

Workshop School: A Place for Students and Teachers to Learn and Straighten themselves and their Communities

By Mollie Williamson

Educators' commit to fostering an environment where students can not only begin to consider the significance of these questions, but also feel supported enough to pull apart complex--and often painful--ideas in a thoughtful and constructive way.

During the first two weeks of classes, students and advisors work together to develop the norms and values under which they will operate for the remainder of the year. Student voices and choices are centered in this decision-making process in order to emphasize the importance of their involvement in change-making.

Every day during a 30-minute morning circle, students discuss and process current events and share their feelings, challenges, and successes with one another in order to develop a strong support network and view one another as collaborators. Traditional discipline methods are forgone in favor of a more restorative approach with advisors facilitating, instead of reinforcing the power dynamics that so often exist in student-teacher interactions.

In order to ensure that the changes and support that the environment of The Workshop School crosses over into students' lives outside of high school, the school's staff works to build relationships with the people who impact students lives outside of school. Parents play a critical role in students' academic progress by attending quarterly exhibitions, providing feedback, and discussing their child's progress and goals with their advisor. When a student's parent is unavailable or absent, another student's parent will often sit in as a surrogate.

During one quarterly exhibition this year, a parent attended and gave feedback for four different students, and brought donuts for the class to ensure that all of the youth were celebrated. The Workshop School also fosters relationships with local organizations, institutions, and the community. Students in the college prep pathway attend classes at the Community College of Philadelphia, Drexel University, and the University of Pennsylvania. Students in internship pathways research organizations that align with their career aspirations, make cold-calls, and often develop internship opportunities from scratch. Meanwhile students in the auto pathway perform repairs for neighborhood residents, and donate ownerless vehicles to community members without reliable transportation.

As students design their projects based on their interests and aspirations, staff members connect them with individuals that work in relevant industries. A student working on creating an online graphic novel may pair with a local web developer; a student working on designing a school mural may seek assistance from an employee at the Philadelphia Art Museum. These relationships help The Workshop School further its goal of erasing the lines between school, career, and community,

and allow youth to broaden the scope of the futures they imagine for themselves.

These efforts aren't without their challenges, developing strong relationships and committing to the process takes time--not only to determine outcomes and develop evaluation methods, but also to continue to hold and promote a culture of intention. The unique class structure requires teachers to adapt to an entirely new learning framework, which creates a steep learning curve for even veteran educators. Staff must consistently work to balance their dedication to developing "the whole child" and teaching them to embrace risk and grow from failure with their goals of promoting the standards and accountability that students will need to succeed.

Advisors must be continuous learners alongside students, because of this, the staff works to develop the same support and growth mindset with their peers as they do with their students. As principal Simon Hauger states, "You can't have a democratic community for the students unless you've built a democratic community for the staff. What does it mean to have a group of professionals working together who all have a voice and all have decision-making power? The adults have to have the same community as we're building for kids, otherwise it seems hypocritical."

Like the students, the staff learn to find ways to navigate and work through the challenges and model the collaboration that is required to create this new scholastic environment. For students, that's exactly what The Workshop School is: a place to learn--to learn to question and define quality work on their own terms, to learn to take ideas from the classroom and imagine the ways that they can strengthen themselves and their communities, to learn to ask for and give support in their efforts to implement those ideas, and to learn that if they are going to do great things when they grow up, they need to start today.