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EXPERIENCE THE MAGAZINE OF COLUMBUS ACADEMY

EXPERIENCE

THE

Developing the **WHOLE CHILD**
Mind, Body, Character & Heart

EXPERIENCE

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permission To be human



RETHINKING THE **HEART** OF EDUCATION

Columbus Academy is building a pedagogical model that recognizes wellness as the centerpiece of students' lives.

Wellness in education has come a long way from the days of health class and PE. True, schools began adding psychologists and guidance counselors decades ago. But today, our understanding of wellness—physically and emotionally—has deepened, just as the external pressures of the world have intensified.

At the same time, while we've always recognized that higher levels of education tend to result in a greater sense of well-being, the reverse is just as true: greater well-being produces better educational outcomes.

“Parents and children are facing new pressures and new technologies,” write Debra P. Wilson and Miguel G. Marshall in a summer 2019 article for the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). “They are wrestling with mental-health issues, a sense of purpose, and what it means to live a good life this century.”

expressing gratitude

“While **ACADEMICS** remain at the core of what [independent] schools do, many have begun to recognize that **STUDENTS’** current and long-term mental, emotional, and physical well-being strongly contribute to their **ULTIMATE SUCCESS** in life.”

Debra P. Wilson and Miguel G. Marshall,
National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)

Over the past year, Academy has embarked on a plan to incorporate a new educational model in which well-being is more than a required course; it’s the foundation. The goal is to cultivate a true sense of well-being in students, and that takes more than a lesson plan – it takes a new way to integrate the lessons into everyday life.

As Wilson and Marshall note, “These skills need to be taught within the core of how independent schools educate students, an overlay as opposed to a silo of a separate subject.”

A TRANSFORMATIVE moment

Spearheaded by our faculty, we’re retooling the Academy experience to nurture healthy practices in every corner of campus. We’re basing our approach on the model of Positive Education, which aims to help students build positive emotions, be more effective learners, stay self-aware of the way their own minds and emotions work and consciously lead healthier lives.

In the parlance of Positive Education, this is what it means for a student to “Flourish.” Flourishing not in the simple sense of thriving, but as shorthand for multiple expressions of well-being that radiate out from a strong core: Vitality, Achievement, Meaning, Relationships, Engagement and Positive Emotions. All of this is being done in ways that integrate into school routines – from classroom instruction to lunch to athletics to socializing.

Two Academy professionals – one teacher, one psychologist – joined forces to bring the model here and adapt it to our unique culture and community. They sought out international experts, obtained certifications from institutes devoted to Positive Education and are now teaching the model themselves.

Meet Dr. Suzanne Ritter, upper school psychologist, and Michelle Schroeder-Lowrey, who teaches music, drama and movement in the lower school. While at an educators’ conference a few years ago, the two had a simultaneous light-bulb moment during a presentation on the introduction of Positive Education to schools. They tracked down the presenters armed with questions and began a conversation. The two have been collaborating ever since on how to weave this model into Academy’s fabric. Today, it’s being introduced to our faculty in a gradual rollout.

An idea born halfway around the WORLD

The original Positive Education model began about a decade ago at Geelong Grammar School, a private school in Corio, Victoria, Australia, in collaboration with renowned psychologist Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. The effort was so successful, Geelong School went on to found the Institute for Positive Education, which trains educators from around the world on the model – including Academy’s own Ritter and Schroeder-Lowrey.

“The greatest thing about the Positive Education model is that it takes what’s been written by philosophers, clergy and psychologists and researched it well, so educators understand the basis for it,” Ritter says. “Teachers can get behind this model because they understand it doesn’t detract from the other aspects of their work – it supports their effort to push students to do well academically.”

Positive Education isn’t about fixing a broken system, according to Ritter. It’s about enriching what teachers are already doing.



Columbus Academy psychologist Dr. Suzanne Ritter and lower school teacher Michelle Schroeder-Lowrey have very different backgrounds and perspectives, but they each recognized that what they were hearing was a light-bulb moment after attending a presentation on Positive Education. Since then, the two have studied and gained certification in the principles of Applied Positive Psychology and Positive Education at institutes in Australia and Washington, D.C. It’s all part of their effort to bring the Positive Education model to Academy.

“We’ve been addressing social and emotional learning for many years,” Ritter says. “A lot of what our teachers were already doing meshes well with the Positive Education model. The model helps us keep well-being at the heart of everything we do. It helps us see how things work together.”

The nuts and bolts – and HEART – of Positive EDUCATION

Far from participation-trophy notions of “positivity” where no child ever experiences disappointment, Positive Education aims to help kids to better understand their own minds and emotions. And, in the process, to help them cope with stress, ask for help, and express themselves in healthy ways.

