Younger, Longer, Better

Deeper Learning at Allen-Stevenson

Position Paper #2

Given how complex, interconnected, competitive and interdependent the world has become today, children need to be educated for deeper learning. They cannot memorize everything that can be known, they need to be prepared to change or extend their knowledge, and they must be ready to apply what they do know to new and ever more intricate problems. Most such challenges fuse intellectual, social, emotional, historical, technological, cultural, and geopolitical domains. Because such dilemmas cannot be solved by machines alone, a robust appreciation of complex systems is often necessary. Deeper learning is a general term that describes this approach to education.

This document describes our distinctive approach to educating boys, as we prepare them to become passionate learners and compassionate achievers. It is organized as follows:

1. How We Face Our Adaptive Educational Challenges
2. Our Vision of Our Graduates
3. Best Learning for Boys
4. Deeper Learning, Our Value Proposition

According to studies by the World Economic Forum (WEC), a variety of so-called “soft skills” are as important to adult success in the 21st Century as intelligence, discipline and expertise. For example, WEC’s list of most critical skills includes the following:

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<td>2. Critical thinking</td>
<td>7. Judgment and decision-making</td>
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<td>3. Creativity</td>
<td>8. Service orientation</td>
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<td>4. People management</td>
<td>9. Negotiation skills</td>
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<td>5. Coordinating with others</td>
<td>10. Cognitive flexibility</td>
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How best to develop these skills undergirds three central questions, which I have posed in several previous communications:

1. **What makes Allen-Stevenson’s educational experience profoundly relevant, valuable and transformative for our boys?**
2. **What can make the components of their educational experience better, even stronger?**
3. **What should be the right balance between stability and change?**

Educational coach Stephanie Rogan, the founder of Greenwich Leadership Partners, describes these as *adaptive* challenges. Different from what she terms *technical* challenges, adaptive challenges are “those that are new and do not have knowable solutions at the onset.” In order to meet adaptive challenges, she writes, a school needs “to be facile, willing to learn, and ready to innovate. It requires taking new questions, new learning, creativity, and flexible thinking.”

### 1. How We Face Our Adaptive Educational Challenges

At Allen-Stevenson, we support deeper learning in many ways. The vigorous combination of experiences in Academics, Athletics and the Arts at every grade level, along with opportunities for boys to reflect through homeroom and advisory meetings, is fundamental. In addition, the role of learning specialist through the Learning Resource Center is to support skills development for every student. Also vital is the contribution of our excellent teacher librarians and our superb technology staff through the Tisch Library Tech Commons. This mix of educational opportunities puts great teaching and learning at the very heart of what we do.

From the very start we put boys in situations where they must participate, summarize, explain, persuade or perform. Over time this practice builds their self-confidence and contributes to their deeper learning. “Younger, Longer, Better” suggests that protecting childhood—boyhood, if you will—as long as possible promotes open, flexible thinking. When students can wonder, play, explore and discover the world and the rich diversity within it, we believe they are more likely to develop the growth mindset, humility and self-confidence that positions them for achievement and fulfillment when they are older.

As boys face new challenges through the three domains—Academics, Athletics and the Arts—they accumulate a *portfolio of robust experiences*, which build their self-confidence and empower their natural curiosity. Accordingly, our mission statement declares, “We challenge our students to take suitable risks, learn from their mistakes, and support each other.” Over time this forms the *foundation* that, to quote the mission statement, “teaches boys to value the gratifying process by which excellence is attained.” They must become *agents* in their own learning. Our unique educational approach shifts the focus from *teaching* to *learning*, so that our students can become even more skillful, not simply in what they know and can do, but also in their capacities to continue learning throughout their lives.
2. Our Vision of Our Graduates

Our recent vision statement affirms what we hope to accomplish in educating boys to become passionate learners and compassionate achievers, key terms identified by EdwardsCo in their brand association and marketing research for the School. Written in advance of the Strategic Planning process and intended to be a kind of “North Star” for that process, the vision statement grew out of discussions within our professional community and with the Board of Trustees. It reads as follows:

At Allen-Stevenson we help every boy achieve his best potential within an inclusive community of joyful learners and their families. We expect him to be active and engaged in his own learning, so that he becomes intellectually, socially and emotionally strong. We help boys learn that they can make a difference, that is, to make the world a better place.

