

Elizabeth Ely Education Foundation

Elizabeth Ely's Principles

Founding Cornerstones - Collaboration, Flexibility, Honesty, Respect

Elizabeth Ely believed that teaching is a dialogue—a deeply intellectual collaboration between student and teacher. She felt that this collaboration must be extended to include parents and administrators, as well as teams of teachers working together for student success. Elizabeth believed that master teachers must be flexible in their approach to teaching, using creative, experiential approaches to capture students' imagination. One of her cornerstones was that like any strong relationship, the relationship between teacher and student—and the relationships in a school community—must be founded on honesty and mutual respect. Building on these cornerstones, she developed five principles that comprise her educational philosophy about what helps students learn best.

Principal 1 - Arts in Education

As far back as the 1960s, Elizabeth recognized that the arts were a critical part of a student's education. She required students to take some kind of art class every single day, every year—no exceptions. The arts:

- Brought out creativity in students
- Ensured they used a different part of their brain every day
- Represented experiential learning—literally getting their hand dirty!
- Connected something concrete and hands-on to other aspects of learning
- Changed the pace of the day
- Often were connected to students' other work

Often students discovered talents they never knew they had. One boy was a mathematics and science genius who ended up graduating from Caltech. Forced to take art, he chose ceramics. Not only did he stick with it for 6 years, he became an extraordinary potter. Another student forced to take courses in the arts discovered she had a knack for acting and ended up with a lead in King Lear, discovering a side of herself she never knew existed.

One art teacher hired by Elizabeth said that Elizabeth was the only school administrator who ever asked to see her portfolio first (rather than simply discussing her teaching credentials). She came to work for Elizabeth because she understood that Elizabeth wanted to hire real artists, not just teachers who could teach the arts. That philosophy raised the bar for students, for they worked with actual artists on their craft.

Principal 2 - Student and Teacher Trust

Elizabeth knew that there must be clear structure in any school, and clear boundaries between students and teachers. But at the same time, she knew that students desperately want to be known well and treated as individuals. They needed to trust that the teachers were there for their support and encouragement. To foster trust, Elizabeth:

- Created small classes averaging 12 students, so that teachers could know every student well and could speak to each student in class every day.
- Set aside regular time for student-teacher interaction/tutoring/extra help. Teachers were accessible during lunch; during free periods and before and after school, and the school culture encourage students and teachers to connect.
- Had students call teachers by their first name. She found that building respect for teachers had nothing to do with what students called their teachers, and she found that the first name basis made teachers seem more accessible and less authoritarian.
- Ensured that all teachers also coached or supervised other activities to allow them to see students in a different light.

Elizabeth Ely Education Foundation, Inc.
111Newlands Street - Chevy Chase, MD 20815
Office - 301-656-0797 - www.elyfoundation.org

Elizabeth Ely Education Foundation

- Always had a regular stream of young teachers as well as veterans. Having young teachers in the building helped students connect and kept the veteran teachers inspired by new ideas.
- Made sure students who struggled in classes were never kicked off the sports teams or deprived of time in activities they loved. Elizabeth recognized that if students were struggling to find motivation to work, taking away the few things they enjoyed did not suddenly make them motivated. She showed them respect, which helped earn their trust.
- Made sure students were not cut from sports teams. If they took the risk to join a team, they could participate.

At times a student would struggle in an academic class for one reason or another. The student might be a star soccer player, and had that teacher as a coach. When the student realized the coach saw him or her as successful in one arena, it often carried over into the classroom. Having something like soccer in common also fostered trust and connections.

Teachers at Field knew students so well that they often suggested books to individual students. Many parents expressed amazement that a teacher could know any student so well as to know what book he or she might like, and students felt honored that any teacher cared enough to personally suggest a book.

Principal 3 - Integrated Curriculum – Contextual Knowledge With a Deep Intellectual Component

Elizabeth was frustrated by English courses that taught Balzac, Hawthorne, Kerouac and Garcia-Marquez in the same year, as it provided little continuity or context for students. She encouraged a curriculum in which various courses were connected, integrated or taught in parallel ways. For example:

- Students taking American history would read related texts in their English class, such as Red Badge of Courage while studying the Civil War
- Students took Art History once a week as part of their history course, studying the art of the time period
- Math and science teachers collaborate to make connections
- School assemblies and field trips are interdisciplinary
- Time is set aside for teachers to connect, and course assignments for teachers are created to encourage and ease connections
- Students were challenged to think deeply and make deep connections among topics. The more measured pace of classes meant that courses emphasized depth rather than breadth and gave students time to think and analyze, not just memorize. She focused on mastery of content, rather than just grades, as a measure of success.

