

# Trillium Charter School

## Democratic Education

### Trillium Charter School's Mission

Trillium Charter School is a democratically-structured environment that fosters students' natural curiosity, creativity, and self-awareness. Students learn to take initiative and assume responsibility for their own learning, which supports constructive interaction with the local, regional, and global community.

#### What is DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION?

An enhanced awareness of life in a democratic culture is a main goal in the field of education, and the application of democratic processes and the protection of human rights in schools are essential for the promotion and sustainability of a democratic culture.

Democratic Education prepares people to live successfully in a democratic society. A school or community based on democratic education may use the following tools...

\***Pluralistic learning** that allows each person to choose areas of learning that are personally relevant and meaningful. Pluralistic learning acknowledges the uniqueness of the student and is based on the right of every person to express this uniqueness.

\***Equal relationships** between adults and children (or adult to adult, etc.) that are based on trust, respect and responsibility.

\*The use of **democratic processes** in discussions and decision-making. (Things like All School Meeting, Judicial Committee, student run committees and groups, student representatives on School Board, etc.)

## **A brief timeline of some important events in Trillium's move toward a strong and stable model of Democratic Education**

(While these are not all the important events in Trillium's burgeoning democratic environment, this timeline does reveal some of the successes and struggles along the way. Hopefully, it gives people an insight into what has been happening over the past 5 years and how the program is being constantly fine-tuned to match the mission of the school and the vision of democratic education.)

### 2002-2003 Year One

- Initial conversations about how the school would be structured began with the newly hired staff. Many of the summer meetings revolved around how “choice based” the school would be. Initial ideas of All School Meeting, Judicial System and mediation process were discussed. Many of these structures were based on those schools such as The Albany Free School, Sudbury Valley School and Windsor House School in BC.
- Trillium opened (with close to 160 students and 8 advisors) with the question “What do you want to spend time doing?” as a driving question. We also had our first All School Meetings and Judicial Committee (JC). All rules and changes to the school had to pass through All School Meetings. When conflicts occurred between staff and students, or students and students, JC was the forum to work through the conflicts. Most students and staff had little experience with, or understanding of, Democratic Education. (School opens as pre-k through 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 8<sup>th</sup> graders were part of high school.)
- All School Meetings, while used often, were often rowdy and difficult to control. The meetings were required for all students. The constant interruption of the meeting processes prompted discussions of not requiring attendance. JC was seen by many as too punitive.
- With many students new to self choice and self regulation, and not enough space or resources, the idea of having students spend their day in the way that worked for them became difficult to manage. Many students/families who attended the lower school seemed to be at Trillium for the philosophy the school stood behind while many students/families in the upper school were there to get away from local schools or failed situations, not always understanding the school's mission.
- With cases backed up in JC many problem issues that staff were dealing with (such as disruptions to the class, fighting, missing class, etc.) never got resolved. Many students (especially in the upper school) began to express that kids could do whatever they wanted and there would be no consequence. Students began to bring staff members to JC.
- Many upper school students were “annoyed” to have to be in the same space as younger kids.
- In order to create some more structure for student learning the upper school began to hold more traditional classes, the primary began to focus on themes and the intermediate created the first learning plans. While this was a move away from student choice it began to create some stability and focus for kids and staff.
- Lower school made a strong commitment to holding class meetings with the belief that training in the more intimate settings would make the All School Meetings more productive and functional. Upper

school struggled to have consistent meetings (there was less interest and support by the students). Most All School Meeting issues revolved around lower school concerns.

- Conversations began about how to bring in more students/families that were more committed to the program. A contract was drafted to let families know the roles/responsibilities of the school, the parents and the students.
- The School Board has a student representative. Their position and role isn't always clear.

