



# Winnetka: *A Community of Learners*

## **Our Vision**

We are a dynamic community of learners committed to respecting childhood, challenging the intellect, nurturing creativity, fostering reflection, encouraging action, and exploring possibilities for the future. We believe that a developmental, child-centered approach to education is the most effective way to meet the needs of our students and the high level of expectations we set for them. We are guided by a set of beliefs embedded in a culture that honors tradition, reflects on transitions, and makes choices about transformations.

# Expectations

We seek and value excellence in our students. The value of school learning is dependent upon the students' ability to use it effectively and responsibly. Our world will depend on individuals who can:

- read with comprehension.
- communicate effectively in writing and speaking by formulating and expressing ideas clearly and by understanding the ideas conveyed by others.
- access and evaluate information by interpreting content and assessing its usefulness and meaning.
- demonstrate quantitative reasoning and use mathematics as a language for understanding relationships in the world.
- use scientific principles as a basis for making hypotheses, interpreting data, and drawing conclusions.
- be reflective and resourceful in making rational decisions, solving problems, and understanding the consequences of actions.
- understand and interact responsibly with the environment.
- understand the diversity and commonality among people.
- communicate in languages other than English so they may participate with awareness and sensitivity as productive members of a global society.
- encourage, appreciate and participate in the expression of multiple art forms and value the importance of the arts to society.
- understand the role and impact of technology on society and use technological resources when appropriate.
- understand the importance on the individual in relationship to society and the effect that each person can have on others, on the community, and on the world.
- develop and maintain enduring relationships and healthful living habits.
- work cooperatively with others to achieve a common goal.

# Philosophy and Practice

A school district's identity is defined by how it responds to changes in our modern world. The value of its philosophy lies in how it organizes its educational culture. This document is the expression of the collective philosophical commitment to schooling by students, teachers, parents, and community members. It crystallizes many of the theoretical and pragmatic beliefs that underlie that commitment.

A living philosophy embodies a continuous process of change that is both unpredictable and constant. It assumes that many of the beliefs that we hold today are tentative and partial, and that they may require rethinking tomorrow in light of new information and insight.

Our task has been to reexamine established ideas to ensure that our educational practices are in alignment with principles of child development and the development of essential skills. Through this process of inquiry we have identified areas where refinement of our teaching will positively affect the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth of our children. Our goal is to prepare our children for effective and active participation in a rapidly changing future.

Over the last 12 years, we have experienced changes, both as a school district and as a community:

- Recent research about learning and intelligence has enriched our understanding of students' needs and helped us identify areas where change is needed to affect children's growth positively.
- The explosion of information in society and its emphasis on the uses of technology have altered the manner in which we communicate with one another and how we use and access information.
- Recent research on the arts and their fundamental role in cognitive and emotional development have influenced how we plan for and assess children's learning.
- Networks of interdependence have brought people of the world into greater intimacy than ever before. This requires greater appreciation for the complexities of people and the need for individual as well as mutual effort. Society has expanded and redefined the roles of student, parent, community, and teacher.

Three themes emerge as we look at our past, our present, and our future. These themes are:

**Teaching, Learning, and Thinking**  
**Respecting Childhood**  
**Democracy and Community**

They are defined and expanded as follows:

## **Our Beliefs**

### *Teaching, Learning, and Thinking*

We believe teaching, learning, and thinking are synergistic processes involving students, teachers, and the larger community. These processes involve the ability to understand the meaning and value of a subject or activity, to see it in its larger context, and to acquire and apply knowledge. Teaching, learning, and thinking are the subjects of a continuing dialogue in our community. The content may change, but at the center of every discussion is the child. Through this discourse, common beliefs evolve that provide the basis for learning.

### **THE ENVIRONMENT**

We create environments in our schools that support and challenge the child. While such environments are initially constructed by the teacher, they also are responsive to the child. Learning is participatory and experiential. Thoughtful and appropriate decisions are made by all participants. Physical design features enhance children's comfort. As our students move through the grades, the content expands while the context remains interactive and dynamic. During this process, we reflect on our practice and adapt our responses to our developing students.

Careful observation deepens our understanding of the children and heightens the importance of the experiences we create. The children's expression of their discoveries and acquired knowledge is their response to the environment; the teacher responds and the dialogue continues.

### **UNDERSTANDING LEARNING AND THINKING**

Brain/intelligence research, which supports and challenges current practice, enhances our curriculum planning and instruction. The identification of each student's talents, strengths, and areas in need of growth and development presents opportunities for teacher and student to reflect upon the best strategy(ies) for learning. Students are encouraged to understand how they think and learn.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING**

Learning is more efficient and effective when instruction is organized and presented in a manner that is compatible with each child's developmental stages. Skills and concepts are introduced and reinforced appropriately. Learning takes place most effectively when children are challenged by genuine problems associated with their interests.

## **INTEGRATED LEARNING**

Organizing concepts and skills from different disciplines around a common theme helps students to make connections. Integrated units of study foster higher order thinking and creativity while emphasizing subject matter.

## **UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY**

Rapid and continual changes in technology challenge us to provide the appropriate tools and instruction for our community of learners. Understanding the possibilities inherent in technology and developing the ability to make productive and ethical choices in a technological environment require intellectual and social skills that have their foundation in the basic curriculum.

