



PROOF OF CONCEPT

The Concept School provides students who have academic or social challenges with the guidance, support, and acceptance they need to navigate the road to long-term success. by **Matt Cosentino** | photos by **Jody Robinson**

When prospective students and their families take a guided tour of The Concept School in Westtown, Head of School William Bennett tends to focus on a few specific points of differentiation: the personalized curriculum, the knowledgeable and nurturing faculty, and the picturesque 13-acre campus. The aspect that piques the most interest among visitors, however, is the friendly and relaxed environment in which *all* students discover opportunities to unlock their potential.

“In larger settings, sometimes students can fall between the cracks, but there really aren’t any cracks here,” Bennett says. “There are so many eyes, and everyone is looking out for each other. I think one of the most unique features is our small size, not just in each classroom, but also our small community where students feel supported and support each other. It’s pretty amazing to look at middle and high school students who are so accepting of each other’s strengths and needs.”

The Concept School, a co-ed independent institution for grades six through 12, was founded in 1972 by a group of educators aiming to help special learners whose needs were not being met in public schools. More than 50 years later, The Concept School continues to be a guiding light for children who may be struggling academically or socially, who have trouble focusing in class, or who would just be more comfortable in a more intimate setting.

The average class size is four; even lunch periods call for small gatherings, with about 18 students compared to the 150 or 200 commonly found in larger schools.

“I think a lot of kids feel overwhelmed with the pressure and the pace of traditional schools,” Bennett says. “Students might need extra time, and it’s hard to give that to them in a large-class setting. I think also when parents walk in they’re surprised at the atmosphere and how quiet it is here. Students can really focus, and a lot of the triggers that you may find in the larger setting are not here. We’re able to make the atmosphere more conducive to learning.”

The Concept School’s tagline—“Where unique minds learn in unique ways”—perfectly sums up its personalized approach to education, where students progress at their own pace. Their likes and dislikes are often incorporated into the curriculum as well. Last year, for example, student interest led to the creation of a course about Russian history that has since received positive feedback.

“The teachers develop course outlines and objectives based on the state standards, but we also use a lot of student interest to help drive curriculum, whether that’s novels that we’re reading or the content in history classes,” Bennett says. “We can be pretty



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—HEAD OF SCHOOL WILLIAM BENNETT

flexible, and we can be proactive in ways that larger schools would find more difficult.”

At The Concept School, learning happens far beyond the walls of the classroom. The school’s beautiful campus includes an outdoor nature center with a creek that may soon be named Concept Creek by the U.S. Geologic Society. For example, students and staff all gathered outside in early April to witness the solar eclipse.

“A lot of our teachers build in five-minute breaks at the end of each period for the students to go outside,” Bennett says. “They can utilize our walking path or throw a football around. It gives them a ‘brain break’ before their next period. With the eclipse, we went out at just after two p.m. and stayed out until about three o’clock, when it was almost dismissal time. We had glasses for the students and they got to witness that historic event.”

Some Concept School graduates have matriculated to prestigious universities. Recent graduates currently attend Villanova University, George Mason University, the University of Utah, and Indiana University in Pennsylvania, among other institutions of higher learning. Whether students aspire to earn a college degree, participate in a career training program, or enter the work force, they will receive the same level of attention and guidance from The Concept School’s caring staff.

“We have a very eclectic faculty with a mix of backgrounds and history,” Bennett says. “There’s a lot of freedom here to be creative and to take risks, and to really work hard to meet student needs and not teach to a test. Our teachers understand that if our students’ mental health is not on solid footing, then learning is not really going to happen. Our teachers are very good at picking up signals if a student is struggling, and we have

hired its first-ever advancement director to lead the fundraising campaign and reach out to potential donors such as Yield Giving, the philanthropic foundation established by MacKenzie Scott.

The proposed renovations include additional classrooms and study spaces, a student relaxation center, and a dedicated stage for the theater department, as well as a new building façade and entrance, a reconfigured parking lot, and storage space.

“We’re really excited about the potential renovation to make the building more modern, more inviting, and more exciting,” Bennett says. “What really matters is what happens inside of a building, but the way it looks can also affect people’s attitudes about wanting to come to school. Our hope is to give it a modern look but keep the same family feel inside and keep doing what we’re doing.”

The Concept School encourages interested donors to speak with graduates, who often return to meet with current students and share their experiences and how the school prepared them for life after graduation day. Bennett, who previously spent decades as a public school educator, including 21 years as an elementary school principal, is always willing to share his insights, too.

“I enjoyed my time in public education and I think we did a lot of great things, but I also know that it’s not for every student,” he says. “Sometimes students need something different, and I think that’s what we provide here in a way that I never knew existed.” ■



The Concept School today, with a rendering of the school transformed by renovations made possible by a \$2.5 million capital campaign

an amazing full-time counselor who our students can access if they need it.”

A leadership team devoted to continual self-improvement drives many of the advantages that come from attending The Concept School. The school has spearheaded a two-year, \$2.5 million capital campaign for vital renovations to a building that dates back to the 1960s. Last year the board of directors



Façade photo and rendering courtesy of The Concept School



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