

Friends Seminary's Response to the NYQM Nominating and Governance Committee's Query

"How is the Spirit moving through the School? The question of how the spirit is moving through the school is broader than Quakerism per se. It's about where the energy (some would say the Spirit) of the broader community is focused and leading."

A Message from Bo Lauder, Head of School

Our school-wide theme for the academic year 2019-2020 was "Taking Care," as it turns out a prescient choice. Beginning in the early phase of the pandemic, we focused on keeping our community whole. To that end, faculty worked ceaselessly to create virtual environments for their students when the campus closed. Many extended their care into the summer, focusing primarily on grades K and 9, our primary entry grades, by teaching classes (Summer Bridge, see below) and "visiting" new students virtually throughout the summer to ensure those students would have connections when school started.

Through the end of fiscal year 2019-2020 we were able to keep our community whole by continuing to pay all employees, whether they could work from home or not, whether they were our employees or those of a third party.

Even with the many challenges we faced and still are facing, this fall we enrolled the largest student body ever—789 students will have the benefit of a Quaker school environment. This is a period when our values provide shape, form and meaning to students and their families.

Anticipating another demanding year, we decided to continue the theme "Taking Care" into the 2020-2021 year. Indeed we are taking care of each other and our students in many ways. Dispensation was given to those employees who are in high risk categories if they applied and had medical documentation. To help all employees with the intimidating issue of travel during the pandemic, the school has offered every employee up to \$300 per month so that they might have choices about how they get to and from Friends. We immediately set up the Friends is Family (FIF) Fund to help those families who were disproportionately affected by Covid. The Board, without hesitation, authorized that \$50,000 from the operating fund should go to FIF Fund, and with community donations, the Fund, in the high six figures, has helped families with tuition, rent, transportation, and even groceries. This was certainly a spirit-led community-wide effort. More of our work, which may be of interest, is highlighted below.

I do feel the need to say that "the spirit" of Friends Seminary can not really be captured on a piece of paper. It is derived from and sustained by our daily work, interactions with

and between our students, the dedication of our faculty and administrative staff, Meetings for Worship, our special places and an unquestioned love for the School.

In Friendship,
Bo Lauder,
Principal/Head of School

Friends Seminary Response Highlights

Summer Bridge

As the School was wrapping up the final weeks of our distance learning program for the 2019-2020 academic year, our faculty and administrative staff responded to the needs of its students by creating an optional program for students called "Summer Bridge," a name chosen because the program itself was designed to bridge the spring semester of 2020 and the fall semester of 2020.

The School recognized that, like our teachers and administrative staff, students and parents had had to shoulder a lot during this pandemic. Much had been asked of families as the School had to quickly move to a distance learning model due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The School is grateful for their partnership every step of the way, through the spring semester. Our desire in creating Summer Bridge was not only to give students optional academic and enrichment pursuits at a time when many summer plans and programs were being canceled but to also thank families for their understanding and support during these ever-shifting times. These programs were offered free of charge to enrolled Friends students.

To give you a sense of the scope of the Summer Bridge program, in the Upper School, there were 7 courses offered during Summer Bridge, serving 112 students. The Middle School offered 11 courses, serving 138 students. The Lower School program offered special programming specific to incoming students and parents in Kindergarten that provided opportunities to meet the K teachers and learn, via artful puppetry videos created by the Performing Arts faculty, about the Quaker SPICES and about what to expect as a new student attending Friends Seminary. Back in the Saddle, a specific course offered in each grade (1-4) was designed to offer enrichment and a review of skills learned in the previous academic year; priming students for a successful fall reentry. These programs served 168 LS students. Additional co-curricular programming was offered through the Friends Seminary Outdoor Program (FSOP) staff and the Center for Peace, Equity and Justice (CPEJ) staff in each division. These programs

were over-enrolled and staff were able to make adjustments to accommodate the demand when possible.

Overall, the School spent \$97.60 per student that participated in Summer Bridge. It is hoped that the good will fostered between the School and the 418 students and their parents makes the School's expenditure of \$40,800 a sound investment in the community.

