

THE PENINSULA WAY

THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

Peninsula School has a vibrant culture whose roots reach back to the school's founding in the heyday of the Progressive Education movement. The informal wisdom of this culture is both invaluable and elusive. We expect -- and want -- Peninsula, as a living institution, to change and adapt over time. But maintaining our traditions and core values in the midst of this natural process has always been a challenge. We believe a written document can be a useful tool as we strive to meet this challenge in conscious and fruitful ways.

To that end, we offer these words as a set of anchor points, recognizing that what makes Peninsula extraordinary can never be perfectly captured on paper.

PENINSULA'S PROGRESSIVE ROOTS

Peninsula School was founded in 1925 by a group of parents who were unhappy with the schools then available for their children. Among these parents were the noted educator, Josephine Duveneck, and her husband Frank.

Peninsula's founders were excited by the then new ideas of John Dewey, Francis Parker, Montessori, and other leaders of the Progressive Education Movement. Progressive educators believed that the drills, memorization, physical restrictions and punishments that were standard fare in schools did more harm than good. Peninsula's founders could not have agreed more.

Dewey's seminal belief in learning through experience was what excited them most.

In his view, facts and skills, though important, weren't of much value without understanding; and understanding was most effectively gained through activities with some connection to the student's everyday life. For example, principles of trigonometry might best be learned by using them to measure the height of a familiar building; ratios and transference of motion might best be learned by taking a clock apart and putting it back together again.

This meant that students must play an active role in their own education. Their ability to think critically and independently must be recognized and respected even as teachers helped to sharpen it. The curriculum must be flexible enough so teachers could shape lessons on the wing, using the questions and observations of their students as cues. And opportunities for exploration should be seized whenever possible.

Peninsula's founders set out to create a school where these compelling ideas were put into practice. Today, Peninsula School still reflects their long-ago vision by offering a child-centered education where history is taught through re-enactments, storytelling, and visits to historically significant places; where children learn through direct interaction with the natural world, human cultures, the arts, literature, and practical crafts such as woodworking, weaving, and ceramics; where we teach material that is already known, but also encourage students to imagine and explore what is not known. Most important of all, even after nearly a hundred years, a Peninsula education is still the joyous, engaging experience our founders envisioned, fostering the habits, enthusiasms, and creativity needed for a lifetime of learning.

PENINSULA'S CORE CULTURAL VALUES

While many of Peninsula's traditions and approaches are age-specific, some of the most cherished aspects of our culture spring from a set of broad-based core values

that are part of life for everyone in the community. These values form our daily context at the school, and inform all of our activities and interactions. These are not approaches to education. *They are who we are.* Dedication to these ideals and our practice of infusing them into everything we do is what makes Peninsula such a special place. This depth of engagement is one of our hallmarks.

Peninsula's core cultural values include:

The significance of every individual

Each individual has something worthwhile to offer. Anyone -- even the most unexpected person -- might be the one who makes the next wonderful contribution to the tapestry of our lives. What follows from the acceptance of this humbling fact is a basic respect for everyone. Whether in the classroom, on the playing field, or in Board meetings, we try to consider everyone's ideas and concerns. We actively avoid ridicule and personal attacks, because they discourage people from speaking up. These practices harmonize with the progressive educator's respect for children's ability to think critically and independently. Nothing is more fundamental to critical thinking than the confidence to ask whatever questions come to mind, even at the risk of sounding silly. And nothing is more vital to that confidence than the knowledge that one is important, respected, and safe among one's peers.

Excitement and enthusiasm as central aspects of learning

When students are excited and enthusiastic about their subject matter, learning happens spontaneously and almost unnoticed, and they are better at recalling what they've learned. Most of us have had the experience of doggedly

mastering a body of facts because we were forced to, and quickly forgetting them -- geometric theorems, significant historical dates, or lists of disembodied vocabulary words for example. What is it exactly that makes it easier to learn geometry while building a tree house; historical dates when they are milestones in Great-Grandmother's journal; or new words when they crop up in a favorite novel? The answer is excitement and enthusiasm.

At Peninsula, we recognize that a child's innate "Curious George" is our most important classroom helper. When children are excited and eager to master the material they are studying, we know we are on the right track.

