

2015

Faith, Learning, and Success in Mennonite High Schools: What's Working at Eastern Mennonite High School?

Ginny Birky

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty



Part of the Education Commons

Faith, Learning, and Success: What's Working in Mennonite High Schools?

by Ginny Birky, PhD

Introduction to Research Project

Background: During the 2014-2015 academic school year, I was on sabbatical leave from my work as a professor of education at George Fox University. The story that follows is a result of the sabbatical project I initiated with Mennonite Education Agency/Mennonite Schools Council and seven Mennonite high schools.

About the research: For this post-doctoral research, I personally visited seven Mennonite high schools in the fall of 2014 to determine the strengths and distinctives of the school related to school atmosphere, academics, and faith development. I visited Eastern Mennonite High School on September 29, 2014 and interviewed 16 participants: seven students, five teachers, three parents, and one administrator. Some of the teachers and parents represented more than one role, but were to speak from the identified role as much as possible. The overarching interview question was: "What are the strengths and successes at Eastern Mennonite High School?" Participants gave written consent to have their comments shared. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify recurring themes. I used the themes to organize the information into a story, explaining the themes with quotations, explanations, and examples.

Story or report: The story about Eastern Mennonite was written based on the perceptions and representations of what the participants said related to what was working and why. Every effort was made to portray the perspectives of those interviewed to get an accurate picture of what Eastern Mennonite was doing to help students be successful, engaged in school, and develop a faith.

Emergent themes. There were many similarities between the selected Mennonite high schools. They had similar values, courses, and clientele. The strengths mentioned at one school were often mentioned at other schools. However, as is true for qualitative research, the data analysis was always organic, so the themes emerged as I immersed myself in the story-telling. Because of similarities between schools, it is important to remember the absence of a theme, quality, or characteristic does not necessarily mean it was absent at the school.

Limitations and disclaimers: It is also important to understand a limitation of the study. I interviewed only a representative sampling of persons from each stakeholder group. Participants spoke for themselves, so the narrative is representative of the participants' perspectives, and does not necessarily represent all perspectives at the particular school. Also, each school's story should be read as one that stands alone rather than used as a basis of comparison to other schools. Each story mentions the names of the people I interviewed. The first time they were mentioned I included the group they represented (student, teacher, parent, or administrator). I intentionally did not use the names of other persons at the school who may have been mentioned by the persons interviewed.

I hope you enjoy reading about the excellent Mennonite high schools I visited. Our Mennonite high schools are strong in the areas of community, academic excellence, and faith integration.

Ginny Birky
George Fox University
gbirky@georgefox.edu

Faith, Learning, and Success in Mennonite High Schools: What's Working at Eastern Mennonite High School?

Eastern Mennonite High School was founded in 1917 by the Mennonite Church and is located in the city limits of Harrisonburg, Virginia. It is a member of the Mennonite Schools Council and accredited by the Virginia Association of Independent Schools, AdvanceEd, and Mennonite Education Agency.

Eastern Mennonite High School serves approximately 190 students in grades 9-12. The high school student body includes around 19% from ethnically diverse or non-white backgrounds. The percentage of international students at the high school is 8.5%, coming from countries such as Saudi Arabia, China, S. Korea, Paraguay, Uganda, and Germany. Students come from a wide variety of church denominations and faith backgrounds.

Students at Eastern Mennonite High School are supported by approximately 20 FTE faculty members. A Head of School oversees the entire K-12 Eastern Mennonite School, and a principal is assigned to the middle/high school levels. In addition, staff members provide support for both students and other employees in the school.

Mission: Eastern Mennonite School joins home and church in calling students to faith in Jesus Christ, academic excellence, personal integrity, and compassionate service in the world.

Vision Statement (Draft): Eastern Mennonite School aspires to be an accessible and inviting learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and reflects Christ's light.

Eastern Mennonite School
801 Parkwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22802
Principal: Phil Landes
Head of School: Paul G. Leaman
<http://www.easternmennoniteschool.org/>



*Paul Leaman
Head of School*



*Phil Landes
Middle/High Principal*

The following pages describe the themes that emerged from interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administrators and from an analysis of the recorded and transcribed interviews.

Significant Strengths: What's Working at EMHS?

Participants in this study emphasized *community*, *caring*, and *collegiality* as Eastern Mennonite High School's greatest strengths. In addition, *teacher autonomy* and *contributions of faith* were very strong. This report is organized around the description of these themes.

The Three C's

"We actually moved to Harrisonburg so all the kids could go to EMHS," said Eva, a parent of three children, two of whom have graduated. Questioned further, the main reasons she and her husband sent their children to Eastern Mennonite was because of the atmosphere/environment and the personal qualities that she believed her children could acquire by attending. Mr. Landes, principal of the secondary school at Eastern Mennonite School, frequently hears similar comments from parents. He indicated that other schools in the area are very strong, "so people don't choose our school because it's their only option for a good education. There's got to be other reasons a parent would spend [lots of money] on tuition each year. Parents make a conscious choice to send their children to us for an education. They've bought in because they believe in this type of education." Many parents articulate their support of EMHS has something to do with the atmosphere or environment. Parents, teachers, and students describe what they mean in a variety of ways, depending on what was most important to them: the presence of *community*, a *caring* atmosphere, and strong *collegiality*.

