



Different BY CHOICE

Brayten Kranz '29 builds a house out of LEGOs®.



Brayten Kranz '29 looks up from the LEGO® table and smiles — he is building a house. His friend across the table is constructing a boat. Although the two boys are now enjoying some independent building time, minutes earlier they and their classmates were eagerly forming the letter U out of the small pieces. Harrisburg Academy's Junior Kindergarten (JK) class, the only full-day, academically focused program in the area, is busy today. Then again, they are busy every day, learning skills that build confidence and lead to independence.

"In one week, we do a unit and learn many things, including a letter," said Jackie Stabach, one of the Academy's JK teachers. "This week, the letter is U. Among other things, we work on the letter's sound, build it with wooden pieces, roll it out with Play-Doh, and write it on chalkboards. On another day, we might practice how it is written and used in both a traditional workbook and an electronic tablet.

"As busy as we are," she said, "I am grateful we have the time to stop and say, 'Let's talk more about how this works,' when those moments arise."

Stabach says a key reason she and fellow JK teacher, Gretchen Qualls, are able to cover so much material in Junior Kindergarten is because the Academy has chosen to support a full-day setting, one of many defining elements of the

school. This power of making independent choices allows non-public schools, such as Harrisburg Academy, to create their identity and offer something truly unique and special within the educational landscape.

DEFINING CHOICE

The concept of choice is a powerful one. It includes the act of making a selection, the power of choosing from a wide variety of options, and the benefit of selectivity in one's final choice. In education today, freedom of choice extends beyond school vouchers or tax credit programs.

The capacity to choose is at the heart of Harrisburg Academy. The Academy is an independent school, autonomous from the state and national government in its finances and governance. The Academy's trustees and administration make thoughtful choices based on data and observations, always mindful of the school's accountability to Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools (PAIS) and the International Baccalaureate (IB), its accrediting bodies. After meeting these standards, the Academy is free to operate as a mission-focused organization whose diverse community members — including current families, alumni, and faculty — reap the rewards of this freedom of choice.

"This small school community is the best environment in which to develop learners and really mold children in the ways that our mission

statement reflects," said Jim Newman, head of school. "If your goal is to provide children with the opportunity to learn how to assess, think deeply, and analyze, then you have to provide a structure for that. How we are organized gives us the latitude we need as educators to create that environment, set the structure, and support intimate classroom learning that is necessary to both achieve our mission and provide the best possible experience for our families."

The Academy chooses specific elements as the core of its identity to fulfill its mission. The school is small by choice to enable a personal experience for its students. It provides certain specific advantages derived from a strategic plan, school mission, and core values. And the school selects what and how curricular material is taught, not being bound to prescribed standardized tests, Newman said.


Beyond decisions that guide structure and governance, the Academy's people — enrolled students and their families, faculty members, and staff — make their own unique choices to be here. Each has his own story, inspiration, goal or obstacle, which makes each decision to join the Academy community distinct and special. Choice, indeed, brings power at the Academy, witnessed through this synergy of people and place, and created where all are committed to helping children grow from fresh, eager learners to seasoned young adults ready to take on the global challenges of the 21st century.



(Left): Vihaan Kamat '29 works on an alphabet writing activity.

(Right): Duncan Little '29 and Junior Kindergarten teacher, Jackie Stabach, share a story with the class. During the week, the students learned about the letter 'G'.





Reese Kimmel '26 studies the effects of light, water, air, and soil on a growing plant in a recent science lab class with teacher, Carolyn Estill-Shover '92.

CHOOSING TO LEARN AT THE ACADEMY

Rooted in deep history and 232 years of educational best-practice, the Academy proudly offers a learning environment that provides student character-building opportunities, unique classroom experiences, and strong academic outcomes. The Kimmel family made the choice this year to enroll their son, Reese '26, in 2nd grade because of the school's academic reputation. For them, the benefits of an Academy education outweighed the challenges presented by their 90-minute round-trip commute to and from Tower City, the town in which they grew up.

"I believe in what we have here," said Jackie Kimmel. "Between the strong academics, exposure to different cultures, importance of physical education, and emphasis on healthy eating, I appreciate the entire package of what Reese is exposed to. We're 100 percent all-in."

Kimmel and her husband, Woody, were both educated in the Williams Valley School District and carry fond memories of their formative years, especially when they played in a nationally competitive marching band taught by renowned instructors. The district's music program still thrives, Kimmel said, as does its athletics program.

Her family admires their local community's strong support for its public schools. "It was a really big decision for us given these reasons, but the Academy's outstanding academics outweighed everything else," Kimmel said.

Of special note, Kimmel appreciates the Academy's commitment to providing true lab science to its Kindergarten and elementary-age students and has seen her son's interest in this area develop this year. "Reese really loves science with Mrs. Shover — on the days that he has regular science and science club, you would think it was Christmas!"



Junior Kindergarten students Sophia Sandhu '29, Grant Skjoldal '29, Eli Anderson '29, and Henry Gaudion '29 paint during academic choice time.

CHOICE FROM THE START: MORE ON SETTING EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

The Academy's full-day JK program is as unique today as it was 29 years ago when the school expanded its offerings to include this program. At the time, an Academy education started at Kindergarten, when full-day preschool with a true academic focus was highly unusual in the Harrisburg area.

Paying attention to early childhood research of the mid-1980s, which stated the growing importance of setting a solid preschool foundation for children, the Academy subscribed to what experts were saying and sought to accommodate this need. Full-day Junior Kindergarten quickly became a valued component of the Academy's identity (followed by the Harrisburg Academy Threes, or "HATS," program in 1995).