The importance of play

In this era of single-parent families, high academic expectations, and lifestyles packed with commitments, there is constant pressure to dismiss unstructured play as a waste of time. Casual observers are often surprised at the amount of time children spend playing at Peninsula. "I don't know how the teachers do it," one of the school's neighbors once said. "As far as I can see, the children spend most of their time climbing trees, splashing in the mud, and building forts together. Yet they go on to become great successes."

It isn't really such a puzzle. Play is essential for normal brain development. It is also one of the most effective learning tools available to us. Through play, children develop essential motor skills and a clear sense of their physical capabilities. Lessons learned during play foster tolerance and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Play also aids in the development of social skills, affording many opportunities to make friends, work out differences, name and express emotions, cooperate with peers on shared projects, and become comfortable with the give and take of life in a community. More immediately, it

allows children to regulate their energy levels so they can give focused and complete attention to intellectual activities when needed. Last but not least, unstructured play makes young minds more amenable to imaginative thinking and successful problem solving. Its importance to success later in life can not be overstated.

This commitment to play as a vital developmental aspect of childhood accounts for our dedication to recess. It also accounts for the fact that there is comparatively little homework at Peninsula. Even imaginative, well-designed assignments can be counterproductive when children are expected to do them after a busy and tiring day. We feel that in general, the benefits of play -- and adequate sleep -- outweigh the benefits of completing a heavy load of academic assignments after school hours.

The importance of community

Self-reliance and independent thinking are essential skills. But the ability to work with others toward common goals is equally important. Communities have enormous power to address problems, to winnow fiction from fact, and to help individuals realize their full human potential through networking and mutual support. For that reason, many aspects of life at Peninsula are designed to strengthen the community of parents, staff, and students, and to teach by example the benefits of belonging to a strong community. We favor physical education activities and classroom projects that encourage teamwork and collaboration. Daily class meetings hone consensus-building skills. Workdays, potlucks, and the spring and winter crafts fairs help us get to know and be comfortable with each other. And disagreements are seen as opportunities to practice productive conflict resolution.

Familiarity as the key to understanding

One of the most striking aspects of life at Peninsula is the general lack of formality. Students dress and adorn themselves as they please and call teachers by their first names. Teachers make it clear that children can be open and honest without fear of retribution. This comfortable atmosphere is deliberate, and is based on the idea that in order to truly understand someone, we must first come to know them. A healthy degree of familiarity makes it easy for teachers and children to understand and respect each other. That understanding, in turn, makes it possible for teachers to tailor the education to the child, and thereby ensure that learning is joyful, rewarding and effective.

Consensus

At Peninsula, very few significant decisions are made without first reaching a consensus of those most involved. This follows naturally from the ideas presented above, concerning the importance of every individual and the importance of a strong community. We have found that respectfully considering everyone's viewpoints is good for Peninsula's general health. While this approach is frequently tedious, it capitalizes on the community's pool of talent and knowledge, and helps us retain a sense of good will toward each other even when we are wrestling with difficult issues.

Personal accountability

Personal accountability is one of the foundation stones of Peninsula's culture. To preserve children's natural love of learning, we allow them to be kids, make sure their voices are heard and respected, and entrust them with a certain

amount of freedom to choose what they study and when. In return, we hold them to their promises and teach them to take on increasing responsibility, not only for themselves, but for others. This tit-for-tat -- freedom in return for responsibility -- is a hallmark of life at Peninsula. Children flying high on a rope swing or "edging" the Big Building know they are responsible for their own safety. If things go well, they take from the experience greater trust in their own judgment. If there's a mishap, they learn something about their own limits. Likewise, students understand that they have full responsibility for completing class assignments, for fulfilling their work jobs (or paying jobs, as in the case of summer school and childcare helpers), and for ironing out problems with classmates. While we keep an eye on things from a distance and provide an occasional nudge or bit of advice, we try to stay as hands-off as possible.

