

# Teaching Boys

By David O'Halloran

**A**s we approached the completion of the \$75 million Great Expansion—a 45-year dream 12 years in the making—Saint David's began preparing for its next strategic focus. Early on in our thinking, we knew we wanted to turn our institutional attention from building walls back to what happens within those walls—our core mission. Boys are who we teach. Boyhood is what we treasure. "Between the innocence of boyhood and the dignity of manhood, we find a delightful creature called a boy... A boy is truth with dirt on its face, beauty with a cut on its finger, wisdom with bubble gum in its hair and the hope of the future with a frog in its pocket."<sup>1</sup> As we reflected on what we do, we had questions: How do we know what we are doing is the best? Are we staying current with the best pedagogical practices? Do we do enough to capture the wisdom of our master teachers and pass it along to the next generation of Saint David's teachers? How do we keep our program balanced with healthy doses of tradition along with innovation? And how do we ensure our teachers can grow, thrive, lead, and be recognized in their chosen profession?

Our newly reimagined, redesigned, and expanded campus on 89th Street took a cast of thousands. An awe-inspiring collection of remarkable talent and unbridled commitment for more than a decade enabled the school to complete its most audacious project since its founding, on time and on budget. It will take that commitment again to answer the questions above and realize our next priority. We want to ensure that the school will never lose sight of what truly defines it: our mission. We aim to continue to balance the education of our boys across our four pillars: the academic, athletic, artistic, and spiritual. Our academic, athletic, and artistic programs are strong. Our boys successfully matriculate to schools that demand much of them academically, athletically, and artistically, and our boys thrive. And we will continue to improve in these areas. The infrastructure to do this is firmly in place. But if we are being honest, many schools are strong in these areas. What distinguishes Saint David's is that we are equally committed to the spiritual—to the development of the character of our boys—one that is informed by faith, shaped by practice, and celebrated by community.

## The Importance of Character

It's not enough in the 21st century to be bright, intellectually engaged, physically active and healthy, and aesthetically aware; our boys also need to be spiritually attuned—people of character, respectful and appreciative of difference, connected to a sense of the greater good and grounded in a strong sense of who they are, what they believe, and why they are here. The education of a boy's character is the whole work of the school. Character is not achieved

through divine providence, but through the quality and consistency of what our boys choose to do—their actions. For a boy to thrive in his 21st century world, he must learn to be a man who believes that his highest obligation is not to himself, but to others—to move from viewing the world as all about 'me,' through one that's all about 'you,' to a world that's all about 'us.' Today, unfortunately, he is too often surrounded by a popular culture that celebrates the very antithesis of these values.

A Saint David's education must focus on teaching boys to think critically, debate intelligently, and act respectfully and responsibly no matter his



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or others' belief systems, race, identity, cultural background, or economic status. To help boys develop strong character, Saint David's focuses on developing a process of moral apprenticeship through our Sophrosyne, Chapel, and religion programs. We concentrate our work on providing boys with real-life examples of character traits that include: an openness to the world, a consciousness of right and wrong, a tendency toward extraversion (in the sense of looking to connect with others), and a constant search for ways to find agreement and build consensus. We must remain committed to our traditions and reinforce the importance of manners and social graces, of compassion and kindness, of a willingness to be open-minded, humble, flexible, and engaging.

The founders of our school did not articulate that they be *perfect* men, but rather... "that they be good men." A good man is gentle (kind and respectful). A good man possesses practical wisdom, and that wisdom is earned, not taught. A boy is not born with wisdom. To develop it, he must learn to combine moral will (a desire to do good) with moral skill (the ability to do good); both must be actively modeled, taught, and cultivated. This can only be achieved within a social context—boy to boy, teacher to teacher, teacher to boy.

