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— Josh Brody,  
Sequoyah Head of School



### What are progressive schools?

Many schools offer programs that are informed by progressive principles of education that were first articulated in the late 19th century by school reformers who were concerned by what they saw as a nationwide emphasis on conformity and standardization. Progressive educational theorists, like John Dewey, countered the industrial factory model with a call for educators to create schooling that would prepare children to become active, engaged critical thinkers and lifelong learners – fostering those skills and habits of mind that were seen as necessary for citizens in a democratic society.

Progressive schools aren't all the same. They can be big or small, with campuses that feature lots of outdoor play space or campuses that are high-tech and urban. In progressive classrooms teachers cultivate respect for a diversity of opinions and cultural backgrounds, encourage students to voice their own ideas, and to work with each other to solve problems, rather than always depend upon the teacher's instruction to find the correct answer.

### So what does progressive teaching and learning look like in 21st-century classrooms?

Progressive educators don't point to hard and fast rules of practice, but to emergent themes, as summarized by the [Progressive Education Network](#). Educators must: prepare students for participation in a democratic society; focus on students' social, emotional, academic, cognitive and physical development; nurture and support students' natural curiosity and innate desire to learn; respond to the developmental needs of students; foster respectful relationships between teachers and students and encourage the active participation of students in their own learning.

### How is progressive education put into practice at Sequoyah?

As often as possible, children are encouraged through their questioning to imagine what is possible and are engaged in the search for answers. Here, students gain experiences and skills that help them pose meaningful questions about themselves, their relationships, their communities, and their world.

Sequoyah's teachers challenge students to be creative, idealistic and practical both in the classroom and out in the community. Curricula and activities are often specific to the particular attributes of the school and its surroundings. Teachers integrate subject matter and help students examine the

geography, ecology, cultures, and politics of the places they live and those they explore in the school's field studies program. Recognizing connections between place, self and community helps students see the relevance of the material they study and empowers them to live out Sequoyah's core value of Stewardship: To take care of people, take care of things, take care of the environment, and seek to make the community a better place for all.

### **What does progressive education look like in our classrooms?**

When asked this question, Sequoyah's teachers responded:

"We are helping students to learn how to ask good questions as opposed to just getting the right answer – in US history, students generate questions and facilitate their own seminar about the balance of civil liberties and civil rights."

"You see students eagerly working together to solve a problem – there doesn't always need to be a teacher present for students to be actively engaged in their learning."

"The classroom is prepared with materials that leads the child through a cycle of activities that encourages them to construct their own understanding."

Students are encouraged to develop their own thinking: "Writing is a good example. We focus on fluency in writing, students developing their voices, having important things to say, seeing writing as a tool and a strategy not just for communicating, but also for thinking."

And students are asked to apply their knowledge to real-world situations where the issues are not so simple or easily defined: "We create opportunities for students to make decisions that have consequences – student government makes recommendations about how to make the school more sustainable."

Our classrooms can be active busy places with a lot of energetic conversations and then shift to become quiet contemplative study areas for independent work. What is constant is the careful encouragement to step up to an intellectual challenge, venture an opinion, try something new – mistakes are regarded as valuable opportunities to learn more. Even young students are invited to set their own goals, with guidance from their teachers, and then reflect on their progress. Students put on creative presentations that demonstrate answers to the essential questions they have asked in relation to a unit of study, and the enduring understandings that they gain through their project-based learning. Assessment is focused on a student's academic, social and emotional learning.

We pay close attention to an individual learner and their social context. What's critical is that we understand the intellectual development of that student – their different strengths and challenges, what they're curious about, what motivates their learning.

Engaging students in their own learning is as relevant today as it was when John Dewey first began to inspire educational reform.