Engagement with the natural world

Much of what happens at Peninsula happens outdoors. On rainy days, children can be spotted building mud huts and floating homemade boats in puddles. Sunshine finds students reading books in the branches of trees. Class groups regularly spend concentrated periods of time camping as far from civilization as is practical, where they might study anything from the life cycles of fish, to the movements of stars and planets or the fine art of outdoor cooking in teams. This emphasis on the outdoors is no accident. Outdoor activities, including class camping trips, are among the most central and sustained aspects of our curriculum. They provide a healthy counterweight to purely intellectual pursuits. They afford happy, practical ways for children to burn off excess energy and to learn the capabilities of their own bodies. They help students gain an understanding of the natural world, their place in it, and the degree to which

they are dependent on it. And they offer us, as parents and teachers, many compelling ways to link classroom studies and the core values of our school with the rest of life.

AGE SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF PENINSULA'S CULTURE

The Beginning: Nursery

Peninsula's nursery and childcare programs include children between the ages of three and five. At this very young age, little ones are keenly aware of their dependence on adults. Before they can engage in confident exploration and learning, they must feel certain that they are in a safe place, surrounded by trustworthy people who care about them. To that end, first and foremost Peninsula's nursery environment is socially and physically friendly and supportive. The ratio of children to adults is low. Teachers are always nearby to help children resolve conflicts without hurting or being hurt. We also help children articulate their feelings and needs, identify what they want, and ask for it. Once this secure foundation is laid and children feel safe, supported, and confident, broader types of learning and exploration can begin. Much of the nursery day is structured so children can make their own choices. The nursery is rich with playthings and possibilities. The challenge is how to choose among them. Blocks and paints, or slides and rope swings? Picture books, or games of running and shouting? Mud pies or doll baths? Children choose the clothing they wear, selecting freely from the dress-up bin if they wish. They decide for themselves when to eat, as well as what and how much. They learn to trust themselves. Along the way, they discover their own interests and the joy of following them. The nursery also affords opportunities to work and play

together. Children and teachers gather each day to read stories, talk about interesting topics, and if they wish, eat lunch together. The class as a whole gathers twice a week for a walk to the school library, where librarians help awaken these youngest of our students to the magic of books through read-alouds and group interactions.

By the time children leave Peninsula's nurseries, they've already begun learning how to get along with others, how to work out their own problems, how to make good choices, and how to express themselves in productive ways. This anecdote from a parent says it all:

On the way to school today, my 4-year-old son said, "Oh no! I forgot to bring my game!" I said, "That's too bad." He responded by saying "When I say I forgot to bring my game, you have to say, 'How can we solve this problem?'" Obliging, I asked, "How can we solve this problem?" He said, "I think I can make a game in Nursery Green."

The Foundation: Kindergarten

After a year or two in the nursery, children are ready to move on to kindergarten. In this new territory, we continue to encourage self-expression and personal decision-making, and unstructured play is still central to the curriculum. At the same time, we introduce more formal group processes. Children participate in class meetings -- telling their news, expressing their opinions on how to solve class problems, voting, and listening while others speak. In addition, they take part in class projects led by teachers with specialties such as art, science, music, or physical education. Kindergartners grow their own crystals, for example, learn dozens of songs, and create ceramic

self-portraits. They join in organized physical activities -- usually simple games designed to minimize competition and maximize teamwork. And they contribute by helping their teachers and classmates shape and modify these activities. Teachers strive to engage each child's interest, so everyone can pursue even group endeavors in highly original ways. Kindergarten is also the place where children first begin to share responsibility for classroom tasks, including cleaning up and caring for materials.

While we are working on these important social skills, we introduce equally important pre-reading and arithmetic skills, taking care to incorporate them into interesting activities. Kindergartners may learn to count by taking an inventory of blocks or paint jars, for example. A simple cooking or building project might provide practice in the fine art of measuring. Letter and word recognition skills can be honed while learning the letters in fellow students' names.

Finally, kindergartners go on their first field trips. In local parks and nature preserves, students use nets to scoop tiny creatures from pools and sloughs, and magnifying glasses to observe their catch. On outings at the beach, they find and touch anemones, barnacles, and kelp, and learn about the tides while building sand castles. In this happy way, they begin to understand that the world as a whole is their classroom.

