

Cambridge Health Alliance

Center for Multicultural Mental Health Research

NIMH Advanced Center for Latino and Mental Health Systems Research

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Graham & Parks Alternative Public School

Partner Descriptions

Graham and Parks is the result of joining two schools in 1981—the Cambridge Alternative Public School (CAPS), which was a small, nationally acclaimed magnet school, and the Webster School, which was a small, traditional neighborhood school. The educational program is highly individualized, with an emphasis on teaching basic skills in creative ways and on learning concepts and ideas. It is a non-standardized curriculum that is mostly developed by our teachers - - a curriculum that is hands-on, project-based, integrated, and multicultural. We emphasize cooperative learning since we believe that learning is primarily a social activity. The staff includes an Early Literacy Specialist, English Language tutors for Second Language students, and a Mathematician in Residence. Our aim is building a community that meets the needs of individual students; that is a place they want to be a part of; that serves their intellectual, social, and emotional needs; that involves them actively; that involves them and their lives in significant ways; that involves them working together across the usual boundaries of race, gender, and social class; and that focuses on the child and the curriculum, on the relationships among people and what is learned.

The Right Question Project, Inc. (RQP), a nonprofit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is simultaneously offering an effective, easy-to-use educational strategy and a clear vision of how to build a more democratic society. This strategy is already having an enormous impact on the lives of low and moderate-income families who come into regular contact with public schools, welfare agencies, the health care system, housing programs, homeless shelters, job training centers and many other publicly supported agencies, programs and institutions. Based on what we've learned from people using our strategy, we are promoting a vision in which their encounters with these outposts of government become opportunities to act democratically and have democratic experiences. We call this vision Microdemocracy because it draws attention to the importance of democracy for each citizen, on all levels.

The Right Question Project began the way some of the best ideas crop up--by not knowing how to do something. In our case, several of us were working in the late 1980s as part of a drop-out prevention program in the poor but historically important Massachusetts mill town of Lawrence. Determined to find ways to increase the participation of low-income parents in their children's education, we set out along some fairly conventional paths. Soon, very soon in fact, we discovered that parents had their own good reasons for not participating--and it wasn't because they didn't care passionately about their kids. They did of course, but they kept telling us that they didn't participate; they didn't even go to their children's schools, because they "didn't even know what to ask."

We're very smart. It was only necessary to hear this one or two thousand times before we finally figured out that there must be something to this revelation. So, of course, we set out to do something about it the wrong way. We came up with lists of questions and handed them out. Eventually, we began to get smarter, really. We learned, more quickly this time, that while handing out questions may seem helpful at first glance, it fostered a dependency on somebody to come up with questions for parents to ask. Finally, we got to this question: How can we teach people how to formulate their own questions? (This actually skips a lengthy learning process in

which, among other things, we understood the difference between "asking" and "formulating" questions). The rest is history, or at least, our history.

For the last decade, The Right Question Project has developed, field-tested, refined and shared its educational strategy and methods. Our history is one of learning turned into action. We have benefited from listening carefully to people who are rarely considered resources for knowledge, yet are great sources of insight.

RQP methods can be applied to a variety of fields and issues. The methods help people develop critical thinking and question formulation skills and to apply a framework to participate more effectively in decision making. Most recently our methods have been used by a network of early childhood programs in Boston and by the statewide adult education programs in New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine. We have led very successful sessions at Harvard Law School, the Askwith Forum and at the Coalition of Essential Schools and Family Support America conferences.

Please visit us at www.rightquestion.org