

Here's to 300 more caring years

Arlington Friends School, founded in 1697, is the oldest school in Pennsylvania continuously operated at the same location and by the same management, the Religious Society of Friends.

As the school observes its 300th anniversary this year, AFS certainly has much to celebrate: Quaker abolitionists integrated the Jenkintown school two centuries before most others admitted blacks; all the students matriculate to college, some to the country's most selective institutions; and the basketball team often rates among the best in southeastern Pennsylvania.

But what truly distinguishes AFS is a three-century legacy of caring for students and nurturing in them a sense of compassion for others.

Twenty years after I graduated, my alma mater continues to remind me that any school is only as good as the caregivers who teach there.

Nel Noddings, author of "Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education," claims that "caring" is about "human relationships in which both parties — carer and cared for — must contribute" and requires the skills of "receptivity and discernment." She suggests that our schools need to foster a culture of caring between students and teachers.

It should not be uncommon, for example, for teachers and students to exchange three simple phrases: "Thank you," "I'm sorry" and "I care." This is a matter of decent human relations.



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Teachers can demonstrate caregiving in a variety of ways. A teacher who sets high standards in the classroom can be just as caring as one who takes a personal interest in students' extracurricular lives.

Unfortunately, most schools do very little to prepare students for discerning or responding to care. A child who can't get along with a teacher is moved to another classroom. Or we try to change the organization of our schools with innovations like intensive scheduling, school-based management and K-12 clusters, hoping they will provide the structure for caregiving.

The truth is that when it comes to caring, the skills of receptivity and discernment are "caught" and not "taught." They develop in relationships between teachers and students who take the initiative to talk with each other, to find enjoyment in each other's company.

Ultimately, students will work harder for teachers they love and respect. I know I did for mine. Maybe that's why I'm a teacher today.

Happy 300th, AFS, and thanks for caring about me. ■

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