

Why I Think the Bixby Advantage Matters: Some Observations

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As a university professor, I am constantly thinking about the learning process and how competency develops. It strikes me that the path is shaped long before students reach college. The most successful learners show enterprise and creativity in not only solving problems but also in defining them. As complexity and pace have ramped up, the students who are left behind are those who are focused on how they perform on tests; their energy is devoted to regurgitating what the teacher has said in class and memorizing definitions and details that have a limited half-life. What our children need is a 21st century education. I believe this is exactly what Bixby provides and where our public schools fail us. From what I have seen Bixby teachers deeply understand how children learn, without needing to teach to the CSAPs, a metric public schools must rely on to prove their worth. I have found Bixby's approach to the instruction of math, science and language especially eye opening. Instead of an approach that drills students on math facts and sucks the joy out of mathematical logic, my son's first-grade math classes are filled with ways that help students see the abstract operations of math in an intuitive and exciting way – arithmetic, yes, but also fractions, prime numbers, and spatial reasoning. In kindergarten, my son began to identify himself as a scientist as the class made weekly treks to a nearby pond to record their observations of environmental changes with their clipboards in hand. They started with drawing pictures of what they saw but gradually moved to writing about what they saw. I am persuaded that Bixby fosters an attitude of discovery that is the best preparation for a lifetime of learning.

Based on my experience with undergraduates and graduate students, what I find to be particularly lacking is the critical skill – not of answering questions – but of understanding what questions to ask. From what I have seen, this is a key skill that Bixby students cultivate from kindergarten. Because many challenges today are multi-dimensional and subject to perceptions, success is often driven by people who are able to make sense of ambiguity. At the college level, many students I have encountered dread ambiguity and prefer specific, step-by-step instructions that they can then apply to the next challenge they face, regardless of relevance. Such an approach instills little confidence in students that they have the ability to navigate complexity. A learning environment that focuses on testing as a way to measure effectiveness perfectly supports this mentality. Testing signals to students that the tester's definition of the problem is what matters; students need only react with an appropriate response. Bixby, because of its philosophy, class sizes, and teacher quality, is able to shift the emphasis to exploration, creativity, and leadership.

Bixby supports its academic approach to help the child “be in charge” of his learning and his destiny with the unique culture that prevails. From first grade, students are given their class schedule, individualized to each child because the classes are so small, and asked to find their way from class to class. Use of Lower Yard, a play area that can best be described as a labyrinthian network of climbing structures and ropes, is open to students who have shown they are safe, responsible and courteous. Twice-a-week swimming classes are part of the Bixby curriculum, which our dual-career household has appreciated because it ensures continuity and familiarity for our developing swimmer. What I admire most about these activities is that they foster a healthy sense of self-reliance and inspire children to tap into their own power from a very early age.