"Research shows that kids of this age are so porous, soaking in everything," Stabach said. "Researchers continue to find that although Kindergarten is very important, pre-kindergarten education is even more so. It's becoming the new Kindergarten, and because of our overall commitment to academics here, adding it was a natural fit."

"It's a very special program. We do follow a curriculum but it is flexible at our choice," she continued. "We have the time to expose the students to concepts and letters and art, but still have the time for them to be social learners. Our small teacher-to-student ratios only reinforce this."

"The magic happens when the dress-up bin comes out, because the language skills come out, too!" Qualls said. "Through our unique program, we are allowing them to be academic, but also provide the little things that will prepare them for full-day Kindergarten: finding confidence and independence; speaking with a loud and strong voice; engaging with both tactile and electronic learning tools; and managing conflict in an appropriate way, among other things."

Stabach and Qualls continue to work as a teaching team at the Academy nearly 15 years after they were first hired. "When I graduated from college, I thought I'd pursue urban education," Stabach said. "Then I worked for a family whose children were enrolled at the Academy, and I knew I wanted to teach here. I get up every day and am still excited to come to work. I look forward to interactions with the children I work with and their families."

"You could feel the difference from the start when you walked into the building," Qualls said of her interview back in the mid-1990s. "You could just feel that people genuinely loved working here and choosing to be a part of this very special learning community — and they still do."

CHOICE AT THE END: PREPARING FOR COLLEGE

Just as important as solid educational beginnings, the personal support for students during their final years of high school and the college search process is at the core of the Academy's longstanding identity as a college preparatory school. For this reason, the Academy is committed to employing a full-time, dedicated college counselor. The school continues to provide sizable resources to this program to ensure student success beyond 12th grade.

College counselor, Keo Oura Kounlavong-Sabath, believes in the independent school philosophy of college counseling and its primary goals: having graduates choose and attend a college or university that is their best fit and is financially doable; be happy at their college and graduate in four years; and find satisfaction that their expectations were well-met.



Dahna Yoon '20, Tyler Quigley '20, Isabelle Borr '20, John Helm '20, and Clara Papenfuse '20 visited George Washington University during the 8th grade trip to Washington D.C. this year.

"It's shown empirically in our industry that when a college counselor can dedicate 100 percent of his or her time to this purpose, students have a higher success rate for actually going to college and graduating," Sabath said.

"It can be a very complex process, too," she continued. "There are over 4,000 colleges across the nation. To build appropriate relationships with college admissions representatives, understand the differences between many application processes, and help a student discover a school that is his or her natural fit versus a school that is a name-brand label, having this expertise and focus in-house is imperative."

The Academy's choice to support this key program, and the components of the program itself, are both measurably different than every other area school. Before an Upper School

student even applies to college, he or she has experienced a comprehensive college preparatory experience. He has seen up to 14 colleges on school-sponsored college trips; he has been exposed to more than one standardized test since his 9th grade year; and he has participated in a semester-long college preparatory class.

He has also attended Harrisburg Academy's Spring College Fair, the largest college fair in the area, and practiced interviewing with real college admissions professionals. The end result? This Academy

senior — like all of his classmates — is able to finish the college search and application process efficiently and effectively, thanks to the personal support he has received.

"Exposure is also the key," Sabath added.

"By stepping my students through the process each year in the Upper School, I can see their maturation. By the time we reach the end, I know each student I will be sending off to college. I have a multi-year view of how each will continue to grow, academically and socially, once on a college campus. College admission professionals appreciate this insight and confidence, and it can be the difference in a tough admission decision."

Sabath, herself, came to the Academy after working as an associate director of admission at Lebanon Valley College. "I made the conscious decision to 'move to the other side of the desk' because I wanted to work more with students," she said. "From the start of my career, I always knew I would work at an independent school because schools such as the Academy are willing to put in the resources, time, and effort to support a true college counseling program."



On this year's 8th grade trip, students visited a number of colleges and universities, and national organizations, including C-SPAN.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS — TRUST IN THE “FIRST CHOICE”

Education was always perceived to be the agent of social and economic mobility, Newman said. If you wanted to improve yourself, you went to school, and people believed in the need to educate everyone.

In the 1980s, people began to question the quality of the education their children were receiving after the release of the Reagan administration’s “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform” study. This information, coupled with the rapid expansion of technology, caused the marketplace of education to explode. All of a sudden, American families were presented with more educational options than ever

before, including public schools, public charter schools, private and for-profit charter schools, traditional faith-based schools, home schools, and cyber schools.

“And then there’s independent schooling,” Newman said. “Many don’t realize it was the first option, starting before the public school system did in the 1830s and ‘40s.” Following such a long history and tradition, independent schools still hold an immense amount of respect and trust, and Newman believes that the Academy’s success is largely based upon this principle, too.

“Our Board holds us fiscally accountable and sets standards as to how we have to act to meet our mission. But it doesn’t govern our daily

operations. Our choice is strengthened because we can act on our thoughts more quickly and more freely, thoughts that we think are in the best interests of our students.

“The degree to which we are focused on what is best for children is thorough — and we go to great lengths to provide what is best for them academically, socially, physically, and mentally,” he continued. “This partnership between trustees, school leadership, and parents is based upon trust, and it always will be. Since 1784, being independent has allowed us to craft our identity and choose the areas that are most valuable to our students and our school, and most relevant to our present-day society.”

Harrisburg Academy’s Board of Trustees Executive Committee. Pictured from left (front): Alison Ballantine ’91 (secretary), Seth Mendelsohn (president), and Martha Peaslee Levine (Schools Committee chair); (back): Javier Idrovo (treasurer) and Keith Clark (vice president). Not pictured: Addison Taliaferro (Enrollment & Marketing Committee chair).