Growth: Primary

Beginning in first grade, the concepts of independence, freedom, and responsibility become more definite parts of our curriculum. Students are now introduced to one of Peninsula's most effective learning tools, and one of the most central aspects of Peninsula School life: the activities program. From this point onward, children spend a portion of each day outside their regular

classrooms engaged in an activity of their choice. The possibilities are many and varied. The activities program offers both free and structured learning opportunities. Some activities, such as dance, music or drama, are directed and lead to a performance. Others, such as art, clay, math, science or woodshop, offer free-form experimentation. Some, like library or physical education, require the child to be on time and to stay through a prescribed period. In weaving, once students are on a loom, they must return every day until they are finished, so that others can have their turn. Students make their choice for the day with all of these freedoms and responsibilities in mind. The program gives them space and time to explore their creativity in many fields, to live with their decisions, to practice dealing productively with both success and disappointment, to perfect academic and practical skills in areas they enjoy, and to learn how to get along in a wide variety of social and physical environments. Among the many good results are greater resilience and self-reliance.

At about the same time, children go on their first school camping trips. Initially, these trips are short, with no more than one or two nights spent away from home. In addition to being great fun, they provide an excellent vehicle for learning various life skills, including cooperation with others, dealing with separation from parents, living with one's actions and decisions, and cooking! Camping trips are also an opportunity for youngsters born and raised in an urban environment to explore and become comfortable with the natural world.

In addition to activities and camping, children in the primary grades take responsibility for more significant "work jobs." For example, each class is expected to clean up classrooms and play areas after a day of hard use. Classes organize ways to divide these large tasks into smaller jobs that can be taken on by single students or students working in pairs. Every Peninsula student agrees

to do certain of these work jobs, and to complete them at certain times. This practice instills early on a sense of the importance of keeping one's promises, and also the importance of fair contributions to enterprises everyone benefits from. Class meetings become increasingly important, allowing time for sharing, for resolving differences, and for choosing and planning activities, such as writing and producing a play or organizing a carnival for younger students. In primary, the greatest academic emphasis is on the development of reading and math skills. We approach both of these subjects from a number of directions: they are woven into class projects and activities, and they are presented through games, manipulatives, and other hands-on ways of learning. During reading time, children write in personal journals, read individually selected books, work at their own pace in traditional workbooks, and enjoy non-traditional work pages created with their specific interests and needs in mind. Because reading and math skills are so vital to academic success, Peninsula's teachers keep very close track of each child's development in these areas. Teachers monitor progress and assess needs continuously, while encouraging and helping each child. To accomplish this, several assistants help in each classroom. Parents sometimes volunteer as well. The high ratio of adults to students allows us to provide generous attention for each child and increases the effectiveness of teachers.

Realization: The Upper School

From fifth through eighth grades, Peninsula students participate in the Upper School, where they take on a growing amount of responsibility for their own education. Upper School students regularly set goals, meet deadlines, and are involved in the evaluation of their work. To keep the atmosphere interesting and

engaging, students continue to explore ideas in hands-on, experiential ways whenever possible. And we continue to honor each student's unique learning style.

Our most useful tool for furthering these ends is Upper School Choice, a program that allows students to explore specific topics in depth. The topics are many and varied. Choices differ from year to year, but examples from past years include film photography, ocean ecology, urban farming, fence-building, entrepreneurship, airplanes and airships, Homer's *Odyssey*, boat design, foreign languages, and many more. Each student selects a class from the offered list and spends one period per day for two or three weeks working on the subject matter. Choices are offered five or six times each year, so that in the course of their terms in Upper School, students may study as many as twenty-four different special topics. Choice classes are an opportunity for both teachers and students to explore an interest in a focused way. They also offer students many chances to discover new interests. Because students enroll in Choice classes based on interest rather than age, the Choice program also encourages children of different ages to work with one another. Older students often take younger ones under their wings. Younger students add energy and differing viewpoints to the mix. Everyone involved benefits from learning new things in new situations and groups.

