



Chicago Academy High School

3400 North Austin Avenue Chicago Illinois 60634

Phone: 773-534-0146 Fax: 773-534-0192

www.cahs.cps.k12.il.us

Gavin Torrisci,, Teacher
3400 North Austin
Chicago, IL 60634
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To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to provide testimonial regarding the significant positive impact that Sara Carroll has made on our English department, specifically in her leadership this year introducing Paideia discussions. I have worked with Sara for seven years at Chicago Academy; I am consistently impressed with not only her teaching but also her ability to lead adults in professional development.

Sara attended the NAATE conference here in Chicago in the summer of 2011, where she received comprehensive training in the Paideia methods; she returned to us with a wealth of information to share. She first introduced Paideia in her own classroom, replacing Socratic seminars with this more student-focused discussion format. She invited colleagues to learn about Paideia by visiting her classroom and borrowing her literature over the next few years. This year, as department chair, she made it a major focus of our departmental PD.

My colleagues and I already were using formal class discussions as a way for students to construct meaning from literature collaboratively, but we had always called these Socratic Seminars. Strictly speaking, though, the Socratic Method entails a back-and-forth between the instructor and the students. What we sought to establish was more student-to-student interaction and self-sufficiency for our students. Through modeling and presenting readings, Sara demonstrated that Paideia provides that. Goal-setting for the group, we learned, was an important first step. The class needed to accept certain non-negotiable goals, such as participation and use of evidence, but beyond that students established ownership by setting bigger goals for themselves. Sara presented the idea that students could be “buddies” with their neighbors to help foster mutual accountability. The class was also in charge of self-assessment at the conclusion of the discussion, when they would reflect on how well they met their goals.

As a department, we each brought these strategies into our classrooms. We shared video clips of our attempts and discussed our successes and areas for growth when we regrouped biweekly. Sara created an environment of trust and rich collaboration, in which we all truly benefitted from each other’s expertise. She is always open about her own imperfections, which gives us all permission to express our own doubt. There is a feeling of comfortable vulnerability when we all meet, which I think is the cornerstone of growth.

Our work with Paideia this year has improved my practice significantly. I see students encouraging each other during discussions instead of expecting me to serve that role. There is broader and deeper participation and greater investment. Students seem more empowered during Paideias than they were during Socratic discussions. Finally, they seem to be enjoying the discussions more, being themselves the authors of the knowledge being created. I am very pleased with the way Sara both introduced this new instructional method and facilitated our growth towards mastery as a department.

Best,

Gavin Torrisci, NBCT
gstorrisi@cps.edu