

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FRONT LINES OF PUBLIC
EDUCATION - BUILDING COMMUNITY AT GAMBLE
MONTESSORI HIGH SCHOOL
(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

In a period of government mandated testing and tragic shooting sprees at schools, how do teachers build communities of trust and a love of learning in their classrooms? At the March 29th Forum at Christ Church Cathedral, Jack M. Jose, Principal of Gamble Montessori High School, and Krista L. Taylor, Intervention Specialist at Gamble, addressed that question. Reflecting on their experiences at the High School, they conveyed the challenges, but they also told success stories of how education can be effective when a spirit of community and an atmosphere of trust exist for students.

Jose and Taylor just published a book that focuses on their work at Gamble Montessori High School. "Angels and Superheroes" relates their efforts to provide students with "a compassionate education" in this era of teaching to the test. The Montessori philosophy and method offer a solid foundation for what Jose and Taylor are working to achieve in Gamble's classrooms, but the students that arrive their each year provide a multitude of challenges.

For instance, a high percentage of students who enroll in the seventh grade come to Gamble with no previous Montessori experience. Without this background, they need time and assistance in adjusting to this different but effective method of education. When they arrive with negative attitudes and little confidence in their abilities to learn, trust building and connecting them to a classroom community is essential.

Furthermore, approximately 70-percent of Gamble's students qualify for federal lunch assistance, and the High School also provides these young people with breakfast. This high rate of poverty among the student body presents another series of challenges in terms of making education an important and positive experience in the lives of students who often confront daily hardships.

At the Forum, Taylor and Jose presented several stories of young people who turned their lives around after reaching a trust level with teachers and experiencing community in the classroom. Gamble's field trips such as canoeing on the Little Miami River, according to Taylor, further promote team building and developing a love for learning beyond the classroom. Many of their examples of innovative approaches to education can also be found in their book.

Both Jose and Taylor expressed frustration with the current public focus on mandated, annual testing of Public School students. Not only do the current tests fail to adequately measure the progress of students over time, but they often stand as road blocks to creating classroom experiences that fosters a love for learning. Accepting the necessity of some testing, Taylor and Jose stress the need for other ways to gage educational success.

As to the current debate on arming teachers with guns or using airport safety check procedures to enter schools, the speakers find these proposals to be the antithesis of good educational environments. As one of Gamble's students declared: "We don't want schools to become maximum security prisons." Jose and Taylor's articulate and passionate presentation left many of the Forum attendees hopeful about public education. "In this troubling and confusing time," noted one person, "that talk was a breath of fresh air."