Class meetings are now critical to the functioning of each class group. They are used to discuss issues of particular concern to adolescents, and to create class cohesion, reach consensus, and resolve problems. But they are also a good way to teach leadership and planning skills. With judicious guidance from teachers, students use class meetings to plan their fall and spring camping trips. Other group projects are planned this way as well. Food drives, Pizza Day, the

Halloween Carnival, and the annual reenactment of the Spanish Armada are all good examples. These planned activities usually include interactions with younger children as well, and thus provide little ones with good role models, and older students the joy of being heroes in a good way.

Upper School is also where we begin to mesh the Peninsula academic curriculum with the standard curricula of the local high schools. This gradual, conscious synchronization provides Peninsula students with the best of both worlds: a joyful, progressive education, and a smooth transition to public or private high school at the end of eighth grade.

To achieve these goals, academic studies in the Upper School grow increasingly rigorous. Students receive their first homework assignments. They learn research, writing, and test-taking skills. Teachers assess each student's progress through papers, work sheets, and one-on-one conversations. And parents are kept in the loop through regular conferences.

The Upper School writing program focuses on analytical thinking, technical writing skills, and creative expression. Students complete a wide variety of writing assignments, including anecdotes, short stories, research reports, literary analyses, persuasive paragraphs, and five-paragraph essays. Learning to write well is mainly about the development of critical thinking and the ability to articulate and defend one's position in a convincing way. Teaching these intricate, challenging skills in ways that preserve creativity and enjoyment requires a good deal of time and energy. For this reason, we devote fewer resources to the underlying mechanics of spelling, punctuation, and penmanship than is usual in the public schools. We find the resulting student all the more interesting and intellectually competent for it.

Upper School math focuses on bringing students from the concrete ideas of arithmetic to the more abstract concepts of algebra (and for some students, geometry) in ways that preserve confidence and enjoyment. To achieve this, teachers pay close attention to each student's abilities and make continuous assessments of progress. Students use both hands-on activities with manipulatives and traditional math exercises to acquire new concepts and master computational skills. As always, teachers use practical applications -- everything from woodworking and weaving to word problems -- to keep studies lively and engaging. Students also learn from and teach their peers in the service of this goal.

The Upper School social studies program aims to foster some appreciation of just how complex and interconnected our world is, while preparing students to take their places in it as responsible citizens. We achieve this through an interdisciplinary approach. Subject matter includes history, cultures, government, religions, current events, environmental issues, and physical geography. Teachers use group projects, lectures, class discussions, special presentations, worksheets, and research papers to enhance students' skills and knowledge. We also employ less usual tools such as movies, novels, role-playing and field trips to add energy and immediacy to the lessons of the classroom. Should a student show particular interest in a specific topic, he or she is encouraged to delve further into it with guidance from teachers.

Science studies in the Upper School include active and interactive lessons. By active learning we mean instructional activities where students take charge of learning the major ideas in science. There are many ways in which students can be active learners in science. Science classes are typically hands-on laboratory experiences including active reading, listening, discourse, and learning to use

science tools and technologies. The important common denominator is that students regularly make new associations between new ideas and their previous conceptions of how the world works.

After Graduation

Eighth-grade graduation marks the end of students' time at Peninsula and the beginning of a new learning experience. Peninsula graduates go on to attend the excellent public and private high schools in the area. Almost all pursue and complete degrees from colleges and universities, including the nation's finest. As one might guess, it is fairly common for Peninsula students to take a "gap year," either at the beginning of college or during it, to travel, do an internship, or pursue a special interest in depth.

Graduates usually continue their relationship with Peninsula, returning for the Spring and Holiday Fairs, to work as Summer School instructors or assistants, or to contribute to Grad Night by discussing their post-Peninsula experiences with the community at large. Many eventually enroll their own children. A few become Peninsula teachers themselves.

IN CONCLUSION

When they leave the comforts and challenges of Peninsula's Big Building, tree forts, rope swings, and mud puddles, our students go out into the world to enrich discussions -- whether in the classroom or out -- with original viewpoints and unusual questions. Teachers, professors, and employers frequently characterize Peninsula graduates as leaders and free-thinkers -- generous, engaging, creative, independent, resilient, motivated, and curious. Characteristics like these are assets, particularly in our increasingly competitive and interesting times.

