

## HSP's Hidden Curriculum: the Intangible Value of a Holy Spirit Prep Education, Part 3 of 5

by Tommy Curtin,

Dear Parents,

I spend a lot of time thinking about the value of education. Holy Spirit Prep is a school I believe in, an *investment* I believe in. However it's not cheap, and there are a number of good schools in Atlanta. What sets HSP apart and makes it worth the investment? Or, another way to phrase the question, "Why should parents spend more for an HSP education when they could spend less for one somewhere else?"

The way a parent answers this question has everything to do with what she means by *education*. If education refers exclusively to what happens in the classroom with some homework sprinkled in, then other schools start to look pretty good. After all, students at those schools go to college too. But what do those student do when they get to college? Who are they? Who will they be after college? These are questions Holy Spirit Prep addresses everyday through both the curriculum of the classroom and the hidden curriculum.

My last letter focused on the second most impactful element of the hidden curriculum, HSP's Catholic identity. This week considers the first: the influence of peers. Nothing in the school environment influences a child more than the students he or she calls friends. And what is influence but another word for education? Good (used in the moral sense) friends are the *sine qua non* of the hidden curriculum. If the education a student is receiving from peers is constructive and aligned to our goals, everything else a school does can begin to have impact. If peer influence is destructive, it takes a miracle to turn things around.

I once found myself in a rather serious conversation with an HSP 9th grader. I asked the young lady if she knew any students at HSP who were into drugs. No, she said. I followed up. Any who abused alcohol or were sexually active? No and no. The second "No," sounded more like "Ew, gross," which represents an A+ answer from a high school freshman. At HSP there is a marked absence of the peer behaviors that threaten the moral and emotional health of students, but which are so prevalent at other schools. The student I spoke to experiences this value every day, but didn't realize it until our conversation made things explicit. She had learned the lesson that, although dangerous behavior might be glamorized in media, it is not the case that, "Everyone's doing it."

Peer life at HSP isn't all, or even mostly, about what not to do. I was reminded of that by an email I received from a high school parent in response to last week's letter. She wanted to let me know that her daughter loves school because of the caliber of other students. What had set HSP apart? First, during the fall semester a group of junior boys had spontaneously and without remuneration organized a pancake breakfast for younger students before school. Second, every day during Advent, 20-30 students gathered in the library during afternoon break to sing "O Come, O Come Emanuel." Unlike much of the content we study for classroom exams, moments like these stay with a student and remain instructive throughout life. Simply knowing that some high school students behave in such a positive way galvanizes other students who might otherwise be convinced it's not cool. That's the hidden curriculum of HSP.

There is no easy way to calculate the value of a peer group. However, I'll offer a few additional thoughts that I hope help.

- Our children spend many more hours with school peers than with us parents. Social media, to the extent we allow it, only adds to the time disparity. By a student's junior high years, the influence of even the most engaged parents begins to wane. From a practical standpoint, peers become the primary educators.
- A child's imagination needs models to grow around, models with which the student can identify. If a student never sees other teenagers living lives of joyful virtue, she will have nothing toward which to aspire. She won't even know what the Good Life looks like.
- Even the most conscientious teenager will make bad choices. When she does, the behavior she observes from her peers will either validate and reinforce that behavior or suggest a better path. If you can discern what behavior is considered normal in a school setting, you know the actions toward which any new student introduced into the school will gravitate. If we add a new student to HSP's Upper School tomorrow, it is more likely that student will sing "O Come, O Come Emanuel" during Advent than get drunk on Mardi Gras.
- Good friends are for life. Friendships built on core values in a mission-focused setting are much more likely to remain strong after graduation. They have deep roots. During the challenging years of college, HSP grads know they can rely on one another for support and needed perspective.

We are so blessed that the education HSP students receive from the students around them offers so many inspiring examples of how to do the teenage years the right way. That's a priceless value.

Yours in Catholic Education,  
Tommy