

# Touchstone

REFLECTIONS ON OUR MISSION AND CORE VALUES

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In his “Reflections” column published in *Under the Cupola*, our monthly newsletter, Head of School Kolia O’Connor explores how our Mission and Core Values are expressed in the lived experiences of students and adults alike at the Academy. Together, our Mission and Core Values serve as a touchstone so that, as we move forward and aspire to create vibrant and enriching possibilities for the future, we will not lose the distinct qualities that make Sewickley Academy the remarkable place it is. We are pleased to share Mr. O’Connor’s reflections with you on the following pages.

# Our Mission Hearts, Minds, & Hands

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As we launch a new school year, it is, perhaps, worth pausing to reflect on what the words of the Academy's mission mean, what they are intended to suggest about what we do and why we do it.

We begin deliberately with inspiration, which suggests that the work in which our students engage is not merely the rote memorizing of facts or the labored acquisition of skills, but an igniting of passion for learning. What we hope for our students is that they will discover areas of interest that will command their attention, that will excite them in ways that promote their natural desire to know more and expand the limits of their world.

What follows is the idea of "hearts, minds, and hands," meaning that we acknowledge the primacy of the heart, of character, integrity, compassion, empathy, kindness, which is so vital to the maintenance of a civil society. Of course the heart cannot be disconnected from the mind, and it is the training of the capabilities of the mind that take up much of our time in schools. What we seek, however, is a mind whose capabilities are guided by character. In "hands," we see not only the athletic, artistic, and kinesthetic elements that are so important to a complete education, but the need to do, to act, to serve, that is implicit in the work of the hands. Fine character and formidable intellect and creative talent are not of much value if they are not employed to contribute to the advancement of society.

"Cultivate" suggests the organic nature of growth and education, as well as the idea that such growth takes time and must be nurtured through developmental stages until it is ready to blossom. It also implies the importance of attention to individual needs, for ours is not a garden with a single variety of flower but an array requiring slightly different care to grow and flourish.

While we acknowledge importance of "individual" potential, we also recognize the vital importance of "collective potential." Ours is not a community of zero-sum competition or survival of the fittest. We recognize that people live and work in groups and that civilization is predicated upon the ability of individuals to be able to work well with others and by doing so advance both their individual interests, as well as those of society.

Finally, "a greater good" acknowledges that there exists a higher, and more noble, reason for the pursuit of individual and collective accomplishment. We, as individuals and as a community, need to look beyond ourselves and remain mindful of the needs of others. By contributing to the welfare of others, to the enrichment of our own community as well as those communities beyond our borders, and to the protection of the natural environment which sustains life itself, we may take comfort in having added to rather than detracted from the greater good.

The Academy's mission is grounded in four core values, "Character," "Educational Vigor," "Diversity," and "Community," each of which will be the subject of future "Reflections". Taken with these values, our mission determines our course and directs all that we do. Parents may want to consider the connections between the Academy's values and their family's own so that the lessons we impart here may be reinforced at home. As we begin this, the Academy's one hundred and sixty-sixth year, let us rededicate ourselves, as we do each fall, to serving our children and one another so that we may achieve our lofty goals.

# Character Reflections

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1600 on the SATs, 5s on APs, a 100 on a spelling test, a smiley face on homework well done: such signs of scholastic success are impressive. Such signs also seem to have special value because they are measurable, all but the last, that is (unless we start to quantify smiley faces). While we are right to value and celebrate outstanding achievement, we should be somewhat cautious about the allure of numbers. Albert Einstein, himself, said that “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” Please do not misunderstand me, however; grades do count. They are the yardstick by which we measure academic progress and achievement. But they do not represent all that we do at Sewickley Academy, where our primary core value is character.

“Sewickley Academy upholds the highest ideals of honor, integrity, responsibility, respect, empathy, and kindness and the actions that flow from them” reads our Mission. We all recognize these values and understand that they are the bedrock upon which character is formed. They are not easy to measure, yet we as a school place them in the position of primacy among those core values that define who we are. And this is for good reason. The brilliant mind without exemplary character is not particularly appealing and might even be dangerous. Let’s frankly admit that the less brilliant mind, if it comes with sterling character, is preferable. The ideal, of course, is brilliance together with character.

