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The *Joy* and *Wonder* of *Discovery*

An engaging program at **Friends School Haverford** fosters an immersive environment where students learn to grow, collaborate, and find solutions to real-world problems.

by **BILL DONAHUE**
photos by **JODY ROBINSON**

The thrill of teaching never gets old for Tippi Aronson. Although she has spent nearly 30 years honing her skills as an educator, she arrives at her workplace every morning filled with a sense of awe and the expectation to be astonished by the strides of young learners.

Aronson leads the STEAMA program at Friends School Haverford, weaving science, technology, engineering, art, mathematics, and agriculture into every aspect of the curriculum. The program is designed to expose students to academic principles that will help them grow as learners, but there's much more to her work; the STEAMA program strives to help students learn about the real-world challenges facing communities near and far—challenges they then become eager to solve.

While Aronson has long been passionate about all scientific disciplines, her favorite aspect of the job comes from nurturing the questions children have. She gets immense satisfaction every time she sees a student follow the path from inquiry to true understanding.

“Our children are just so deeply in love with learning,” she says. “Our job as teachers is to help raise good humans. We have children here who want to be engaged, solve problems, and collaboratively embrace creativity. As a result, we end up having children who have experience with open-ended questions and are great problem solvers. That is important now as well as later in life.”

Aronson is a proponent of place-based education, an approach that immerses students in the cultures, landscapes, and opportunities of their local communities. She first realized the power of place-based education through her time working for Need in Deed, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that strives to transform teaching and learning by connecting the classroom with the community through student projects and service learning.

As an example, Aronson cites Friends School Haverford's close relationship with



nearby Haverford College. Students benefit from access to the college's abundant on-campus resources, such as an historic arboretum and the Haverfarm, a year-round farming and educational space designed to integrate sustainable food and agriculture into the lives of students, staff, and members of the community.

Last year, older Friends School Haverford students became interested in local flora,

which then led to them collaborating with the agriculturists at Haverfarm and excitedly tending to their own lettuce and strawberry crops at school. Besides learning practical knowledge such as the differences between land farming and hydroponic farming, the students contacted local food banks and community leaders to receive valuable lessons in topics such as food insecurity and seed keeping.

“What started as little nuggets of ideas blossomed into a full-year analysis about our choices and ways to best serve the community,” Aronson says. “Their job is to ask great questions and try to find solutions to problems. My job is to guide them.”

This fall, Friends School Haverford students will be learning about water and how it shapes the world. Teachers will guide students as they dissect the theme not only from a scientific perspective but also from a sociological one. For the remainder of the year, students will delve into topics such as botany, genetics, engineering design, and light and sound.

“Our job as teachers is to help raise good humans.”

—Tippi Aronson,
Friends School Haverford



“We have dedicated spaces outside the classroom where children can learn STEAMA in a very intentional way, but are wholly connected to the classroom experience,” Aronson adds. “For example, as we investigate water this fall with the fourth and fifth grades, we’re also going to the farm to see how it uses and controls water, and visiting the pond to learn about ecosystems. We’ll also be thinking about issues like runoff, ensuring that we are good neighbors. Behind every skill we teach, there is a purpose.”

The STEAMA program encourages collaboration among Haverford teachers. In fact, the program *requires* an interdisciplinary approach, according to Head of School Andrea Myers.

“We’re a small school that embraces each individual, and that allows the space for every child to shine,” Myers says. “We do have distinct times of day when we’re teaching subjects like math, literacy, social studies, and science, but it’s all integrated. There’s a lot of time for teachers to share resources and experiences. It’s a well-coordinated ‘synch up’ designed to help students make connections.”

Making the World a Better Place

Founded in 1885, Friends School Haverford has cultivated a welcoming community where families of every belief, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic background come together. The school educates children from nursery school through fifth grade, with the goal of creating an unshakeable foundation as they prepare for middle school, high

school, and beyond.

“We want students to feel empowered to analyze information and the stories that are coming to them,” says Myers. “In life, they are going to be asked to solve real-world problems, and they have to understand that some of the best ideas will have come from making mistakes. We want them to know not to internalize the disappointment of an unexpected outcome or see themselves as a failure. Rather, we want them to reflect and analyze what happened because we know some of the most brilliant creations are born from past mistakes.”

Spending time outdoors is an essential part of a Friends School Haverford education. In the process, students experience wonder and forge an intimate relationship with the natural world, but also develop interpersonal and problem-solving skills.

“Being outside is just what we do here,” Aronson adds. “The outdoors is a gift for anyone of any age; you get to run and climb and explore and investigate new things. It’s also time that is less directly controlled by adults, so children have the freedom to interact and sometimes naturally disagree. They will learn to work through an uncomfortable moment and come out of that moment with a way forward.

“We want our students to listen to themselves and listen to others,” she continues. “Those are two skills that take practice and time, but they are critical to anything they choose to do in life. You need time to

be alone, as well as time to go outside and interact with other people and be responsive to that. If you do that, then you can take action and work to make the world a better place.”

At its heart, Friends School Haverford strives to provide students with the building blocks they need to become lifelong learners—not only mastering the skills of mathematical thinking and scientific discovery, but also fostering an enjoyment of learning and collaborating with others.

“We all learn together, but the student is at the center,” Aronson says. “The teachers here are well educated and dedicated to getting to know who each student is; no one is invisible. Our small class size allows us to do that. I’m surrounded by colleagues who believe every child has a light within them. That’s what drew me to a Friends education in the first place, and that’s why I love it here.” ■

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