

## Pine Point School

Grades PreK–9  
Stonington, Connecticut  
Private/Rural  
Enrollment 271

### Strong Minds and Caring Hearts

When five stalwart visionaries decided to found a new private school in 1948, they sought to provide a quality education in which hands-on learning would build a firm foundation for core academic skills. Now, almost six decades later, Pine Point School in Stonington, Connecticut, thrives, using service learning as the key strategy of its rigorous academic curriculum that exemplifies the school's motto, *Strong Minds and Caring Hearts*.

“I am always inspired when I hear the kids say that they feel they get more out of their service than they give. This is education at its finest,” says Paul Geise, the genial and farsighted headmaster of Pine Point School. Nestled in a rural area of southeastern Connecticut close to the Rhode Island border, Pine Point makes certain that all its students use their talents to help others. A structured service-learning initiative that reinforces the curriculum spans all grade levels. Little ones begin by providing companionship to senior citizens at the Westerly Adult Day Service Center, and each successive grade engages in a collective community project that runs the gamut from beach clean-up and recycling to interviewing of veterans and tutoring of young children. A highlight of the experience is the eighth-grade performance-based assessment project in which the students demonstrate critical thinking, analytical reading, expository writing, and presentation skills through a service project that correlates with a literary work.

Many schools may wonder if what they do in the way of character building has any long-term effect on their students' lives. Pine Point knows for sure that it has made a difference. David Cruthers, assistant director of development, points out that the school follows



Ninth-grade oceanology students monitor local waters.

its graduates closely and notes that a high percentage of them pursue interests that are service oriented. Recent graduates have helped porters in Nepal, worked in speech pathology in Central America, developed village infrastructure in rural China, and taught young children in the favelas of Brazil. Parent Alice Groton observes how the school “reaches out and gets involved in our greater community.” She adds, “We are a small school with a big mission of caring for others.”

#### Ethical Basis of Pine Point

From its very roots and philosophy, Pine Point has been in the business of ethical education for close to six decades. However, in 2004, under the transformational leadership of Geise, the whole school as well as members of the surrounding communities set out to reaffirm precisely what Pine Point's core values were. Respect, integrity, moral courage, and excellence emerged as these essential values; once recognized and understood by faculty, students and parents, they became known to all, through the school newsletters, the school's Web site, the student handbook, and the service-learning documents. Students learn and practice the core values in a variety of strategically planned initiatives that include developmentally appropriate service learning, class and school meetings, cooperative group activities, cross-age activities, and collaborative academic projects.

Susan Kozel, assistant head of school, states that the administration makes a special effort to emphasize the core values in the training of new staff at the faculty retreat that precedes the opening of school. Music teacher Linda Lozis, who was new last year, quickly got a sense that these core virtues were something very important at Pine Point. She looks back fondly on a memorable activity in which all new staff members collaborated in creating a skit that included the core values. Putting these core values into practice takes place daily in the class lessons, service projects, and extra-curricular activities, while weekly faculty meetings allow the staff to reflect on the larger purposes of education. Parent Holly Carbonneau comments on the result: “I believe Pine Point School is a small slice of heaven. There we have found caring, dedicated teachers who not only teach but challenge our children to be good, caring members of society.”

### An Expectation of Kindness

Another parent, Janet Hinkle, points out, “One of the best characteristics of Pine Point is its universal expectation that all students will be kind to each other at all times.” Though Hinkle maintains that this is not forced upon students and that the students are not punished for not following it to the letter, she is quick to add that “it is an expectation that everyone seems to share.” That honored New England tradition, the town meeting, surfaces in many forms at Pine Point and serves as a bonding element. The whole school gathers every Monday morning for a weekly greeting exercise that unites the upper and lower schools. During the spring semester, presentations by ninth-grade students on their service projects are much-awaited components of these gatherings. All grades have class meetings at least once a week, and the middle school students participate twice a week in advisory periods. Cross-age tutoring is another strategy that engenders caring. It is not unusual to observe a fifth-grade student and a first grader walking hand in hand down the hall or exchanging high fives after completing a project together.

