

Across the threshold

LAB 
INVESTING IN
THE POWER OF LAB

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LABORATORY SCHOOLS
ANNUAL REPORT 2012

Because a great education can't be contained by four walls



When a teacher takes a child out of the classroom and into the world, an underlying goal is to create a sense of wonder.

And whether the activity is art, science, math, humanities, adventure, or play, Mother Nature is a most worthy teaching assistant.

With a focus on new buildings—the Stony Island Avenue Early Childhood Campus and the future Arts Wing—some of the most notable conversations over the past year have centered not on what would happen inside those buildings (though that was certainly important), but what would happen outside them: in play areas, green spaces, and gardens.

Since its founding by John Dewey, the Laboratory Schools faculty have emphasized the power of nature and simply being out of doors to enhance the educational experience. In every grade, teachers have reason to take students across the classroom threshold to learn from, and in the context of, our natural surroundings.



This past year has been one of great transformation for Lab as the Schools moved from four to five divisions, prepared for the fall 2013 opening of Earl Shapiro Hall on the new Stony Island Early Childhood Campus, and made any number of crucial (but less glamorous) infrastructure improvements to our historic main campus.



From the Director and Board Chair

In a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece, Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, called upon John Dewey as he wrote about the challenges facing today's educational systems: "Who wants to attend school to learn to be 'human capital'? Who aspires for their children to become economic or military resources? Dewey had a different vision. Given the pace of change, it is impossible (he noted in 1897) to know what the world will be like in a couple of decades, so schools first and foremost should teach us habits of learning. . . . The key is to develop habits of mind that allow students to keep learning, even as they acquire skills to get things done. This combination will serve students as individuals, family members and citizens—not just as employees and managers."

We couldn't agree more.

Teaching a young person to think, question, analyze, express, and challenge with respect and curiosity are the hallmarks of a Lab education, and they have stood the test of time. The guidance and leadership of our faculty, staff, and coaches models the other behaviors—compassion, fairness, and a sense of mission—that serve as the cultural base of our school.

We know these skills have mattered to our alumni because they tell us so—often and with many specific examples.

By the end of this school year, we will have worked with individuals across our community to create a new mission statement for the Laboratory Schools. We will do this work not just because it was suggested in our last Independent Schools Association of the Central States accreditation but because it is the right thing to do. And



it is the right thing to do *now*, before we move students to our new campus and before our student population increases.

A goal as we work to articulate our common purpose will be to ensure that we stay true to our shared values. We will answer these questions, and more:

> What are the core factors that give life and vitality to our schools, without which we would not be the same?

> What is great about Lab that should never change because it is so important to every generation of children who attend?

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(but less glamorous) infrastructure improvements to our historic main campus.

We have seen enormous investments of time and energy by parents, alumni, and friends. Development Committee Chair Chris McGowan is to be recognized for his tireless efforts. Whether hauling boxes or nattily dressed, enthusing on his love of Lab to a fellow parent, his contributions have been countless.

We would be remiss were we not to express our gratitude again to Sherry Lansing, '62.

This year we continue planning for the new Arts Wing and the facilities that will (finally) match the creativity of the students and teachers who will work in them. The wing will have a community gathering space, three performance halls, studios, rehearsal



and practice rooms, and a digital media lab. The centerpiece, a 250-seat multipurpose theater, will be named the Sherry Lansing Theater.

Ms. Lansing says, "Attending the Lab Schools was one of the most important experiences of my life. It shaped my value system."

On behalf of the entire school, we aspire to foster exactly that sentiment in each graduate. Thank you for your part in helping us make it happen.

David W. Magill, EdD
Director

John W. Rogers, Jr., '76
Chair, Board of Directors



Turtles break the ice



This year, Marie Randazzo and Sandy Strong had a lot of animal lovers in their nursery class, and they got hooked on the pet turtles. In response, Ms. Randazzo made a concerted effort to take a small group to Botany Pond every day the weather complied. Come winter, the children decided to transform their basement play area into an indoor Botany Pond, a backdrop for all manner of imaginative play.



“At the outset they learn to feed and care for the turtles. By the end they have started to learn to love and care for the earth.”

“The kids often find what’s really interesting to them and notice things that adults don’t. We’re not lying on our tummies staring into a pond. Sure enough one day a child found baby turtles that the teachers just never would have seen.”

“If you stay in your classroom you’re missing so much, the whole cycle of life. There’s a constant dynamic in life that is just not as palpable in a classroom. It’s one thing to read a book or see in a museum, but here the children learn through their own movements. They start to think about what they mean in the world and what the world means to them.”

“They assimilate information when they move and copy. When they play at being ducks or a turtle, the becoming helps them understand it. They show so much understanding of the animals’ habits. They show how much they have observed.”



“By the time we get to camp the kids are using their Harkness skills. They have a willingness to listen, not to dominate a conversation. The campfire is a great place to put those skills into practice. They explore sharing and

understanding, what it means to be part of a larger community: How much pasta should you take so that there is enough for everyone? How do you negotiate wanting to sleep—or talk—in a tent with 12 other boys?”

“It wouldn’t have even been that bad if it had rained. Because they’re going to get rained on in life, and if it happens in a moment of real adversity and not just at camp they’ll be less prepared.”

“We teach that when the sun goes down we should lower our voices to really feel the energy of the place dampening down—hear the wild, hear the frogs. Outside they are more conscious of clouds, wind, temperature. It’s a new way of being, a new way to pay attention.”

