

CAN YOU AFFORD TO SEND YOUR CHILD TO PRIVATE SCHOOL? CAN YOU AFFORD NOT TO?

By Jim Mitchell, Alexander Dawson School

The goal of every school is to provide the best education it can for the students of today, so that they are prepared for what the world will demand of them tomorrow.

Looked at globally, the United States continues to lag behind other countries in Europe and especially Asia in almost every category. One stark exception is in creative thinking and problem solving.

As part of a delegation of United States educators invited to China to observe their teaching style and schools, I had a remarkable opportunity to meet with some of China's education leaders. Amidst their own students' remarkable success in math and science, they lamented that these same students did not know how to think creatively, and that's what they were asking us to advise them on. How does America teach kids to think creatively?

Mind you, they were not talking about the arts, i.e. painting, composing, writing, or performing, they were talking about invention, discovery, and new ideas in science, technology, and business. They noted that the United States annually had more patents issued than any other three countries combined.

While there is no single, all-encompassing answer to their question, the training of minds to think creatively, to model problem solving approaches early, and to encourage students to think originally by asking the speculative question, *What if?* helps move students in the right direction.

This kind of education can only be accomplished in schools with small class sizes, because it involves close interaction between student and teacher, and between student and student. It requires an active dialogue, and participation in the learning process so that learning becomes a personal experience.

It is typical of what we think of as a college seminar, but research shows that small classes and active student participation works at all levels.

Deborah Meyers, a nationally recognized educator, author, and consultant, was hired by the New York City Public School System to try to improve schools in Harlem, NY. After several experiments, she concluded that the one thing that would make a difference was to create schools within schools, so that students were in classes of 15-20 students instead of 25-40 students. The sense of community that was created, the idea of knowing and caring about the other students in the classroom, improved not only their test scores, but also their personal sense of pride and expectations for their own future. What she created was, in essence, an independent school environment.

The small class size, sense of community, raised expectations, personal attention, and tools for the future is what is found at independent schools.