

# Crossing A Bridge



Fifth graders fill the bridge to the Middle School on Recognition Day

## Fifth graders have fun building skills needed to succeed in Middle School

They fidget and whisper while adjusting a mustache or pulling a shawl over long blond hair. The line of 10-year-olds costumed as European immigrants from a century ago is about to walk through Ellis Island — more commonly known as the fifth-grade classroom at Saint George’s.

But today, Ellis Island is a series of tables where parents question each immigrant about their education, work history, health, and “character.” Each student has spent a month researching the identity of an immigrant with the goal of reaching America. The ones with the right answers are allowed to take a loyalty oath to the United States and become citizens. A few with “illnesses” or questionable backgrounds are “deported,” but afterward everyone changes into regular clothes and shares a lunch of foods from around the world.

“The kids do the research, choose between different project options, and become active participants in their own learning,” explains Erika Mullins, who team teaches fifth grade with Jennifer Smith. “We act as guides instead of telling them what to do.”

And not just guides for the unique class projects such as re-enacting Ellis Island that make fifth grade so memorable. Erika and Jennifer are guides on the road to the Middle School, that mysterious, slightly scary world across campus.

“We are a bridge from Lower School to

Middle School,” says Jennifer. Her students learn to use the same daily planner that will help them stay organized in sixth grade. “We also give nightly homework and assign long-term homework that’s due on a certain day.”

“Our job is to prepare them for Middle School and being successful there,” adds Erika. Their lessons cover time management, how to think critically and solve problems — the skills Middle School teachers want to see in their students.

Along with these skills, Erika and Jennifer help their students develop a sense of being a community. Community service activities at a nearby retirement home — trick or treating, caroling, delivering valentines — helps build relationships with older adults. A big spring trip will give the entire class a more intensive community service experience along with visits to a Spanish restaurant and store to practice their language lessons.

Monthly team-building activities such as a canoe trip down the Little Spokane or negotiating a ropes course together encourage them to help each other out when they tip a canoe or encounter a challenging task. “Team-building activities often sound fun, but can be really hard,” warns Erika. “There are tears along the way, but in the end they all love it.”

“We talk about how this helps them

with friends and life,” adds Jennifer. For example, a lesson about the ways students behave in a group — are they a “shark” a “teddy bear” or a “turtle”? — lets them consider how they naturally respond and even try out different roles. “I’ve heard them later identifying the roles they played, like ‘I was really being a turtle.’ That is a pretty advanced developmental skill for 10- and 11-year-olds.”

Practicing scripted conversations such as “When you \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_” teaches them appropriate ways to interact. “It helps them take responsibility for their own actions on the playground,” explains Erika, and Jennifer notes that “successful people can get along with a lot of different people. They can communicate and do a job.”

Those communication skills are essential for several of their class projects that involve public speaking. As “Code Blue Scientists,” the students form teams to research diseases then present their findings as “expert doctors” to the rest of the class. Such projects give students choices between written or artistic expressions. “Some want to write, others to draw, but it’s an opportunity for all students to use their gifts to show what they know,” says Erika.

The spring Writers’ Celebration gives each fifth grader the chance to lead a group of younger students. They welcome visiting parents then give each student a chance to read their writing. Some fifth graders don’t have a teacher in their room, but each year they get lots of compliments.

Fifth grade closes with Recognition Day and their formal transition to the Middle School. On a typically sunny morning in early June, the rest of the Lower School lines up on the path to the bridge over the little stream by the Middle School. Each fifth grader shakes hands with their teachers before crossing the bridge — this past year decorated with big red stars like a walk of fame — to be welcomed by Jamie Tender, head of the Middle School. A recognition



and honors ceremony follows, where their teachers read compliments the students have written about each other. After a slide show reviewing the past year, the fourth graders sing goodbye to the fifth graders, who sign each others’ yearbooks and walk up to Davenport House for a special lunch. Special because “it’s like going to a fancy restaurant,” says Erika, “with a menu, place cards, and they get served by their parents.”

“The kids say, ‘We’re graduating’ but Jennifer and I say they are just moving on to the Middle School. You only ‘graduate’ from high school or college, and they’ve got another seven years to go before that happens.”

Still, they are headed to a new building with individual lockers and more freedom. But they also will find new teachers with similar philosophies and expectations for their academic efforts and behavior that they have known in fifth grade.

“The tone in Lower School continues in the Middle and Upper Schools,” says Jennifer. “The Middle School teachers tell us they are impressed with how well our kids treat each other and their interest in learning.”

Perhaps that’s the most lasting result of attending fifth grade at Saint George’s. As Jennifer puts it, “They deal with life in a more mature way. But that doesn’t just happen by magic!”

— John Carter

**In a teambuilding exercise, students try to cross the gym without stepping off the mats**



**“Maria Milano” navigates Ellis Island to recreate an immigrant experience**

**On the Web**

View more photos of the fifth graders’ Ellis Island re-enactment at [www.sgs.org/news\\_and\\_photos](http://www.sgs.org/news_and_photos)