Community. Mrs. Cranston was in her fourth year teaching at EMHS and was quick to share that the best thing about EMHS was community. She defined it as a sense of "being on the side of our students and that we're all in this together." She credited her teacher colleagues for modeling to her their concern about students at both a family level and a personal level. "We cheer them on. It's kind of the ethos here."



Students perceived community to be when they were known. Haley, an eleventh grader, said, "I notice that everyone knows my name. They know who I am in the hallway and they call my name. You really are treated like a person. Teachers want you to have an individualized path through high school according to who you are and not who everyone else is. It's probably easier because it's smaller here, but everyone is just one big family. I know people are going to be nice to me and easy to talk to."



Andre, also an eleventh grader, echoed what Haley said, but added another perspective: "Before I came here, not only did I not know that many people, but I didn't necessarily want to know that many people." Being small was also important to senior student Esther because of the ability to know everyone's name and talk to each person at some time. LJ, a senior, commented that the smaller size allowed students to have better relationships with their peers and their teachers. And to Keith, father of three EMHS students, it was his number one strength – small class size.

LJ shared his perception of what he meant by a good atmosphere: “It’s a vibe of all the positive people around you.” He believed that because of the small size of the school, “people don’t purposely put down other students. It’s more of a family-based school environment.” Eva loved the type of people -- both kids and adults -- that surround her children at EMHS. She said they did not leave their last school to escape anything negative, but “here there is just a different level of kindness and respect.” Soon after her son started at EMHS, she asked him if the students were nice. He responded, “Mom, you have to remember it’s abnormal here for one of the kids not to be nice!” Eva concluded by saying, “Those things are priceless to me—that’s what I want for my kids.”

Ruby, a parent of two EMHS students, also identified community as one of the strengths of EMHS. She appreciated how the high school does a good job of “incorporating all of the aspects of my kids’ life. They minister to the whole child.” The school at Eastern Mennonite is community for her entire family; they care for each other, carpool, attend activities together, and do social things with this group of people. As a result, she felt it was easy to integrate all aspects of their lives. She said, “It seems like they mesh together very well.” Mrs. Cranston explained community for her: “We see each other, know each other, go to church together, and are aware of each other’s situations – these are elements of a school community and it makes the distance between us smaller.”

Keith observed that students accept each other and get along well. He said cliques rarely develop and friendships include a broad range of teenagers who have multiple friend groups. He appreciated that students seemed to identify more as a whole class rather than individual groups. Seeing each other as “one” enhances the community as a whole and each person individually.

Teachers, parents, and administrators all mentioned the extent of family and parent involvement in the business and activities of the school. Mr. Landes said parents want to be involved in their children’s education, not only at home, but also at school.

Caring. Mrs. Cranston thought the small school allowed them to “pay more attention to individual students and families when there were specific needs.” Ruby said the school community cares for each other when there is grief and when there is happiness.

LJ and junior student Emily both discussed the level of caring that takes place at EMHS. They talked about several tragedies in the last few years – multiple parent deaths, illness, and suicide. Emily said she especially remembers a morning when a student had just lost her father and they had a meeting in the auditorium. “Mr. Landis, the principal, broke the news to everyone and then it was more of a laid-back kind of day. Mr. Yoder and the counselors were available to talk to people if students needed to talk. And the next day school was out earlier in case anybody wanted to go to the funeral.”



Emily and LJ were impressed how much everyone came together during those times. Emily said, “No one really judges anyone, and everyone’s just there to lend a hand.”

Students learn how much faculty care when teachers offer help at unconventional times. Mr. Stutzman teaches a variety of classes (English, Bible, Sociology, and more) and gives his students the option of calling him anytime day or night. He said, “Not many do or I wouldn’t offer it, but for anyone who is really struggling, it’s something I can do.”

Just as someone going through a difficult time is cared for by the community, the same is true for a student who fails the community in one way or another. At EMHS, there is no prescription that applies to every offense. Instead it is much more individualized. Mr. Landes talked about their methods of addressing student challenges: “We use the restorative justice model here. I love that. When there’s an issue with a student, I love sitting down with parents and family to bring the whole community into the discussion. That’s a distinctive in our school for sure.” While the whole staff has had some training in restorative justice, Mr. Landes and one of the counselors are certified in the restorative justice model.

When teachers know students well enough, they give guidance in personal ways. Mrs. Bender, both family and consumer science teacher and parent, gave an example from her son’s student days at EMHS. She said that sometime during her son’s senior year every one of his teachers gave him input on vocational areas he should consider. “It was very influential,” she said. “It started him in a direction that he wouldn’t have seriously considered otherwise. For him to have those gifts recognized by another adult has been very important.”