Character is also cultivated in an environment where boys are held accountable for their actions and behavior, and where expectations for both are held high, but also one that allows boys to learn and grow from the mistakes they make. Saint David's is an institution of education not correction. More often than not our children are defined by the stories we tell about them; they become who we say they are. As adults, we must always allow our children the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Too often we harken back to previous misdeeds, not allowing for or noticing how our boys have changed. This is critical in the overall education and raising of boys. It has been said that boys don't learn subjects; they learn teachers.

### **Relational Teaching and Spirituality**

Research shows that the best teacher of a boy is one who sees the boy for who he is, not who they want him to be. We know from noted psychiatrist and author Ned Hallowell and others that boys' sense of connection to parents (their first teachers) is the most important factor influencing their well-being and whether they'll decide to engage in risky behavior as they grow older; the second most influential factor is a boy's sense of connection to his school (and his teachers). Boys find value in tradition and ritual, in having a common reference that enables experiences to be shared, to be transcendent, connecting them to all who have

passed through these walls, are passing through them now, and will pass through them in the future. Michael Reichert, Director of the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives at UPenn, cites three global studies (2010, 2013, and 2016) he conducted through the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC), of which Saint David's is a member, that demonstrate the importance of the relational dimension in teaching boys.

Dr. Reichert and his research partners found that, above all, boys are relational learners, and that "the establishment of an affective relationship is a precondition to successful teaching" and learning. At Saint David's, we frame much of "the relational" through the perspective of our founding faith, helping to shape the moral compass of our boys. The shared experiences of ritual, ceremony, and tradition that the school's faith tradition provides, help boys

bond with each other and to the higher ideas that define what "good" looks like.

It is no secret that we live in an increasingly agnostic or secular age, but I would advocate that spirituality, informed by a faith tradition, plays an even more essential role now. "The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for," Mother Teresa once said. "The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty—it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality."

As parents and teachers, we have a responsibility to ensure our children are nourished with the food that feeds their souls—love and spirituality. Saint David's recognizes its need to stand firm in its mission and advocate for the role of the spiritual in forming and framing the moral and ethical, the character of our boys. It is for this reason that our founders identified spirituality as the fourth of our school's four pillars. If we want our boys to fulfill their potential, to live full, productive, good lives, they must feel wanted, loved, and cared for, and this spiritual dimension of the human experience must be cultivated.

In her book *The Spiritual Child*, Lisa Miller, Director of Clinical Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, lays out the scientific link between spirituality and health and well-being. Children who have a positive, active relationship to spirituality are 40% less likely to use and abuse substances, 60% less likely to be depressed as teenagers, 80% less likely to have dangerous or unprotected sex, and have significantly more positive markers for thriving—including an increased sense of meaning and purpose, and high levels of academic success.

We are fortunate to be able to use tools from our founding faith's framework as well as our school-wide Sophrosyne health and wellness curriculum, advisory program, religion and world-

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religion courses, and other programmatic initiatives to guide the moral development and social-emotional health of our boys. With our culture in the midst of an adolescent mental health crisis, this has never been more vital. For our children, spirituality can help promote a sense of peace and security, lessen anxiety, build community, and increase empathy.

Dr. Miller defines spirituality as “an awareness of a relationship with a loving higher power. It is a reality to be experienced, not a proposition that must be understood.” Cultivating spirituality is not dependent on a particular religion or philosophical school of thought. Saint David’s is aware of this and does not use its founding faith to proselytize or evangelize, but rather to frame curricular goals and educational experiences. Attracting and retaining teachers that understand this and who understand boys, is critical to its future success. Our teachers are our school’s greatest resource. As champions of its mission, the school recognized it must invest even more in its teachers—hence the birth of the Teaching Boys Initiative (TBI).

### **The Teaching Boys Initiative**

By establishing TBI, Saint David’s aims to stay abreast of and advance best practices in teaching and learning for boys, and invest even more in its faculty compensation and professional growth and development programs. The school wants to ensure it remains at the forefront of boys’ education by supercharging professional development and research into the art, craft, and science of teaching boys, and using it to constantly inform pedagogy. In the past, the school has concentrated its efforts on curriculum—what we teach, when we teach it, and why. Now the school plans to turn its attention to how best to teach boys and how boys best learn—an area of strength for Saint David’s, but which can never be taken for granted.

