The Power of Tradition

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LABORATORY SCHOOLS
ANNUAL REPORT 2010
Dear Friends:

Between the two of us, we have worn many hats at the Laboratory Schools: most notably, director and board leader, but also alumnus, believer, proud parent, champion, friend, and donor. Together, we have also lived what has become known as Lab+, a project that has been decades in the making and is now closer to becoming a reality than ever before.

The goal of updating key aspects of the Laboratory Schools’ physical plant goes back nearly 20 years to school leaders: Lab board members, teachers, parents, administrators, and consultants who saw that strategic investments in core areas could strengthen an already outstanding academic program.

In working with University leadership and our board of directors, we have come to fully embrace the fact that Lab’s existing facilities cannot accommodate the increasing enrollment demand from both the University and the broader community. And so it is in order to continue that excellence—and in particular to maintain the socio-economic and racial balance that has long been the hallmark of a Lab education—that we will open our doors to a growing number of students in the coming years.

But we do nothing alone. You—parents, alumni, friends, faculty, and staff—are the people who make all the difference as we work to bring about positive enhancements to a school that stands on a powerful century of tradition.

We want to thank you and remind you of just a few of the things that make your unique perspective so important and that, when brought together, make our community complete:

Why you as a parent matter so much

You entrust your child to our educators every day, see the fruits of our efforts, and offer real-time feedback on our strengths and our opportunities.

You bring your talent and energy to bear in the classroom and throughout our halls with your volunteerism and enthusiasm.

Why you as an alumnus matter so much

You anchor us to our traditions and hold us accountable to the strengths of our past.

In the boardroom, the classroom, or your own home—you are our emissary, cheerleader, and spokesperson through your example of what defines a Lab graduate.

Why you as a member of the Lab faculty and staff matter so much

You teach our children and steward our Schools with a level of excellence unrivaled in the United States.

You find what is special in each child, listen acutely, help that child reach his or her fullest potential, and create a learning experience that benefits all.

Why you as a friend of the Schools matter so much

You bring us an outside perspective that makes our community even more sophisticated and informed.

You recognize Lab as a proving ground for the best practices in primary and secondary education and know that our faculty can shape the way students are taught in America and beyond.

Of course, there is so much more to thank you for. But above all, each of you has helped us stay focused on what is so special about Lab.

We assure you that, even as we work to transform our physical plant and enhance our programs, we will stay true to the academic and educational philosophies and practices that have made this institution a leader in education and the intellectual home to thousands of graduates.

So, as we anticipate breaking ground on the first major phase of the Lab+ Master Planning process, we stop to express our heartfelt gratitude and to tell you how much we look forward to sharing this moment in history with all of you.

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

David W. Magill, EdD
Director
Traditions at Lab aren’t about fight songs (the school actually has one) or mascots (what exactly is a Maroon?). Instead, the traditions that ground us are the beliefs that have shaped what unfolds in our classrooms:

> Think critically, be analytical, and challenge assumptions
> Be open to others’ ideas
> Learn not just during childhood but for a lifetime
> Celebrate cultural differences and our common humanity

People associated with Lab, from the University president to our newest families—and of course our teachers—care deeply about ideas, discussion, creativity, and intellect.

As the Schools embark on a once-in-a-lifetime transformation, it’s important to remember how much of what we truly value will remain unchanged.

Our traditions transcend time and place, and they are as much about how we approach our future as what we see when we look back.

The Power of Tradition

The word “tradition” is not often associated with the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. That’s not surprising: for more than 100 years, the Schools have taught students to value experimentation and innovation.

But that doesn’t mean we don’t value the past.
"There was no break between a child’s experiences in his own home and those in the school. He began with simple, familiar activities as cooking, listened to stories and dramatized incidents from them, sang songs, played vigorously with other children, and went on trips and observed nature."

How the Schools implemented Dewey’s ideas for N/K students in the early 1900s.—The History of the Laboratory Schools, by Ida DePencier.

