

Gillingham Charter School: Offering Students a Charlotte Mason Education in a Public School Setting

Gillingham Charter School opened its doors in Pottsville, PA in 2011 and serves 250 K-12 students from all over Schuylkill County. Gillingham is the only school in the United States that offers a Charlotte Mason education in a public school setting. It combines Mason's philosophy with the best current research and resources to create an environment where children retain their natural love of learning and build lifelong relationships with big ideas, great books, the local community, and the larger world around them.

The Program:

Charlotte Mason was a British educator from the turn of the twentieth century who was decades ahead of her time in recognizing that a child's personhood is every bit as real and worthy of respect as that of an adult. She believed that education should cultivate a child's natural hunger for learning, and that every child should have direct contact with great books, world-changing ideas, and quality art and music. Gillingham calls this a "Relational Education," and implements Mason's model to help its students build meaningful relationships in every area of their lives.

Relationships with Knowledge

Gillingham's vision is that its students not only learn but CARE about what they learn. Students learn facts within the context of stories that make the facts come alive and connect them to the child's existing body of knowledge. They narrate (tell back) what they are



learning in their own words, and every child learns to speak, ask questions, and participate in class discussions. Gillingham uses integrative math to teach strong math skills and logical thinking, and teachers co-learn with the students instead of drilling with lectures or questions. Also, ALL students study Latin and Spanish, and all develop tactile perception and fine motor skills through handwork and playing a musical instrument. These are not optional electives, but are a central part of Gillingham's broad curriculum.

Because this educational model honors the whole child, the environment is structured to invite

growth and participation. Learning periods are short and interactive, with more challenging subjects placed at times when attention span is naturally higher. Classrooms have large windows and homey details like lamps, rugs, and plants. A local artisan bakery provides the school's food program, using local sources and ingredients to craft delicious, nutritious meals.

Relationships with the Natural World

Science, biology, conservation, and ecological awareness must be meaningful outside of the lab and classroom as well as inside, so Gillingham creates practical ties with the natural world. Students spend time outdoors every day, eating lunch under the maples or taking classes on the patio. All



***Relational Education is
deeply rooted in two primary
principles:***

CORE BELIEF:

*Children are persons, thus they
have the innate desire to learn
and to live fully.*

CORE PRACTICES:

*To offer students a "banquet of
learning" to put them in relation-
ship with the vast inheritance of
knowledge around them—with
others, ideas, and the natural
world—through rich language and
real experiences.*

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students participate in nature studies and keep nature journals where they detail and illustrate their observations. They learn to care for their environment as they pick up trash in the neighborhood and tend the community garden.

Relationships with Each Other

Gillingham uses Restorative Practices and the Nurtured Heart Approach™ to help students develop the skills of healthy interpersonal relationships. They collaborate, take risks, and work out conflicts with each other. Classes are capped at 22 students so that classmates and teachers can know each other, and every younger student has an older student as a partner to help them with their learning.

Relationships with the Community and Larger World

Gillingham's vision is for its students to be rightfully proud of who they are and of their hometowns and communities. Each class learns local stories and history. Gillingham invites community leaders and entrepreneurs to speak at the school assemblies. Students spend time in community service and participate in programs by the local Chamber of Commerce and Manufacturers Association that teach entrepreneurship and job skills.

Gillingham also invites local legislators, business leaders, and other community members into the school every month for personalized tours. Nicolle Hutchinson, the executive director, takes them through the classrooms, where they meet the students and staff and see a Gillingham education in action. Afterward, the visitors and school leaders sit down for a conversation over refreshments. The feedback and interaction from these tours have been invaluable in building connections and understanding of Gillingham's charter school model.



The Results:

Even though Gillingham has over 70% free and reduced lunch and over 30% of its students have IEPs, data shows that the longer



a child is at Gillingham, the more progress they gain in their math and reading scores. Recent test scores revealed that Gillingham's students have some of the highest levels of growth in the county. But it's also through the feedback from students, parents, teachers, and community that Gillingham measures a Mason education's success. Students say, "I've found a family." One said, "Now that I'm a reader...." Teachers say, "I taught twenty years in the public school system, but I have never used these educational methods. They make so much SENSE." Parents say, "My son used to cry every morning before he got on the bus; now he can't wait to go to school." Many say, "My child is using vocabulary words I've never heard. He teaches me things in nature I never knew!" Visitors say, "Your

children ask questions, and they're really good questions. How do you teach them to do that?" Mason's philosophy of respect for the child and the child's innate love for learning is still effective today.

Thank you to Anna Brovont, Research & Development Coordinator, and the staff of Gillingham Charter School for sharing their story. If you would like to submit a suggestion for a future Innovation Spotlight, please contact Brandie Karpew at b.karpew@pacharters.org.