Over the past decade or so Saint David’s has been intentionally laying the foundations for TBI by establishing a robust supervision and evaluation program currently directed by Nora Sundar, and a comprehensive onboarding and ongoing professional development



program currently directed by Jamie MacNeille. These programs have matured substantially and have become embedded in the overall Saint David's professional experience. The school is now ready to add a new suite of research-based programming coordinated by Tori Gilbert. Strategically, TBI will combine and enhance these three professional development arms—two existing and one new—into one comprehensive, focused program:

→ The **Onboarding of Teachers New to Saint David's** and **Ongoing Teacher Professional Development Programs.** This arm includes our existing Mentor/Mentee, Summer Grant, and Year Round Conference and Workshop Programs. As part of the initiative, new Pathways and associated coursework (outlined later in this article) will be added. It also includes the addition of Instructional or Learning Coaches, Graduate Program and Graduate Teaching opportunities, and more compensated opportunities for professional growth.

→ The **Supervision and Evaluation Programs.** This includes our existing Milestone Review, Legacy, and annual SMART Goals programs. Under the initiative, these programs remain largely intact with the major impact being the realignment of professional expectations with the new Framework for Best Practices.

→ The new **Research Programs.** This will be the new arm of professional development at Saint David's. It will include new internal and external Action-Research opportunities, the creation of a Professional Wiki (a curated collection of internal and external research studies into best practices in teaching and learning for boys), and an Expert Speaker/Visiting Scholar Series for parents and teachers that will focus on raising and educating boys. There will also be publication opportunities for teachers, and further opportunities for our faculty to contribute to the broader professional learning community on a national and global scale.

Before the pandemic, Saint David's began this new strategic initiative by partnering with CIRCLE (the Center for Innovation, Research, Creativity, and Leadership in Education), specifically Dr. Brad Adams and Dr. Phil Cummins. With CIRCLE's expert guidance, Saint David's faculty—through focus groups, surveys, and direct editing—collectively created a set of three documents inspired by the school's mission and informed by high quality research in the field. These documents now serve to guide our professional growth and development work and include: a Framework of Best Practices in Teaching and Learning for Boys, a Profile of a Graduate, and a Profile of a Teacher. Of the three, the Framework is the core. Divided into three domains—the Relational, Instructional, and Professional—it outlines the ideas and ideals (see next page), the essential characteristics of the great teaching at Saint David's.

*The Action-Research program will apply innovative pedagogy to the academic challenges uniquely facing boys.*

In its work with CIRCLE, Saint David's also designed and created a Professional Wiki. This virtual database provides a curated clearinghouse of synthesized research (by our own teachers and by researchers worldwide) on how best to teach boys and how boys best learn across all disciplines and subject areas (reading, math, writing, thinking, acquiring foreign language, etc.) in one easily accessible location. Our teachers will contribute to and use the Wiki in planning their lessons and units of study, and they'll access it as part of their Onboarding and Ongoing Professional Development, Supervision and Evaluation, Curriculum Planning, and Research. In fact, it is already being used.

In a pilot TBI program launched the school year before last, six of our teachers engaged in Action Research





