of this system shows up in small classes—no more than 18 students are to be found in each classroom, and more freedom to learn according to individual styles.

“We (the faculty) are supported here, which translates into the classroom,” explains Jennie Chiko, who teaches 7th grade and Latin. “We get to teach more at our own pace, and that of the students. Oversight isn’t as tight, meaning there is less pressure. When kids need more time, they get it.”

This also means no “teaching to the test” common in most public schools, which need to meet certain government educational standards in order to receive funding. That approach to teaching leaves Chiko and her colleague, Kristen Sanchez, flat.

“We believe here that kids are the same everywhere; they have shape-able minds and hearts,” says Sanchez, who teaches Social Studies. “The difference is here we are not as scripted or prescribed...we have more freedom to teach the core content (of each course) as it works for our classroom...we can teach to a bigger picture rather than meet a daily, scheduled requirement.”

This is not to say there is no testing done here. The students take standardized tests each year beginning in 4th grade, but the results become just one piece in the bigger puzzle that makes up each student’s profile, not the whole thing. Each piece is then used to create the individualized approach to learning that most benefits the child.

In service to the community

Sanchez, who taught in New York City public schools before joining Newtown Friends five years ago, is also the school’s community service coordinator. Unlike some public school systems that incorporate a service component in high school or here and there in the lower grades, at Newtown Friends, the idea of being of service to the community-at-large is embedded in the overall curriculum. Beginning with the 4-year olds, right through the graduating 8th graders, students are shown, and experience firsthand, the benefits of putting the needs of others first.

Each grade does an age-appropriate project. For example, this year’s Pre-K and Kindergarten classes held a Trike-A-Thon to raise

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SOME STUDENTS AT NEWTOWN FRIENDS DEMONSTRATE THEIR COMMITMENT TO WORLD PEACE.

money to benefit the Mercer Street Friends, a Quaker-affiliated organization in Trenton, NJ.

"Our kids partner with theirs in a number of ways," explains Sanchez. "We learned about kids in need, and about how we could make a difference for them." Newtown Friends kids took part in the *Send Hunger Packing* program, which provided snack bags for the Mercer Street kids, because many of those children get free breakfast and lunch each school day, but don't always eat so well at home on the weekends.

"The kids got sponsors and raised money. Some rode scooters or tricycles, and they all shared their stories of how they were helping other people," Sanchez says. Part of the school's annual Fall Fest, the Trike-A-Thon was a huge success.

Newtown Friends' 5th graders hold weekly pretzel sales to raise money for Bucks County Head Start, which provides programs for preschoolers. All proceeds go to buy ingredients for Thanksgiving meal boxes that are distributed to Head Start's neediest families at that holiday.

"The 5th graders organize this effort, printing flyers, getting other classes to donate other foods and allocating it all into the boxes for delivery," Sanchez adds. "These kids then provided the fresh turkeys, potatoes and carrots to fill 30 boxes last Thanksgiving."

In the 6th grade, community service becomes a class in and of itself. The students partner with residents of next-door neighbor Pennswood Village, a Quaker retirement community. Students teach their Pennswood pals some things, and their pals show them that being retired doesn't mean stopping, or even slowing down; service can be a lifelong endeavor.

The intergenerational sharing has included tap dancing classes, T'ai Chi, and water aerobics taught by the Pennswood residents. For their part, the students most recently taught their elders the art of Wii bowling.

Eighth graders partner with residents of Wood Services in Langhorne, where they work and play with mentally challenged teens. The year's highlight is a basketball game between the students from the two schools.

"Our main goal is to teach the kids that community service isn't something you are made to do," says Sanchez. "Rather it is something that becomes an ingrained part of their lives, and they don't want to stop (doing for others)."

Special projects

Seventh grade is a special program, where the students plan large community service projects by talking about issues that are important to them. "They research and discuss other points of view and plan out their projects in small groups," explains Chiko, who oversees them.

Some projects have included providing care packages to homeless shelters; letter-writing campaigns to politicians; educational programs for the Bucks County SPCA, including promoting Adopt-A-Pet; and informational programs about elder abuse and neglect, autism and recycling. Other faculty members serve as mentors and coaches for the 7th graders, who do some of the work in the classroom, but much of it on their own time, where the school has traditionally gotten a lot of parental support.

"We're an independent school that stresses inclusivity, and encourages diversity in socioeconomic, religious, ethnic and family structural ways," says Niszczak. These goals are exemplified in the work done by the group known as TASC, The Agents of Social Change, in which more than 50 students participated over the past year.

Comprised of committees such as diversity, fundraising, and sunshine (to promote school spirit) the kids have worked to raise awareness of the genocide in Darfur for the past two years, raising money

and running clothing drives to help the people of that country. "We just sent 1,000 Crocs, money and many bags of clothing over there," says Sanchez.

TASC illustrates the way the kids at Newtown Friends "own" their service projects. This is a voluntary program, and the participants meet during lunchtimes and give up recess to make their plans, communicating outside of school through a closed online forum. Supported and guided by the faculty, the students put into practice the lessons they've been taught since Pre-K: to work independently, try hard and do their best.

The community service component has always had a place in the school's curriculum. Embedding it into daily study and home life helps create well-rounded young students who go on to be balanced, giving citizens, and who may someday even return to Newtown Friends in their golden years to "give back."

Newtown Friends School Open House will be held January 24, 2010 from 2 to 4 p.m.

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