

Focus Is Shifting to Independent Learning

by Kate Sosin
Courant News Writer

For adults who grew up with textbooks and chalkboards, classrooms frequented by Boston youth may look very different than the settings they recognize, but it is not the switch to tablets and computers that is responsible for that change.

Teachers are pushing kids out of their desks and into the world at many

area schools, focusing on independent and experiential learning.

"A teacher telling a student what to do over and over again doesn't really improve their understanding," argues Denise Labieniec, director of studies at Winsor School.

Independent learning is part of Winsor's tradition, but Labieniec says that practice has evolved as technology increasingly gives stu-

dents direct access to information.

Educators at Winsor focus less on feeding knowledge to students and more on teaching students how to learn, says Labieniec.

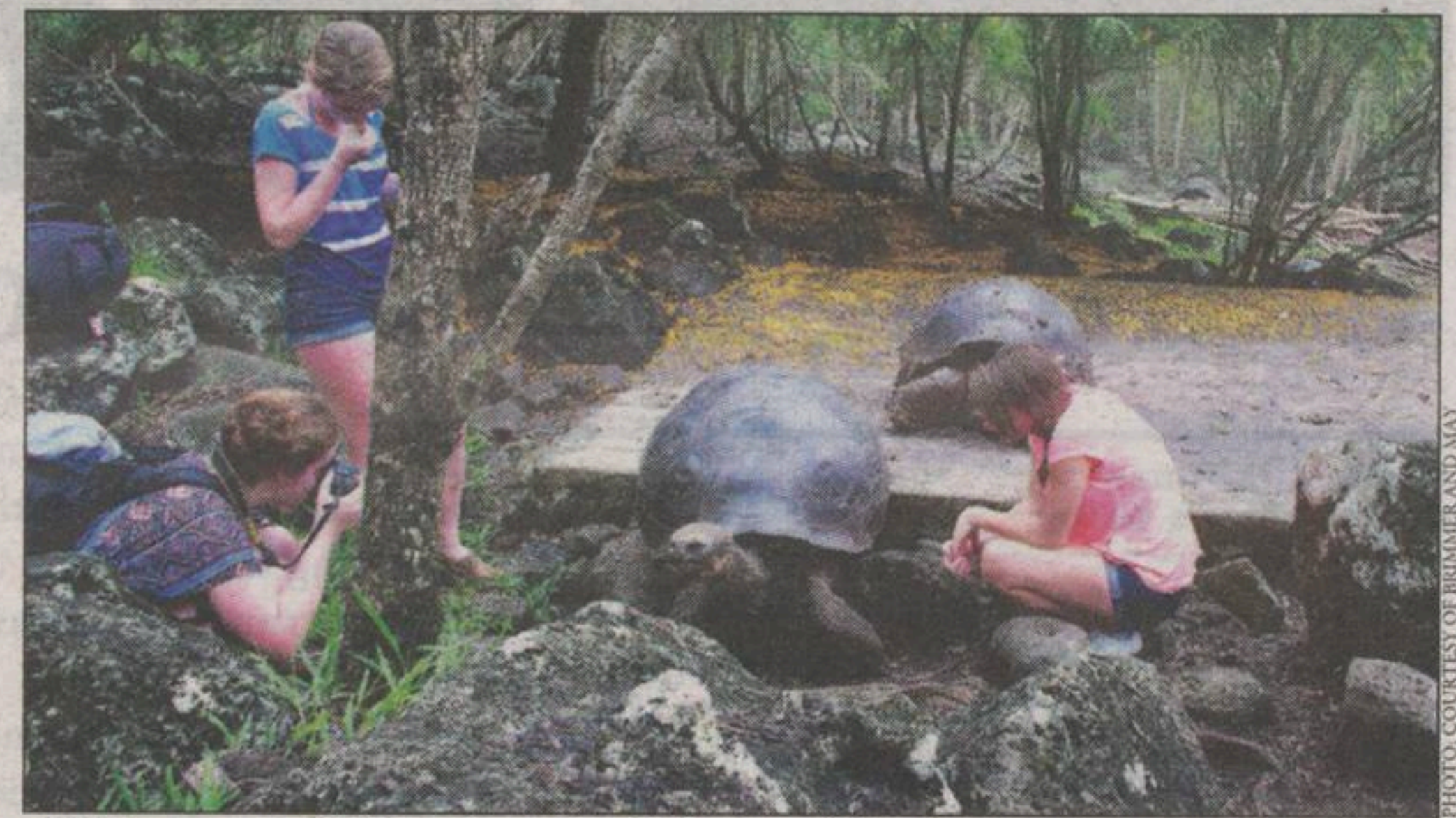
"It's really moving away from a teacher-centered approach to learning," she said.

This philosophy culminates in a capstone Independent Learning Experience during senior year. Faculty oversee these large, self-directed projects, which have included fusion cookbooks, physics studies and German translations.

Mount Alvernia High School similarly pushes students beyond the bounds of traditional teaching.

This year, teacher Jennifer Staysniak's class, Social Teaching in Action, will document the histories of local social justice activists using a grant from a Brookline-based organization, Facing History and Ourselves.

"I'm really interested in oral history and issues of social justice,"



A Brimmer and May trip to the Galapagos Islands

explained Staysniak.

Students will interview activists and create a website, voicesofactivism.org. Topics will include religious rights, environmental activism, prison reform, women's rights, civil rights, children's rights, anti-poverty and community action.

Brimmer and May School also makes the larger community available to its students, and that com-

munity has no boundaries.

By the time students graduate, most will have traveled abroad as part of the school's Winterim program. Destinations have included China, Senegal, the Galapagos Islands, South Korea, Belize, London, Mexico and New Orleans.

"Regardless of whether students are on financial aid or not, everyone has equal access to those trips," said Judith Guild, head of school. "The importance of those trips is how do we get our kids out into the field?"

Guild feels these six-to-ten-day trips motivate students beyond lessons taught in traditional classroom settings.

"It's really exciting to see students experience and come back and say I want to work harder so I can get there," Guild said.

Inspiration is very much the point, said Labieniec.

Independent and experiential learning are not always one in the same, she points out. Independent learning is self-directed, while experiential learning is hands-on. Both, however, can engage and drive students, especially as technology improves and the world speeds up.

"What we try to have is have our independent learning be as experiential as it can," Labieniec said.

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