## Best Practices in Teaching and Learning for Boys

Ideals	Ideas	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Relational</b></p> <p>Great teaching starts with intentional learning relationships between teachers and students that balance scholarship and creativity with high expectations and clear standards. Through these relationships, we show boys how to become “good men” who recognize their capacity for spiritual experience, embrace difference in all its manifestations, and adopt a broad perspective and strong moral values. The establishment of an effective and ongoing connection, enabling us to know our boys, give them agency, and respond to them accordingly, is a precondition for good learning. Relational teaching is best achieved by refining our practice in whole child development, relationship management, and cultivating a positive learning culture.</p>	<b>Child Development</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Align learning to developmental stages and characteristics</li> <li>2. Support each boy in recognizing his own capacity for spiritual development</li> <li>3. Promote student agency and voice</li> <li>4. Prioritize character</li> </ol>
	<b>Relationship Management</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Assume responsibility for managing relationships</li> <li>6. Connect with boys by personally relating to their interests and circumstances</li> <li>7. Maintain standards while accommodating a measure of opposition</li> <li>8. Reach out to support boys’ individual talents and needs</li> </ol>
	<b>Learning Culture</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Build an inclusive learning community of boys</li> <li>10. Create and maintain a rigorous, joyful learning environment</li> <li>11. Promote positive mindsets</li> <li>12. Set and model high expectations for learning and motivate boys to take gradual responsibility for their learning</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instructional</b></p> <p>Instructional design is how we create intentional learning experiences that result in the acquisition and application of competencies—the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and learning habits that will help our boys become young men of ideas and ideals, action and reflection who are ready to excel in school and beyond. Learning is, therefore, best designed with a clear articulation of learning goals and criteria for success and should promote the emerging voice and agency of students as they take increasing responsibility for their learning, themselves, each other, and their world. We are committed to growth in our disciplines by refining our practice in student engagement, curriculum design, and situational judgment.</p>	<b>Student Engagement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Convey mastery and passion for subject matter</li> <li>2. Apply transitive factors to captivate boys and promote understanding</li> <li>3. Segment lessons to facilitate well-paced, active learning</li> <li>4. Personalize and differentiate learning and feedback</li> </ol>
	<b>Curriculum Design</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Articulate clear learning goals, objectives, and success criteria</li> <li>6. Curate and use quality visuals, manipulatives, and models to clarify ideas and develop skills</li> <li>7. Design opportunities for boys to demonstrate and develop their understanding</li> <li>8. Plan and implement understanding checks using ongoing and varied assessments</li> </ol>
	<b>Situational Judgment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Notice, act, and reflect on outcomes and practice in real-time</li> <li>10. Build and draw upon an adaptive repertoire of pedagogical strategies</li> <li>11. Direct the energy of boys toward fundamental learning goals</li> <li>12. Employ creativity and a sense of humor to engage, connect, and advance learning</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Professional</b></p> <p>In pursuit of professional excellence, we model intellectual curiosity, moral introspection, scholarship, creativity, and an appreciation for the aesthetic and the athletic. Through our habits of reflecting on pedagogy, we follow a system of assessing needs, designing processes, developing materials, evaluating effectiveness, and adapting methodology that adds to our professional culture’s intent and positive impact. We promote the school’s Mission through our shared commitment to its ideals and values; our respectful, compassionate, kind, and joyful interactions within our community of inquiry and practice; and our willingness to grow in our professional expertise.</p>	<b>Commitment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Exemplify the mission, values, and ethos of the school</li> <li>2. Experiment with a range of research-informed, evidence-based strategies</li> <li>3. Reflect on professional standards to self-evaluate and warrant practice</li> <li>4. Maintain relevant expertise in subject matter and pedagogical approaches</li> </ol>
	<b>Communication</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Create effective partnerships with students, parents, and families</li> <li>6. Initiate and manage successful professional relationships</li> <li>7. Demonstrate character in leadership</li> <li>8. Maintain clarity, appropriate tone, and care in all communications</li> </ol>
	<b>Collaboration</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Contribute wholeheartedly to our varied communities of inquiry and practice</li> <li>10. Collaborate in research-informed and evidence-based reflection and professional learning</li> <li>11. Engage in coaching and mentoring relationships</li> <li>12. Promote school culture and make substantial contributions to the community</li> </ol>

**The Saint David’s School Framework for Education**

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that not only accessed the Wiki, but also contributed to it. Sam Woolford’s research examined the Impact of a Free-Choice (“Genius Time”) Inquiry Project on Student Skill-Building, Agency, and Motivation and was published in *i.e.: inquiry in education, Volume 14, Issue 2*, by the Center for Inquiry in Education of the National College of Education at National Louis University.

