

## **The Kind of School We Are**

*By Head of School Tim Seeley, published Oct. 10, 2019, in The Weekly Packet, Castine Patriot, and Island Advantages.*

What kind of school is George Stevens Academy? We proudly call ourselves a "town academy," but what exactly does that mean?

When Maine became a state nearly 200 years ago, Blue Hill had more than 20 elementary or "common" schools, one-room schoolhouses providing primary education to the town's children, and one secondary school, Blue Hill Academy, approved by the Massachusetts Legislature in 1802 and incorporated in 1803. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Blue Hill Academy operated as a private school for local and boarding students, charging its students tuition and fees.

In 1873 Maine's Legislature passed the Free High School Act: towns could either establish public high schools supported by state funds, or they could pay tuition to private academies to educate their residents. In 1898, thanks to a bequest from shipbuilder and mill owner George Stevens, George Stevens Academy opened its doors. In time, Maine defined as "publicly-funded private schools" those private schools whose day tuition is mostly paid by "tuitioning" or sending towns. These private, publicly-funded schools are what we call town academies. GSA is one of 10 town academies in Maine that collectively educate more than 5,000 students.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Stevens Academy served mostly residents of Blue Hill, but when high schools in surrounding towns closed—for instance, Penobscot's in 1954, Brooksville's in 1960, and Castine's in 1961—towns paid tuition for their students to attend George Stevens Academy. Today, students from seven surrounding "tuitioning towns" make up nearly 100% of GSA's day student enrollment. A minimum town tuition rate for these students is established each year by the Department of Education.

GSA's mission as a town academy reflects this historical commitment to town students. We are the high school for nearly all students in the seven towns that surround us. We celebrate the diversity of our students' interests, talents, and aspirations, as multifaceted as the towns they come from. Our program provides a challenging education for all these students, whether they continue school after graduation, or move directly into the workforce. Many of our students will build their futures in these very towns, populating local businesses, trades, and professions. As a town academy, we shape our program to best educate our students today, recognizing that they will become our communities tomorrow, here on this peninsula or elsewhere in the world.