

The following is an article I wrote during the 1998-99 school year to appear in the summer edition of *On Circle*. It was written in collaboration with Middle School Teacher Tom Fahsbender, Montessori colleague William Maier, Librarian Norma Mitchell and Board Member John Friedman. Over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, I have been often reminded of this article and the fact that its message is even more relevant today than it was 12 years ago.

WIN WIN COMPETITION

by Pat Werner

“THE WORLD IS A COMPETITIVE PLACE.” So says conventional wisdom. After all, it is through years of fierce competition that our own species was able to evolve from some beastly ancestors. Darwin called it “Natural Selection.” Herbert Spencer called it “Survival of the Fittest.”

If human beings evolved through fierce competition, it seems reasonable to assume society’s institutions must be made out of that same stuff. Those who ignore this would fail and drag down their associates with them. To make it in such a society, individuals must compete and win, or be left behind. The pedagogy and culture of our nation’s schools reflect this conventional wisdom. Class ranking, curved-grading, academic and athletic prizes, and ever-present contests make many of our educational institutions training grounds for future competitors.

Some educators and parents believe that such a competitive environment is essential if we are to encourage our children to strive to do their best, to run their fastest. They fear that, in the absence of competition, children would lose motivation and sink into mediocrity. Independent schools, like public schools, strive for high ranking in public opinion, endowment, SAT scores and athletics. Today, despite the widespread discussion on new ways of preparing children for the twenty first century, school culture in the United States continues to accept common assumptions about competition.

An Alternative to Competition

At WMS we believe competition has its place. But we know that competition alone cannot sustain true motivation. Some parents, when first introduced to our methods at Washington Montessori School, question whether our children will be adequately prepared for the competitive conditions they will face when they enter the real world of secondary schools and the workplace. They may concede that our method is fine for preschool children, but they



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urge that we get serious with older students. As parents’ experiences of WMS deepen, they usually find that our educational philosophy reflects their own beliefs, and realizes many of the hopes they have for their children. At times, though, they second-guess themselves, worrying about the conventional wisdom regarding competitive training. So, what is the rationale for WMS’s nurturing ways?

It’s About the Process

No task is too rigorous for such a self-disciplined mind! They follow their own standards of excellence, they strive to do better and learn more because their accomplishments are deeply satisfying. As Montessorians, we emphasize the learning process. We might go so far as to say that the products that our students generate are but the means for their real learning.

We teach children all the usual basics—reading and writing, mathematics, the sciences and the arts. But, more importantly, we help them to discover how they learn so that they enjoy learning as a lifestyle. We help them discover their inner resources and the discipline to persevere and achieve. We don’t try to teach children everything; we choose depth over breadth. At an early age, Montessori children learn to follow rather than to suppress their curiosity. Their inner drive sustains them as they practice.

WMS classrooms are largely devoid of rivalry and failure. Our students see their classmates as collaborative partners, rather than rivals. They call on each other for help, as well as companionship. We want our children to think of themselves, and of their classmates, in a multi-contextual way. We value their daily learning outside the school, from their family and from their other activities, just as we do in their classroom learning. Our students regard their mistakes as challenges to be overcome, rather than irreparable failures.

Prepared for Life Beyond Montessori

We believe that these attitudes are the best preparation for real life. Most of our students will spend more time with us than they’ll spend at any other school in their lives, and they possess a magical, absorbent mind during these wondrous years. We are confident that the attitudes that are nurtured here are lasting ones, and the conversations with alumni confirm this. “Montessori was a place not to be competitive,” said a 1983 graduate, “it was a place to love learning. When I competed, I competed with myself.” Another WMS graduate who went on to earn a BA in Psychology said “I learned independence, motivation, concentration, and, most important, the value of cooperation.”

With their family, and in their extra-curricular activities, our children have plenty of opportunities to witness the dynamic of their culture. But the best preparation for hardship is not hardship. It is supportive, successful experiences. So WMS is an island on which children’s origins and spirits are still divine, where they construct themselves as powerful, self-aware, expressive individuals. And, yes, they can compete and win, too!