Spanish Teacher Flor Berman investigated how technology can be used to motivate young learners to use their target language when she incorporated drones in a new unit planned around the theme of ideal neighborhoods. Flor found that the novelty of using drones captured boys’ attention, that motor activity reduced reticence and encouraged risk taking with language, and that collaboration with each other enabled the boys to generate more ideas and language than they would have alone.

Humanities Teacher Catherine Milligan investigated the value in providing video feedback on student work to see if it would bolster eighth grade boys’ personal engagement in art history analysis. The boys found the video feedback more detailed, personal, convenient and helpful. Cited among the benefits of this form of feedback was the boys’ agency in choosing the timing for watching the video feedback and also their ability to replay it as often as they wanted to. Ms. Berman and Ms. Milligan were part of the IBSC Action Research cohort for 2021-22.

Grade Eight Homeroom Teacher Saybel Pipitone was selected by IBSC for the 2022-23 Action Research cohort to investigate how boys could develop communicative capacity at school and beyond. Through research of existing studies on emotional and social well-being, Ms. Pipitone discovered that men who can identify and name their feelings and needs are better able to resolve conflict. Utilizing the methodology of Nonviolent Communications developed by Marshall Rosenberg of the

Center for Nonviolent Communication, which is in line with Saint David’s mission and values, eighth-grade boys created projects that they shared with Lower School students, providing the tools and language for resolving conflict in healthy ways.

Lower School Math Coordinator Bridget Gallagher investigated how assessment of boys’ math skills informed teacher planning. She focused on how using the data would ensure that lesson design closely targeted needs and built upon strengths.

Ms. Berman and Dr. Gilbert have been published in the trade journal *The Language Educator*. One of Tori’s units “Sana, Sana” has also been featured in *Designing World Language Curriculum for International Communicative Competence* - a book on exemplar curricula. Flor’s article, “The Joys of Early Language Learning at Saint David’s,” isn’t directly related to her research project, but describes Saint David’s thematically designed instructional approach to teaching language and the use of kinesthetic learning.

Last summer, Catherine and Flor were invited to Texas to present their research to the International Boys’ Schools Coalition’s Annual

Conference and, this summer, Tori and Saybel were invited to present in New Zealand. Ms. Pipitone presented her Action Research on nonviolent communications. Dr. Gilbert presented her Action Research investigating perspectives and approaches from Saint David’s master relational teachers in pre-k through eighth grade, through which she discovered a limitless capacity to assess situations and select relational gestures that foster the supportive relationships needed for successful learning.

As part of TBI, we have also created new Pathways for Professional Learning, streamlining our programs and providing our faculty new options for more research, learning and growth. Some of the new courses include Relationship Management, Practitioner Research 101, and Reflective



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Practice. In Relationship Management teachers investigate how effective teachers of boys continually evaluate the status of each relationship, use relational gestures to connect with students, and take responsibility to repair breakdowns when needed.

In Practitioner Research 101, teachers explore Action Research as a tool that identifies the teacher as the best person to solve issues that arise in their own classrooms. While a great deal of more abstract research is done in the halls of academia, Action Research is about bringing the systematic inquiry process into a teacher's daily, ongoing work. It can help establish clear directions for the nagging questions that keep a teacher up at night: What if I had done this instead? Why is this happening? I wonder if this is why X is struggling so much? Finally, in Reflective Practice, teachers are invited into the ongoing inquiry of a small group of colleagues interested in exploring one particular point of practice related to the Saint David's Framework.

