



Brewster's Longview School Director Gives Keynote at Paris Education Conference

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Published on Friday, 01 September 2017 23:37



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Brewster private school, Longview School, was honored this week in Paris, France where its director was invited to give a keynote presentation. Mark Jacobs, Longview's co-founder and current director, travelled to the annual conference of the European Democratic Education Community (EUDEC) to speak about combining a structured curriculum with student empowerment in a democratic school. The conference brought together more than 400 participants from all over Europe and around the world. The group was comprised of educators starting schools or hoping to do so in the near future, along with both veteran teachers and those from recently founded schools.

In addition to Jacobs, the conference organizers brought in long-time educators such as Henri Redhead, a grandson of the renowned A.S. Neil who founded the Summerhill School in Leiston, England almost 100 years ago. Redhead addressed the group on Monday night, describing the way Summerhill gives students freedom to direct their own education. Although no classes are required in the school, about 90% of the upper students choose to take enough classes to be prepared for the rigorous General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) tests so they are able to move on to universities in England or abroad.

Longview School also sent elementary school teacher Carolin Trott to the conference. Trott, a native of Germany, received her advanced teaching certificate from Great Britain before coming to Longview as an international teacher trainee. She is now a U.S. resident and runs the Longview elementary school program.

In addition to his keynote, Jacobs and Trott presented two workshops together. The first demonstrated Longview's use of student-run judicial processes in order to deal with rule breaking at the school. Longview's approach is modeled upon the American court system. Instead of teachers and administrators deciding how to resolve conflicts and mete out consequences, a rotating Judicial Committee comprised of 4 students and one staff member does so. Jacobs said, "Besides resolving conflicts fairly, the committee also teaches students both moral thinking and practical problem solving. The committee deals with everything from someone leaving a mess to making a disrespectful comment, to not doing homework." Workshop participants wondered whether using the committee strained relationships between students. Trott responded to that query by saying, "What fascinates me most about Judicial Committee is the way kids handle complaints. No matter which side they are on, afterwards there are no hard feelings about one another. The committee is about making the community run better and strengthening relationships. The students on the committee see that, and the consequences they come up with reflect that." Workshop attendees took extensive notes and left with shared documents so they could consider how to implement programs in their own schools.

Jacobs and Trott also ran a workshop about the relationship between adults and students in Longview School. Democratic schools are known for the environment of equality in which students and adults treat each other with equal respect. Their small communities (Longview typically has about 30 total students in all grades combined), mixed with the culture of equality, support deeper connections both inside and outside of the classroom. Ms. Trott stated, "One of the things I love about being at Longview is the relationship I am allowed to form with each of my students. I know them like I know friends: their likes and dislikes, problems they are having in school with peers or at home, successes they celebrate outside of school, their favorite music or games, etc. This allows me to build a strong foundation based upon trust which makes me a much more effective teacher." The discussion at the workshop spanned a range of issues including how to maintain professional barriers, to see students for who they are becoming even when they misbehave, to give every student a fresh start each and every day, and to maintain authenticity in the adult/student relationship.

All three presentations were well-received by the conference attendees, many of whom engaged Jacobs and Trott in extensive conversation afterwards in order to gather insights specific to their own schools. Conferences like EUDEC help promote the rapidly-growing movement in education towards empowering children with real power and responsibility while they are young, even as young as kindergarten age. Democratic schools like Longview School focus on teaching the whole child, so they not only learn rigorous academics, but also develop into more independent, responsible young adults.

Longview School is a non-profit private school located in the Village of Brewster, New York. For more information about their program, the school website is www.longviewsschool.org.