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The fifth-grade program at **Friends' Central School** helps students build confidence, integrity, and other skills needed to become the leaders of tomorrow. page 17

A Foundation for Success

by DANIEL SEAN KAYE | photos by ALISON DUNLAP

The fifth-grade program at **Friends' Central School** helps students build confidence, integrity, and other skills needed to become the leaders of tomorrow.

Fifth grade is a remarkable time in a child's development—socially, emotionally, and academically. At Friends' Central School in Wynnewood, a program designed specifically for fifth graders enables them to grow, learn, and explore in ways that will help them excel later on, both in their academic pursuits and in life.

Small class sizes and individualized instruction are hallmarks of Friends' Central's fifth-grade program, where differentiated learning allows for acceleration. The Lower School's thematic approach unifies education across disciplines, from core subjects (literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies) to electives (art, music, physical education, and world languages). This helps fifth-grade students not only hone the skills to articulate their thoughts but also grow as individuals, become good problem solvers and critical thinkers, and advocate for themselves and others.

"Our Lower School campus is set up to let a child learn in a fun atmosphere," explains Rufino deSantos, fifth-grade math teacher at Friends' Central. "In fifth grade, their executive functioning is developing, so we want to bridge childhood and the development of executive functioning needed in the Middle School."

Founded in 1845, Friends' Central serves about 900 students from nursery through grade 12. With a mission to cultivate the intellectual, spiritual, and ethical promise of each student, Friends' Central strives to stimulate courage and intellect while helping students envision how they can peacefully transform the world. Friends' Central's curriculum is also grounded in continuing reflection, integrity, compassion, and a willingness to accept responsibility.

In addition to "skills and drills," Friends' Central's Lower School focuses on teamwork, collaboration, and questioning. The Quaker values of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and service are at the school's core; everyone is treated with respect in an inclusive and inspiring atmosphere designed to bring out the very best in each student.

"One thing we're intentional about is letting the fifth graders be leaders," adds Christie Kapothanasis, fifth-grade literacy teacher. "They can model for the younger kids, teaching them about the values of the community. As projects ramp up, we let them lead the way. By the end of the year, they lead the development of the project for next year's students."

Friends' Central immerses students in the skills they need to become intellectually curious and explore new aspects of themselves. "Lower School students are taught the skills they need to grow as readers and writers, while still being provided with the time and opportunity to read and learn from texts that can teach us different perspectives," Kapothanasis says.

Math instruction emphasizes problem solving, communication, and collaboration to help students become critical thinkers. "We look at [a problem] as part of a bigger, longer investigation," deSantos says. "The question really becomes, 'How would you solve it?'"

Max Williams, the fifth-grade social studies teacher, has learned that students at this pivotal age need to feel as though they have a place in their community and in the world around them. Social studies is a big part of that.

"Talking about what is happening and how they feel about it can shape their lives in



productive ways," he says, adding that fifth graders have 60 minutes of social studies every day. "They learn how to understand social movements and civic engagement. For the weekly Current Events session, they deep dive into big subjects. They are free to ask anything. It can be very difficult to understand what's going on in the world, but we try very hard to create a culture of respect and understanding. No question is off the table."

The fifth-grade program's goal: to help these students take steps forward in their education and development, and to become good, responsible citizens of the world.

"Teaching them at the Lower School helps us do that in age-appropriate ways," says Williams. "For instance, even though, in home-room, they're part of a small group, the entire fifth grade works together on projects and has time together. It's another way we set them up for success in the Middle School and beyond." ■



Friends' Central School
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