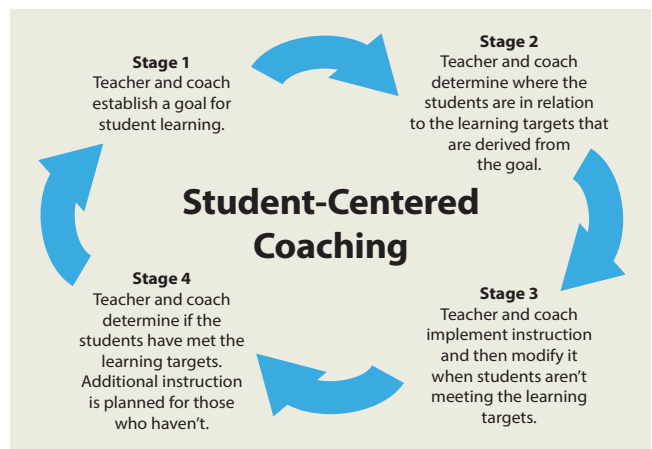
Another dimension of TBI involves the introduction of Instructional or Learning Coaches. These coaches will work alongside our teachers, especially those in their first three years at the school, collaborating with them to design instruction that targets student outcomes. Taking a targeted approach like this increases the learning and efficacy of teachers, coaches, and most importantly our boys. Our student-centered coaching helps teachers get closer to student learning while also impacting instructional practice. The illustration on this page models the basic process we use.

We have also begun conversations with leading universities about creating opportunities for collaboration, coursework, and targeted graduate programming. There is inadequate grounded research that provides guidance and answers to key questions about effectively teaching elementary age boys. Collaborative Action Research conducted by Saint David's teachers in partnership with university faculty will be an annual source of discoveries, both theoretical and practical, that all contribute to this field of inquiry.

This coming school year, Saint David's will also launch TBI's Visiting Scholar program by welcoming Dr. Michael Reichert, mentioned earlier, a leading scholar on the importance of the relational dimension in the education of boys, to provide seminars and workshops for our faculty and our parents. In fact, he began his work last January with our senior masters, capturing their wisdom and practical knowledge for future work with our early and mid-career teachers.

With all this foundational work behind us, TBI is now fully launched because of a generous gift of \$1 million with the condition that it be spent down over the next three years. A Saint David's family, so inspired by the school's strategic thinking, asked if they could help jumpstart our efforts—allowing us to get the program off the ground while taking the time necessary to organize a major fund-raising initiative to endow it long-term. Our objective, by endowing TBI, is to take the pressure off tuition dollars as we look to the future.

TBI is already helping Saint David's establish an even more vibrant professional community that directly benefits all of our



*Diane Sweeney*

boys right now. In addition to the six pilot action researchers, this summer, 26 members of our faculty enrolled in one or more of our new professional development opportunities and another 18 teachers participated in designing innovative curriculum projects, travel experiences, or professional association grants. TBI is helping Saint David's bring a new level of professional focus and investment to our teachers' work. It stimulates collegial conversations and work about how best to teach and learn with boys in a way that is informed by our mission, best practices in the field, and celebrated by the institution... and we have only just begun.

TBI will keep Saint David's at the cutting-edge in educating boys, positioning the school as a leader in boys' education in New York City and beyond. It will seamlessly and permanently embed best practices (informed by research) into our professional development framework. It will create an environment informed by and expressly designed for the way our boys think, absorb information, and behave. Our teachers, by engaging in Action Research and using the Professional Wiki, will bring results to the classroom that can be implemented immediately and shared with fellow faculty.

TBI will also help us inspire existing faculty, and attract and retain top teaching talent, with comprehensive, mission- and research-focused professional development and support provided by permanently funded instructional coaches. The Action-Research program will apply innovative pedagogy to the academic challenges uniquely facing boys (e.g. Harvard's Project Zero, Reichert and Hawley's work with the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC) and John Hattie's "Visible Learning" meta analysis). We will further engage parents, along with faculty and staff, via visiting scholars and speakers who will speak and work with us on a wide range of pertinent topics including education, parenting, teaching, social-emotional development, and overall health and well-being of our boys. Inspired by our mission, TBI is pushing Saint David's forward, confidently, into the future. ■

1. Alan Beck (1970) *What Is a Boy?* Buzza Cordoza, MA.

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