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Embracing the Great Outdoors

Long known for its progressive approach to education, **THE CREFELD SCHOOL** offers a unique program designed to help students connect to nature, focus on mental health, and kickstart each day.

BY MATT COSENTINO
PHOTOS BY JODY ROBINSON



DAN CUNITZ IS A SELF-DESCRIBED “DIEHARD PROGRESSIVE EDUCATOR” who sought out a career in education because he believed in nontraditional ways to help students grow. He found the perfect place to pursue that endeavor at The Crefeld School. Nearly three decades later, he remains proud to work in a diverse community for an administration that is always open to new ideas.

Located in Chestnut Hill, The Crefeld School serves students in grades seven through 12 with the mission of developing engaged, lifelong learners committed to making an impact in society. Cunitz has been a Crefeld science teacher for the past 28 years, and he is constantly dreaming up new concepts that align with the school’s philosophy. One example: VAP, or Vigorous Activity Period.

VAP is a program for all of Crefeld’s middle school students in which Cunitz and Noa Eagles, an emotional support counselor, lead the kids on a bike ride, a hike through the woods, or another outdoor activity first thing in the morning. The idea was to help students prepare for a day

of learning while connecting to nature and with each other.

The idea came to Cunitz about five years ago when the bike company Specialized donated a fleet of bicycles to the school. He flew California to be trained on how to run a cycling program. While there, he learned that the entire company shuts down at lunchtime every day to go out outside and exercise. He loved the concept so much that he brought it back to Crefeld’s leadership.

“We all know the benefits that people receive from getting outside, what doctors say about the access to nature, and we know that cardiovascular work helps our heart and our brain,” Cunitz says. “So why wouldn’t we imbed that in our day? The administration is incredible here, and they took my request seriously. They completely retooled our schedule to allow us to do this every day.”

The VAP program is held bright and early, rain or shine. Cunitz stresses that it is not gym class—it’s not a time for competitive sports—but rather an opportunity to spend time in nature.

“So many of these kids were cooped up during the pandemic and don’t know how to be outside,” he says. “Having them be exposed to the elements is a big part of it. We’re giving them the skills and the confidence that it’s OK if the weather is a little bit adverse to be outside.

“Maybe 30 percent of the time I might feel like I don’t want to go out because it’s raining or cold,” he continues. “But I will



tell you that 100 percent of the time I feel better having done it.”

The mental health aspect is a critical piece of VAP. Eagles sees some students weekly and others she checks in with regularly to talk about feelings of anxiety, depression, stress, etc. Being involved in VAP allows her to talk and listen to any student in a casual setting.

“I’m on hand to offer emotional support on the fly, which is often how kids are more open to emotional support,” she explains. “They might not know that it’s emotional support necessarily; it’s just a conversation with an adult who cares in an environment that is non-threatening. It provides the atmosphere that they open up a little more rather than have them sit in my office talking about stuff they’re struggling with.”

Eagles notes that adolescents in particular were severely impacted by COVID and may be in need of extra support.

“Crefeld provides the atmosphere for students to be completely themselves,” she adds. “It’s not just about education—it’s about life skills and building relationships. It’s not something that I have seen anywhere else, and I think it’s necessary. I go home every day appreciative that I get to be part of this community, and that’s what we want the students to feel too.”

Cunitz certainly feels the same way and is pleased to be contributing to that goal with VAP. He has spoken about the program at both national and international conferences, and believes it would be a worthy addition to any school.

“So many progressive school ideas have filtered into the traditional systems over the years,” he says. “I think The Crefeld School is a model that could be recreated all over the place with great success. I would love to see VAP adopted elsewhere, and I have no doubt of the benefits it offers.” ■

➔ **The Crefeld School**
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