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Michael McCarthy
Principal
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Dear Mike,

I was asked to write about my experience of King as part of the school's accreditation process with Expeditionary Learning. I'm happy to have the opportunity to put into words at least some of what King is for us as parents, students and community. As you know, my wife and I are involved in the community and selective as to where we live, and that choice has been based solely on the quality of education available to our three kids. While we are devoted to our community and have seen it significantly change over the past five decades, we would shift location if our kids' education required it. King is what has kept us, and in fact solidified our choice to remain in the inner city.

I hope this note helps to explain the parental perspective that Sarah and I have for King, a perspective shared by countless families in our community.

Before you brought Expeditionary Learning to King, just driving by the school was an eye-opening shock that augmented the stories of violence there. Students would swarm the streets when getting out of school, fights were common, kids were everywhere seemingly looking for trouble and all too often found it within the city. Granted, this was my younger self witnessing this, but, the result of my daily drive-by observation was that it instilled for me the thought, "If I ever have kids, there's no way that the kid will be going to that school!"

Then things changed. I got married, had kids and we soon faced the challenge of educational choice-making as parents. Our city also changed and became far more urban and diverse, and luckily - as I discovered - King changed.

As slightly older parents, we choice-fully found a public hands-on elementary school education for our kids. Then, middle school was next, and with planning we looked at either moving or checking if there was a program within the city that met our and our kids' educational needs. For us we define education as academically successful, engaging for our kids - maintaining their excitement in learning, and building a solid core of emotional intelligence. What Sarah and I know about kids' development and success is that all three are critically important. Expeditionary Learning at King satisfied all three areas beyond our expectations.

We have three King kids, two graduates (twin girls now successful honor and AP students going into their junior year within Portland's largest, most diverse HS), and their brother who will be continuing into the 8th grade at King Middle School. I'll attempt to shorten this note - a full study of impact could be written on each area - by separating my comments about their and our experience of King into three areas: The Child within The Program; Vision, Intentionality and Community Within King, and Inner City Portland and Changing Maine.

The Child:

We chose the school for the hands-on learning and integrated experiential approach - both academically and developmentally - that is fundamental to Expeditionary Learning at King. At King, EL makes learning real, participatory and academically challenging for every kid's different learning style. There has been full understanding and attention to the individualistic developmental needs of our three children, and for each student at King. As parents we wanted real world experiences for our kids, inclusive of a diverse community of learners, but also safety and academic rigor. Perhaps the kids' words best express what we got.

I interviewed my 13 year old son and his King buddy about the school. Here are quotes of what they said - this is at the end of 7th grade:

Tell me about King:

It's Amazing!

What, specifically?

- The Expeditions, we can focus on one thing or problem where you can really focus on it, making it engaging and not just out of a textbook.
- Like it that we have a really strange schedule, it makes it so you don't have to go through the same routine again and again, it gives you responsibility.
- Like HOWELS for guidelines
- You can make a lot of friends
- You experience many different cultures, people, and lessons in bullying... (like what?) ...well, in how others feel and experience the world.
- I like how we have a Culminating Event and a Final Product, it gives the Expedition a purpose. And that we can inform Portland of a problem that we can make better.
- We can relate to the Expedition and it sticks in your mind so you'll remember it 10 years from now.
- Teachers are friendly and you get to know them really well and they can help you out when you need help; they can be very understanding and are flexible
- HOWLS benefit so you get credit for your effort of working up to your goal to work up to the best of your ability - they really reflect your effort in school

(My note: they're not shy when talking with adults and they ask questions continually - as is the case with all their friends, sibs and their King friends. Polite and civil engagement with adults is a common trait of King students.)

My interview with my twin 16 year old girls went a little further, reinforcing what their brother and his friend said, and also elaborating as to what King has provided them - the basics are: They feel that King prepared them for high school, taught them how to write well, analyze and question the historical and social impact of issues, excel in science and math, speak in public, and put together projects and forward their ideas for presentation. They recall the in-depth knowledge they gained from each of their expeditions, not just the content area but the integration of studies as well as the perseverance and social awareness that occurred. As one said, "King taught me how to think!" Their study skills, teamwork, and appreciation of others were honed and integrated into their practice of learning. And as parents, we recognize that their ability to stay centered in who they are, while also compassionate and supportive of others, demonstrates the emotional intelligence we wished for. FYI – as twins, they were in separate houses at King, seldom seeing one another, yet, their experience is the same.

Another indicator of success, none of my kids ever wanted to miss out on a day at King.

