

A school that gives, now needs

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Three hundred years ago William Penn planted the seeds for a "holy experiment" in education in his City of Brotherly Love by creating a host of primary day schools dedicated to the cultivation of equality, pacifism and the inward search for truth.

Frankford Friends School was born of that vision and for well over two centuries has provided the children of Northeast Philadelphia with a fine education in the Quaker tradition. Unfortunately, today, the school finds itself struggling to survive, neglected by a larger society that fails to acknowledge the importance of a religiously based elementary education.

I first came to know Frankford Friends in 1964 when my parents enrolled me there in the kindergarten. Although I came from a Slavic, Catholic background, I was welcomed with open arms.

The school offered more than a sound education; it gave its students something much more special — moral integrity and values. As a private school many of its students were the children of white, middle-class professionals, but as a Quaker school with a commitment to diversity Frankford Friends took great pride in its children of color as well as those of less affluent circumstances. We were all treated as if we were unique, and we learned to relate to each other with a mutual respect for that uniqueness.

Today Frankford Friends School is one of the most diverse independent schools in the Philadelphia area. The children of doctors are joined by those of teachers and blue-collar workers in even greater numbers than existed 25 years ago. Ninety-five percent of the students come from Northeast Philadelphia and reflect the rich mix of blacks, East Indians, Koreans, Christians, Muslims and Jews that comprise that section of the city.

This respect for diversity has allowed Frankford Friends to give true meaning to the Friends' ideal of "brotherly love" at a time when so many other independent schools can only pay lip service to that standard.

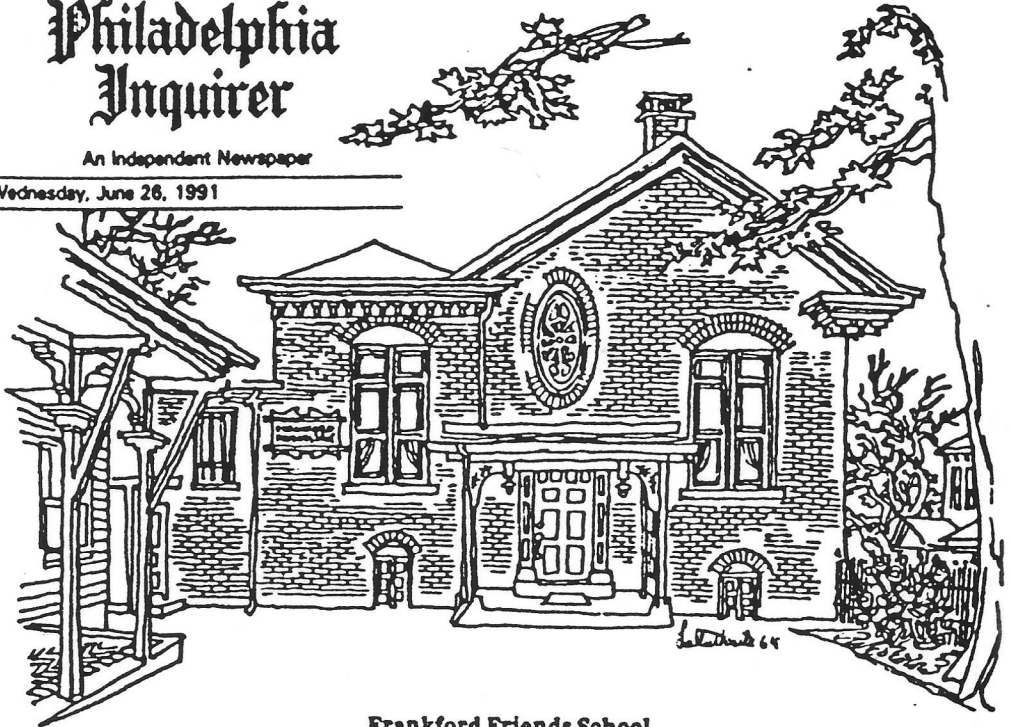
Sadly, the school's special mission — its commitment to diversity and to Northeast Philadelphia — also jeopardizes its future.

To encourage a diverse student body, the school committee has tried to keep tuition rates affordable and to supplement those in

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financial need with scholarship assistance. Currently, the school's tuition is among the lowest for Philadelphia-area independent schools. At the same time, because Frankford Friends doesn't have the luxury of a major endowment or con-

Frankford Friends' low tuition has given it a diverse student body. It has also made it hard to make ends meet.

siderable alumni support, it relies almost exclusively on tuition to meet its expenses. It has thus become difficult for the school to meet its expenses.

The school's financial difficulties have been exacerbated by dwindling enrollment, spurred in part by increasing crime and economic decline in the area where it's situated. In the last few years the

school has experienced vandalism and graffiti raids and there is a growing concern among some parents that the neighborhood is not as safe for children as it used to be.

In the next year Frankford Friends will have to make some major decisions about its future. The 150-year-old meetinghouse, which provides the school with assembly space, art facilities and a kindergarten, will have to be renovated extensively or razed. The school also must find ways to meet the demands of a younger generation of teachers who will not work for the modest salaries the school can afford to pay.

Essentially, the school will have to decide whether or not it can continue to exist.

Unfortunately the future does not look bright for religiously based elementary schools like Frankford Friends. Ever since 1983 when the report "A Nation at Risk" warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity in our schools," public concern has focused on secondary and undergraduate education, not on primary schooling. At the same time, educational reforms have resulted in increased graduation requirements while little has been done to

improve the quality of moral education being offered.

Even religious denominations like the Society of Friends are torn between support for public education — which they view as social outreach — and their own schools.

At a time when teenage drug abuse and sexual permissiveness have become major issues, we need to take the ethical stewardship of our schools more seriously. And if we are going to make a difference in the education offered in this city we must place a greater emphasis on the early school years.

We don't lose students to the ills of society in college or in high school. The problems only become painfully glaring at those levels. We begin to lose them in primary school.

Frankford Friends has proved that it can make a real difference in the lives of children of all backgrounds. It's time society granted the school, and others like it — as well as their teachers — the resources and respect that they deserve.

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