Friends Is Family Fund

Thanks to the generosity of the Friends community, we have been able to offer emergency financial relief for families experiencing income loss as a result of COVID-19. This relief has taken many forms, ranging from tuition payment delays to grocery vouchers to one-time tuition aid packages; FIF aid has reached 86 students from 69 Friends families to date, though families continue to reach out for support as the city endures ongoing waves of impact into the fall. A top priority for the Friends Is Family Support Committee: treating each family with dignity throughout the process and handling the details of their circumstances with discretion and confidentiality. Each individual story illuminated the humbling scope of need in the Friends community and the city more broadly. The FIF Support Committee created its own process for requesting support, focusing specifically on the testimonies of simplicity and integrity as they collected only the most essential information from families already feeling vulnerable. Responsiveness was paramount, and families received communication from the school within 24 hours of reaching out. Perhaps most profound: Five families who had requested and received a one-time tuition aid package based on job or income loss in the spring declined or returned part of the aid granted, asking specifically for the money to be returned to the FIF Fund for other families since their own income or employment situations had stabilized throughout the summer.

Director of Distance Learning Hire and Prep for Teachers Moving to Hybrid Teaching

Prior to the summer recess, the School rehired the recently departed math teacher department chair, Benjie Messinger-Barnes, this time as Director of Distance Learning. In this position, Benjie spent the summer and opening months of the school year supporting teachers with a large increase in virtual learning. In some grades, this meant helping whole courses go online, in other grades it meant increasing the ways that technology was supporting in-person learning in the pandemic era. Central to Benjie's work has been helping teachers to create a sense of community, human connection, and a forum to practice Quaker traditions and values. For example, Benjie has helped teachers learn the most effective ways to lead students in silent reflection and guided inquiry during a Zoom session. Benjie has also worked hard to make sure that as we

move forward with an increased role of technology that no child is left behind due to technical constraints or troubles with online engagement. In fact, FS teachers have spent well over 3,000 total hours on professional development related to online learning and social/emotional health in the online setting.

Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health in a Pandemic

As the Support Services Department prepared for an unpredictable fall, with a combination of reopening our school buildings, continued distance learning and/or a hybrid of the two, along with heightened conversations about racism and inequity, it was clear that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) would be a crucial framework for supporting the mental health of our students, staff and families. Throughout the summer, many mental health professionals (including our own) across NYC independent schools participated in different SEL working groups in order to harvest their collective ideas to provide a range of resources and programming. From identifying the needs of our specific community, through surveys and conversations, determining the structures for support, and recognizing the various stressors different constituencies may be experiencing, we provided space for individuals and groups to come together and share their stories, process their emotions, and learn coping skills, tools, and strategies for managing uncertain times. We also connected community members to organizations or outside practitioners for ongoing needs. We shared webinars, articles, and resources available in the larger community, including no cost and lower fee therapeutic support as well as apps for meditation, calming, and self-care.

Social-emotional learning and support plays an important role in improving learning and academic outcomes, increasing academic performance, improving attitudes and behaviors, decreasing negative behaviors, furthering personal responsibility, self-awareness, and encouraging goal-directed behavior. It reduces emotional distress, boosts social awareness, improves relationship skills, decision making, and pro-social behaviors such as kindness, sharing, and empathy. Thinking from a systems perspective, it was important to proactively anticipate and implement preventive measures and then attempt to recognize and address worries and fears at all levels - admin, faculty, parents, children. With anticipation of separation anxiety, traumatic stress, grief and loss, vulnerability, fragility, inattention, and more, we provided forums for parents, faculty, staff, and students using best practices for community well being and an understanding of the importance of 'care for the caregivers' to create a climate of support across the School. Keeping in mind that recovery from a crisis takes time and may not happen in a linear fashion—especially during a pandemic that does not have a discrete, known end, awareness, balance, and connection helps. We set and celebrate achievable goals and the resilience of the great people in our school who go above and beyond as they support and help others in times of crisis. The support provided aimed

to foster a continued sense of belonging that members of our community need to feel during times of crises as well as a sense that no one has to suffer alone and that there is help and hope.