Collegiality. Members of the community experienced a spirit of collaboration between all constituent groups, which then encourages positive actions throughout the school. Mrs. Cranston said the tone is one of collegiality. “I feel supported, and when teachers feel supported, they are better able to support the students when they need empathy or understanding in individual situations.” Mr. Landes echoed this response when he talked about how members of the community work collectively towards a common goal. “The sense of working together extends to all members of the community. EMHS staff, parents, and students are different because when you have to pay money to go to school, there’s a different level of buy-in to what goes on here.” From the perspective of a parent, Eva concurred when she said, “It’s a huge positive that teachers are receptive to listening to parents and listening to students. They’re very focused on the kids.”

Perhaps collegiality is a result of satisfaction. Andre’s comment of “I love it here” was a common sentiment of many. Rachael, a sophomore student, didn’t think she had talked to anyone at EMHS that didn’t “have something nice to say about someone else. They are always willing to help with anything. It’s just a nice place.”

Collegiality generates trust. Students in particular appreciated a sense of freedom and trust at EMHS. Rachael said it was great to have lockers without locks on them, leave backpacks anywhere, and have the freedom at lunch to hang out in the Commons instead of be restricted to a specific area. She said, “I definitely feel more adult-like here. It’s kind of preparing you for college.” Andre added he was glad not to be assigned to a particular lunch table and that he could use a backpack to carry his books. He said, “There’s a lot more freedom and a lot more trust, and it makes things easier.”



Mrs. Bender stated a similar sentiment from the perspective of a teacher. She said there is an “enormous amount of trust for students, which translates into freedom to make decisions and freedom to come and go. It’s assumed that you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. People look for the good. Of course when they blow it, we deal with it appropriately.” Mrs. Bender felt less regimentation gave students room to grow, develop, and try new things.

As an administrator, Mr. Landes shared his angle on the concept of trust: “When you’re a young person and somebody extends a level of trust to you, you rise up to a different level. We trust our students... There’s also a level of trust that I feel between other administrators, staff, and teachers here, that nobody is going to be standing over me every day making sure I’m clocking in and clocking out, that sort of thing. They trust I’ll do my job. I think the feeling is extended to our students at a different level, which translates into kids that are more thoughtful about others.”

Teacher Autonomy

A common theme among teachers was the ability they had to make decisions in their departments and classrooms. Mrs. Cranston said, “We work together well, but we have a lot of independence.” In order to understand the context of teachers’ work and their ability and willingness to work together at EMHS, some background may be helpful.

Teachers. “One of our absolute strengths here is the faculty,” someone said about EMHS. “All of our teachers are passionate about helping kids, but they’re also passionate about their content. They know it inside and out. They engage in it both inside and outside of school. And they bring to the classroom unique experiences that enrich the content, rather than just trying to [use] some syllabus that was outlined for them.” Mrs. Roth, US history and government teacher, affirmed this comment when she said one of the strengths of the school is that teachers love what they do. “We love our content area and we love teaching, and that makes a huge difference.” Most of all, Mrs. Roth loved the personal connections she had with both her fellow teachers and “especially my students.” Mr. Stutzman voiced a similar sentiment when he said, “Yeah, I love what I do. I love our students. It’s just a super place to be.”

Elijah, a tenth-grader, said this about teachers at EMHS: “They help you learn the information and keep you excited about the subject. They also challenge you without overwhelming you with work. There are differences, but there’s always something I like about each of my teachers.” Esther was another student with positive comments about the personal relationships she had with her teachers and their availability to her. She appreciated feeling comfortable enough to ask questions during class and the invitation to seek help after school.



Ruby referred to the availability of teachers as being “phenomenal.” Students may come early, stay late, call, e-mail, or text. Teachers also attend extra-curricular events. On another topic, Ruby believed teacher knowledge and perspectives were strengthened by the fact that many of them had been in service or mission work somewhere in the world. They share these overseas experiences in chapel and in their classrooms. Ruby reiterated how happy her daughter had been with the teachers she has had.

Both Mrs. Roth and Mr. Stutzman said their relationships with students weren’t just related to learning content, but also about life outside of academics. Mrs. Roth said, “It’s more about the life lessons they’ve learned or the times when we sat there and listened to them for 45 minutes during our free periods to talk about what’s going on in their life. One of my favorite things here is that our faith can come into our discussions; that is just extraordinary.” Mr. Stutzman commented that for him teaching at EMHS was more of a ministry than a job.

Mr. Landes' comments summarized these sentiments: "Teachers here are not paid what they could be if they were just a mile down the road. They choose to be here because they believe in Christian education. They believe in the school, and that translates into a different experience for a student in the classroom. You can talk about the fact that we have fewer students in class, but really, I think the difference is that teachers and staff choose to be here. And that creates a unique experience for our students."

