

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

## Kimberton Waldorf fosters creative thinking

*Gov. Tom Corbett has called for innovation, competition and choice in our education system. The following is one of a series of articles about different approaches to education.*

To look at the graduates of the Kimberton Waldorf School in East Vincent, which enrolls about 300 students in grades pre-K through 12, you'd think students had their noses to the grindstone 24/7. Nearly all its graduates go to college, including the nation's most rigorous: Swarthmore, Stanford, Smith, MIT, the Ivy Leagues — even Oxford and Cambridge.

Yet students spend much of their time on creative activities like drawing, painting, singing, dancing, sewing, knitting, gardening, wood-working and even (in high school) blacksmithing.

Textbooks are rarely used. Students are prolific writers, but all reports are written and illustrated by hand, rather than on computers, until the 11th grade. Rote memorization and “teaching to the test” are scorned. Creative thinking is prized.

Perhaps the most unconventional aspect of Kimberton Waldorf is its practice of keeping the same students together in a self-contained class with the same teacher for eight years, from first grade through eighth grade. Class sizes range from 20 to 30.

This fosters a family atmosphere. Over time, students are able to develop a close relationship with the teacher and each other, and the teacher can develop a close relationship with the parents.

Each teacher has a set curriculum for each grade level, but is given the freedom to teach it in his or her own way. Teachers are welcome to infuse their personal enthusiasms into their lessons.

“We are creating a home-like environment, not the institutional setting of some public schools,” said David Hunter, a parent of two Kimberton students and a member of the school board of trustees. “The kids even eat together in the classroom in the elementary grades.”

While public schools attempt to teach all kindergartners the alphabet, letter sounds and a few words by sight, Kimberton concentrates on storytelling and socialization in kindergarten. Reading will come later.

Even in first grade, children begin by drawing the letters of the alphabet and learning to write before learning to read. If a child isn't reading by the end of first grade, there's no panic. The child will figure it out later.

“That's an advantage of having the same

teacher for eight years,” said Kimberton teacher Peter Lehman, who is currently teaching first grade. Lehman has been at Kimberton for 33 years, completing four complete K-8 cycles before starting with a new set of first graders this year. “Every child is different, and we can help them learn when they're ready.”

Each day begins with a two-hour period focused on a “main lesson” — a core subject that is studied in depth for perhaps a month in a variety of ways. Students keep handwritten journals accompanied by their own illustrations covering each topic.

After the main lesson, shorter lessons fill the rest of the morning, which might be taught by the classroom teacher or by a specialist such as a foreign language or music teacher. (All

students learn a musical instrument.) The afternoons are devoted to sports, painting, handwork such as knitting or wood-working, and gardening.

Starting in ninth grade, teachers are specialists in their subject, but because the school is so small (just 80 high schoolers), integrated learning is easy.

It might seem most Kimberton students would go into the arts, but 42 percent of Kimberton graduates major in science or math in college. With so many enthusiasms, multiple majors are not uncommon. One recent graduate earned degrees in both mechanical engineering and music composition at Lehigh. Another majored in theater and chemistry at Oberlin and later earned a Ph.D. in chemistry at MIT.

### Lessons for Pottstown

What lessons can Kimberton offer to Pottstown schools, which seem worlds away with a student population that is 65 percent low income and more than half minority?

First: Relationships matter. The key to Kimberton's success is fostering a close relationship between students and teachers that can only come by keeping the same “family” together for years.

Second: Teachers need freedom to teach in their own way — learning and growing with their students.

Top-down diktats for each teacher to do exactly the same thing, with lots of drill and regimen, take the joy out of teaching and learning. They are a prescription for failure.

*Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not those of the school board or administration.*



Commentary by  
Thomas Hylton