It’s night, well past bedtime for most of Meredith Dodd’s three-year-old nursery schoolers. Some are struggling to stay awake. Some are just trying to keep it together. And then it’s time. Dr. Jane Goodall and the children process down the aisle of Rockefeller Chapel, hundreds of people giving a standing ovation. The children smile and wave paper doves they’ve made with University undergrads.

Dr. Goodall turns to the audience from the podium. “Everybody,” she says, waving her arm in a broad embrace of the class, “Look at this. This is our symbol of peace.”

This may be a once-in-a-lifetime experience at Lab, but it certainly manifests something that the Schools’ early childhood teachers have been doing for generations: taking young children seriously.

Ms. Dodd’s students (she frequently reinforces that many are only 36 month old) are the youngest members of “Roots and Shoots,” an international program begun by Dr. Goodall of youth making positive social and environmental changes. The primary activity that these nursery schoolers have engaged in as part of this program is as old as Lab—gardening.

In the garden, the three- and four-year-olds marvel at the feel of digging fingers into dirt, gently picking up a worm, or discovering a seedling.

“What better way to help children learn than to use what they are good at?” says Ms. Dodd. “Sensory experience—feel, touch, smell. It is the process, not the product, that is so important,” she says, explaining a concept embraced by John Dewey himself.

And the exploration is a two-way street: “It is not just us teaching but a reciprocity of learning. That is so fundamental to Dewey—relationships with people, materials, the environment.”

Sending home frequent communiqués to parents about what was said or done in class is one seemingly small way that Ms. Dodd fosters that reciprocity. Armed with those tidbits, parents ask questions and prompt their children to share.

And, in keeping with the goals of Roots and Shoots, a child talking about the wonder of worms becomes a mini-ambassador for the environment.
Social justice

Middle School humanities and questions of fairness.

The emphasis is not placed upon text books nor upon subjects of study as ends. It is placed upon Quality of Life as this expresses itself in good taste, helpfulness, gentleness of spirit, sensitiveness of the rights of others, initiative, fidelity to conviction and trustworthiness—all of which are so necessary in realization of democratic ideals.

—Wilbur Samuel Jackman, dean of the Schools, 1905

The school and political stance

Middle School humanities and questions of fairness.

One student chose a miniature ballet shoe. Another paired flags from England, Russia, Italy, and Germany. Still others used ticket stubs (favorite sports), school crests (a future college?), even a photo of a picket fence (middle class). Each element made up part of a collage. Each collage added up to a snapshot of its maker.

"Who am I?" is the very first question students tackle in seventh grade humanities. By the end of the year their answer to the same question might change dramatically. "We start with identity—who we are as people in school—and expand to who we are as Americans," explains teacher Peggy Doyle.

"Social Justice in a Democratic Society," the yearlong interdisciplinary humanities program that Lab history and English teachers created more than a decade ago, is grounded in a fundamentally Deweyian idea defined a century ago: at its best, a school exemplifies a purer form of our society's democratic principles so that students grow into adults who improve the world.

The teachers emphasize that these discussions are not always easy and that tackling complicated and often emotionally-charged ideas benefits from the support children get as part of a larger group.

Ms. Doyle recalls one student's reflection on Our America, a book born from tape recordings made by two teenage boys who lived amidst the poverty and violence surrounding Chicago's Ida B. Wells housing projects right here on Chicago's South Side.

A few years after having read the book together in class, the student stopped Ms. Doyle in the hall, remarking, "That book lifted the veil."
The girls’ varsity soccer team is scrimmaging, coached by Michael Moses, ’81, (who also coaches the boys’ varsity team) and assistant coach Carlos Acosta. The girls run hard, get muddy, shoot for the goal, sometimes fail, sometimes succeed. None of this is surprising. But looking back to the start of the Schools, maybe it is. Because, unlike many schools around the country, girls competing in athletics has always been part of the U-High tradition, one that has embraced athletics as an integral part of community from the start.