### 2003.2004 Year Two

- Large staff turnover. Only 4 advisors (out of nine) who started year 1 start year 2.
- In order to create an environment that was less chaotic the staff decided to create a set of consequences for disruptions of the learning environment (the precursor to OVR).
- A constitutional convention was held to create a constitution for the school. This document would clearly outline the rights and responsibilities of the students and staff. A group of 8 students and one staff member met to create Trillium's first constitution. This constitution was really just a bill of 12 rights and responsibilities. The All School Meeting approved the new document in October of 2003.
- An All School Meeting committee was established to help organize and run the meetings more productively.
- Primary focused on thematic studies but also gave time each day for free exploration. Intermediate offered academic classes in the mornings and choice time in the afternoon based on the learning plan. Upper school continued to combine middle and high school students in classes. Many attempts were made to give kids more choice time in the upper school (through project groups, interest times, etc) and many different schedules were attempted.
- In order to provide high school students with more choices, evening classes were begun. All Trillium staff were required to offer at least 2 quarters of evening classes per year. Fridays became half days to make up for the extra hours staff put in AND to allow for some planning time.
- JC continued to meet a few times a week to listen to cases although more of the major conflicts were dealt with through the consequence matrix.
- More students were beginning to demonstrate the ability to work independently, although the majority of the student body wasn't able to handle responsibilities of independent learning.
- The rights and responsibilities were not always equally understood or applied throughout the school. There was often confusion about how to proceed if people's rights were violated or if they were not following their responsibilities.
- Conversations in staff meetings often revolved around how to give students more support, how to deepen the democratic process so it worked for everyone, how to make sure that kids and families who came to Trillium came for the right reasons and how to provide more choice and freedom for kids to explore the world on their own terms.
- Buddies are started (middle school with lower school) to improve relationships among the students.

### 2004-2005 Year Three

- A second constitutional convention is convened to deal with the issue and problems surrounding the first constitution. A member of each advising group and one staff member meet for 4 hours a day for 4 days to re-write the constitution. It is passed at the All School Meeting. It is the same constitution that is in place presently. It more clearly establishes the role of the JC, the All School Meeting and staff rights.
- The OVRR (Outcome for Violation of Rights and Responsibilities) matrix is created to handle repetitive disruptions to the classroom environment. The social environment becomes more stable, less chaotic and friendlier. Expectations of students' "behavior" are made more clear.
- An increase in the student body by about 60 students presents new challenges. New students don't always understand the constitution or the idea of a democratic school. New staff members also are not always fully aware of the mission of the school and their own role. Conflicts between staff interpretations of the mission create confusion amongst students.
- Fewer proposals are brought to All School Meetings. By this time All School Meeting is optional but the meetings are still sometimes too large to have good, in-depth conversations during the meeting itself. Proposals start to circulate in advising groups first so discussion can happen there.
- JC begins to become more focused. Rather than giving arbitrary consequences it starts to use the OVRR matrix. It begins to more accurately follow through with its decisions.
- Upper school continues to offer classes. Entire primary school adopts learning plans in a modified way, also continuing with themes. Intermediate continues to offer classes in the morning and choice time in the afternoon.
- Trillium graduates first class of seniors. Total number of graduates: 5

### 2005-2006 Year Four

- Many returning students allow for a more productive and stable year in the upper school.
- Student culture throughout school is more solid. Students getting to know each other, the staff and the systems better.
- New student "screening" enhanced. All students need to shadow with their parents for at least one day to make sure the school is right for them. Better planned Parent and Meet the Teachers nights.
- All School Meeting proposals slow down. Less frequent meetings. Idea of having separate lower and upper school meetings emerges hoping to prompt more age-level relevant proposals.
- Fewer JC meetings. Less students using JC to solve problems.
- First high school generated All School Meeting proposal: "Allow bathroom walls to be used for art." What comprises art is up for question. Combinations of pictures, graffiti, conversations and hurtful words found in all bathrooms. Parents express concern. A meeting is held with interested parents and proposal creators to discuss concerns. Some parents suggest that they should have a right to vote on All

School Meeting issues. Proposal creators eventually realized their proposal was poorly worded and wasn't specific enough. They went around to encourage people to vote for their next, more detailed proposal.

- Class structures fairly similar for all levels from previous year. Similar amounts of “freedom” at each level.
- Trillium purchases new building.
- High school internship program has staff member to help run it. Allows work outside of building.