The Academy’s commitment to character is one that is not for its own sake, however. In referring to the actions that follow from good character, we emphasize that it is not enough merely to be good; one has to “do good” as well, so we build opportunities for students to do good into our programs at every level.

Some might say that such values are anachronistic in the modern world, but I would submit that, especially today, where the power and reach of single individuals is almost beyond imagination, the promotion of these values is vital to the successful continuance of our civil society. All too soon we forget about Watergate; the savings and loan

scandals of the 1980s; the Orange County, California, debacle; as well as Enron, WorldCom, Tyco International, and other corporate imbrolios that not only stand as monuments to individual corruption and greed, but also negatively impacted tens of thousands if not millions of innocent individuals.

Character counts, and not just on the large stages of public and private life, but in the small mostly invisible transactions that take place daily among us. I often tell students that character might simply be defined as what you do when no one is looking, when there are no witnesses. Character is not doing right so that you won’t get caught; it’s doing right even if you could never be caught.

In Arthur Miller’s masterful play *The Crucible*, the protagonist John Proctor, when agonizing about telling a lie to save his life, vacillates, first telling the lie and then quickly recanting, saying, “Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life!” In the end, Proctor is condemned to death in the Salem witch trials for refusing to offer the court a lie that would have saved his life. He is a man of extraordinary principle, flawed as we all are, but nevertheless devoted to an adamant idea of character.

Thankfully, very few of us will ever face as dramatic a choice as John Proctor, but to have our students understand the fundamental importance of personal integrity must be paramount among our commitments. And so, through our work on the playgrounds and in the classrooms, in school and at home, wherever and whenever we interact with our students, regardless of their age, we must, teachers and parents alike, both through direct instruction and through our own behavior, teach the lesson that character counts.

# Reflections

## Educational Vigor

Sewickley Academy is committed to the highest standards and expectations in academics, while recognizing the essential contribution of athletics and the arts, and the maintenance of an appropriate balance among the three.

The second of our core values is very often the first thing people think of when they consider what Sewickley Academy stands for, and I think this happens, frankly, because people take our commitment to character as a given. More than anything else, however, our excellence as a school is measured by the quality of our academic, athletic, and arts programs, and we are proud that our records of achievement clearly convey our success in maintaining our commitment to this essential core value.

Vigor is a word that shares its root with the French word *vie*, or life. Vigor suggests a life-force, a robustness, a quality of energy that we feel is essential to our programs. The oft-heard alternative, rigor, suggests severity, strictness, austerity, and stiffness, certainly not qualities we hope to infuse into what we do here at the Academy.

To instill in our students an appreciation for and experience of the life of the mind seems to me integral to what a fine education should be about. While I grant you that not all of our students will become academics and philosophers, there is hardly a branch of human endeavor that is not intimately connected with the ability to be contemplative, to think deeply and creatively, and to gain satisfaction from such effort.

John Adams, in offering advice to his son John Quincy about how to keep himself intellectually nourished, told him always to carry a book of poetry. I often think of this admonition and frequently turn to poetry when speaking with our students. In the compressed, incandescent language of poetry, form and meaning are inextricably intertwined. Poetry is never merely what is being said but always also how something is said. An idea conveyed through a sonnet can never be the same when presented in a haiku.

At Sewickley Academy, we present ideas in different forms to our students, as well. The meaning of a quadratic equation and the meaning of a Shakespearean couplet are derived by students who are taught to recognize patterns and understand the language of form. In the case of the mathematical equation, the ability to graph it highlights the link between form and meaning (a parabola and a line are two distinctly different forms, and their equations are, thus, formally distinct).