At the turn of the century, University High began with the merger of three separate high schools. It was not a simple task to bring together schools with differing heritages, student bodies, and faculty. But, writes Lab historian Ida DePencier, “unity was achieved, suddenly and completely, through a non-academic demonstration of superiority: The University High School had the best football team of all the preparatory schools in Chicago.”

While football didn’t survive, today’s U-High athletics program draws hundreds of participants (nearly 65% of U-Highers play on at least one team) for the love of the game—and to win. The High School fields more than 28 sports teams, and over the past decade teams have competed—and won—at high levels of sportsmanship, including 45 Illinois High School Association regional and sectional championships in nine different sports. They achieve this within a “no cut” policy system that encourages students to play and distinguishes U-High from most athletic programs in the country.

Over the years the sports offerings have changed to match students’ interests. The football program ended in the 20s. Fencing is back on the scene for the first time since the 50s, and girls’ soccer replaced girls’ field hockey and softball in the early 90s.

Regardless, Lab has always managed to strike a balance that Athletics Director David Ribbens sees lacking elsewhere: “There was never this disconnect that if you’re really good at sports you’re weak academically.”

A key difference for Mr. Moses (who played soccer and baseball for U-High and benefited from the leadership of Sandy Patlak, a Lab teacher and coach for nearly 35 years) is that today’s students lead more complex lives—more after school commitments, more connectivity (cell phones, texting, and the like).

Maybe an inherent simplicity in sports offers a good counterbalance. “Dewey’s idea was to learn by doing. Physical education and athletics are just that,” says Mr. Ribbens.

—1916 editorial, Charles Hubbard Judd, the head of the University’s department of education and director of the schools from The History of the Laboratory Schools, by Ida DePencier.
The Lab+ Campaign is the first ever fundraising initiative of this magnitude for the Schools. While challenges in the global economy have slowed philanthropy across the country, our community has stepped forward—as it has always done.

Lab board member Leandra Knes, MBA’84, parent of eighth grader Anna, is just one of many who has made a commitment to Lab+. “I chose Lab for Anna when she was three, and it was the only school I applied to because I felt so very strongly it was the right fit for us. Clearly, there are many excellent schools in Chicago, but none had the richness of diversity that Lab has,” she says.

She notes that as each year passes she sees, in new ways, how teachers put students first, how their attentions to each child go beyond pen and paper: “The real thing that differentiates Lab is that the teachers care about the ‘whole child,’ not just grades or scores. Obviously those are important, but I have always felt that Anna’s teachers and I act in partnership to ensure that she graduates not only well educated but also as a happy, well-balanced adult.”

Her feeling that she is a partner, that “the schools help me raise Anna,” is a concept that has been in place since 1916 when a small group of women created the University Co-operative Nursery School. (The group was started by Frances Lillie, also notable for later helping Lab purchase a house on Woodlawn for the nursery school and also because the Frank R. Lillie House, named for her husband and a designated National Historic Landmark, sits next to the Schools on the southeast corner of 58th and Kenwood.)

Says Ms. Knes about her commitment to Lab, “The teachers that Anna has had from kindergarten have not only been highly skilled at disseminating information, they instill in our children a love of learning that I am confident will stay with them the rest of their lives. This is rare in education today, so when the campaign to build a first class educational facility came along, it seemed the perfect way to say thank you.”

Ms. Knes freely admits that the level of philanthropic commitment she has made to Lab+ was new to her. “It made a difference to me that our new Lab facility was designed with great involvement from the teaching staff. It will enhance an already strong educational process—for years to come.”

Another successful and worthwhile parent activity has been the Scholarship Fund Clothing Sale, initiated in 1947 and held each spring and autumn for three days. This amazingly well-organized project has been a lucrative one as well. For example, in 1956, approximately 300 women contributed time and effort to the processing of about 12,000 items. The first sale in 1947 netted $365 for the fund. In 1960, the gross intake was $5,630.86.”

