

THACHER MONTESSORI SCHOOL/WAKEFIELD ESTATE PARTNERSHIP

December 2016

Wakefield Estate: History and Mission

The Wakefield Estate is a 22-acre historic property in the Blue Hills section of Milton, MA that was owned and occupied from 1707 to 2004 by nine generations of the same family. It is home to a rich assortment of historic buildings, rare collections, and a prized plant collection. The Estate takes its name and mission from Mary May Binney Wakefield, who, upon her death 2004, entrusted the trustees of the Estate to carry out her wishes that the estate be a place for public learning and enjoyment, with an emphasis on re-establishing and cultivating the connection between people and nature. Since 2007, we have implemented a diverse set of programs, utilizing the assets and resources of the estate to promote hands-on experiential learning opportunities for learners of all ages.

The estate is owned and managed by the Mary M. B. Wakefield Charitable Trust, whose mission is to promote life-long participatory learning using the land and resources of the Wakefield Estate. Through collaborative partnerships with schools and community organizations, the Trust provides educational opportunities, tours, presentations, workshops, hands-on training, internships, and other programs covering a variety of subjects, including local history, ecology, horticulture, agriculture, archival work, and historic preservation. By fostering the connections between people, land, and history, the Mary M. B. Wakefield Charitable Trust aims to create a living and accessible landscape that carries on the legacy of Mary ("Polly") Wakefield and her vision for an engaged and knowledgeable citizenry.

Thacher Montessori School: Evolution of a Partnership with The Wakefield Estate

For several years after Thacher Montessori School started our Adolescent Program (AP), the class took a weekly, day-long trip to the Barefoot Farm in Plymouth, MA. The farm, owned by a former Thacher staff member, provided engagement through projects, scientific exploration, and weekly chores. With the logistical challenges of this arrangement, AP founding lead guide Ty Johnston approached Mark Smith, the executive director of the adjacent Wakefield Estate, about a partnership.

Ty and Mark created a plan for AP students to construct a handful of raised bed gardens. In addition, they agreed that AP students would tend the Wakefield chickens and sell the eggs to the Thacher community. Both endeavors proved successful and paved the way for new opportunities within the developing relationship. AP students began providing increasing numbers of volunteer hours on the property—to create trails, complete small construction projects, conduct scientific experiments, and work in the gardens. AP students now spend hundreds of hours each year at the estate, making it a place where students feel comfortable to be themselves while working on real and meaningful work.

More recently, other younger classrooms, and the Thacher community as a whole have found opportunities in the relationship with the estate. Many Children's House classrooms take weekly nature walks on the property, visiting the different animals, walking the labyrinth, and exploring the forested and formal garden areas. Lower and upper elementary classes similarly take nature walks and also find ways to use the property for follow up work, such as finding samples for botany lessons. Thacher's upper elementary classes have enjoyed utilizing Wakefield's natural space for rites of passage. In addition, there are several community-wide events that allow Thacher families to learn more about the Wakefield Estate. These include family tour days, Fairy Woods Fest, Dogwood Days, the holiday open house, Thacher's end of year reflection, workshops, and more! These events provide increased exposure for the Wakefield Estate and positive community experiences for Thacher families.

Thacher and Wakefield co-sponsored noted environmental educator David Sobel to speak at Thacher last December. We will be co-sponsoring an annual spring environmental education speaker going forward, as we explore new ways to deepen the partnership.

Steps to Building Effective and Sustainable School-Community Partnerships

From the presenters of the 2017 MSM workshop,
“Greening Your School Through a Community Organization Partnership”
December 2016

1. Organizational Self-assessment

- What is your school’s mission and how does that relate to partnering with a community organization in your area?
- How does a partnership enhance the educational goals for your students?

2. Inventory of Community Organizations

- Make a list of the community organizations in your area.
- What are the resources, programs and assets of each organization that relate to your school’s mission?
- What is the self-interest of the organization?

3. Internal Reflection

- How would a partnering with a given organization meet the organizational self-interest of each organization and be mutually beneficial?
- Why do you think they might be interested in partnering with your school?

4. Making Contact to Explore Partnership

- Head of school: Introduce yourself and your school’s interest in building partnership and be clear about your school’s self-interest and how it may relate to theirs.
- Once mutual interest has been established, set up a schedule of meetings for staff to explore further.

5. Staff Brainstorm

- Provide opportunity for program staff of both organizations to meet and discuss:
 - Program design, goals, and desired outcomes
 - Staffing
 - Logistics: supplies, costs, who is covering what

6. Project Implementation

- Have clear expectations: be clear about who is doing what.
- Hold regular dual-organization staff meetings to trouble shoot and build trust as project takes root.

7. Evaluation

- Staff of each organization should evaluate project against goals and desired outcomes.
- Directors of partner organizations and members of boards: evaluate relationship, with staff input.