It is interesting and important, I think, to recognize that neither poetry nor mathematics function within hermetic environments. This seems obvious for poetry, with its dependence on allusive power, but it is also true for mathematics, as demonstrated by the great Czech-American mathematician and logician, Kurt Gödel, who demonstrated that mathematical propositions are not provable within mathematics itself, although they may be proved by means of logical systems external to mathematics. Thus the elegance and beauty of mathematical systems like Euclidian Geometry, for example, depend for the proof of their validity on ideas external to Euclidean Geometry.

I find this idea particularly compelling, for it heightens for me the critical necessity of functioning across multiple disciplines and making connections between and among different modes of thought and expression in order to achieve solutions or present experiences, not merely within the limited context of a single paradigm but through a multiplicity of expressive strategies thereby enriching outcomes. This is the rationale behind the Academy's commitment to an educational vigor that comprises academics, athletics, and the arts, three different and vitally important ways of understanding the world and entering into an experience of it.

T.S. Eliot, in the "East Coker" section of his *Four Quartets*, says that, "In order to arrive at what you are not, / You must go through the way in which you are not." This intellectual, athletic, and artistic dislocation that students experience as they journey towards a greater understanding of themselves and the world in which they live is at the center of educational vigor. And our hope is that our students will develop a sense of wonder at the possibilities of the heart, mind, and hands that they will carry with them for life.

# Reflections

## Diversity

Sewickley Academy is dedicated to being a community that represents and celebrates different backgrounds, talents, interests, and divergent yet informed opinions.

A statement like this seems a given for a school like ours, or frankly for any independent school in the country. We have happily reached a point in our development as a community where we might mistake such a statement as ordinary and not demanding of reflection. But that posture would be wrong. As innocuous as this statement sounds, it has enormous implications for who we are and what we aspire to be. It is, in its understated way, a powerful statement about our collective commitment to equity, justice, fairness, and safety for all past, present, and future members of the Sewickley Academy community.

As we reflect, it might be helpful to think about what diversity is not: diversity at Sewickley Academy is not about tokenism or being politically correct. It is not even about tolerance. I have yet to meet someone who embraces the idea that their presence will be tolerated. Tolerance is clearly not a high enough standard for the Academy. Diversity is not only about race, creed, color, religion, sexual orientation, ethnic or cultural background, or socio-economic class, but it is about how we think about these things and how we conceive our place in the world. Ultimately, diversity is not about other people; it is about us.

Mohandas Gandhi said that we must be the change we want to see in the world. As educators and parents, we must be committed to creating a world for our children that is better – more respectful, just, fair, supportive, kind – than the one we inherited. We cannot wait for others to make this happen because we cannot change others; we can only change ourselves. And we can begin at home and at the Academy.

Being located near Pittsburgh is a great asset for us. The region from which we draw our students provides us a wonderful opportunity to create the kind of intentionally diverse community we know will benefit our children. This is one of the critical points of divergence from our public school counterparts, who serve only their local geographic populations. With our broad reach, we can go beyond a public school's geographical limits to achieve our goals.

A commitment to diversity is expressed not only in the visible composition of our community but also in the invisible ways in which we are different. It is not just about people but about ideas. It is about

the curriculum, the intellectual food we are feeding our children. If we want our children to grow up healthy and strong in mind as well as body, we must be committed to serving them an intellectual diet that provides both a mirror in which they see themselves and a window through which they may see people and worlds different from their own. Thus the curricular choices we make need to ensure that each child, each student, is visibly present. And to those who might suggest that such an attention to diversity leads to a “dumbing down” of the curriculum, I say two things: first, we should not assume that one culture has a lock on quality and excellence; second, it is through the varieties of experience that children learn and grow. The greater the range of opportunity, the greater the intellectual demands and potential for intellectual growth.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” Diversity is similar: it does not demand a renouncing of one's own identity in favor of another – or worse, some amalgamated mish-mash – but grows from a deep and abiding sense of the value of one's own identity while simultaneously recognizing the equally valid identities of others and the rights of each and everyone to exist in a physically and psychologically safe and secure environment. And here is the hard part: we must be willing to ensure the safety and well-being of those who are different from us in order to ensure the safety of all, for it is true that if any one is unsafe, then we are all unsafe. And we must be mindful that safety is a necessary precursor to being able to learn.