Anti-Racism Community Dialogues & Summer Course on Race, Justice & Circle Keeping

As we became aware of incidents of lethal racial violence against Black Americans across the country, as well as experiences of racial bias within the School through Instagram postings from @BlackatFriends, we brought the community together in different forums for reflection and dialogue. Beginning monthly in May and ending in August, we ran a series of intergenerational dialogues on anti-racism open to the whole community. Those dialogues were widely attended, as community members of all ages felt the call to action on anti-racism. The first community-wide dialogue on race, for example, brought together 250 people! The dialogue series included both interracial spaces and racial affinity spaces, in alternating fashion.

As part of the Summer Bridge program, CPEJ hosted a summer course for Upper School students on Race, Justice, and Circle Keeping. Roughly 25 students enrolled in the course. Instructors used the Peacemaking Circle process to help students explore how race has impacted their own experiences as well as how it has shaped the modern world. Students learned about the different levels of racism and how they work in concert to harm individuals and communities. Then students learned how to facilitate Circles on race so that they would have the skillset to convene Circles whenever and wherever needed.

As a culminating experience in the course, these students joined CPEJ staff in facilitating the final community-wide dialogue on race in August. Additionally, this fall, these same student leaders have used their newly-acquired skills to facilitate a multitude of reflective conversations with their peers in collaboration with CPEJ staff. One of the latest Circle sessions has been a post-election dialogue held for parents, students, teachers and staff at Friends in which the student facilitated breakout groups that included many participants.

Parents Association Promotes Community

When our school had to move to remote learning last spring, the Parents Association (PA) quickly took action to implement ways to continue to promote community. Hosting everything from virtual “live” magic shows and dance parties for students to mini courses in zoom for parents, the PA helped us stay connected to one another. Each week, students and parents were sent activity challenges, such as word searches with staff names or instructions on how to create a “time capsule photo” of objects that were

important to our community during quarantine. Frequently, creative challenges would be shared widely in the Friends Weekly Digest (FWD). This fall, PA committees are working hard to keep long-held community celebrations and traditions alive; modifying parent connection opportunities in safe and socially distanced ways. The Service and Diversity and Inclusion PA programs have charged on using technology that allows parents to connect in new ways, such as sharing weekly queries in the FWD. Halloween festivities moved completely outdoors and allowed parents to gather safely in efforts to create a “spooktacular” surprise when students were dismissed which spread joy to all. The *God’s Love We Deliver* bag-decorating activities carry on as parents are given supplies to design a bag at home while zooming in to learn about the ways God’s Love supports those in need. The PA is also hosting virtual speakers for parents, faculty and staff that focus on providing support and taking care of each other during these difficult times. The partnership between the PA and the school remains strong in this unusual year and our warm and vibrant community remains bonded. The pandemic has certainly curtailed our regular programming but the commitment to community remains high.

Service Program at Friends Adapts to Pandemic Challenges

In order to provide the Friends community with more opportunities to asynchronously learn about issues of social justice, CPEJ has launched Service Learning Modules. In line with our head, hearts and hands framework, each service learning module is designed to allow participants to dive into a particular topic and learn about it using a lens of justice. The head speaks to the importance of educating ourselves about social justice issues, the heart is connected to the importance of building empathy and understanding for those most directly impacted by these issues, and the hands are a symbol of taking action. Participants have the opportunity to read articles, watch videos, and engage with others on threaded discussion boards. At the end of the module, participants have the chance to connect with organizations actively working on issues related to the theme of the module.

Prep for Election & Speak Up for Civility Community Compact

Informed by our Quaker values and inspired by a civility campaign of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance program, the Center for Peace, Equity and Justice at Friends launched a civility initiative that invites students, parents, faculty, and staff to consider ways we might pursue, through our individual and collective actions, a more civil dialogue in the public spaces of our democracy. The initiative was driven by concerns from student leaders, faculty, and administrators, who, as witnesses to the increased levels of division and polarization, wanted to find a response that calls for something better. These civility affirmations invite community members to consider how our timeless Quaker testimonies and practices can inform how we learn about and

discuss politics and other complex issues. It asks ourselves: In our classrooms and at home, what are ways we might pursue these values and practices more fully during the election and beyond? Our school environment aims to be one in which it is safe to explore—and disagree on—important topics. Recognizing that individual truth is always partial, we need to listen with openness and respect, especially to “the other,” as much as we need to speak up with clarity and conviction. Separate Zoom assemblies were held in each of the three divisions, as well as breakout groups for community dialogue around the affirmations and queries. View the Speak Up for Civility community compact [here](#). Additionally, developmentally-appropriate activities around the election were designed and implemented by teachers and student leaders in all three divisions. These ranged from a mock election in the Lower School, Circle dialogues in the Middle and Upper School advisories, to a student-moderated assembly with BIPOC panel guests.