11th grade students read Civil War poetry in English, while studying the Civil War in history and looking at the photos of Matthew Brady in Art history. The Civil War unit culminated in an 11th grade class trip to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where an elaborate game divided the students into northern and southern regiments to reenact the famous battle there, using a scavenger hunt type activity. Students learned in context: literature in the context of history; history in the context of literature; art in the context of academics. Field trips were the most memorable part of many students' educational experience, and the cross-curricular connections enhanced learning and memory. More than anything, student learning was enhanced by a highly intellectual content in a structured—but never rigid—environment that made room for great freedom and creativity within a structured setting.

Principal 4 - Collaboration Among Teachers, Students and Parents

Elizabeth felt very strongly that families and the school were partners, sharing the same goals. Good communication and frank conversations with parents about their children, including their academic and social progress, were her hallmark, even when the conversations were very difficult ones. She felt that parents should be informed immediately if she heard rumors of inappropriate behavior, and she worked closely with parents to help them figure out the complex role of parenting.

Elizabeth Ely Education Foundation, Inc.
111Newlands Street - Chevy Chase, MD 20815
Office - 301-656-0797 - www.elyfoundation.org

Elizabeth Ely Education Foundation

She viewed parents as so important that when she founded the school; she first interviewed parents extensively before even meeting the students. Philosophically, she understood what a difficult job parents faced, and made it a point never to accuse or blame parents for their child's challenges. Rather, she worked with them to strategize when their children faced struggles. She viewed teachers, parents and the students as a team, and gave great respect to students even as she disciplined them. She made sure the students' voices were heard.

To foster collaboration:

- She devoted time to speaking both collectively and individually with all parent visitors during the admissions process, including on each admissions tour.
- Student applicants were interviewed with their parents present to observe and listen during the interview. Parents were sometimes skeptical, but almost always grateful in the end, as it proved invaluable for them to hear their child talk about their visit, and understand their child's perspective on the day (rather than asking "how was your visit?" on the car ride home and getting the answer "fine."). Often parents gained unique insights into their children. One student, in front of her parents, said the person she most respected in the world was her dad, because he was not only passionate about his work in anthropology, but also sincerely wanted to change the world.
- All interactions were very personal—not "by the book"—and teachers, students and parents were always reminded of each other's perspective.
- There was no such thing as a "zero tolerance" policy. There were rules, but Elizabeth understood that two different students might break the same rule in two very different contexts. She did enforce discipline, but took each case individually.
- She stood by her teachers, always backing them up, even if they made a mistake, and did the same for students.
- There were multiple roles and opportunities for staff members to interact with students.

Principal 5 - Experiential Learning

Elizabeth felt that experiential learning was the most effective style of learning and encouraged field trips; simulations, debates and other experiential learning opportunities that she believes truly helped knowledge "stick." She encouraged experiential learning in many ways:

- Every student in grades 7-12 undertook a two-week internship every year, giving them exposure to the real world in schools, businesses, the arts, and others.
- Field trips played a key role in the curriculum
- Arts activities were always hands-on
- Role-playing, simulations and other experiential learning activities were encouraged.
- Foreign language students took trips abroad, usually during the 2-week internship program so that they did not have to miss class time while traveling.

For the internship program, teachers visited each student on their internship site halfway through the program. Some students were given great responsibility on their internships. One teacher called to speak to the supervisor of a 7th grader who was interning at a large office. The secretary passed the call along to the head of the company, and the teacher asked how the student was doing. The head replied, "You could have asked her—you just spoke to her!" The student was answering the phones for the company! Students worked for artists, in therapeutic riding centers, on Capitol Hill (two 8th graders met for lunch in the Congressional cafeteria each day), in schools and all over the city. One student traveled to Arizona to learn how to create the marbled paper used on the inside cover of old books. The program gave students real-world experience—sometimes inspiring, sometimes mundane—that helped them better understand their passions and interests and apply their skills in the working world. The exciting experiences inspired students to look beyond high school, and the mundane experiences made them look forward to going back to school—a win-win situation!