

The Business Journal Interview with Gabriella Rowe, head of school, Village School

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Reporter Joe Martin
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Gabriella Rowe didn't learn how to read until the fifth grade. While many would view that as a setback, she used that as a driver to carve a successful career in education.



The former investment banker worked at an elite private school in New York owned by her family for 15 years before moving to Houston in 2014. She's wrapping up her first year as head of The Village School, the second-largest K-12 private school in the Houston area. She came on board to oversee the school's massive expansion, which added a high school, expanded its middle school and added a pre-K learning center. Next summer, the nonreligious private school owned by BcfX5b[]U9Xi W]cb will add a dormitory, a STEM building and a redeveloped athletic complex.

What's your educational background?

I went to the Nightingale-Bamford School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in New York City. I was the poor scholarship kid from the West Side. In those days, I was diversity.

It was a deeply traditional education; I was very lucky to have that. I also had (that education) as a severely learning-disabled kid. I was dyslexic and had an opportunity to learn beyond that.

How does that experience with a learning disability center you when you're educating here?

Drive matters an awful lot. Resilience matters an awful lot. A saying my mom — who was a 50-year teaching veteran — used to say, “A little bit of hardship goes a long way.”

We spend a lot of time trying to make things easy for our children. It's not always such a good thing. My learning disability taught me just how much I was capable of and no matter what the world told me, what labels it put on me, what failures I had, I could accomplish great things. Those failures were amazing. To this day, I remember learning to read when I was in fifth grade. I never turned back after that.

I love delivering that message to both students and parents. They look at me as successful yet I didn't have this perfect start that parents push so hard for their children to get. It gives me the ability to give them a first-hand example.

It makes my ability to work with parents that much more human, which is an essence of what we do.

The resounding theme at The Village School right now seems to be expansion. How's that vision changed since your first day about a year ago?

I came in year 49 (in the school's history), and my task was more to bring together the great ideas that came before me and do a lot of in-depth self reflection on who we are and how to build on that.

All too often we create master plans, and then we pull them out five years later, dust them off and say, "Here's how it was wrong. It's why we didn't build it and now we're going to improve it." That's five years of a child's life that didn't benefit from that plan. We owe it to our children to do better work than that. For our plan a straight line (of thinking) determined the priority of timing, what got built when. We had the good fortune of being in a city that continues to expand; a place where education is important to our parents and their children and what better place to build a future vision for who we want this school to be. We have to build a school that teaches to children's future not the past. We can't be building a school that would've been great for us to go to.

What is the future, then, for these children, and how does it change the way you teach them? We know the challenges will be greater than the ones we've faced. They'll be highly complex, global and require a deep sense of interdisciplinary knowledge.

You can't just be a mathematician anymore. You have to be able to draw, to collaborate with physics, engineering, construction of materials.

The real world problems (will be a) valve breaking one mile underground. The team that fixes that will have geologists, geophysicists, artists, machinists and computer designers. The skills are finite and each has areas of expertise but they need to have overlapping knowledge.

They're not going to be asked to learn things — they're going to be asked to teach themselves things. They're going to be asked to figure things out.

So then how do you design a school that is able to be functional but still flexible as education changes?

Sometimes schools worry about buying the latest technology, when sometimes what's needed is just a well-placed window.

The life cycle of technology has shortened so that it might not even last a year. Let's take that for granted. That's a textbook, a tool, but learning space and the experiences of children need to be driven by elements that can be applied in many different ways.

The windows, the walls, the juxtaposition of classrooms, expanding and contracting spaces, and sound levels apply to a wide range of learning experiences and stimulate experiences within each child as opposed to us pre-prescribing what those experiences should be.

How do Houston's industries help facilitate the education?

It's a vocational gold mine. I've never been in a city that has had such depth of industry dependent on high levels of education as Houston does. Take aerospace, energy and medical. You can't be successful in any one of those professions without having passed through a bunch of educational gates. It's critically important you've learned the skills but also the ability to problem solve and collaborate with a group doing heavy, higher-order thinking.

We reach out to the corporations, and they want to support our students. Our students are their future engineers, their future doctors. The better job we do as a school in partnership with them to stimulate these entrepreneurial opportunities, the better (the students) will be at their jobs when they get to Schlumberger, Houston Methodist, Total, University of Texas, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center or NASA.

These projects must require a significant investment from the school. How much does this cost?

We haven't given an exact dollar figure, because it changes daily. It's in the tens of millions. We're making a massive investment in the children's future.

Does that equal an increase in tuition?

There's no increase in tuition you could make that would be enough money to pay for all of this. That's the difference between capital investment and operating investment.

Tuition is designed to keep the lights on, to pay the teachers, to run the school every day.

Capital investment comes from individuals or, in our case, our parent company Nord Anglia believes that by investing this capital, the school's longevity and viability as a top-notch educational institution will be that much longer and more successful.

It's a benefit in the way that we're set up. Our parent company, our parents, our students, our teachers all want the same thing. We need to make sure we're continuing to provide a rising platform of facilities for the rising abilities of our students.

Village is building a new STEM campus. How will it transform the program?

The acronym STEM is supposed to represent the interweaving and interdisciplinary teaching of all those subject matters. You throw art in and it says not to forget that without the art, many of those (subjects) aren't possible.

So how do you design a STEM building?

Lots of open, interdisciplinary spaces. Lots of clearly defined spaces that connect seamlessly with other disciplines, and a lot of hands-on learning.

Your biology lab doors open up onto an outdoor garden on the terrace of the second floor where you can do the genetics engineering and the plant and botany study in the higher-level classes. On the same outdoor garden, you have a hydroponics lab where your physics students work in as well. Go down one floor to the dry labs and there are garage doors that open into the parking lot. They are going to do robotics, but again we don't want to make robotics the study of physics alone. We're going to be asking them to do projects that combine the botany lab, the robotics lab, the physics lab, the

chemistry lab and we're probably going to loop the top floor of the building in as well, which is one big open art studio that can be broken down into partition areas.

We're increasingly designing our spaces to enable them to evolve with our students. We start with an idea, a plan, but we don't build it with such specificity that it can't evolve and change as the learning needs change over time.

There's nothing sacred in the building of a school building. It should all be up for reflection every year.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The Rowe File

Gabriella Rowe

Head of School, The Village School

Age: 49

Hometown: New York

Education: Bryn Mawr College

Family: Married, two boys ages 12 and 16

Hobbies: "Triathlete, extreme sports such as rock climbing, horse riding. I am a rabid New England Patriots fan."

What are you reading: "Brave Companions: Portraits in History" by David McCullough