“Nature is a beautiful, challenging setting, which makes one’s own experience more vital.”

“We read a lot about characters in conflict and talk about person versus nature. Now at camp, they can start to see it and see how a character could be feeling that conflict.”

Nature as setting, not purpose



Led, in part, by humanities teacher and avid outdoorsman Sam Nekrosius, the seventh grade annually heads to Pretty Lake to sleep in tents and cook over a fire for four days. Through the experience, they contextualize lessons from science and literature and explore the concept of community.





Science: messy and unexpected



Lower School scientists use the out of doors as a laboratory. For Gerold Hanck's third graders, outdoor activities are about observation, active listening, and seeing animals and how they adapt to their environments. In the garden, Gwennan Ickes is working to instill a sense of wonder in her fourth graders as they develop an understanding of the world right under their feet.



"I am all about inculcating a sense of wonder, of being amazed. It is a different way of directly gathering information. A forest in a book is neat and organized. A real forest is messy and unexpected. That in and of itself is a learning piece." –GI

"To find pill bugs they have to look under dead leaves, under rocks. It's very different from having something handed to you, but in this way you learn where and how the animals live. The personal investment and attachment to the experience make it much more relevant." –GH

"We make soil profiles using alum to separate the layers of sand, silt, humus, and clay. It teaches us that something we take for granted is vitally important. What is the difference between dirt and soil? Dirt is in the wrong place. Soil is the root of all life on earth. But what *is* it?" –GI

"Great scientists come from having that part of oneself awakened. When asked about how they became scientists they explain a moment of wonder, of having directly experienced something." –GI



“Part of making art is being amazed”



At least a few times each year, Mirentxu Ganzarain takes her students outside to work. It is one way she teaches about observation, contour, positive and negative space, and—most universally—how to stay focused.



“We draw leaves because there is just so much detail to look at, all those edges, contours. Nature is wonderful for that.”

“Also I think it forces them to interact in a very focused manner. They have to see a topic and then to stay focused just being outdoors with the birds singing, the light changing. They use different senses and have to stay open to things they can’t control.”

“In a classroom, sitting on a chair that looks like every other chair, in a white box, breathing recycled air—it’s all controlled. Outside, kids use more of their senses and it opens them up to create stronger artwork. It sharpens their senses.”

“In sculpture we deconstruct a chair. I put it on a table and we think about the parts, how it was constructed, where the materials came from. At first, the kids stand back and look at the chair like a two-dimensional image, rather than interact with it as a 3-D

object. And then they realize that to really see it they need to move it, turn it over, touch it. Outdoors it’s like their minds open, the curtains part. It wakes them up. It is more than just intellectual—it’s physical as well.”

“In nature you are always surprised. Nature takes you places and you have to follow. Typically, high schoolers have an expectation of guidelines to follow and think that there’s only one way to do an assignment. The battle is in the letting go. To question rigidity is so unique to Lab.”

Parents' Association President's Report

I am extremely proud of what the Parents' Association (PA) accomplished in 2011–12 to meet its core mission of educating parents, building community, providing support to Lab's faculty, and representing parent perspectives at Lab.

This year's PA-sponsored educational forums proved particularly strong and well attended:

- > "Headline" speaker Ken Ginsburg, MD, a pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine, spent a day speaking to students, faculty, staff, and parents about fostering happy, successful, resilient children.
- > UChicago Professor Stan Beilock, author of *Choke*, spoke about her research on why people "choke under pressure" and practical ways to manage performance.
- > Georgia Bozeday, from Rush Neurobehavioral Center, discussed executive functioning skills and strategies.
- > Lab experts led discussions around cyber safety.
- > Michael Tyler, author of the *The Skin You Live In*, and Beth Wilson, a child development specialist, discussed diversity, difference, and tips for talking with younger children.

Videos of some of these talks and other related information can be found on the PA page of the Lab website under "parent resources."

The PA continued to focus on embracing new families and strengthening the Lab community by:

- > Welcoming more than 100 new families with mentoring, orientation programs, and receptions;
- > Hosting 475 of Lab's "extended family" at Grandparents/Grandfriends Day;
- > Strengthening communication tools, particularly at the Middle School level;
- > Helping families connect at any one of many dinners, barbeques, community service activities, and parent-only evenings;
- > Celebrating at school wide events—Bizaarnaval, Connections, and Rites of May.

Finally, the PA helped represent parent perspectives in joint committees with the Schools' administration. These groups addressed subjects like the U-High schedule, high school dances, and how teachers and administrators approach learning differences. They also participated in the searches for the Primary, Middle, and High School principals. In addition, the PA launched a new Parent Diversity Committee to help create a culture "where we value and promote the rich diversity within our community and create an environment where every family feels welcomed and can contribute and engage fully."

None of this happens without the scores of parents who take time to lend their leadership, effort, and talent to our work. On behalf of the PA governing board, I thank all volunteers and encourage you to be involved wherever possible, letting us know how we can best serve our parent community.

Lauren Polite
Parents' Association President



Debbie Green and Liz Parker
at Connections 2012

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Atman Shah and Tarlan Hedayati, '92,
at the Dewey Founder's and
DePencier Societies wine tasting

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1362 EAST 59TH STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637
alumni@ucls.uchicago.edu
www.ucls.uchicago.edu
773-702-0578



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