The middle school’s Pine Point poetry competition, affectionately called Poetry Madness since it is structured like the collegiate March Madness basketball tournament, serves as a tangible example of the way in which the school develops *strong minds and*

## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Pine Point School:

- Evaluative data derived from feedback from teachers, students, and community partners in every service-learning project reveal a high degree of satisfaction.
- Follow-up studies of alumni reveal that a significant percentage of them are pursuing interests that are service oriented.
- The number of community partnerships (currently 32) continues to grow annually.
- The number of student-initiated service projects has increased. G.I.V.E., a service organization started by students, received the Association for Fundraising Professionals’ Youth in Philanthropy state award.
- The strategic study of school climate undertaken last year reveals that parents gave Pine Point excellent ratings (from 90 percent to 96 percent) in all the following areas: safe learning environment, quality of teaching, opportunities for parent involvement, fostering creativity, empowering students, valuing family, cultivating leadership, living out its mission, serving community, being a place of excellence.
- Performance on standardized tests has been consistently strong.
- Scores on eighth-grade performance/service assessment have improved.

*caring hearts.* Last May, all students and faculty gathered together in Mitchell gym as Hamilton Salsich, a 2006 Connecticut Teacher of the Year, read the favorite poems selected by students and faculty. As engrossed as if observing a tie-breaking moment in a championship game, the audience, tense and silent, listened to Salsich’s sonorous voice read the final choices. The overwhelming favorite, Dudley Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham,” which described the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, received thunderous applause. It is not surprising that the selection correlated with the school’s emphasis on addressing social injustice.

Developing such caring students is no accident at Pine Point, for the school provides many channels for solving conflicts amicably. The Responsive Classroom model serves as the framework for creating routines in grades K–3. Talking Couches, found

in all homerooms, are comfortable spots to resolve disagreements and misunderstandings. In the lower-school classes, students and teachers work together to develop classroom jobs, civility charts, and social ground rules, while middle school students find that conflict resolution strategies taught as part of a social-skill unit called Work It Out help to eliminate bullying and cruel teasing.

### Service Learning: The Core of Strong Minds and Caring Hearts

“Pine Point has an admirable service-learning program, called a ‘learning’ program because we firmly believe that the habit of serving others is fundamental to being fully human,” writes Geise in his September 2005 ViewPoints address. Service learning director and seventh-grade teacher Dave Smith believes that the school’s exemplary service-learning program, with its thoughtful integration of academics, service, and moral development, has been successful for the last 15 years because it is “an integral part of Pine Point, not an add-on.”



Pine Point students celebrate the virtues of solar power.

Collective cross-grade projects help all students realize the benefits of being of service to others, and original projects, initiated by students, show another level of advancement. A close connection with the curriculum makes the projects all the more meaningful. For example, a beach clean-up project in which fourth graders collect, sort, and analyze sources of litter along local beaches dovetails with math and environmental science skills; and a language arts project in which seventh graders interview veterans about wartime experiences, organize their responses, and write biographies reinforces proficiency in interviewing, research, and writing. Anna, an eighth grader, says that her work last year in interviewing senior citizens at the Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center changed her perspective of history and of older people. In reference to service learning in general, Anna adds, “Education is more than ABC’s—it’s about making a difference.”

In an article published in the *Middle School Journal*, Smith points out that implementing a rigorous eighth-grade performance assessment that

focuses on literary analysis, community service, and research would “not only test our students’ knowledge of basic skills and concepts through authentic applications, but also would require them to demonstrate a social conscience.” Amanda and Victoria, current ninth graders who finished their projects last year, agree with Smith’s estimate of the project’s outcomes. After reading the novel *Flowers for Algernon*, Amanda served at a learning center for students with autism for approximately ten hours and then wrote and presented a synthesis of her reading and experience to a panel of teachers and community members. Although she said public speaking was not her forte, she deemed the experience “incredible” because it developed her own courage and her insight into the world of the autistic child. Victoria, after analyzing themes in *Walkabout*, a novel about two children stranded in the Australian Outback, applied the theme of responding to different cultures to her work with the homeless and to needy children.

