



Open Letter to new parents

A slightly lengthy, but important and open letter to all families considering THINKschool:

Hello, my name is Shira Shvartsman. THINKschool is the brainchild of years of working with students in our community as the owner of a tutoring center, as well as years of academic research in education, linguistics, language acquisition, anthropology, and more. This background has allowed me to see the deficits in education offered by our schooling systems. It has allowed me to get to know the parents in our community and what they wish to gather from their child's schooling. It has given me a unique understanding of how children learn and what they want and should get out of attending school daily.

I have to be honest with you all: enrolling in THINKschool warrants a different way of thinking about your child's schooling. It requires shifting understanding and expectation, thinking outside the box, and being prepared for the unexpected. I'll explain why.

On a personal level, I have strong opinions about our education system, and I believe that a revolution is warranted. With THINKschool, and what I hope it will grow into, I plan to lend to that revolution. I don't take a single day or element of our school lightly, but I do believe in breaking stereotypes. Should you choose to become a part of it, you should be open to that and be willing to let your children flourish in slightly unknown waters. But they will be cared for greatly and taught well; they will love coming to school. They will be surrounded by teachers and staff who will love them and ignite an interest in learning and discovery. They will advance and be happy doing so. As a new school and model, we get better every day; we learn every day; we hear parents and their suggestions and consider them all. We evolve with your children and that will never stop, nor should it.

We are not, and will never be a fully scripted, 100% structured and organized, typical school, because children are not scripted, 100% structural and organized, typical humans. They're individuals and they deserve a learning environment that complements their wacky, whimsical, and exploring minds. That's us - we are a bit wacky, a bit crazy, and have lots of love and learning to give. We are the true definition of "outside the box." Parents of THINKschool students should be open to the understanding that our methods and approaches may come in a way that is different from what you're used to.

We believe in breaking stereotypes.

We believe that children are vastly underestimated and that, as educators, our job is to provide them the tools which they will always be able to reflect upon and use to know their worth and prove their points. We are setting the stage for the type of people our society needs – innovators, out-of-the-box thinkers, logically inclined and articulate humans. The means by which we achieve this is still the school modeling; it just might look a bit different at certain turns.

You will notice that, while we do have testing for certain subjects and at certain points throughout the year, it is not our main concern. We do not believe in testing the way that the traditional school models do. Instead, teachers assess students' progress throughout classes. How they can communicate during subject classes and how they can bring the topics they've learned into a discussion with their peers. At the beginning of a year, teachers may give more tests than later in the year. These tests are not used to assess what the students have learned, as that will have already been gathered during class, but how they test, how they apply knowledge, and how they interpret what has been taught. The first few tests serve as a tool by which teachers get to know their students. Those tests do not measure what students have learned past their ability to memorize definitions.

What testing such as that, on a consistent basis, can do is lead an otherwise amazing and capable kid to stress studying and impose unnecessary pressure on themselves. Under this stress, students are known to disassociate from the material, develop poor self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and resort to a variety of actions such as cheating. That is not the type of behavior or self-doubt we believe in promoting.

Instead, we discuss and apply learned topics to activities; we hold our parallel classes that require knowledge from varying subjects in order to complete a particular task. We believe that students learn best by doing and discussing, rather than by cramming for a test that wouldn't do more than showcase their ability to memorize. By taking these approaches, teachers are able to curate lessons to cover any deficits and talk through, explain, and reteach, if necessary, the missed materials. Specifically for science, though there may be periodic tests, the bulk of our "testing" is done through class experiments. We act out scenarios, and apply science to real life, using our hands and creating. Tests are a necessary evil, but we believe that they should be given in moderation and only for subjects or topics that warrant them. Still, our students are advanced and excel.

For subjects like English, we deviate from the typical applications of weekly sight words or vocabulary words, from typical DBQs and comprehension passages. We root our curriculum in grammar and textual cohesion. We inspire students to be curious and ask questions about the unknown. We read texts that promote thinking about the world around us and how we figure into it. We reference semantic structure for writing skills. We value creativity in these topics above all.

For math, we run from the common core applications, instead relying on the logical application of numbers, values, and their applications to the real world. What this creates is a platform through which students are able to tap into their own skills and apply them to problem-solving. On average, a math class between first and fifth grade will be about a grade level ahead of NYS standards, but this does not come from shoving difficult topics down the students' throats. Instead, this is rooted in teaching them the logical correlations amongst mathematic topics.

Our relationships with students are likewise different than can be found in many other schools, specifically public schools. Students learn to respect their teachers and, by that understanding, learn to listen, admire, and apply the knowledge their teachers share with them daily. We believe in play, in being loud, in getting dirty, and in running around. Desks and chairs are a tool for organization and each classroom, of course, possesses them. But we also believe in leniency and the fact that sitting at said desk and chair for 7-8 hours a day is ridiculous. All classrooms offer flexible seating options, including wobbly chairs, bean bags, floor mats, and more. We are known to even conduct lessons allowing students to sit crisscross applesauce on top of their desks. Whatever works.

We believe in considering the "whole child" and that education should be complementary to a child's learning style. Some children require rigor and high expectations while others flourish under the lifting of pressure. We have high expectations of our students and believe in pushing them to their abilities, but we also believe that each child should be given the opportunity to succeed in their own way.

By applying to and enrolling in our school, you understand these facets. You entrust us with this different learning model, and you agree to come in with an open mind.

I hope to see you on our learning journey. Thank you in advance for your trust!

- Shira Shvartsman

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shira Sh". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.