“Positive Education is misunderstood as ‘having to be positive about everything’” Schroeder-Lowrey says. “All emotions serve a purpose. There’s real worry and real grief. Negative emotions are genuine. But what we do is try to get people to look at what those emotions are telling them.”

“It’s also about helping students understand their own minds – and their own strengths,” adds Ritter.

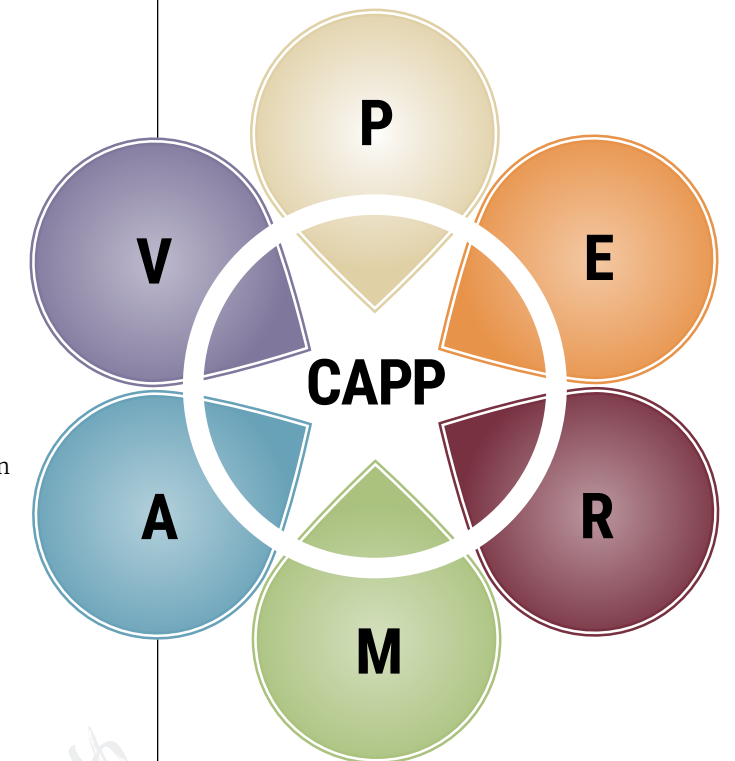
“Research shows us that when we understand our core character strengths, we are more confident and more connected to the people around us,” Schroeder-Lowrey says. “Those strengths are the foundation on which the ‘house of flourishing’ is built, so to speak. Research also shows that people who understand their strengths and practice the skills within the PERMA-V elements have a much higher continuous life satisfaction. They flourish.” [See “The keys to positivity” sidebar in this story.]

“The thing about what we’re working on is: we’re putting well-being at the heart of it. That’s a big shift,” Ritter says. “Of course we all care about kids, that’s why we’re here. But now we know better what gives kids the emotional, physical and spiritual energy to tackle challenges every day.”

Ritter notes that our brains naturally focus on the negative because that’s what problem-solving is all about – a survival instinct at its most basic. But that instinct can work to our detriment when it overwhelms us.

“It takes three positive interactions to counter one negative,” Ritter says. “So, for instance, if you spend all day on social media facing negativity, you’re already at a disadvantage right there.”

THE KEYS TO POSITIVITY



A leading researcher and speaker in Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman, Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, proposes the mnemonic **PERMA** to summarize **Positive Psychology** into five key elements:

POSITIVE EMOTIONS – feeling good

ENGAGEMENT – being completely absorbed in activities

RELATIONSHIPS – being authentically connected to others

MEANING – purposeful existence

ACHIEVEMENT – a sense of accomplishment and success

Add to that a **V**, for **VITALITY**, to reflect students’ needs for regular exercise and deep, restful sleep, and you have **PERMA-V**, which Academy prefers as it includes another important dimension in student life.

Source: The Flourishing Center

manage and overcome stress

relationships



“We’re not just teaching kids. We’re teaching parents and faculty.”

For instance, kids need more sleep. And here’s the science. And we need to work with parents on that. That’s what’s wonderful about this model. It’s not just about kids. It’s about everyone in their lives.”

~ Dr. Suzanne Ritter

Positive Education has a lot in common with classic cognitive behavioral therapy, Ritter adds. That’s a form of therapy in which people become more aware of their own thought processes to tackle emotional challenges like anxiety and depression. And with the pressures kids face today, that’s a kind of life skill they’ll need well beyond their school years.

“Today, kids tend to be raised like there’s a single path to success,” Ritter says. “We want them to learn how to determine what their unique path is. Positive Education helps kids understand their strengths better and look to the people around them and use their strengths. Intentionality and agency are really important in this approach.”

