

Introduction: Pay Attention to the Kids

WILLIAM D. WHARTON

Photos by Coralie Kraft '09



Commonwealth Turns Fifty! 1958-2008

We are already actively planning a series of events for the fall 2008 celebration of Commonwealth School's fiftieth Anniversary.

SAVE-THE-DATES

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2008
*All-Constituents Juried Art Show
at the Alpha Gallery on
Newbury Street (courtesy of
Alan Fink, father of Aaron '73)*

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2008
Anniversary Gala

Stay tuned for event details...

CALL FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

For the 50th anniversary celebration of the school and for a permanent photo archive, we are looking for historical photos of the school and all its community. We will copy any photos you send us and return the originals.

CALL FOR ART

We are soliciting art from students, alumni/ae, parents, alumni/ae parents, and faculty for the juried art show. Look for a separate mailing containing art specifications.

Please contact Janetta Stringfellow at jstringfellow@commschool.org for more information.

THERE WERE SOME 875 STUDENTS in my graduating class at York Community High School, a highly regarded public school sixteen miles west of Chicago's Loop. Because I took honors courses, and because my older brother had been valedictorian and a talented athlete (I, alas, was neither), teachers knew who I was—"Wharton's little brother." But I can remember only two conversations in those four years when one of my own teachers took me aside to tell me to buckle down and stop wasting my talent. Those conversations hit home powerfully, in large part because I was surprised they had noticed me, showed interest in what I was doing, and knew me well enough to realize I had been slacking. Their attention and care woke me (at least temporarily) from my adolescent torpor.

Small class size, the National Association of Independent Schools currently argues, is not critical to good teaching; in order to maintain financial sustainability, schools should therefore not shy away from exceeding 18-20 students in a classroom. That may be a good business plan, but it ignores a crucial fact about teaching: education best arises from a close relationship between a teacher and a student. Any English teacher with 80-100 students will have fewer opportunities to question and hear from each student in class, will read and comment on fewer



ENGAGING MINDS



CHANGING LIVES

Engaging Minds, Changing Lives seeks to raise \$9,000,000 for Commonwealth. Enthusiastic alumni/ae, parents, and friends have already given or pledged a total of \$7,400,000. That number is impressive, but we need to meet our goal if the school is to continue attracting the students and teachers who make Commonwealth unique. As we enter the final phase of the campaign, we hope that all the members of our community will join in this effort. Every gift—from \$50 to \$5,000—is an investment in the future of the school: an expression of support for its distinctive mission and its extraordinary and diverse population.

“You give because you believe in what the school does, you believe it does it well, and you believe other people should have the opportunities you had yourself. I have personal knowledge of the uniqueness and effectiveness of a Commonwealth education. It can and does change lives.” —Alison Hoppin Murchison '79

of their papers, and will not be able to meet with students to discuss assignments or explore the chance subjects that turn out to mean a lot to each down the road. As in my case, many students will pass through four years of high school with no more than a couple of meaningful one-on-one encounters with a teacher.

What Plato said of orators is true of teachers as well: good ones have to know the souls of their listeners. That interest in souls keeps teaching fresh. Everyone has heard of tired veterans going through the motions, teaching from the same twenty-year-old notes. Great teachers love their subjects, continually revise and reinvent them, and thus enjoy active intellectual lives throughout their careers. But their interest in each particular student—in the parade of characters who think, talk, and write in patterns as varied as their fingerprints—helps turn every course into a new one. Such curiosity and care and concern make all the difference in teaching. At Commonwealth we teach an average of 11–12 students in a classroom; our teachers know their students well. The entire faculty spends five full days each school year discussing each student individually at grading meetings. That's a crazy business plan (which is one reason we've undertaken our endowment campaign), but it's the right way to run a school. And we look hopefully at the recent interest in smaller public schools. The breaking up of those comprehensive public behemoths of my youth into smaller, more personal places signals that others are taking notice. (As I recently learned, one of Boston's most exciting inner-city charter schools, Codman Academy, looks to Commonwealth as its model.)

Each of the following articles speaks to the essential relationship at the heart of good teaching. At Commonwealth our best work still arises from the Socratic encounters, clashes, and surprises of the classroom and studio. And writing about her work with Teach for America, Alice Ricks speaks eloquently of how teachers, through their energy, their expectations, and their attention, have the power to change lives.