— The History of the Laboratory Schools, by Ida DePencier

Parents, then and now
Helping to shape the Lab experience.
“We are all convinced that supplementary reading has come to stay. The best kind of supplementary reading is that which children get by going to books in the library. . . . Teachers should learn to use books and guide children in the use of books.”

—Charles Hubbard Judd, the head of the University’s department of education and director of the Schools, 1910, when in-school libraries were not a given.

Why would a class of U-Highers spend 12 weeks reading Moby Dick when the average high school class (if they read it at all) spends only half that time? It’s called close reading, and it lets students take time to think, learn, and analyze with a level of depth unheard of in most high school courses. Students are assigned only 10 to 15 pages at a time and yet, says High School English teacher Carrie Koenen, “We never finish a discussion, ever. There are just so many things to look at, sentences you have to unpack to understand.”

Close reading for U-High upperclassmen really starts freshman year (or in Middle School for those who have grown up as Labbies). It reflects a passion for text that has served as the underpinning of U-High’s English program for at least four decades.

Juniors and seniors choose three elective English classes each year. The offerings range from Moby Dick and Anna Karenina to hard boiled detective fiction and even graphic novels. It is by no means the canon—anyone’s canon—but breadth is not the objective. The goal is to teach students to understand what it means to think critically and to analyze content and structure for meaning.

Freshmen and sophomores are assigned at least some of the same texts, often ones that are shorter and a bit more accessible, like Catcher in the Rye, Of Mice and Men, and Romeo and Juliet (which sophomores have been reading for decades). By the time they are juniors, students are independently uncovering unexpected things in their reading.

In classes that are run as seminar/discussions, says Ms. Koenen, “Students are committed to finding meaning for themselves but also for each other.” It’s a perfect example of a Deweyian community of learners.

Ms. Koenen found a recent conversation about Margaret Atwood’s A Handmaid’s Tale particularly compelling. Students linked an image of a dead man falling to the ground to an earlier section in which Atwood had set up the idea of “falling” in love. Were the students plowing through a survey course, stresses Ms. Koenen, they might never have seen the relationship.

U-Highers are a remarkably literate bunch—an interest in reading blossoming from years of immersion. It is a stark contrast to other teaching experiences Ms. Koenen had, when getting a student to read “was like pulling teeth.”

At U-High, she says, “I always come away enjoying a text so much more because I get to teach it here. It is the most fun I have ever had.”
I am proud of all the Parents’ Association (PA) accomplished in 2009–2010 to meet its mission of building community, educating parents, and representing parent perspectives—all to make Lab the best it can be.

Embracing new and extended families has become a central activity for the PA. This year we welcomed 130 new families with receptions, mentoring, and orientation programs. And the PAs many volunteers figured prominently when the Schools hosted more than 500 grandparents and grandfriends in the fall. On a division level, volunteers made it possible for families to reconnect (or meet for the first time) at any one of many dinners, family barbecues, and parent-only activities. These events—combined with Bizaarnaval, Connections, and Rites of May—bring families together school-wide to enjoy our common connection to Lab.

Additionally, the PA sponsored a number of educational forums around important age-specific issues, including raising media savvy kids, identifying risky behavior in teens, providing homework help, parenting through “Smart Love,” and maintaining skills over the summer. We continue to work to improve communication among parents and provide helpful information through our website (www.ucls.org), the school E-News, and other means.

Finally, the PA helped represent parent perspectives specifically on the subjects of security and the Lab+ architectural plans, including the construction of the new Early Childhood Campus and as part of the search committee to replace retiring Lower School Principal Beverly Biggs.

None of this happens without the scores of parents who take time to give lend their leadership, effort, and talent to our work. On behalf of the PA Governing Board, I thank all of the parents for your participation and contributions to the Laboratory Schools and encourage you to be involved wherever possible, letting us know ways that we can best serve our parent community.

Lauren Polite
Parents’ Association President,
2009–2010

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Parents’ Association
President’s Report
As of October 1, 2010

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