Courses. EMHS has seven periods a day. The smaller class size was again identified by several people as an asset at EMHS. Andre believed fewer students in the class made them more individualized. "You don't feel you're part of a crowd. You can ask questions and have conversations." LJ also credited smaller classes to having more one-on-one time with his teachers.

EMHS offers a variety of courses in addition to the core academic areas. As Mr. Blosser, upper level math teacher said, "We recognize that not all of our students will go to college." Whether students go to college or not, elective courses help round out their high school experience. Ruby referred to them as "experiential courses" and believed they were "high on the list of good things here."

The elective courses allow adolescents to experience as many pursuits as possible and figure out what areas they most enjoy. Many content areas offer quarter classes, providing greater flexibility and more opportunities to take electives: art, music, family and consumer science, technology education, and some English classes. While quarter classes can be a scheduling challenge, they have been around for a long time for the purpose of enhancing student opportunity.



Mrs. Bender teaches family and consumer science courses, which include food science, nutrition, ethnic foods, housing, interior design, human development, and sewing. In human development the curriculum includes the whole lifespan, conception to death, which allows students to focus on all the life choices people make related to good stewardship of the body and mind, their time, and other resources. Mrs. Bender recognized these decisions as "choices of integrity" all along the way. In foods classes she emphasizes hospitality, "which is an opportunity for friendship, for sharing, for service, even for missions. I think it's just one of the best ways to go about sharing the Word with other people."

As a senior, LJ enjoyed his electives, which were mostly quarter classes. He and Emily referred to several other course titles they had taken and enjoyed: woodworking, car care, drawing, guitar, robotics, 3-D printing, and pottery. Music, art, and drama were strong programs and also popular course offerings. Mr. Landes said, "You would think a small school would limit classes, but quarter classes allow us to offer more."

Rigor and support. "Academics is a huge strength," said Mrs. Bender who was once a student at EMHS herself. EMHS provides a quality education which prepares students for college. According to Mr. Blosser, "it is one of our goals to serve our college-bound clientele, and we want to send them

off well-prepared.” Both LJ and Emily had heard from graduates how well they were prepared for college, so they were confident in their own preparation.

Parents concurred. Eva said, “EMHS has a reputation for being academically sound.” She said her kids were over-achievers and were doing well after completing their education at EMHS. Two had graduated and were in medical and engineering school; both felt prepared for college. Eva credited EMHS with helping them develop strong comprehension and communication skills. Keith said one of his alumni sons was a national merit scholar, started his own business, and is also in an engineering program. He believed EMHS had a “college-going culture.”

Esther shared her student perspective on rigor: “There’s encouragement to do the best you can academically, both from our teachers and from our friends. Our grading scale is different. It’s really challenging because almost everyone here cares about academics, whether it is for a test or an exam or even just homework. The work load alone is definitely good preparation.”

While it isn’t the only way to gauge how well students are prepared for college, SAT student scores are informative as to whether “we’re hitting what we’re supposed to hit,” said Mr. Stutzman. He said most students take the SAT test, not just those at the top. “Our scores have been pretty spectacular. I feel good about the rigor here.”



One of the areas of excellence is in the area of writing. Mrs. Bender shared an example from her son’s experience. He was chosen for an entry-level minimum-wage job in a machine shop. The employer said her son got the job out of 300 applicants because he could write a coherent and error-free cover letter. Mrs. Bender attributed her son’s ability to write to the emphasis put on writing at EMHS. Mr. Stutzman affirmed they have worked hard at writing across the curriculum. He said every semester-long class requires at least one writing assignment during the semester.

The science department has a good reputation at EMHS; both the former and current biology teacher have been recognized for outstanding teaching. When Rachael talked about quality teachers, she mentioned the teacher who was awarded Virginia’s “Outstanding Biology Teacher” for 2013. He led a variety of science-related extended study trips to special locations, such as national parks and Alaska, as well as more local environments. He also organized a 500-student BioTech Symposium EMHS hosts annually; it includes speakers and workshops related to current scientific issues. Rachael said, “I’m pretty sure he’s inspired tons of people to become biologists.”

According to Mr. Landes, a former biology teacher himself, the concept of “gel electrophoresis” is typically taught in an AP biology class. However, he had recently observed it being taught in a general biology class at EMHS. He realized students in the class were being exposed to fairly expensive equipment and advanced material at a young age, having the potential for greater preparation and confidence when students take biology in college. He said students who start at EMHS and go to college “usually find a smooth transition.”

A strong independent research program allows students to take a class and do independent research in a subject area of their choice. In order to receive credit, they follow a protocol which involves choosing an area of interest, connecting with professors at local colleges, conducting new research, and then sharing the results. Most of their time is spent in the community doing lab work, field

work, or library research. Students work very independently, although they work with an assigned teacher for guidance. Keith said both his son and daughter had the ability to do this kind of research. He said it was “the highest level of independent research, and they did it from high school.” His daughter is now in college and “has the opportunity to do things she wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise. They put her into a program that has her continuing part of that work. Where else would you have the chance to do that?”