Grace Gordon (see profile on page 26) leads students in the Explorers Program on a hike across Academy’s 231-acre campus.

HELPING kids cope with relentless CONNECTIVITY

This new model also helps students learn to be better curators of information in the rapid-fire, always-on digital world in which they’re growing up. As it turns out, being connected online leads to disconnection from critical time spent experiencing the physical world.

“As kids get smartphones younger and younger, we see the research on how it has affected their ability to concentrate,” Ritter says. “We want to drive technology, not have it drive us. We can do and process so much more, but I see kids getting overwhelmed with all of that.”

Positive Education is a way to understand your own brain.

“Our brains love stimulation and information, but not at the expense of thinking deeply and creatively and having human connection, relationships, spirituality,” Ritter says. “So, we have to strive to master what comes into our brain – curate it – rather than having it master us.”

Schroeder-Lowrey agrees, and she’s seen lots of head-nodding from friends who are fellow parents.

“I have a daughter who’s 14 and I want the best for her, dealing with the changes in the world,” Schroeder-Lowrey says. “I’ve had conversations with friends and family who didn’t understand why kids don’t get more of a toolbox of coping skills when they’re young to help them as they get older.”

Live, learn, teach: Making POSITIVE EDUCATION happen here

From their visit to Geelong School to training sessions and certifications at facilities around the U.S., Ritter and Schroeder-Lowrey have been building their own skill set in recent years to roll out the Positive Education model at Academy. Their work of introducing the model began with internalizing and living its concepts themselves. And now they’re sharing that experience and training with Academy’s faculty.

“Geelong has a model that says: *You have to learn it and live it for a while. Then you teach it,*” Schroeder-Lowrey says. “We want faculty to be immersed in the concepts, so that we’re all speaking this language and kids naturally pick it up. Positive Education is like everything else – we can have the information, but if we’re not practicing it, it’s meaningless.”

Once all of the faculty have embraced the Positive Education model, the school will introduce a curriculum that reflects its principles. That begins in the 2020–2021 school year.

“We are in our live/learn year as a whole faculty participating in Positive Education trainings, book clubs and strength-spotting activities to boost our knowledge and understanding of the skills of PERMA-V before weaving it into the curriculum next year,” Ritter says.

And that preparation is important for parents, too.

“We’re not just teaching kids. We’re teaching parents and faculty,” Ritter says. “For instance, kids need more sleep. And here’s the science. And we need to work with parents on that. That’s what’s wonderful about this model. It’s not just about kids. It’s about everyone in their lives.”

Whole-group faculty training will continue through spring 2020. Teachers will learn how to incorporate the elements of PERMA-V into their classes in different and relevant ways, from lower to upper school. But the mindset is already finding its way into student life. Recently, when the school had its Winter Closing, Schroeder-Lowrey led the lower school students in songs that touch on the same elements essential to Positive Education.

“We sang about things like gratitude, responsibility, purpose, intention, and connection to something much larger than ourselves,” Schroeder-Lowrey says.

Positive Education is more than a course or a lesson – it’s like the music students will carry in their hearts and minds that shapes the way they see everything – for the better.

“Initiatives come and go. Some of them work, some do not. Positive Education is something bigger,” Ritter says. “Academy wants students to be well, but people are wary of the ‘next thing.’ We want to bring this to the school in a way that is authentic. We want parents, faculty and students to understand that this is not a new ‘program,’ it’s the foundation, the lens through which we see everything else: policy, activity, pedagogy.”

FLOURISHING an intentional focus for this year’s speakers

In early November, we welcomed Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar to our community as this year’s guest speaker for Columbus Academy’s Celebration of Leadership. The lecturer, entrepreneur and *New York Times* bestselling author spent the afternoon speaking with students in grades 8–12 during a special assembly and then sat down with members of our upper school journalism class.

Dr. Ben-Shahar shared his thoughts on the importance of Positive Psychology stating that everyone:

1. has permission to be human (“the foundation of a happy life”)
2. needs ways to manage and overcome stress (“lack of recovery is the problem”)
3. relies on relationships (“#1 predictor of happiness” and “must be real rather than virtual”)
4. should make a habit of expressing gratitude (“reduces pessimism, anxiety and depression ... what a difference it can make”)

This important conversation on Flourishing also included a parent education event featuring Academy’s own

Dr. Suzanne Ritter and Michelle Schroeder-Lowrey. In addition, professional development for faculty and staff throughout the year has been centered on Positive Education, including an introduction to the concept by Tamara Lechner from Australia’s Geelong Grammar School just prior to the start of classes in August.