EL at King:

Engagement and excitement in learning, combining a planned approach with caring adult guidance via EL instruction, is what guides this success. At a developmental age when kids too often start to wane academically, EL at King captures them, engages them through plan-full expeditions and integrated approaches, makes them feel a part of not just a community of learners inside the school, but engaged members of their broader public community. They feel respected and that their own education is purposeful, that they themselves are responsible for engaging, exploring and growing that purpose. As parents, we couldn't ask for more!

As seems to be continually the case, King and EL already practice what researchers say is needed for our youth. Robert Putnam cites, in Our Kids, The American Dream in Crisis (Simon & Schuster, 2015), the loss of mentors at critical developmental times for youth is the major determinant as to whether a child goes on to college. This loss affects academic achievement and therefore both the income gap and social disparity within communities. Despite my oversimplification, the point is that EL, as incorporated into King's practice, has woven access to a variety of caring and accessible adults, supportive peers, and a community school that is engaging for all.

Academically, our kids have succeeded, as have the large and diverse number of King kids I've followed through my involvement with Portland Schools. While my family does not place a high value on score results, the children have achieved high marks in state testing, as well as within King and follow-up High School grading systems. The projects they've worked on have been engaging, stretching their comfort level and opening up new ways of looking at the world, appreciating and uncovering their own abilities, and envisioning their potential personal opportunities. Within King the purposefulness within which the school is programmatically arranged is aligned perfectly with the children's developmental growth within the critical years of 6th through 8th grade. Bonding, appreciation, teamwork, and academics are reinforced and developed within grades 6 & 7 through classwork, expeditions and integrated activities. Leadership is stressed and developed. Within 8th grade even greater academic intensity occurs within a cohesive team of diverse individuals, grounding them and preparing them for high school academically and socially. The process creates one cohesive school of caring individuals focused on each-other and learning. Old issues of safety are virtually non-existent, as safety is a natural outcome as kids and teachers share similar goals. High expectations are proposed and met as part of the daily reality at King, so that disrespect is a social oddity that has been replaced with a standard norm of one community, one engaged and respectful school. The result is an increased focus on both academics and the emotional intelligence of each student and staff member; again, excitement in both learning and teaching. EL creates the programmatic framework for this success for our kids, and its execution is through excellent leadership and an engaged and dedicated staff.

Once again, the kids both demonstrate and say it best! My 13 year old was in the car with my wife listening to the radio and the lyrics of a teen trauma-drama-song went like this, "I wish I could be like the cool kids, the cool kids! I wish I could be like the cool kids". Ben became pensive and said of King, "We don't really have that. We don't have any cool kids, we're all the same." He then went on to explain how his friends and classmates at King all look out for each other and support one another. He said he could understand that some kids elsewhere might have those feelings, but, it isn't something going on at his school.

EL at King creates a safe environment of equal learners from unequal backgrounds. The children learn respect for one-another and recognize through working together how to be supportive of others, and – perhaps more importantly – how to ask for support for themselves. With the school separated positively into two houses – creating two school houses of a smaller scale, looped 6th and 7th grades, and focused staff, each child knows their community, their mentors, and feels supported while being challenged to go further. This environment for learning, augmented by specific educational targets by grade and by individual ability – in academic and in work habits – is what has created an ongoing model of success at King. Again, leadership and staff, often the same, are always ahead of the learning standards of the day,

as they've incorporated them into each expedition and each classroom via the EL framework. Taken together, this is what makes King a model school, and so very successful for our kids.

The Broader Community:

Growing up in segregated Washington, DC, as a boy witnessing the riots there in the '60's, and now seeing the challenges faced within other cities – knowing also that our changing city of Portland could be prone to the same potentially devastating flare-ups based on inequity - it causes a questioning of what can we do on a continuing basis to help? How can we make meaningful and sustaining change within a community to offer not just understanding, but, factual opportunity for all? One answer is King. The very change in King from a violent and internally divisive school for students, staff and community, to one of safety, mutual appreciation and support, along with academic rigor through Expeditionary Learning – and no small amount of leadership - offers a path forward. Local governmental and civic leaders, business owners and higher education leaders recognize, both from what they have observed at King as well as from their actual participation with King students conducting expeditions, that King offers positive growth for all learners as they further develop as equal members of society. For our diverse community the achievement of King's "One School for all learners" translates into an expectation of One City for all with equal opportunity. With each graduating class at King, that expectation becomes a reality.

Please feel free to contact me if I can be of help.

All the best,

Russ Cox