EMHS was one of the first schools to offer a unique online course as a pilot project. “Global Anabaptism” registers students from EMHS and has included students from as far away as California. It is conducted through Mennonite Schools Council, but is actually taught by an EMHS faculty member who loves technology and is interested in more online teaching. As Mr. Landes said: “What a cool thing to open up global Anabaptism to the world!” Other online options are open to students who need a course EMHS does not teach.

Students referred to the academic programs as a strong component of EMHS. There is a solid commitment to the Honors program and six AP courses (calculus, statistics, biology, world history, English literature, and Spanish). In addition, some students sign up for a *Virtual Virginia* class period where they may take AP classes not offered at EMHS. The grading scale is weighted to recognize the added academic rigor associated with these courses. Mr. Stutzman said written papers at EMHS are sometimes comparable to papers he wrote in college. Speaking from a parent perspective for a moment, he said, “It’s manageable and it’s good. The rigor will serve them well.”

Rachael enjoyed going to school with other students with similar “academic values.” She believed students want to work hard and get good AP grades along with college credit. She said students take their coursework seriously and with a “sense of urgency.” Once you “reach the top,” Rachael believed it was more a sense of satisfaction than of competition. “I like knowing that others value education as much as I do. It rubs off on the rest of us.”

Students found themselves juggling their academics with sports, clubs, and extra-curricular activities. Haley said time management was more important at EMHS. Rachael added, “Like today, I have a game at 6 pm, so I probably won’t get home until 8 pm. And I also have a cello lesson.”

Not only does EMHS have academic rigor, but it also provides support for those who need it. Mrs. Roth said it another way, “We can push for the rigor because we have a lot of good support.” These support services include a reading and studies skills program, which helps students who struggle with taking responsibility, due dates, task completion, and organization. It is offered as a period in their schedule so students can work on homework, study skills, or take a test. Peer tutoring is also available, as is individual tutoring. In addition, there are several alternative courses available for students who want or need a different path.

Ruby made a statement about the current level of support available for students. She said, “A couple years ago I was questioning whether or not we were an exclusive school because I didn’t see a lot of opportunity for special needs kids. But oh my goodness, that’s huge now. There’s a lot of opportunity and it’s been addressed, and those children are now having an opportunity to be here as well.”



Related to Ruby's comment was an observation made by Mr. Stutzman. He said, "I'm always amazed at how well our students interact with kids who come through with major learning disabilities. We've had kids with significant inabilities who are mainstreamed in our classes, and the other kids just flow with it. They must see it modeled by older students doing the same thing, but it's just spectacular." About two years ago, a student with a disability was nominated by peers to receive one of the three senior awards given to a deserving student. Mrs. Roth said, it was not out of pity, but out of honor. "I feel like students here learn to recognize the gifts in others even if their unique gifts are different from what the typical high schooler would tell you is a gift."

Extra-curricular activities. While students go to school for academic coursework, many of them extend the school day with extra-curricular activities. Being small gives students the opportunity to be involved in many ways. Mr. Landes said, "You're not competing against 100 or 200 other people. And the quality of these programs is phenomenal. We're competitive at the state and national level in a lot of these areas, which is amazing for a school [our size]."



A student and a parent both highlighted touring choir, which travels to Europe every other year. Esther said it was a wonderful experience to sing in concerts and travel with faculty and sponsors. Ruby shared an experience her daughter had that was "an extremely faith-challenging" event for her, but strengthened her understanding of God and her place in the world. The group was in Romania and her daughter was touched to see "so many people with so little, but yet they were so happy." Ruby's daughter knew she had much in comparison to people there and it changed her outlook.

Elijah loved orchestra and music. Andre enjoyed being involved in sports, choir, orchestra, and TSA (Technology Student Association). Rachael said there were "tons of sports" at EMHS. She added, "Sports are amazing because everyone is so supportive about trying out, even if you don't make the team."

Students seldom had to choose between academics or sports or music. Somehow EMHS accommodates them all, and students benefit as a result. Eva remembers a time at a baseball game when half the team left for an orchestra performance immediately following the final whistle of the game. She said, "It goes back to students here being well-rounded and accepted. They're in choir, they're in classes, they're out on the field, and you just enjoy it and take pride in your institution."

Approximately 22 clubs were in place, all initiated by students. Students could start a club with any focus by writing a proposal, organizing a group, finding a sponsor, and getting approval from Mr. Landes. Haley felt there were some unique opportunities in clubs that she never had before: Garden Club, Yarn Club, Girls' Soccer Club, Skateboarding Club, Fly Fishing Club, Vinyl Club, and more. A favorite for Elijah was the Red Hymnal Club -- students get together on certain days of the week and sing from the Mennonite "red hymnal" in different locations in the school. He also enjoyed the Math League, a group that got together during lunch to see how many "very hard" problems they could solve. Haley believed the variety of activities pushed her to try new things. "They make me want to participate more when I see my friends explore different things too. It's just helped shape me into who I am."