It is because of our commitment to educational vigor that we must, of necessity, embrace the power of diversity, for it is through the latter that we can achieve a more fulsome and rich proportion of the former. A Sewickley Academy education, then, is an enormous and vital gift we can give our children, and ensuring that the Academy remains true to and can fulfill her commitment to diversity is a way for each and every one of us to make our contribution to the successful future of our children and the nation they will inherit.

# Reflections

## Community

Sewickley Academy seeks to foster a deep understanding and appreciation of our connections with one another and those beyond our borders, as well as our obligation and responsibility to serve and lead inherent in these bonds.

Sociologists will tell you that people have always lived in groups. Most of us work in groups, worship in groups, and even play in groups. There's a good reason for this: the relationships between human beings usually make us stronger than when we act alone. At the Academy, we understand that the central relationship is that between the student and the teacher. This relationship is supported by a broad and diverse community of students, faculty, families, and alumni.

Lewis Mumford, in *The Transformations of Man*, says, "above all we need, particularly as children, the reassuring presence of a visible community, an intimate group that enfolds us with understanding and love, and that becomes an object of our spontaneous loyalty, as a criterion and point of reference for the rest of the human race." This notion that the integrity of the local community is fundamental to our ability to have healthy relations with those beyond our borders is inextricably linked to our commitment to diversity. Interpersonal success is predicated upon our ability to practice, particularly as children, the skills necessary to interact with those who are different. Such practice builds familiarity and minimizes the ideas of strangeness, leading to sympathy and even empathy. Thus, when we go out into the world beyond our borders, or when we are visited by those from abroad, we are equipped to engage others in positive, healthy, and enriching ways.

This year, we have been privileged to have an ASSIST student here from Lithuania, and he has added immeasurably to our community, both in the Senior School, where he takes his classes and participates in athletics and extra-curricular activities, but also in the Lower School, where he has visited classes to share stories about Lithuania with the younger students. In the short time he has been a part of our community, this remarkable young man has already made a significant and positive impact, and we are better for his being here with us.

Communities like Sewickley Academy's work because people are committed to one another and to the larger ideals of the community itself (i.e., our Mission and Core Values). There is a sense of mutual

respect and regard born out of an acknowledgement that each individual contributes his or her unique qualities to the whole. This past fall, it was impressive and touching to see how student performers at *Ephemera Live* – an occasion when students share their musical, dramatic, artistic, and poetic talents with one another – would rise to welcoming calls of encouragement and offer their gifts to a remarkably supportive audience, who listened attentively and rewarded each performer with a heartfelt applause.

Members of a community also share a willingness, even desire, to look after one another. This sense of mutual obligation finds its expression in myriad ways. Not too long ago, I was in the lobby of Rea when two kindergarten girls came out of the auditorium, the first showing the second the way to the ladies' room. As they reached the door, I heard the guide say, "Can you find your way back or would you like me to wait for you?" The simplicity of this exchange belies the powerful social compact implicit in it: I will be there for you, and I will not assume that you don't need me until I verify that you are all right on your own: leadership inextricably bound to service.

Having touched briefly on how community is connected with diversity, mutual support, and leadership as service, I want to close by reflecting on what I will call the elasticity of community, or that ability to bend and stretch and accommodate change (i.e., newcomers) while maintaining a community's distinctive qualities. In an earlier "Reflections" piece, I discussed how change is fundamental to life, and this is true of communities as much as any organism or system. Our community will change and, indeed, must change if it is to remain vibrant and healthy. Our challenge is to allow for necessary change while holding true to the core values that define who we are as a school. The test is that, if we were looking through a window from the outside, we would say, "I'd like to be part of that community"; and looking into a mirror, we would say, "I am proud to be part of Sewickley Academy."