Student Participation in FCNL Annual Meeting & Quaker Public Policy Institute

For a third year, Friends students will participate in the Friends Committee on National Legislation’s Annual Meeting and Quaker Public Policy Institute. While last year’s student group was able to meet with legislators on Capitol Hill to lobby for the repeal of the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Iraq, this year’s student representatives will call on Congress for strong action to address police abuse that results in murder and violence against Black people, the militarization of the police, and legislation that begins to transform policing. The two-day conference will connect students with Quakers from across the country in Zoom advocacy groups. Besides gaining advocacy skills from Quaker lobbying professionals, as well as the opportunity to use their voice to promote peace and justice, the dozen student participants reported that they valued the time spent working alongside Quakers young and old from states across the country to develop their persuasive talking points for their assigned meetings with political representatives.

Youth Philanthropy Initiative (YPI) Funds Nonprofits Furthering Social Justice

To complement their study of the origins of social inequality throughout 9th grade History, students participate in a service-learning project through the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI). This program gives students the opportunity to look at how social issues play out in New York City today while they learn about and work with a local social service organization. In addition, this project will emphasize a variety of academic and personal skills including presentations, collaboration, self-advocacy, research, writing, and the ability to create compelling narratives. Since the 17th century, service has been a central pillar of Friends education, and we hope to continue that tradition through this program.

Last year, students and teachers recognizing that the climate will have a bigger impact on humanity than the internet ever had, and considering Friends Seminary's call to peace, equity and justice and the Quaker testimony of stewardship, decided to represent nonprofits in the NYC area whose mission and programs worked for a sustainable future. Through this annual project, Friends students have helped to fund over \$45,000 worth of grants sponsored by the Toskan Casale Foundation and other supporters. Last year, grants were awarded to Edible Schoolyard NYC, Green City Force, and WE ACT. This spring, students have selected to focus on nonprofits working to further racial justice.

Parents New to Friends Seminary Orientation to Quaker Education

Friends Seminary prioritizes parent partnership in educating the whole child. The School believes it is important that parents have an opportunity to understand more profoundly the philosophy and pedagogy of our Quaker school. Our community's culture is strongest when every member understands the testimonies and practices that our school upholds. These core values are interwoven into all aspects of a student's experience at Friends. For these reasons, the School asks all parents new to Friends to participate in an orientation workshop to learn what makes a Quaker education unique and how these core values are infused in the classroom, our communal Meetings, our interactions with one another, as well as the world beyond. During this orientation, parents have an opportunity to unpack everything from Quaker terminology to the testimonies—with the intent to better understand a Friends approach to learning. Initial funding to launch this workshop was supported by The Sue Thomas Turner Quaker Education Fund (STTQEF), housed at the Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

Virtual Meetings for Worship

Of course, Meetings for Worship have continued despite the difficulties of social distancing. Friends Seminary got their virtual Meetings for Worship up and running as early as the first weeks in March 2020 when teachers and students all had to go remote.. These communal worship spaces have been vital for our community now more than ever. Divisions are holding regular Meetings for Worship through Zoom, as well as all-school Meetings and even constituency-specific ones such as monthly Meetings being held for alumni wanting to use the Quaker practice as a way to connect during this difficult time. As a Quaker school, we feel fortunate that our community has a means by which they can reflect together and listen for the Spirit in us.

We respectively hope these highlights address the NYQM Nominating and Governance Committee's query. The energy of the community can be seen in myriad ways that speak to the Quaker values that continue to ground us.

Submitted by Friends Seminary Administrative Committee
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