LJ was enthusiastic about working on an old 1968 Mustang in Automotive Club, now in its third year. The group started out with about \$300 of seed money in a cheap wrecked car. After selling off some parts, they were able to increase their assets to about \$10,000. The club also had two classic Mustangs, a motorcycle, and a couple go-karts that were all club-owned. After paying for club

members to attend play-off games, they gave money towards buying a new bus and also to the Red Hymnal Club to buy more copies of the old red hymnal.

These activities enhance the academic aspect of school and give students additional opportunities to extend their course offerings and enrich their lives.

Critical thinking. Teachers encourage students to think critically about their course material. Mr. Stutzman deliberately asks his students to be critical of what is read and verbalized in class. Then “when students seem to be nodding along, I’ll ask them, ‘Now, why do you believe this?’ For me, it is part of helping them recognize it’s what you have to do” in order to function well in society and make wise decisions.



Mrs. Roth said having a good relationship with students helps them feel safe and able to question or critically think about a topic. She shared an example from the previous week when she used Wikipedia as one of her sources for a court case. Students in two out of three of her government classes questioned her on why she used Wikipedia. She explained to them her thinking process—that she has enough experience to critically



evaluate sources, it wasn’t her only source, etc. Mrs. Roth felt like it was important to allow students to ask questions about the process, challenge them to articulate their thinking, and allow them to debate back and forth. She said, “I want my students to know I am not the keeper of the information. We want to know and hear each other.”

Because the social studies department encourages students to think deeply, Mrs. Roth commented that this year faculty chose to read the book, “*Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?: Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7-12*.” She said, “We really concentrate in our discipline to move beyond giving students the one and only right answer to encouraging them to critically think.”

The math department also incorporated critical thinking. Mr. Blosser said last year was the final year to use an old textbook in Algebra II, so he decided to eliminate the textbook altogether, and instead teach using context-based instruction. He said, “Instead of saying, ‘Here’s how you solve an equation. Now do 50 like it,’ I started every lesson with a situational problem. And I said, ‘Here’s the situation. What would you do to solve the problem or answer the question?’ I had students work in groups and use their intuition and their previous experiences to solve the problems. I tried to make it really tangible so students could see that the math we learn has applications.” He concluded by saying, “It’s my goal for students to never ask me, ‘How am I ever going to use this?’”

Emily appreciated the opportunity to do worthwhile and meaningful projects instead of busy work. She was three weeks from the due date for a personal finance project in her economics class. Her topic was “Is College Worth It?” Her task was to investigate the amount of money spent on college, and whether it was worth the time and effort for her career down the road.

Ruby shared an example of her daughter's ability to stretch herself. Her daughter was an artist and needed a project for her AP Spanish class, so the Spanish teacher allowed her to paint some murals in his classroom. Ruby thought it was a great project because in the process, her daughter had to explore further content in Spanish, and then integrate the research into her art work in a way that would be meaningful for her. Ruby was grateful her daughter had the opportunity to combine experiential learning with a project for which she had passion.



Autonomy. For Mr. Stutzman, teacher autonomy was near the top of his list of strengths for EMHS. He said, “For me as a teacher it’s the ability and the freedom to go directions that excite me and which I think are educationally valuable. If I’m pumped about whatever it is, generally my students are too. A lot of my classes are dialogue and conversations, so it allows me to go in a variety of directions. No class ever ends up being the same and I’m ADHD enough that I really appreciate that possibility. So for example, if I’ve got a group of kids who are really excited about one particular set of concerns in my World Issues class, I can go that direction and not go the traditional route of being required to stay within the parameters of the curriculum. And you know what? I don’t remember anything from high school other than the stuff that I was really interested in or that a teacher was really interested in. Content changes anyway.”

Mrs. Roth was in agreement. Although she recognized the value of a set curriculum and said she uses them as a guide, she was glad she did not have to follow Virginia’s Standards of Learning (SOL) step by step. She believed not being tied to the SOLs gave her freedom to teach from a more global perspective. In US History she found a lot of latitude to add stories that might not be in the text book, particularly accounts of pacifists in many of the conflicts throughout the history of the United States. She invites students to share personal stories of grandparents or relatives who chose alternative service in place of going to war. She also likes to include stories about the importance of religion in the development of the colonies.

Mathematics teacher Mr. Blosser believed that because of the latitude teachers are given, they are free to determine what works best with their students. “For our teachers, that opportunity is tremendous. I’m fortunate to be able to teach AP calculus as a young teacher. When I came here seven years ago, we didn’t offer that course. I felt we needed to offer it, so I proposed it, and as a newbie, got to teach the highest level math course.”



Teachers credited administration for supporting their imaginative requests. Mr. Blosser said, “The administration trusts the teachers and wants to support creative initiatives and endeavors because they know teachers will make it something special and worthwhile if they have the passion, background, and knowledge.” Mr. Blosser shared other examples from the work of his colleagues: “For instance, our science teachers are people who have actually engaged in research. Some teachers take our kids on trips across the country to places they know will enrich their lives. Our Bible teachers are people who are deeply involved in their churches. Some of them are activists in certain political arenas.