#### 2006.2007 Year Five

- Upper school creates a year long course handbook.
- Year starts with a split schedule. Lower school in the morning, upper school in the afternoon. Little chance for kids to meet as a whole.
- Split schedule changes to all students in the building at the same time. With additional 80 students added to student body the building is bursting at the seams and the energy is often chaotic. (Almost 300 kids total). Several classes held in tents in the back space.
- School moves into new building over a long weekend. Many spaces are unfinished and remain so all year.
- Trillium Framework is introduced after year of planning and design. Developed to help give students and staff more focus and to address the question “what are we supposed to be learning?” that some students ask.
- Upper school spent year trying to stabilize environment with new staff and students.
- Upper school begins to more consistently hold class meetings. Several stop rule meetings are held to deal with issues of vandalism and student-to-student behavior.
- Lower school holds first all lower school meeting. Only one is held all year.
- No All School proposals are made the entire year.
- “Levels of Independence” adopted by intermediate to help give those kids who could handle the freedom more independence, as well as help give direction to those who needed more support.
- JC continues to improve with larger group of committed staff and students. JC begins to meet on a weekly basis. Many cases are heard.
- Large group of students move up from each level, ensuring a more consistent and knowledgeable student body.
- High school trip to Kenya a great success!!

- Buddies (middle with primary, high school with intermediate) begun in all classes, school wide.
- Summer spent improving building, including making all spaces more useable.

### 2007.2008 Year Six (as of November 1<sup>st</sup>)

- Large percentage of returning staff and students. New staff and students have strong buy-in to the Trillium mission and vision. New staff members all have multiple years of teaching experience.
- Upper school develops defined program to move toward more “lower school” type look and feel (classes combined with large chunks of time based on learning plans). Many of the ideas are based on The Met (a school in Rhode Island).
- School opens with great calm. BEST OPENING YET!! Many returning staff and students help set great tone and understanding of school’s mission and ideas.
- Relationships between students begin to build across many age levels.
- Middle school teachers comment that new 6<sup>th</sup> grade group helps to set new focus. Many of these students have been at Trillium since it opened and came in as 1<sup>st</sup> graders.
- Calm atmosphere allows for more breathing room with staff. Middle and high school have weekly meetings. Attendance and participation is strong and focused. Announcements, issues and proposals are part of each meeting.
- Constitutional language is spoken and understood by much of student body and staff.
- Internship program in upper school grows.
- Coffee time and off campus privileges are given to upper school students who demonstrate responsibilities.
- Larger participation in keeping the building clean by all students.
- Personal Learning Plans used in high school in connection with classes.
- Lower school holds lower school meeting run by 5<sup>th</sup> grade student. Several proposals are voted on.
- Advising time in upper school becomes a time where students can pursue their own personal interests.
- Staff decides to rework the OVRP system to be geared more toward reparations and less about punishment. A case management model is being defined.
- An auction class is created for high school students to help raise money for the school and build its image in the larger community.
- Students in upper school work on “independent goals” outside of classes.
- First All School Meeting held. Two proposals. One proposal, to hold a 3<sup>rd</sup> constitutional convention, passes overwhelmingly. Constitutional convention to be held as a class over one quarter to rework the 3

year old document and make it more functional and transparent. Two major focuses: How to make the All School Meeting a more integral part of the school as well as developing clear guidelines as to where the students CAN make decisions. (Students in upper school expressed frustration about not knowing what they could make proposals about and what they couldn't.)

- Discussion held among staff about having parents have a voice in All School Meeting but not voting rights.
- Staff approves an upper school student designed proposal to create a self contained class based mostly on learning plans and student interest. (Not necessarily classes.) Eventually students and staff hope this model will encompass the entire upper school.
- Discussion held with staff to have JC held as a class to allow for more upper school participation. (Presently JC meetings are held during lunch which the upper school students don't like to give up.)
- High school students begin to work with middle school students to create Personal Learning Plans.
- Students in high school can begin to take classes at PCC and PSU.