As teachers and educators, our role is to empower each boy’s natural curiosity to develop his capacities, values and skills, not only to learn about the world around us but also to value the diverse fabric of humanity. Through a collaborative culture of inquiry, we design learning experiences that challenge boys to take thoughtful risks in pursuing excellence in achieving their best potential.

We educate each boy to acquire cultural competence and global understanding, to appreciate community and engaged citizenship, and to develop the drive to share responsibility for promoting a sustainable and equitable world.

This statement has guided the aspirations of strategic planning, while expressing in fresh language Allen-Stevenson’s core values and goals in the midst of a period of change. It also reaffirms our responsibility to educate our boys about complex contemporary challenges like climate change, immigration, racial literacy, belonging and citizenship.

3. Best Learning for Boys

Starting in Kindergarten, we incorporate the intellectual, physical and artistic components of learning, as well as the social and emotional facets of learning. We always assume that learning is a process, not a static result, and that it should empower each boy’s innate curiosity. Through ample professional development opportunities, along with insights from our Learning Resource Center, we become experts on boys and their development. During each boy’s years with us, we instill the basic skills to bolster his curiosity, creativity and confidence. While boys always learn through a variety of modalities, we know that they must be active participants in their own learning.

Two recent notes eloquently articulate these themes. So as not to identify the particulars, the notes are modified slightly, but their spirit is intact. The first message was from the father of a young man who was just accepted “early decision” by a prominent university. It read,

“[My son] would not be the young man he is without Allen-Stevenson. The School provided [him] a breadth of opportunities and an environment that allowed him to challenge himself and explore his interests. I want to thank you and all of the A-S team for your academic rigor,
community and guidance. Your focus on gentleman scholars that are well rounded and contributors to the community, is to be applauded. [My son] remains extremely close to his A-S friends.”

Similarly, the grandfather of two recent graduates wrote,

“Please find enclosed a small token of appreciation for the extraordinary educational experience you and the School have provided for our grandchildren. Both boys spent their entire pre-prep days at Allen-Stevenson, and both boys flourished as a result. For us, as grandparents, it was even more important that each of them got to experience the simple joys of being kids. Allen-Stevenson allowed them the blessing of a happy youth as they were being well prepared for the inevitable challenges ahead. Congratulations and thanks to you and the faculty for a crucial and difficult job well done!”

These two notes illustrate something essential about the happy, joyful atmosphere the School creates for boys. They are two examples of how our students become both passionate learners and compassionate achievers. As a pre-secondary elementary school, we assert that “younger, longer, better” propels boys to use childhood as the singular time to develop that portfolio of robust experiences described earlier. This characteristic makes an Allen-Stevenson education the best learning for boys, one that develops a sturdy, resilient foundation for their lives.

4. Deeper Learning, Our Value Proposition

At Allen-Stevenson, we believe that life is intrinsically interesting and that a good education unlocks its mysteries. In a complex and rapidly changing world, educating boys to become passionate learners and compassionate achievers takes care and intentionality. It requires that we embrace the entire span from Kindergarten through 8th Grade. We cannot educate solely in terms of achievement testing or secondary school placement, but rather for the wonder, play, exploration and discovery that only childhood can afford.

The last two issues of Lamplighter, our Allen-Stevenson magazine, have featured these perspectives on learning. The Winter 2020 issue highlighted social and emotional learning (SEL), which helps boys connect lessons from the head and the heart. In that issue, I wrote that SEL has never been more important or more difficult and quoted Wall Street Journal columnist Julie Jargon in defining SEL as “the process by which children learn to understand and manage feelings, develop empathy for others and acquire problem-solving skills.” The Spring 2021 issue of Lamplighter addresses deeper learning in greater depth, as does the newly published web page about learning at Allen-Stevenson.

These issues show just how we cultivate “Passionate Learners, Compassionate Achievers” here at Allen-Stevenson. Supporting the whole child often leads to greater academic success because we nourish both their heads and their hearts. We pay attention to how boys and their passions change over time. We encourage each one to stretch his talents and appreciate the energy, interests and perspectives that others bring.
As a result, our graduates are more than prepared: they are self-aware, compassionate, and world ready. They are open to deeper learning. These outcomes cannot be taken for granted. They must be intentionally cultivated.

David R. Trower, Head of School

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