And so they bring that to the classroom because it's something they care about." Mr. Blosser continued to describe his own way of "always thinking mathematically," and shared ways he uses this passion and expertise with students in his classroom.

While teachers valued autonomy, they also enjoyed working together as departments. Teachers have worked on aligning all levels of their curriculum so they know what is included in each course their students take. Mr. Stutzman articulated faculty teamwork: "It's collaborative; it's a decision together." Teachers seemed to have the best of both worlds when it came to autonomy and accountability for day-to-day teaching—some freedom and some collaboration/guidance.

Contributions to faith

Keith, a parent of three children, credited the atmosphere at EMHS for ethical teaching and the positive influence it had on his children. He said, "All my children are believers. But if it hadn't been for EMHS, I am not sure they would be. The environment at EMHS has been a tipping point [in their lives]." Parents and students credit teacher's lives as role models, chapel, Bible courses, and integration of faith for the Christian environment they appreciate.

The most obvious influences on faith development are the required chapels and Bible classes. But every EMHS employee signs a Statement of Faith, so individually students are mentored and surrounded by Christian adults of similar faith, and "those interactions are extremely important in faith development," said Mr. Landes.

Bible classes. Bible classes motivate students to consider the application of faith in their own lives. Students are confronted with the questions: *So you are a person of faith. What does that mean for you in your day-to-day life, and how does that impact you?* Esther said without Bible classes "I probably wouldn't have time to study the Word and all those things. So, Bible classes are really helpful in growing my faith."

At the end of their senior year, students give a 20-minute presentation in front of family, teachers, and fellow students. According to Eva, "it's a big deal." They talk about their family, faith, challenges, and how they are going to continue their faith journey after they leave EMHS. Eva said it's such a "great night" and has motivated her to attend 15 or 20 presentations beyond those of her own sons' speeches.

Chapel. Mrs. Bender spoke from her perspective as a parent when she said, "Why do I send my kids to EMHS? Because of chapel. I love chapel, and I love it that as a teacher I get to see what all our students are exposed to. It's so much more than Biblical teaching. It gives them a wider view of the church and a window on the world. They get to hear people talk from all over the world—MCC'ers, missionaries, and local folks talking about how God is working right here in our community."



Elijah said there weren't many chapels he didn't like, but he loved the singing chapels. He said, "When we sing the hymns I am just blown away. It sounds so professional and amazing."

“Chapel is a key strength here because I love hearing the speakers,” said Esther. “I just like hearing people’s perspectives because that helps me know my own faith so when I do go on to college, I know how to represent and defend my faith.” LJ said chapel speakers “often spark a conversation and make you think about it throughout the whole day.” Keith said, “Chapel creates a culture in students’ minds about what’s important and what’s not. It doesn’t replace church, but in some ways it’s more powerful than church because it’s all the other students around them that are participating and learning about their Christ, the Bible, and the Good News through just going to school. I think that is incredibly valuable.” Eva said she heard students say they were glad for chapel because it brings the whole school community together for that one period each day. She believed the experience of all being in one place made an impact on them.

The community includes alumni and friends of EMHS who occasionally bring a chapel message. Parents and the community are invited to attend chapel services. Weekly Neighbor Groups provide a time for students to learn to know each other and gain spiritual direction under the mentorship of a faculty member.



Mennonite & Anabaptist connections. While EMHS embraces Mennonite and Anabaptist teachings and theology, a strength of the high school is that students are from many church denominations and backgrounds. Mr. Landes said, “Sometimes students come to us with different values, but they understand that we’re a peace church. We don’t expect everyone to embrace our version of a Christian school.” But parents and students voiced their support of EMHS’s beliefs, indicating they particularly embrace the values of peace, justice, and service.

Mr. Landes credited the diversity of the student population with enhancing faith perspectives. He said, “When I went to school here in the late 70s we were about 90% Mennonite; now we’re about 60%. That sounds like a negative, but for me it’s a positive. When I came here, one of the things I had missed out on was a more diverse faith perspective. There are students here from all walks of faith and even some without faith. I think that’s good for our kids. I feel good that my children are going to a school that is more diverse than when I was going here.”



Because EMHS believes that Christ demonstrated inclusivity, students have equal opportunities in terms of participation and leadership. As a parent, Keith affirmed the inclusiveness of EMHS. According to Mrs. Bender, faculty and staff work hard at being inviting and not alienating.

