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.
In 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 that turn and forever 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?

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.

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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 it make happen.

David W. Magill, EdD
Director

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

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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.

“The kids often find what’s really interesting is there 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.”

“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.”

“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.”
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.

“It wouldn’t have even been that bad if it had rained. Because they’re going to get soaked in life, and if it happens in a moment of high adversity and not just if 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 of listening.”

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

“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 setting is a perfect 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? Was it enough for everyone? How much water? What do you want to sleep in—or in a tent with 12 other boys?”

“We have an understanding of our interdependence on the environment. We can’t just take our worst excesses and dump them on the environment and say ‘I don’t care what happens.’”
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, Gwenan 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 big and complex. 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. 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
At least a few times each year, Mirenxtu 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.”

“I think it forces them to interact with their visual memory. They have to have a different mind set for their approach just being outdoors with the birds singing, the light changing. They use different senses and they interact with it as a 3-D object. And then they realize that visually, and if 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 a classroom setting on a chair that looks like every other chair, in a white box, breathing recycled air—it’s all controlled. Outdoors, kids use more of their senses and they create stronger artwork. It sharpens their senses.”

“When we look at a work of art in a classroom, I ask them to think about the parts, how it was constructed, where the materials come from. At first, the kids stand back and look at the chair like a two-dimensional image. And then they realize that to really see it they need to move it, turn it, touch it. Outdoors it’s like their minds open, the curtains part. It makes them up in the morning and just intimidated—it’s physical as well.”

“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 as a two-dimensional image, rather than interact with it as a 3-D object. And then they realize that visually, and if they need to move it, turn it over, touch it. Outdoors it’s like their minds open, the curtains part. It makes them up in the morning and just intimidated—it’s physical as well.”

“They’re not always surprised, because high school art is very formulaic. But outdoors, nature becomes a catalyst of guided tours to follow and think about. It’s only one way to do it anywhere. The battle is in the ability to transform rigidity is an essential 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 engaging families with the Laboratory Schools’ administration and its leadership, effort, and talent to our work. None of this happens without the scores of parents who take time to lend their support, leadership, and diversity, difference, and tips for engaging fully. A couple of our parent-only evenings; Grandfriends Day; hosting 475 of Lab’s “extended family” speakers; Joni Kabat-Zinn and Beth Wilson, a child psychotherapist and a child life specialist, spoke about her “Pressure” and practical ways to manage stress. Cyber safety. Videos of some of these talks and other related information can be found on the PA website.

The PA continued to focus on bringing our parent community closer together. The PA launched a new Parent Diversity/Inclusion Resources program. It created an online database of resources for families with mentoring, orientation, and Beth Wilson, a child psychotherapist and a child life specialist, spoke about her “Pressure” and practical ways to manage stress. Cyber safety. Videos of some of these talks and other related information can be found on the PA website.

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