“Students First,” a core value at Parker, aims to develop learner autonomy and independence by putting responsibility in the hands of students. How does that value play out in real life?

We sat down with Parker’s three division heads—Dr. Bob Gillingham, Dan Lang, and Dr. Monica Gillespie—to help explain the enduring value of Parker’s approach to student-centered learning.

Note: The transcript of this conversation was edited for space and clarity.

PROGRESSIVE ROOTS

Bob: In recent years, we’ve moved closer to the original vision that Colonel Francis W. Parker had for the School. The shift toward the interest of the students has been a dynamic effort in the last decade. We spend a lot less time teaching kids how to do things and a lot more time teaching them how to think. Ultimately, at Lower School, we want to make sure that the kids are well-prepared to move joyfully into the Middle School, and also have a level of independence that will help them to navigate all of the new challenges coming their way.

Dan: We in the Middle School are leaning more that way as we look at the student experience. We constantly ask ourselves: What is their experience really about? Especially as students move from Grade 5 to Grade 6, we’re attentive to the fact that the transition is dramatic and has challenges of its own.

Bob: Like being the smallest. Again.

Dan: That’s right. Kind of moving from the top of the heap to starting over at square one. But it is a joyful transition. One of the things that we’ve seen consistently across the divisions is the focus on the relationship between the teacher and the student. Being able to leverage the relationship that teachers make with students and the environment that they then create is really what helps us support kids towards excellence.

Monica: Most of our students come from the Middle School and literally run to the Upper School—and then they try and figure out if running is still cool or not. But they’re ready to be with us, and they’ve developed a sense of wonder, adventure, and learning that really starts in Junior Kindergarten. While they are bigger and older, those characteristics are still present. At Upper School, we want to take all of that energy they have, their desire to learn, and what might be meaningful to them, and provide the space for them to learn about those things while also offering new opportunities. We know it’s not for us to make decisions for them, but to empower them to make the right decisions for themselves—so they really are ready to manage their own lives.

Dan: When I think about “students first,” I think sometimes there’s a misconception. If you say, “we’re a student-centered school,” people may make the incorrect assumption that our
Top: Head of Upper School Dr. Monica Gillespie with Head of Middle School Dan Lang.  Middle: Head of Upper School Dr. Monica Gillespie.  Bottom: Head of Lower School Dr. Bob Gillingham.
approach doesn’t equate with high-level academics. There is absolutely very high-level rigor all the way from Junior Kindergarten through Grade 12. The difference is that when our faculty are teaching, they also focus on the fact that in their classroom there are human beings. And the only way those students are going to be successful is to put them first.

DEVELOPING IDENTITIES

Bob: One of the most fulfilling aspects of my job is to be able to see students after those of us in the Lower School haven’t been in daily contact with them for a while, when they are Upper School juniors and seniors. Their sense of identity has really begun to coalesce around the interests they had when they were younger. In our role as pacers at graduation, it gets me every time when I look in their eyes and I can still see the 10-year-old.

Monica: The only way they can find that identity is if they feel connected and have a sense of belonging. If you don’t feel that you belong, or if you feel that you’re not respected, you’re not really able to build that sense of self that fosters interdependence—which is ultimately what we want for them. We have outstanding faculty and staff who know our students, and our students know they belong. That’s an amazing thing.

Bob: I’ve noticed the teachers don’t try to control the kids top-down. Instead, they build a framework within which students can operate comfortably with a feeling of safety. With that, students are willing to take risks. Yes, sometimes they stumble and fall. But they know how to get back up again. They become good at that. They persevere; they develop greater resilience. I only see that increasing as they make their way through the three divisions.

THE END GOAL

Dan: Try as we might, you can’t actually force someone to learn something. Students have to want to make that choice. Through strong relationships and compelling learning environments, our students become motivated and choose to create their own knowledge. “Students First” is the progressive essence of our School. Students direct their learning, building it on the foundation of the mental constructs that they have developed for themselves.

Monica: When our students go out into the world, we want them to be confident that they can make decisions for themselves that are based on values. We want them to have resilience and the personal agency to manage their lives. They are able to make a meaningful difference in the world because they are interdependent and connected, traits they have because they were in a school environment where those qualities grew and developed over time. That’s really what our society needs: People who have a strong sense of self, which is independence, but who also know that they are dependent upon others. That’s one of the many gifts of our School, and a hallmark of the Parker experience.

HEAD OF SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Head of School Scholarship Program, spearheaded by Jeff ’75 and Karen Silberman in 2017, ensures that all qualified students have access to a Parker education.

The Program significantly increases Parker’s ability to provide a life-changing educational experience for qualified students, and advances the School’s mission and commitment to greater socio-economic diversity and inclusivity.

To encourage the School to raise even more funds for financial assistance to benefit additional students, the Silbermans will utilize their $1.5 million gift to inspire others to join them as investors in the Program. Their investment will provide double the recognition for other donors’ gifts to the Program for the next two school years. The goal is to raise an additional $1.5 million from the Parker community for a total initial investment of $3 million.

Donors who give to the Program during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years will be recognized at double their gift level. For example, if a donor gives $5,000 to the Program, they will be recognized for a $10,000 contribution.

For more information, visit: francisparker.org/hosscholarshipprogram