Geise points out that one way of assessing the strength of a character education program is to ask the question *Do students take the initiative in the advance of character?* Pine Point students deserve an A+ in this category. Individually, students have volunteered to leave school and help in New Orleans, asked fellow students to assist them in financing surgery for children with cleft palates, and directed their birthday gifts to support the less fortunate. Cassie, a fifth grader, shares that the Shoe Train campaign she initiated last year came from a talk she had with her mom at home. Students had fun creating miniature shoes to adorn a bulletin board that spurred other students to donate new and “gently used” shoes to a local center. In another vein, the students have collaborated to form a youth group for philanthropy—called G.I.V.E. (an acronym for generosity, involvement, volunteering, and education)—that works with many service organizations. This year, the organization, which has at times partnered with Beacon Hospice in the nearby town of Mystic, won the Association for Fundraising Professionals’ Youth in Philanthropy state award.

### Parents and School Values

Ask parents about their views of Pine Point, and you will be bound to hear many anecdotes about teachers who have generously given of their time and care to help students, and even some tearful testimonies of

the personal benefits that parents have experienced. Parent Karen Stone calls the relationship “a dynamic partnership between students, school, and family—dedicated to the education of the whole child.”

Another parent, Mary Minn Kong, gives praise to the way the school implements its mission: “Pine Point does an excellent job fostering *strong minds* through activities such as the school debates, ninth-grade speeches, the Math Counts club, poetry nights, and book club meetings. . . . *Caring hearts* are apparent when the school facilitates children from the lower school to the middle school getting increasingly more involved in a variety of activities to help members of the community.”

Many parents testify that they believe their children’s perspective on life and willingness to accept others is an outgrowth of participation in service at school. Elena Marquardt relates that her daughter Emily still remembers visiting the senior citizens at Westerly two years ago and has asked if her family can go back to visit the friends she made there. Parent Suzanne Purnell observes that the school inspires “internal motivation for success in all areas of life” and praises “the willingness of the school community to help others without thought for personal gain.” Art teacher Maria Iacoi, whose two children also attend Pine Point, provides another insight: “My son is the kind of child who could slip through the cracks anywhere else, but that will never happen at Pine Point.” Iacoi adds, “They really know my son. The staff will just dig deeper and deeper until they find the strengths of a child. We care about how kids come out of here. We want them to be successful when they move on to their next school.”

### Future Steps: Innovation and Improvement

When asked to describe the *animus* of Pine Point, Geise replies, “A healthy spirit of innovation and a thirst for continual improvement.” The school’s record shows that it has never been a slacker in taking first steps. It is already doing its part to reduce its own contribution to the generation of greenhouse gases, by having 330 solar panels installed on the school roof; Pine Point expects that they will generate about 50 percent of the electricity that the school uses annually.

## PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS: Paul G. Geise

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *dynamic* and *welcoming*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** service-learning program that exists in all grades

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE:** Students love to come to school.

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:** consistently high scores on standardized tests; improvement in student presentations in the eighth-grade assessment project each year

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:** *It’s important to include everyone—students, teachers, families.*

Also, since other environmental issues loom over our nation, Pine Point will take the initiative in developing service projects that support issues such as energy conservation, recycling, preservation of biodiversity, countering of global warming, and pollution control. As for additional projects, Geise says the school community is interested in pursuing a more global perspective, possibly through exploring additional possibilities for international studies and partnerships. It is easy to see that Pine Point is living up to what Geise believes is the “greater responsibility” placed on independent schools today: “to restore faith and confidence that goodness and honor and integrity are still nourished in society.”

### REFERENCES

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