



Wendy Fisher: The life of an administrator



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Wendy Fisher fell in love with Montessori through the experience of her children.

Fisher, now head of school at Mountaintop Montessori on Pantops, spent so much time in the classroom of the school in Washington, D.C. that the oldest of her five kids attended that the head of school suggested Fisher explore getting certified to teach. After that, Fisher said, “I never looked back.”

The philosophy of a Montessori education, which emphasizes kids’ individual development in mixed-age classrooms and gives them lots of freedom to direct their own learning process, spoke to Fisher, who had studied journalism and worked in PR before her children were

8/20/13 at
7:00 AM

born. In addition to leading Mountaintop, she now works as a Montessori consultant, serves on the Board of the Virginia Association of Independent Schools, and is pursuing her doctorate at UVA's Curry School of Education.

But for the last 10 years, life has revolved around the school—a community that's more like a family unit than anything else. Her role is not unlike that of a mom: "You have to be a jack-of-all-trades, and turn on a dime," and it's best to forget your ego. "People love you and hate you, and the same people love you and hate you in the same day," she laughed.

For all her study in the field of education, the job often has little to do with applying pedagogy. "All this stuff that I have empirical knowledge about—most of that is irrelevant," she said. "All those things really are like the palette on which everything else I do rests. Sometimes I get to the end of my day and I'll say, 'I accomplished nothing. All I did is walk around and sit around and talk to people.'"

Sometimes that's just the life of an administrator. Fisher remembered a speech given by a retiring president of the Fork Union Military Academy—a school on the opposite end of the instructional spectrum from hers, if ever there was one—at a VAIS meeting once. "He said, 'Most of my job is drinking coffee and looking concerned,'" she said. "You get to this point in your career where people want somebody to listen, and care, and maybe throw a tidbit of wisdom."

But that belies the great devotion of time and energy Fisher's job does require. Not that she'd have it any other way. The thing about Mountaintop, she said, is that it attracts the very people she would want to spend all her days with anyway.

"There's a lot of diversity, but there are some common threads that run through," she said: an emphasis on intentional choices, being in nature, appreciating local food, getting connected to your own creativity, staying active. The school community eats together, works together, runs together. "There is no work-life balance,"

she said, matter-of-factly. “My friends are there. We care about each other.”

And they care about their mission, and the bigger picture of helping kids—and each other—find their places in the wider world.

“Our system of education honors that people find meaning through purposeful work, and by grounding themselves in the larger purpose of being a human being,” she said. Finding that path becomes the greater goal of school—and life outside school. When you’re working for what you love, no matter your age, “it makes the work and the learning and the striving for excellence second nature,” she said. “It’s not a decontextualized task or a broken-apart checking of boxes. It’s all whole and part of being who you are.”