

The Watershed School

*From the principal's
bend in the river*



12/7/09

“Call up in imagination the ordinary schoolroom, its time-schedules, schemes of classification, of examination and promotion, of rules of order, and I think you will grasp what is meant by “pattern of organization.” If then you contrast this scene with what goes on in the family, for example, you will appreciate what is meant by the school being a kind of institution sharply marked off from any other form of social organization.”

John Dewey, Experience and Education, (1938)

John Dewey and Public Education

The previous passage was written back in 1938. Perhaps Dewey is now rolling in his grave wondering how we could have run in a circle back to where we started. As 2009 swings to a close, it appears as though the US educational system is becoming more centralized, less diversified in course offerings, and more standardized. In general, the trend is towards less reflection of local interests in curriculum.

We have moved towards a national institutional model geared towards the bottom line of a couple of standard measures of test scores. With all the focus on Terra Nova and Alaska’s SBA assessments, it’s frustrating to see so little debate concerning the validity of high stakes tests as an indicator of student knowledge and genuine performance.

Dewey was viewed as a progressive educator during the early twentieth century. Historically,

before the 1940s it was generally the academically gifted and economic elite that remained in education beyond grammar school. Even still, with that public school population of the early 1900s, many educators questioned the one size fits all factory model. Dewey championed to see that all children were educated in a more natural learning environment and fought to educate beyond the simple drill and kill of the 3 Rs. He felt strongly that a role of education was to prepare children for enjoyable lives as engaged citizens of their home place.

Goals Reached

In two weeks we’ll be halfway through Watershed’s first year. It’s an amazing experience for the staff, students, and parents to be part of. As promised, we have more than doubled the physical recreation of our children as compared to the rest of FNSBSD. As outlined in our school charter, students are tromping through forest and field to study our natural landscape. In keeping with school goals, classes have learned extensively about Alaskan and Tanana Valley history.



This isn’t to say no attention is being paid on the 3Rs. That’s far from the reality. Our children are learning and mid-year assessments prove that

our children are prospering well academically. What we are really showing, is that time can be spent on ALL THAT OTHER STUFF (that stuff being left out across the country), and still teach children to reading, write, and use mathematics. Time can be spent on natural learning experiences.



Nature Builds Character

Robert Michael Pile (1992) uses the term “the extinction of experience.” It refers to the termination of direct, frequent contact between children and natural systems. Nature becomes a cliché, a product of someone else’s design. Even our National Park system is creating virtual visits to our national treasures. See Kings Canyon from your easy chair! Is this what John Muir had in mind?

Beyond the experiential opportunities available through direct involvement in the outdoors, is the physical and psychological benefits afforded by repeated treks through the forest. No doubt you have heard a few whines and grumbles from your children. We’ve heard a few ourselves, but with each passing day the children become stronger and more comfortable in the out-of-doors.



Bob Burton, who in 1972 helped found Vision Quest, is a believer in rites of passage for children and young adults. He believes in placing youth in situations that demand considerable growth, emotionally, socially, and physically. The out-of-doors is the platform this organization bases its philosophy upon. Burton talks about some kids finding it easy to quit early in life. “But in nature,” he says, “you can’t quit. You’re faced with real physical challenges.” He goes on to point out that by learning to meet these genuine challenges, children become better equipped to deal with challenges at school.



Making Time for Quality

In the 1940's, Lewis Mumford identified the concept of regional surveys. According to Mumford (1946),

“regional surveys are: the backbone of a drastically revised method of study, in which every aspect of the sciences and arts is ecologically related from the bottom up, in which they connect directly and constantly in the student’s experience of his region and his community. Regional survey must begin with the infants first exploration of his door yard and his neighborhood; it must continue to expand and deepen, at every successive stage of growth until the student is capable of seeing and experiencing above all, relating and integrating and directing the separate parts of his environment, hitherto unnoticed or dispersed.”

Henry David Thoreau took part in this sort of regional survey in his frequent treks across the Walden Pond area. By these repeated visits to his backyard he became intimately aware and connected to his home place.



More Than a Field Trip

The Watershed School is fortunate to have immediate access to our neighborhood natural areas. Thanks to Grandma Francine, we have forests easily accesable across the street for our youngest explorers. Our older children cut out with their own hands a Watershed Nature Trail loop. It’s about a block away. Beyond the trail loop is federal land where children repeatedly visit particular spots to learn about permafrost, pond ice and the life beneath it, and survival skills. Other children have made bird feeders which require frequent repeated visits to maintain them for the birds. These sorts of activities, which require repeated visits to the same areas are what Mumford was driving at with his “regional surveys.”

Sincerely,
John Carlson
Principal/Teacher