
Independent Schools Inspire the Pursuit of Passion

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*"Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things."
—Denis Diderot (1713-1784) French philosopher and writer*

The pursuit of passion has long been touted as one of the keys to a fulfilling and rewarding life. From gaining admission to the college of one's choice to finding success in business, and even to longevity, the anecdotal evidence is plentiful.

In the microcosms of our schools, we can attest to the fact that the measure of success is generally directly correlated to the fervor with which it is pursued, whether in the classroom, on the athletic fields or on the stage. The importance of helping our students discover their passions is irrefutable, and the benefits are far reaching.

The best preparation we can provide for our graduates as they enter college and beyond is to foster an enthusiasm for learning and a willingness to stretch beyond limits they imagined possible. As they discover their passions, our students experience personal growth, meaningful and lasting relationships to one another, to ideas, to the work at hand, and to the world at large.

Independent schools are uniquely poised to provide students with multiple pathways for finding and developing their passions. Our programs are thoughtfully and intentionally designed to reach the diversity of needs, interests, and talents of all our students, and to inspire each one individually. Creating the best conditions for success helps to encourage students to feel comfortable exploring new areas and taking calculated risks. Each day in our schools, opportunities present themselves to help us prepare young people to find their passions, fulfill their promise, and make their marks in the world.

"Triple Threat," Triple Benefit

Independent school faculty members, particularly those at boarding schools, have a unique ability to touch and inspire their students on many levels. The so called "triple threat" model, where faculty members serve as

teachers, coaches and dorm parents, enables them to know their students beyond the walls of the classroom. These multiple roles, as noted in Values Added: The Lifelong Returns of an Independent School Education, NAIS, February 2004, transform teachers "into mentors and allows them to see the whole child—not just the student behind the desk. It gives instructors insight into the broader dimension of an individual student's personality and personal development. It lets faculty see what motivates and excites their students..."

These dedicated and gifted faculty members provide the opportunity for rich interaction by clearly demonstrating their commitment and interest in young people. They balance warm hearts with steady hands and set high expectations, often showing rather than telling the way. They help students understand what they can expect from themselves with a delicate balance of "hands-on and hands-off." They bring a diversity of interests, talents and backgrounds to our school communities. Most of all, they model passion—for teaching, for pursuing interests with fervor, for the work they do every day, and for their schools—that inspires their students

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and enriches their experiences beyond measure.

Students form lifelong relationships with teachers who have been fully invested in their individual successes. Again and again, all of us who are privileged to serve in the independent school community hear from alumni that their teachers were so much more than just teachers—they were mentors, surrogate parents, friends and sources of inspiration. Students who feel supported and encouraged by their teachers open themselves up more readily to inspiration and to trying new things. Independent school faculty get to know each student on a variety of levels and are able to develop a great sense of what might capture their interest and spark their imagination. They also share their joys and challenges and collaborate frequently with other faculty members to encourage students to explore new areas.

Examples abound. A three-season varsity athlete is badly injured and unable to continue to participate in sports. Devastated, he struggles to fill his time and find a new identity for himself beyond athletics. His photography teacher, well aware of his plight, recognizes his talent behind the lens and suggests he submit some photos to the school's publications department. A photo of a new athletic field, a source of great pride for the school, is just what the alumni magazine editor is looking for to accompany an article. She invites him in and asks if he would be interested in photographing away games the school photographer is unable to attend. Before long, his photos are gracing many of the school's publications and website, and he is filling his spare time taking pictures and learning all he can about photography.

Finding a passion often requires that a student be open to new experiences and to extend beyond traditional comfort zones. For an adolescent, this can be a daunting proposition requiring a level of maturity and self-confidence that may not yet be developed. Independent schools, with their close faculty-student relationships and intimate class sizes, providesupportive and nurturing environments that encourage students to take the necessary risks to discover their strengths and explore new territory.

Breadth and Depth of Our Curricula

Independent schools are known for their commitment to rigorous core curricular offerings. Often our academic requirements, including mathematics and foreign language minimum expectations, provide our students with the exposure they need to explore topics in more depth and to find new areas of interest they would not otherwise have experienced. In the process, students often stumble upon a topic, a language, an interest that captivates them in a way they couldn't have imagined.

