Buxton School

Disciplinary Philosophy and Practice

Founded as part of the progressive movement in education in the early part of the twentieth century, Buxton has long believed that the lived experience of building and participating in a community is the most powerful teaching tool we have. Ellen Gear Sangster, who founded Buxton in 1928, used to describe Buxton as “a pragmatic moral education.” In other words, students and faculty alike learn from their experiences—and what they learn is how to live together with others in ways that are beneficial to both the individual and the collective, how to bend the self to the whole, how to feel and use one’s social power for the good of others, and how to be a citizen who works toward a greater good.

As part of those ideals, Buxton has always approached “discipline” differently. In fact, we try to avoid the word. This is because what we are trying to do—in every aspect of Buxton life—is to educate. Our approach to wrong-doing, harm to others, harm to the community, and the breaking of our norms and customs is, at heart, an educational project. How can we help young people see the effect of their actions, take accountability for those effects, repair harm, be forgiven, and try to do better? That’s what Buxton has set out to do, as humanely as possible, since its inception.

The term “restorative justice” has been coined to describe exactly this approach, and we are proud to have been practicing that in a personal, nuanced, and growth-promoting way for almost 100 years.

We sometimes joke that Buxton “runs on conversation,” but it’s true. Over the decades, we have found that talking through problems, talking through harm, talking through the natural consequences of that harm, and talking through how to grow and get beyond either doing or being on the receiving end of harm can be a profound, long-lasting, and powerful approach. Our faculty are taught that listening to students, helping them with their problems, and helping them navigate harm, is a significant part of their jobs. Our faculty meets every weekday to discuss issues in the school, and much of what we are working through (through conversation, of course) is how best to support students as they grow up, make mistakes, and learn from them.

So what does this approach look like? A disciplinary matter can come to the faculty’s attention any number of ways:

• A faculty or staff member might witness a student misbehaving or harming another student

• A student may approach a member of the faculty with concerns about another student’s behavior and harm they may be causing themselves or others

• A student may approach a member of the faculty to report having been harmed by another student

• A student may “confess” to wrongdoing to another student, teacher, or staff member

Once a potential breach of our customs or standards has been brought to faculty attention, several things happen:

• Faculty members will talk to all the students involved, typically one-at-a-time

• Faculty will “investigate” further if necessary by talking to witnesses or others who might have knowledge, perspective, or context to bring to our understanding of an event

• Faculty will discuss the issue together to make sure we are hearing multiple perspectives and making sure we know as much about the people involved as possible

Once we have determined that a wrong has occurred, our first and most important tool is conversation. The person who has perpetuated the wrong will be required to engage in (typically) long conversations, often with more than one faculty member, to talk through what happened and to help them understand the harm involved. These conversations frequently touch on questions like:

• What effect did your actions have on the other person?

• How do you think that made them feel?

• What effect did your actions have on any bystanders?

• When you break a custom or hurt someone else, how does that effect the overall feel and function of this community?

• So much of what makes Buxton special is the level of trust between students and faculty. What happens to that trust when you break a custom or norm? How can you repair that trust?

• What can you do to make this better?

• What can you learn from this experience?

These conversations are not trivial. They are the hard work that important lessons require. And they are not over until we are satisfied that the student has really *heard* and thought about their role in making this community weaker or, in time, stronger. And they also do not end until we have come up with some kind of action that the wrongdoing can take to try to make things right.

The other half of this equation, of course, is the person who has been harmed by another member of our community. We take that equally seriously. When we become aware that someone in our community has been harmed, several things will happen:

• A faculty member will meet with them to hear about their harm and offer support.

• We will offer mental-health services from our school counselor

• We will help the student think about what might help mitigate that harm

• We will continue to support the student as they process feelings of anger, hurt, resentment, sadness, etc.

*[Note: Please see our Sexual Harm Policy for more on student support in instances of sexual abuse or harm.]*

Finally, we will try to make things right between the parties, either through a mediated conversation or through faculty intermediaries. “Making things right” requires that both parties have a basic willingness to move beyond conflict or harm, have a shared understanding that living together means being willing to forgive, grow, and move on. We understand that approaching discipline this way means that those who have been harmed by another student must practice patience, perseverance, and grace, and requires all students have the self-discipline to live with and beyond whatever mediated conclusion all parties have come to.

This process requires energy and persistence on the part of the teachers, self-examination and humility on the part of the wrong-doer, and grace and acceptance on the part of anyone on the receiving end of apologies or other restorative actions. It is also not perfect or magic. For some students, it may require several rounds for them to really “get” what they need to do differently. And we also know that, at some point, a student may just not be able to get where we need them to be and they might have to leave the community, either temporarily or permanently.

We know that purely punitive systems do not work, whether that is in the microcosm of Buxton or the macrocosm of the prison-industrial complex. We also know that what we are doing is radical and can feel counterintuitive. Sometimes students want Buxton to “do” something more overtly “punitive,” to “teach that person a lesson.” But our approach is definitely *doing* something and, we would argue, requires far more energy and commitment than simply enduring a punishment. We know that actual *learning*—that slow, imperfect, uneven process—leads to change. And that’s what education is all about.