Emphasizing the importance of positive psychology this year have been (from left) Dr. Suzanne Ritter, Melissa Soderberg, Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar and Michelle Schroeder-Lowrey.



Tamara Lechner from Geelong Grammar School helped to train Academy’s faculty and staff on Positive Education before the start of this school year.



The state of STUDENTS' emotional well-being

Research shows **PERSONAL** agency, engagement and a sense of **BELONGING** matter deeply

According to research by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), several factors beyond a well-taught curriculum contribute to academic success. And in many cases, independent schools like Columbus Academy are performing well – and often outperforming other kinds of schools – in these matters. Here's a look at some recent insights from NAIS.

Cultivating **PERSONAL** agency

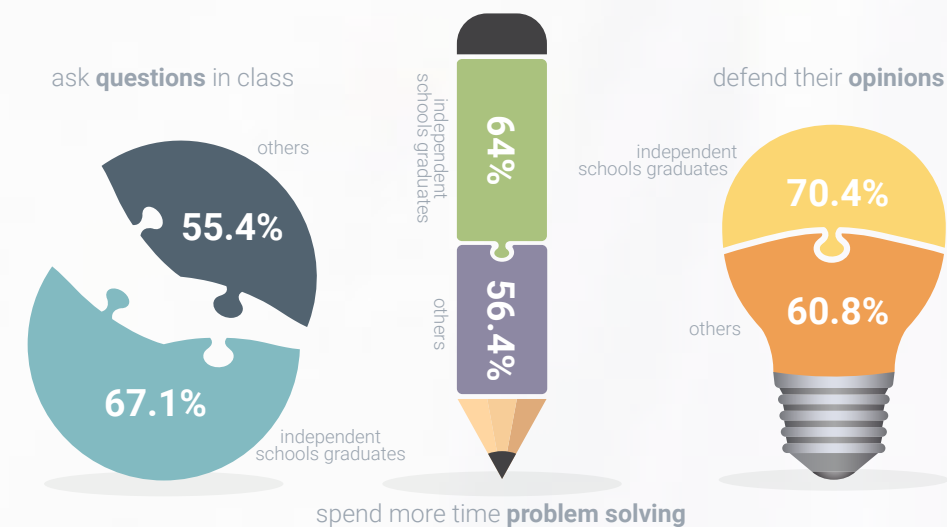
The **courage to take initiative** is now seen as a critical component of the educational experience. Research has found that agency increases when teachers care for students without coddling and create classroom cultures that inspire deep thinking, persistence and resilience.

While student engagement is connected to student success, the critical emotional component to engagement – how much curiosity and passion students show for learning – can be elusive.

According to the 2016 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), students were asked, "How much do the following interest or engage you?" The results show that students in NAIS member schools are "some" or "very much" engaged in classroom activities such as discussions and debates (87%), the use of technology in projects and lessons (80%), and group projects (78%).

"How often in the past year did YOU...?"

When it comes to students at independent schools, one way to see how they're doing is to look at how they fare once they get to college. The NAIS has been watching the data across several years from the Higher Education Research Institute regarding the college experiences of independent school graduates. Students surveyed describe how often – from "frequently" to "occasionally" to "not at all" – they take different positive actions in college. The latest results, from 2015, show that independent school graduates do significantly better than other sectors' graduates.



As part of ongoing efforts to improve student well-being, "belonging" has gained more attention in recent years. Belonging is commonly defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment." Academic success strongly relates to the level of a sense of belonging, because it fuels engagement in class.

But there's still more work to do, as the pressures of modern culture continue to squeeze students in negative ways.

Nearly half of those surveyed say social media makes them feel judged (45%), and nearly two in five (38%) report feeling bad about themselves as a result of social media use.

In a recent Pew Research study, teens today identify anxiety and depression at the top of the list of problems among their peers. The numbers are astonishing – 70% see anxiety and

depression as a major problem. The Pew study goes on to identify the drivers of anxiety: 35% of girls and 23% of boys feel pressured to look good, while 36% of girls and 23% of boys feel nervous about their day in general. Nearly all teens feel some pressure to get good grades (90%), with more than 60% noting that they feel heavy pressure to get good grades.

About NAIS

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) is a nonprofit membership association that provides services to more than 1,900 schools and associations of schools in the United States and abroad, including more than 1,600 independent private K-12 schools in the U.S. Of private school students, 671,000 are in NAIS member independent schools. Enrollment in NAIS schools has remained steady since 2005. As the largest association of independent schools, NAIS co-creates the future of education by uniting and empowering our community. The association offers research and trend analysis, leadership and governance guidance, and professional development opportunities for school and board leaders.