## **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

Our schools provide students with an opportunity to explore the world. Direct contact with places, events, people, and materials is essential to cognitive and emotional development. Children need experience to share and understand forms of information. Meaning emerges because of the interplay between the child's experience and the new information.

## **THE ARTS**

Historically, the arts have been an integral part of our school experience. The arts provide the context that makes regard for and response to the whole child possible. Our commitment to the integration of the arts in our school experience is validated by research about learning. The arts are fundamental to literacy. Giving students the opportunity and tools with which to enter the world of the arts provides them with avenues for the expression of their intellect, creative imagination, and curiosity. The arts are the voice of our humanity.

## **ASSESSMENT**

We believe that our children should have multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know. Assessment is a tool that provides a picture of the

child in the process of being a learner. This perspective guides educational priorities and includes parents in the process. The value of the individual and his/her contribution to the world lies in the manner in which he/she uses intelligence, experience, and creativity in real-life circumstances.

## **THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

When students work with and learn from individuals of character and intellect, they interact with role models whom they may wish to emulate. Teachers must be deserving of this admiration. Therefore, allocating time for learning is as important for teachers as for children. The district is committed to addressing the educational needs and interests of teachers as well as the educational needs and interests of children.

## *Respecting Childhood*

We, as adults, have the responsibility to respect childhood. It is a unique period in human development, which requires that we honor and regard our children's need for safety, understanding, and support. We must prove worthy of their trust.

## **PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING**

All members of our community must work together to instill the attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary for the physical and emotional well-being of our children. Information that aids the necessary development of good nutrition, exercise, and health habits promotes a sound mind and body.

## **THE ROLE OF EFFORT AND SELF ESTEEM**

Self esteem is acquired by working diligently in school. It is achieved by the continued development of useful skills and knowledge. Confidence in oneself is the result of interacting with ideas, people, and the environment in healthy and satisfying ways. Confidence develops in the presence of objective standards, healthy competition, and a nurturing environment that encourages social as well as individual growth.

## **CONSISTENT RELATIONSHIPS**

Because of changing family roles and social structures, children now, more than ever, need opportunities for continuing relationships. Our schools are a place where these long-term relationships occur. A child learns to maintain enduring relationships through experience. Trust in friendships, teachers, and school culture develops confidence. Our goal of developing relationships guides our organizational structures.

## **THE ROLE OF PLAY AND EXPLORATION**

School is a place where opportunities and time for play and exploration are valued and sought. The use of play as both the work and language of the young child changes as children grow. In play, children practice the concrete processes that they will eventually internalize as abstract thought. Play and exploration are the media through which children can formulate and test their own ideas.

## *Democracy and Community*

“Education in a democracy,” said Alexis de Tocqueville, “is an apprenticeship in liberty.” It promotes the attitudes, values, and skills needed to live in freedom. Democracy is not inherited. It is constantly learned and experienced. We create freedom, sustain it, grow from it, embed it in our families, communities, and institutions, and claim it as our heritage.

Yet, there is no guarantee that democracy will prosper unless our words combined with our deeds allow it to be so. Thus, we believe that communication, the interchange of knowledge, ideas, criticism, and advice in all of its diverse forms, is the bond that holds the fragile elements of democracy together.

## **COMMUNICATION**

The constant flow of information inherent in the process of communication has many facets and occurs in many settings. Within the classroom and in parent-teacher conferences, in the school newspaper, at fireside chats, at PTA and School Board meetings, on Go-to-School Night or at the dinner table at home, the process of communication gives voice to each invested individual at the level at which he or she is best able to respond.

The absence of any single constituency diminishes the forces that make democracy work. The critical balance between the needs of the individual and the good of the whole is put in perspective by constant communication among all shareholders.

Therefore, each individual has the responsibility to listen, encourage, and impart ideas. Each individual also has the right to be heard respectfully. In a democracy, individuals are encouraged to interpret and analyze, ask questions, challenge, make choices, think reflectively, and collaborate with others.

Communication begins early in life and is nurtured by those who have the benefit of experience.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY

We are a village of individuals and groups who are deliberate and intentional about developing community. Individual growth is indebted to group experience and complex networks of interaction. The free and open flow of ideas encourages differences. We value those differences and recognize that growth is made possible through reasoned dialogue. Knowledge and experience are not possessions of individuals alone, but of groups that work to promote the growth of all their members.

## APPRECIATION OF DIVERSITY

Democratic principles demand an open society founded on tolerance of differences and mutual respect. It is appropriate that students be encouraged to understand the American culture in which they are growing as they prepare for an active role in shaping that society. It is imperative that students understand the modern world and the past, respect divergent cultures and traditions, exercise judgment, and gain perspective as appropriate to their age and experience.

## Conclusion

The measure of our success lies not only in what we say but in what we do. Our quest for excellence requires us to act upon our beliefs. As a community we dedicate ourselves to learn together; to recognize our collective strengths and individual differences; to seek to understand and accommodate each other; and to perpetuate the traditions and practices that have been the foundation of our district. We see education as a life long journey taken together. Our journey continues.



*This document was prepared by the Winnetka: A Community of Learners Task Force, which in 1996–98 studied and reflected on the philosophy of The Winnetka Public Schools and the values of the students, teachers, parents, and residents it serves.*

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