

Penn's education legacy

By William C. Kashatus

Pennsylvania is celebrating Charter Day this week, commemorating the March 4, 1681, charter King Charles II of Great Britain granted to William Penn for a colony in North America. But there's another charter, one granted by Penn himself, that deserves special recognition this year.

Penn directed his Provincial Council 325 years ago to join with Philadelphia Monthly Meeting and establish a Friends Public School, the predecessor of the School District of Philadelphia and the region's Quaker schools.

The FPS was open to all children and aimed to teach the rudiments of literacy and morality. Penn hoped that such "a virtuous education of youth" would cultivate the principles of religious toleration, participatory government, and brotherly love. In so doing, the school would provide his colony with honorable leadership and constructive citizens committed to his utopian vision.

Known today as William Penn Charter, the school, founded in 1689 and incorporated in 1698, has been a pioneer in progressive education.

Seventeenth-century society relied largely on the family, church, and local community to educate children. Learning was informal and achieved through observation and discipline in the home, attendance at church, and apprenticeship in a trade.

Penn, arguably the most enlightened educational theorist of his time, introduced a separate institution strictly for learning. Unlike the Puritans, whose schools prepared intellectually gifted males for the ministry, the FPS was inclusive, admitting all children "to the age of twelve," regardless of religion or wealth. The curriculum emphasized

"reading, writing, math, and useful sciences," and apprenticeship to a trade when students reached age 13.

The 1698 charter was revised over the years to meet the changing demographics of the colony. In 1701, government sponsorship of the school was abandoned due to concerns about the union of church and state. In 1708, Penn eliminated Philadelphia Monthly Meeting's governance, placing the school under the care of a Board of Overseers. He removed the requirement that all overseers be Friends in 1711.

By the mid-18th century, Pennsylvania's social diversity and financial prosperity demanded an expanded system of education. To meet the need, the FPS established 16 neighborhood schools, each dedicated to a specific mission. Seven of those schools retained the practical education envisioned by Penn. But there was also a Latin school with a classical curriculum, which catered to gifted male scholars; a night school for African American children; a day school for girls; and several charity schools for poor children. The expanded system anticipated today's public charter schools.

In the 1810s, overseer Roberts Vaux felt a moral responsibility to create a larger common school system for the city's growing numbers of idle children. Securing funding from the state government, Vaux arranged to educate poor children through the FPS's charity schools and, in 1818, established the School District of Philadelphia. With the passage of Pennsylvania's free school laws in 1834, those charity schools were replaced by tax-supported public education.

In 1875, the overseers consolidated their remaining neighborhood schools into a single college-preparatory day school for boys. Located at 8 S. 12th St. and renamed William Penn Charter, the school gained a

national reputation for high-quality instruction. In 1887, Penn Charter introduced interscholastic football, track, baseball, and soccer, cofounding with Germantown Academy the Inter-Academic Athletic Association.

Throughout the 20th century, Penn Charter continued to introduce such progressive reforms as the country day school model, relocating to a spacious campus in then-suburban East Falls; the middle school concept; community service; and cooperative learning, while retaining its college-prep emphasis.

In 2007, Darryl Ford became the first African American head of school. Under his leadership Penn Charter continues to adapt its curriculum to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society. A Center for Public Purpose is being planned to strengthen the school's participation in the Philadelphia community to improve equity in education, poverty, and food scarcity.

The spirit of the school has always been defined by the moral education it provides. Students are encouraged to reflect on their lives and their relationships in a weekly silent, meditative worship in the manner of Friends. They learn to question the stereotypes of society and search their consciences to resolve the ethical dilemmas posed in a humanities or science class. Even sports and service learning become proving grounds for the ideals cultivated by the school: service, personal integrity, and a respect for social and religious diversity.

Penn Charter reminds us of the wonderful possibilities that exist when people of goodwill act on a genuine commitment to children. William Penn would be proud.

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