

MICHAEL D. HANAS

Personal Statement/Philosophy of Education

I believe that independent schools have a moral obligation to lead. I believe that we simply must use particularly well the autonomy our independence affords us—to articulate and refine our mission, to develop programmatic possibilities, animated by our deepest understanding of human development and best practices in pedagogy, that our colleagues in public schools are simply not free to pursue, to incline and equip our students to contribute mightily to all of the communities of which they are part, and to make stronger the community of which our school is part. I believe that if the primary purpose an independent school serves is to afford families that can choose to do so the opportunity to avoid sending their child(dren) to public schools, then it ought not exist.

I have loved much about each of the school communities of which I have been part, but my experience in Friends education over the past 15 years has raised my expectations for integrity in mission and practice and has allowed me to grow as a learner, a teacher, and a leader. I am most at home in a learning environment animated by “high, hopeful expectations,” what Doug Heath has called a distinguishing feature of Quaker schools. I am most fully engaged by the challenges and opportunities that stretch us, rather than our success in familiar and comfortable terrain. I am more concerned that we might ask too little of ourselves and our students than too much. As Doug Bennett, former President of Earlham College, has noted, “In Friends schools we believe that students (and I would add adults—in their many roles) learn more and learn better when they have real responsibility for their learning, their community, and their character.” Real responsibility invites us to consider leadership as service, cognitive dissonance as fertile ground for intellectual growth, and conflict as the locus of moral growth. As full and complicated as our lives can be, as complicated as the schools, organizations, and communities of which we are part can be, a commitment to real responsibility and the Quaker belief in the power of simplicity focus our attention on what matters most.

I believe that what matters most in schools is relationships. I believe that nothing informs the quality of a student’s experience more fully than the degree to which she or he feels seen and known, if not understood, as a learner, as a family member, as a citizen, and as an individual in the middle of transformation. I believe that adults—teachers, staff, administrators, Board members, parents, and alums—share most fully in the collective responsibility for their individual students and for the well-being and growth of the school community as whole when they are allowed to be themselves, to bring their whole selves to their work, and know that their presence and contributions are valued.

Integrity in mission and practice, in an environment animated by “high, hopeful expectations,” where school community members are afforded real responsibility grounded in authentic relationships begs the question “Why? What is this education for?” Clearly—and particularly in a Friends school—the answer is not performance on a standardized test, nor matriculation at a particular school, nor any outcome so narrowly defining the students with whom we work. I believe that the ultimate aim of education is not skills or knowledge, but action. In bringing to life the mission of our school, we create the conditions wherein we might change the lives of our students and the lives of all of those with whom they come in contact. Then—and only then—have we earned both the opportunity and the responsibility to exist.