As mentioned previously, Mrs. Roth finds a perfect opportunity to integrate Mennonite values into her government classes by having students bring in stories of their relatives who participated in Civilian Public Service or served the government in alternate ways. She said, “Because our faith informs our actions as a citizen (how you vote, pay taxes, march for a cause, etc.), it’s appropriate to address these values.” Mrs. Roth also believed that discussing current events, such as ISIS and Ferguson, Missouri, caused her students to grapple “with what faith’s role in politics should be.” She saw it as a way to incorporate faith into her content area. While Mrs. Roth brings tough issues to class for students to wrestle with, she also recognizes there are many faith traditions and different belief systems represented at EMHS. So her mode of operation is one of “Let’s talk about it.”

Mr. Stutzman said he is often impressed at the ability of students to debate significant issues of faith in a way that is safe and non-judgmental. He said he can't take credit for it because he teaches juniors and seniors who have learned how to have civil discussions before they get to him. He commented, "They've learned to disagree well, and it's not just agreeing to disagree. It's a genuine willingness to keep pushing, to keep asking, to keep attempting to help people see things the way you see them." LJ put it another way: "People here still respect what you say when you believe another way." Mrs. Roth said she's had the support of administrators to help her work through ways to handle hard issues such as these in the classroom.

Application of faith. Faculty and administrators on campus consistently watch for opportunities to apply and integrate their faith. Mr. Stutzman shared the importance of faith integration: "The ability to incorporate my faith into absolutely everything I do is number one. I love the fact that I can pull the Bible out at any point or stop class to pray for a student that's struggling, and that it is seen as a really good thing. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that. That's absolutely number one indeed."

Teachers and coaches practice different ways of incorporating their faith into the classroom. Eva highlighted her appreciation for prayer offered before eating and before travel for a field trip or sporting event. Mr. Stutzman likes to start class with prayer. Bible classes assign students to lead devotionals. Rachael said her Spanish teacher has them memorize Bible verses and The Lord's Prayer in Spanish, and her Honors teacher has students compare something they're learning from the textbook to Bible stories. Andre stated that his world history teacher leads a short devotional every day in conjunction with a brief discussion about the Bible verse and prayer. Elijah enjoys times when his class starts with a discussion about the day's chapel. Rachael shared that at the top of every chemistry test the teacher has in writing: "The first step to knowledge is the fear of God." She said that Bible proverb makes her want to study more.



Mrs. Cranston suggested the greatest influence on student's faith development was teacher modeling. "Faith is caught" in settings outside of structures, she said. "Teachers here have an active faith, a political faith, and an activist faith. I'm amazed at the energy and creativity that goes into teacher's lives outside of school, and students are aware of that."

As a result of the above influences, students said their faith was stronger because they were at EMHS. Esther shared a testimony from her experience: "I have built a strong relationship with God so I can go out into the world and answer questions that people have about faith and why I believe this way. I feel like I am confident enough to answer those questions."

Students apply their faith in personal relationships. Mr. Stutzman said one of the things that struck him when he first started teaching at Eastern Mennonite was how much the students were involved in the spiritual lives of each other. Some set up their own Bible studies outside of school. He knew of one junior girl who had recently—on her own—advertised a Friday after-school Bible study for seventh and eighth grade girls. He knew of at least three other groups of students meeting at different cafes for prayer and Bible study on their own and with no adult coordination.

One application of faith is service; a student said, “We do a lot of it here.” EMHS has a full day devoted to community service projects. Rachael said she had worked at a camp, cleaning up the grounds and doing whatever needed to be done. She added, “It’s so much fun!” Haley said she worked with “tons and tons of books” to box them up and move them. Other students pick up trash, do landscaping, or contribute other volunteer hours to organizations and churches in the community. “Service is in the culture here,” said Mr. Landes. “It’s not all about us. It’s about extending service out in the community. That’s definitely a distinctive that we have here.”

Final Thoughts

About her experience at EMHS, Haley said, “I enjoy coming to school every day.”

Elijah shared the most important reason for him to attend school at EMHS: “The thing I like most about EMHS is the Christian environment and being able to talk about faith.”

Mrs. Roth shared a big reason to appreciate EMHS. When she goes to state or national conferences and talks to other social studies teachers, she realizes “we have it so good here. When I hear the pressures they have and how they’re treated by colleagues and administration -- it’s the atmosphere here that makes up for the pay.”

When teachers teach who they are as Christ-followers, it aligns their passions with their professions. Mr. Blosser said, “It’s not just that we’re trying to check boxes, but our teachers live this stuff. So we try and inspire students that what we’re excited about could also be a part of their lives.”

This report was written by Ginny Birky, PhD, from George Fox University (Newberg, OR) as a sabbatical leave project and in partnership with Mennonite Education Agency/Mennonite Schools Council. Ginny grew up in the Mennonite tradition, graduated from Bethany Christian High School, Hesston College (AA), Goshen College (BS), Ohio State University, (MS), and Oregon State University (PhD). She was on the School Board of Western Mennonite High School for six years and on the Board of Overseers of Hesston College for 12 years. She is a former high school teacher and currently teaches doctoral students in the College of Education at George Fox University. Prior to this project, all of her research had been related to public high schools. The project was supported in part by the George Fox University Grant GFU2014G07.

