

THIS SPACE HERE

Windsor House School “Core Principles”

Windsor House School was a democratic K–12 public school. For close to fifty years, it provided students, staff, and parents with a learning environment structured around engagement in democratic practice. Founded in 1971, it operated as part of the North Vancouver School District from 1975–2011, and as part of the Gulf Islands School District from 2012–2019. The Windsor House community continues its educational projects through the Transforming Education Society (<https://transforming-education.org/>).

* * * * *

CORE PRINCIPLES

The Windsor House philosophy is not based on the beliefs of one person or group, but rather it draws on a number of educational philosophies as well as current learning research. The following guiding principles have emerged as critical to the success of our young people.

Profound respect

Profound respect across all ages and roles strengthens relationships and makes the school a safe place for learning and healthy development.

In both personal and online communications, members of the community try to speak respectfully to and about each other. For example, when inquiring about an incident, we consider that each person involved wants to maintain his or her self-esteem, even if that person has made an error in judgement or done something the community does not support. Staff ask themselves, “Would I use this tone and language if speaking to an adult?”

Windsor House staff work hard to build strong, trust-based relationships with students, and adequate time is built into the program to develop these relationships.

Self-determination

Self-determined learning allows the student to take charge of the process, which helps ensure relevance and engagement. Young people entering the “real” world after this type of education report being well-equipped to pursue their goals and make sound decisions.

Our students have many opportunities where they can independently choose how to spend their time. They may play, read, write, reflect, and discuss. They can work on academic and creative projects, and apprentice within the community. In this way students’ natural curiosity drives them to pursue their interests, resulting in strong engagement and intrinsic motivation.

Students choose what they will learn from the classes and activities offered by staff. “Open Space” meetings take place at the beginning of the year, in which students can sign up for classes offered by staff or request classes and activities not on offer. Parents, students, alumni and volunteers offer enrichment activities.

In addition to scheduled classes, students have open access to school facilities and equipment for their projects, as well as online learning environments that allow them to work independently.

Democratic governance

Windsor House is democratically governed for two reasons. First, we believe that to function well in a democratic society, people should be given the opportunity at a young age to experience its power and understand their own responsibilities. Second, we believe that a democratic learning environment allows rights and freedoms to be distributed equally to all, regardless of age or role.

School Council is the governing body of the school and as such makes all decisions affecting the day-to-day running of the school. Young people often begin by participating only in decisions that affect them personally, but this model supports them to eventually take an interest in issues that affect the whole community.

School Council meets once a week and all students, staff, parents and volunteers in attendance have one vote. School council also decides on proposed Resolutions (which require a two-thirds majority vote to pass). Complaints that members have been unable to resolve may be brought forward for settlement by the Judicial Council, a subcommittee which functions to support conflict resolution issues.

Multi-age grouping

Our students are not placed into grades or classes but are encouraged to access school resources to pursue their own interests and goals. Multi-age learning and social groups tend to form around common interests.

Multi-age groupings allow students to learn from someone who is just a step or two ahead of them, and to reinforce their own learning through the mentorship of others. Students gain a great deal from assisting someone less able, taking responsibility to set a good example, and having the opportunity to understand that the knowledge they have to share is valuable. This scaffolded learning is very powerful.

Parent participation

Windsor House has been extremely successful in engaging parents and alumni in building and sustaining the school's vibrant community. The many and various talents and strengths of our parents, alumni, students and volunteers enrich our young people's education.

Each family agrees to donate an agreed-upon number of hours to the community, either in school hours or from home, which includes attending evening meetings and weekend work parties. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers are welcome at school with their parents, which helps maintain familial bonds between siblings and fosters empathy among the older children. Bringing entire families into the school helps build community.

The parent participation model brings adults together in an environment where they can model collaboration and respectful communication. This extended school community provides young people with many mentors to choose from.

Freedom with responsibility

Our students have many opportunities where they can independently choose how to spend their time. They are entrusted with their own motivation and direction, and the staff and school environment are in place as resources. Along with these rights and freedoms, come responsibilities. Freely given commitments must be honoured and all actions must be respectful of other community members.

The school environment is arranged such that different rooms are run by councils that determine the activities taking place there. Any student can undertake work in any room as long as he or she honours community standards and the intentions of the space as set out by the

room council. In addition to the room councils, there is a licensing system that determines levels of computer use and access to outside spaces.

Our children learn to take control of their own lives, to make autonomous decisions and follow through on them.

Accountability

Windsor House follows all of the required ministerial orders, including those for reporting and attendance.

Instead of receiving grades and report cards,* students document their own learning in portfolios and participate in several hour-long conferences with their families and their advisor teachers each year.

Source: <http://windsorhouseschool.org/core-principles-2>

* Students are issued report cards for ministerial purposes, but the parent community has collectively opted not to see them, preferring to draw on the ongoing dialogue generated through conferences, e-portfolios, and time spent in the school community to capture the “how” and “what” of students’ learning.