Independent schools also have the flexibility to take innovative approaches to curriculum development and implementation, often offering courses that are more conventionally seen in colleges and universities, and including broader offerings than public schools are able

to offer. Independent schools also can provide the opportunity for in-depth exploration of a subject, offering extensive honors and Advanced Placement level courses. As a result, our students have more opportunities to find subject areas that captivate them, and to explore them fully.

Small Classes, Big Rewards

Small class sizes make it difficult for students to “fall through the cracks.” Faculty members are able to really get to know each individual student and forge relationships of trust and mutual respect. Teachers can be more flexible, and appeal to multiple learning styles within the classroom, encouraging students with diverse cognitive profiles to become fully engaged, and often inspired. They are able to balance structure and freedom, push and comfort, and challenge students to set high expectations for themselves. Along the way, students often find the spark that ignites their interest and stirs them to delve into a topic or subject area in greater depth.

Small class size also promotes collaboration and close interaction with peers. At secondary school age, students often learn as much from each other as they do from adults. Classrooms filled with motivated and excited students provide inspiring and infectious charged environments where students feel free to explore, experiment and get excited about learning.

Beyond the Classroom

One of the hallmarks of independent school education is the commitment to educating the whole child, both in and out of the classroom. Students are engaged in a broad range of activities designed to spawn interest and enthusiasm, build confidence and discovery, and promote personal growth. Rich programs in the arts and athletics and a broad range of extracurricular activities provide them with many venues to discover their passions and showcase their talents.

Consider the gangly young freshman boy who is growing so fast his body can hardly keep up. He joins the junior varsity soccer team, continuing with a sport he has played since he was a child. His coaches take note that while he may not be destined to be a stand-out soccer player, he laps all the other boys during warm-up runs. They tactfully direct him toward the cross country team. This becomes a life-changing event that not only introduces him to what surely will be a lifelong passion, but brings him national recognition and the opportunity to compete on varsity team at a top college.

Imagine a shy young ninth-grade girl coming to a boarding school for the first time, miles from the comfort of home. A singer at her prior school, she is reluctant to try out for the choir at her new school. The academics dean routinely reviews student records and is familiar with her interest. He tips off the choral director, who encourages her to come to practice. Once there, she finds herself on familiar ground and gains confi-

dence with every practice. She is able to use her singing gift to help her make new friends, connect with a new community and take pleasure and satisfaction from doing something that she loves.

At independent schools, participation in sports and extra-curricular activities is universal, but not exclusive. It is not uncommon to have a varsity football player on the stage reciting a Shakespearean soliloquy or a champion ski racer huddled contentedly at the potters' wheel. As lines between athletes and artists blur, the possibilities for lifelong interests emerge.

Today's Students, Tomorrow's Leaders

Independent schools recognize that education for the 21st century calls upon us to prepare young people to discover and fulfill their promise, to foster their engagement with ideas and people, to become citizens of the world, and leaders of tomorrow.

At every level, be it a student who engages in his or her own personal pursuit of learning, or the quiet leadership that we might call friendship, we inspire students to stand up, stand out, and stand for something by providing leadership opportunities that build competence, confidence and compassion.

Practicing leadership inspires students to reach be-

yond their grasp, to think creatively and express their thoughts clearly and convincingly. Leadership encourages students to stand behind something they believe in and to call others to advocate for their cause. By encouraging students to speak their minds while providing them safe places to speak their hearts, we are opening them to the benefits of pursuing their beliefs with conviction and following their passions with commitment.

Discover the Path

Joseph Campbell said it well in *Man and Myth*: "Your whole physical being knows that [following your passion] is the way to be alive in this world and the way to give to the world the very best that you have to offer. There is a track just waiting there for each of us, and once on it, doors will open that were not open before and would not open for anyone else."

As independent school educators, we have the tools to help our students discover their paths to academic mastery, creativity and responsibility, and along the way to help them find a passion that will open the doors to their future. There is no doubt that this is one of the true values and lifelong returns of an independent school education.

