

Ascension Episcopal School

Inspired to achieve.

Gator Bytes!



August 19, 2011

Dear AES Families,

I hope you all had a chance to see in last Sunday's Advertiser the report on the state of public education in Lafayette Parish. Three hundred and fifty respondents representing teachers, parents, school board members, and community leaders ranked the leading (18) issues affecting educational improvement. The timing for this kind of discussion couldn't be better as we at Ascension Episcopal School launch into a new school year. Listed below, with the number in parenthesis indicating the survey ranking, are nine concerns that speak directly to the qualities that characterize a good independent school, like AES!

- Retain and attract great teachers (1)
- Lower student-teacher ratios (2)
- Weed out bad teachers (3)
- Curriculum (6)
- Classroom innovation (8)
- Trust (9)
- Safety (11)
- Availability of information (13)
- Timely response to phone call and emails (14)

While all of these are significant, I would like to briefly address the first two.

Our singularity of focus at AES (college preparatory curriculum at all grade levels) is a strong attraction in the recruitment of teachers. Further, at independent schools teachers can work with their students free from the fetters of state mandates and burdensome paperwork. Rather than "teach to the test," they teach to the individual students in their classrooms, and they get to teach in an appreciative, affirming, **safe** environment. (In this latter regard, see the article in Monday's Advertiser on the Northside High School principal who was injured while breaking up a fight among students last September and is still unable to return to work.) Not surprisingly, when teaching vacancies do occur, many of our applicants come from the public school sector. Strength of curriculum and class size also yield strong teacher applicants from Catholic schools.

On the retention side, independent schools tend to do well for the reasons stated above and also because they are less subject to burnout than their public school counterparts. Motivated students, high parental interest, and administrative support are also important retention factors. And of course, at AES our relatively small classes contribute significantly to a positive working environment. In one of the Sunday

Advertiser articles, retired educator and current AES trustee, Melinda Mangham, pointed out the difficulty of teaching students to write well “when a teacher has 30 students in each of six classes. That’s 180 students writing 180 essays that she has to grade.” Mangham also notes the importance of the classroom teacher as “the most important cog in the entire school system.”

Knowing the significance of optimum working conditions, and that too large classes inhibit the ability of our teachers to differentiate the individual learning needs of their students, the AES Board of Trustees, has recognized the importance of hiring and retaining highly qualified faculty and paying careful attention to the impact of class size across all grade levels. These concerns are reflected in our school’s new strategic plan that will soon be ready for distribution to the AES community.

What, then, is a small class? What is a large one? Though there is a hefty body of research on this subject supporting a widely divergent array of findings, it remains very difficult to define a precise tipping point when the scale slants one way or the other. Some gifted teachers can work effectively with an amazingly large number of students. (I can think of one instance in which the teacher-to-student ratio was more than 1:5000, but that was a rare case, indeed!) In my view, a class becomes too large when the number of students makes it difficult or impossible for the classroom teacher to perform or interact at a high level. Experience and wisdom, as much or more than the accumulation of research data and algorithmic computations, are effective mechanisms for arriving at the right answers. At AES we are fortunate to have a central administration (head of school and division heads) with over 150 years of experience and a faculty with an average experience of 17 years (preschool), 15 years (lower school), 15 years (middle school), and 15 years (upper school). As important as experience and wisdom are, accessibility is equally important, and this is something you should experience in every division of the school.

In my last “Gator Bytes” message I talked about the importance of the perceived “value proposition” in a family’s decision to invest in an independent school education. Equally important is a feeling of confidence and trust, a critical piece of which is effective and timely communication. Please know that we are committed to earning and keeping your trust at AES.

Geaux Gators!

Lee Cox
Interim Headmaster