

Newly accredited Quaker school creates “culture of joyful learning”

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FALMOUTH — The state's only Quaker school has received accreditation and, in the process, was recognized for creating "a culture of joyful learning."

[Friends School of Portland](#), an independent day school for preschool through eighth grade on Mackworth Island, recently received accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. The accreditation comes on the heels of a nearly two-year process of evaluation and self-reflection that James Grumbach, the head of school, said is consistent with the school's philosophy.

Now in its sixth year, Friends School is the only Quaker school in the state and one of about 80 nationwide. The majority of the school's 83 students come from Portland, Falmouth, South Portland and Cape Elizabeth.

The school's mission is to honor "students' natural gifts as they learn to enter the world with confidence, competence, joy and a sense of purpose." The school is guided by the Quaker values of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, stewardship and truth.

The school begins each week with 20 minutes of silent reflection. Within an hour on Monday, laughter and chatter echoed through the halls of the school as students huddled in small work groups, typed away on computers and rehearsed a play.

Grumbach said the school's students are in multi-age classrooms after kindergarten and work collaboratively as a school in many ways. The school focuses on place-based education to make students aware of their own world.

Grumbach said school officials planned from the outset to apply for accreditation, a process that began in the school's third year with an application for candidacy, followed by a year-long self-study.

After review by a NEASC committee, Friends School received commendation for being true to its mission, producing a thorough and accurate self-study and for the dedication of board members and staff.

Major recommendations include "that the school pursue an attractive and stable location for a permanent home that ensures opportunities for its trademark place-based learning" and "that the school begin a conversation among all constituents about what the ideal school enrollment would look like with without restriction from current space or staffing."

Grumbach said Friends School rents its building from the Maine Educational Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and has a lease through the 2013-2014 school year. He said the Mackworth Island locale is perfect, but the building does not allow for growth, an ongoing topic of conversation for school leaders.

Grumbach said the accreditation process was helpful in that it reaffirmed what the school is doing well and areas in which it needs to improve. For parent and board member Kim Simmons, it gave voice to feelings about the school.

Simmons cited a commendation from the NEASC visiting committee, which credited faculty and staff with establishing "a culture of joyful learning."

"It felt to me that it put words to something we aspire to," she said. "For them to give those words felt so affirming and exciting. That is the essence of what education should be for the kids."

Jen McNally, a parent and marketing coordinator for the school, said she was happy to find a school environment where her children are invested in learning and where classes participate in service projects.

"This became our community," she said. "It's a very supportive community."

In addition to service projects, the school reaches out to the community through a variety of events. An auction and brunch on Saturday, March 31, will raise funds to provide financial aid to families to offset tuition, which is \$14,600 a year. The event, scheduled for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., is open to the public and includes food, music performances, silent auction and activities for children.

On April 2, the school is hosting a screening of "The Prep School Negro" in collaboration with other local independent schools. An outreach workshop with director Andre Robert Lee will follow the film. The free public event begins at 6 p.m. in the Ludke Auditorium at University of New England, 719 Stevens Ave., Portland.

The school's community events continue May 2 with a Parenting for Peace presentation by Michael Thompson, author of "Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Friendship Development, Popularity and Social Cruelty in Childhood." The free lecture begins at 7 p.m. in Hannaford Hall at the University of Southern Maine's Abromson Center in Portland.



Preschool student Cedar Levin works on a painting during art class at Friends School of Portland on Mackworth Island in Falmouth. The state's only Quaker school recently received accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.



Art teacher Celeste Henriquez asks preschool students to discuss shapes they see in a painting during an art class Monday morning at Friends School of Portland. The state's only Quaker school is now in its sixth year.