# Our Values in Action Reflections

In earlier “Reflections” articles this year, I wrote about the importance of our Mission and Core Values and why they are so fundamental to who we are as a school. For these central tenets to have meaning for us as an institution, they must find their expression in all that we do at the Academy. It may not be obvious at first blush, but a very important way they are expressed is through our commitment to providing students with financial aid. As we enter the final weeks of the admission season, it is perhaps worthwhile to pause and reflect on Sewickley Academy’s financial aid program and consider how it reflects our beliefs.

One might begin by asking why we provide financial aid in the first place. The answer to that is easy: a commitment to our Mission and Core Values (diversity, community, and serving the greater good) requires us to provide qualified applicants access to an Academy education regardless of their ability to pay. The United States is a pluralistic and democratic society in which each individual has the opportunity to fulfill his or her full potential. Educational opportunity is at the heart of any functioning democracy, and the Academy makes its contribution to American society by providing qualified students access to that opportunity based on financial need. Our graduates, in turn, leave us to make contributions of their own, thereby fulfilling the promise of our mission.

I think it is also important to address some of the prevalent misconceptions about financial aid at the Academy. For example, it is not uncommon for people to think that financial aid is used to recruit athletes to our programs. While this does happen at the collegiate level, at the Academy, it does not. In fact, financial aid is not used to recruit any specific category of student. We have no merit-based awards, so a student’s academic, athletic, artistic, and extra-curricular records are not considered when determining financial aid awards.

Financial aid awards are based only on a family’s demonstrated need for financial assistance. It is worth noting that everyone on financial aid is required to pay something to attend the Academy, and every family makes a sacrifice proportional to their capacity to pay tuition.

Another misconception is that financial aid is just for students of color. Again, financial aid is allocated based on need not on color. While diversity is important to the Academy, the diversity ensured through financial aid is socio-economic. It is important to recognize that there are comparable levels of diversity among both students whose families pay full tuition and those who receive some level of financial assistance.

As many families struggle to meet the demands of tuition in order to provide their children with an outstanding Academy education, some who pay the full tuition might think that they are, in effect, subsidizing financial aid students. They are not. In reality, tuition income covers only about 84% of our operating costs each year.

This means that, in actuality, every single student enrolled at the school receives a sort of financial aid because the Academy does not charge what it costs to educate each student. To close the gap, we rely on income from our endowment, from grants specifically restricted for financial aid, and from fundraising activities like our Annual Auction and the Annual Fund. Participation in these activities represents a belief that the Academy must and should remain as affordable as possible for everyone and be able to provide extra assistance in the form of financial aid awards to those who may need it. All students and families today are the direct beneficiaries of generations of past Academy families who have contributed generously to the Academy’s endowment, providing support for the students of today.

Next year’s financial aid budget will top 1.4 million dollars, an amount representing nearly 10% of our annual operating budget. Any family, current or prospective, may apply for financial aid by filling out the requisite forms available from the Admission Office. Those forms are then sent to the School Scholarship Service in Princeton, New Jersey, which makes a determination regarding the amount of assistance a family might need. A report is forwarded to the Academy, and using the numbers from that report, the Financial Aid Committee makes the awards. This past year, financial aid supported about 16.5% of our students, helping their families close the gap between tuition and their ability to pay.

So what does the Academy get for its financial aid dollars? In short, we get to ensure that qualified students can attend our school. We get socio-economic diversity. We get the most stimulating academic environment we can create for all our students. And we get to make an enormous contribution to American society. It is important to realize that it is not just the student who receives aid who benefits; it is everyone with whom that young person interacts; thus, the beneficiaries of financial aid include everyone in the Academy community, from our faculty to our students and their families. Each student in this school contributes in myriad ways to the quality of the community, from the classroom to the darkroom, from the dance studio to the playground and the athletic field. John Donne said it most powerfully when he wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself;” underscoring the inextricable link between one individual and another and the idea that each and every individual in a community counts. Financial aid allows us to assure the strength of our community by keeping the doors open to all qualified students and providing them an opportunity to make the most of the promise of America.



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