

Why the Obamas Chose Sidwell: The Anti-Elitist View

by Irene McHenry, Friends Council on Education

Why did the Obamas select Sidwell Friends school for their children? The media's answer has emphasized that Sidwell is private, expensive and, most of all, *elite*. Ironically, the choice of a Quaker school means just the opposite. In spite of Sidwell's reputation as "the Harvard of Washington DC prep schools," the fact is that Friends schools are diverse, open, and teach equality and community service. The Obamas know that, and it probably had something to do with their choice.

A few facts to counter the elitist myth about Friends schools: There are currently 86 Friends schools across the United States, members of the Friends Council on Education, all of which provide a values-centered education, with a curricular emphasis on respect for diversity, active participation in democracy, collaboration, and peace.

Sidwell Friends is no different from the other 44 urban Friends schools in the United States. Throughout their history these leading-edge schools have achieved authentic economic, religious and racial diversity. 56% of students in urban Friends schools come from families with annual incomes under \$35,000. Many students receiving financial aid also receive free lunch and have access to the cafeteria in the beginning and end of the school day. In urban Friends schools, 11% to 40% of the students receive financial aid. Sidwell, the largest urban Friends school (1100 students), provides financial aid totaling more than \$5 million annually to ensure socio-economic diversity. As for religious diversity, the student body draws from nearly every religious tradition on earth. Most Friends schools average only 6% Quaker students.

The Obamas also know that Friends schools promote a vision for democracy. Quakers believe that each person has the capacity for goodness and a responsibility to attain that goodness. Students learn that all of life is sacred, learn to resolve conflict non-violently through thoughtful listening and active engagement with different perspectives, learn to embrace the diversity of cultures and religions represented in their schools. Students learn to take action in alignment with their core moral beliefs and to work for the good of society through energetic service to their communities and the world.

Quaker values are not unique; these values can be found in most religious traditions. What makes a Friends school environment special is that these values are woven into daily life, both in and out of the classroom. Friends Education provides a constructivist approach, an inquiry-based pedagogy valuing multiple perspectives and a continual search for academic excellence within a values-centered environment.

Sidwell Friends School exemplifies the special DNA of Quaker schools, just right for the families that choose it. The DNA combines academic vigor, the quest for excellence in the educational program, and a community sustained by an inward, spiritual experience expressed in the living values of the school.

The Obamas recognized this and, as Mrs. Obama's spokeswoman said, "in the end, the Obamas selected the school that was the best fit for what their daughters need right now."

Respectfully submitted,
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