

Christ Church Episcopal Preschool

Jo Harney, Head of School

Why I Teach in an Episcopal School

When I ponder the question of why I teach in an Episcopal school, I focus on what makes my experience different from my friends who are public school teachers, all of whom are dedicated, loving educators, with excellent qualifications. We share many of the same ideals, goals, and excitement about teaching, especially as we near the opening of our classrooms in September. So what is it that makes my experience distinct?

First and foremost, we are a prayerful community—not just praying *people*, but a praying *community*. We pray together in chapel, of course, but also in faculty meetings for our colleagues undergoing difficult times. Sometimes I see two faculty members praying together in a quiet hallway or in the school's administrative office. When the school or an individual is facing a big challenge, faculty members may gather in the chapel early in the morning to light a candle and spend some time in quiet prayer and contemplation. We teach our children to pray in gratitude for all God's blessings, and it is our goal for these prayers not to become rote. Rather than saying "Let's pray before snack," we find that "Let's thank God for our food" reminds them why we are praying. When a parent is in my office sharing something very personal, like a breakup of a marriage, or the imminent death of a family member, it is definitely a time to pray. I know that my colleagues in all sorts of other schools pray too, but our public embrace of prayer and the freedom to pray as a community provide us with a strong foundation of mutual support.

Secondly, our school is defined by community. Our mission statement says (in part) that we will "create community among families, school, and church." This means proactively reaching out to the parish to involve them in our ministry. The Rector and I are in constant conversation about ways to encourage participation by school families and parishioners in all events that take place on our campus. The faculty community is nurtured in an intentional way by providing opportunities for sharing meals, sharing stories, and sharing worship. We have asked our faculty members what kind of chapel is meaningful to them, and have responded with some early morning faculty chapels that meet their needs. Pop-up lunches occur from time to time on no particular schedule. Lunch may be served in the hallways of the school, in the parish hall, or in our commons room. Faculty meetings are sometimes given over to small group meetings for sharing stories. The community we build in our classrooms is based on supporting children as they learn to be good friends, helping them treat one another with kindness and respect. We provide many opportunities for parents to join with one another in parenting classes or social events. This has resulted in friendships that have endured long past their children's enrollment in our preschool. Alumni show up in great numbers for many of our events. This focus on community goes far beyond the typical PTA community in many other schools, and I am grateful for the climate of support and joy it engenders.

Our chapel services and Godly Play lessons are a key component of our life together. Although families are invited to attend any and all chapel services, we specifically designate the first one of each month as "Family Chapel." Parents, grandparents, siblings, nannies, babysitters, and friends show up to sit with

their child among his or her classmates and to participate in the service. They join in the songs, prayers, and silence that we practice and their presence speaks of their support of our Episcopal identity. The children are proud to have their parents with them. Godly Play lessons (taught in each class once a week) are based on the chapel themes and reinforce the learning that has begun in the chapel each week. When parents leave our school, they frequently comment on chapel as being their favorite memory of their child's time with us.

Finally, the service we provide to the community makes us look beyond our own walls and recognize how much we have to share. Because our children are so young, it is sometimes difficult to find ways to engage them in direct service, although we do ask them to participate in food collections, adoption of needy families for Christmas and Easter, and other simple-to-explain projects. Our parents know that modeling service for their children is the best way to teach them to make it a priority as they grow up. They provide dinner in a men's homeless shelter once a month, cooking, re-heating, delivering, and serving as their schedules allow. Parents who can't manage child care for the evening can still participate by cooking at home and delivering the food to school when they drop off their child. Our parents have also implemented projects to collect socks and underwear for shelters and community centers and diapers for a downtown child care center serving the homeless and working poor. It has been very meaningful for me, as head of school, to witness the parent community taking on such efforts without being nudged by the school staff.

We are not unique in praying, serving, worshipping, or coming together as a community, but many of the places that are able to practice all of these in a supportive climate are Episcopal schools. In the three Episcopal schools in which I've been privileged to teach, I have arrived at school each morning knowing that my own spiritual needs would be met, that my colleagues and I would support one another in prayer, and that we would help our children to know the love of God and to be grateful.