

## Van Lunen Fellows Applied Project

### Define and Employ a Relational Model of Education

#### at Rivendell School

Rivendell School's Christ-centered education is designed around the fundamental belief that healthy relationships are a primary doorway to learning and that students in relationally connected classrooms are most likely to experience an optimal environment for education. In order to hold to this tenet with integrity and also sustain an excellence-driven academic program we believe it is essential to research, explore, and understand what a Relational Model of Education for Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade should look like. Once the model is clarified, it is essential that we effectively practice and communicate the standards of the model. Rivendell School is a uniquely relationship-based, Christ-centered school which educates 150 students in grades Kindergarten through Eighth Grade and is located in Arlington, Virginia. *This project was designed to help Rivendell School define and employ a Relational Model of Education in order to more plainly spell out the school's educational philosophy for current and future faculty, trustees, administrators, and families and, in the course of time, to create measurable standards for how to practice the Relational Model of Education. Additionally, by more clearly explaining and practicing this Model at Rivendell School, the surrounding community and academic institutions beyond the school may be more fully informed and possibly even impacted by the implicit Truth upon which the Model is designed.*

The Headmaster and the Board of Trustees at Rivendell School engaged in multiple conversations about how, historically, an emphasis on relationships has shaped the school's fundamental educational philosophy and set the school apart. Further discussions allowed the board to fully embrace the Relational Model of Education as a dynamic and foundational Rivendell concept. In conjunction with the Headmaster and the Curriculum Committee, the Board has advocated for the development of a curricular component for the model which will provide teachers with direction, examples, and standards as they implement the Relational Model of Education.

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## Background to the school, and the emerging of the Relational Model of Education project:

### Background:

Rivendell School is a blessed, Christ-centered educational sanctuary on the edge of Metropolitan Washington D.C. Our program is designed for children in Kindergarten through Eighth Grade and we serve nearly 150 students and their families. We love this number because it allows us to know the names, the stories, the family members of every child, and we recognize that deep relationships are an incalculable asset to our community. While the culture of Northern Virginia creates an atmosphere in which contentment is viewed as complacency, Rivendell seeks to demonstrate that staying within our mission and not expanding our program to be “bigger and better” allows us to hone and perfect our uniquely high-quality, academically adaptable and excellent, child and family-centered, relationship-based learning community.

The structure of our academic program revolves around relationships. For relational reasons we keep class sizes at 16 to 17 students, we have combined-grade classrooms where a child experiences consecutive years with one teacher, and we invest innumerable parent-involvement hours in the school to ensure that children and parents are connected to each other, to the community at-large, and to the day-to-day learning and school life. Opportunities abound for students and teachers to know each other deeply as we stay within our sweet spot and obey the “rule of 150.” Beyond the student body, however, teachers and parents are also provided with opportunities to know each other deeply and many social events and town meetings are designed around the specific goal of connecting with each other.

We speak often of our desire to educate the “whole child” at Rivendell School and we take seriously our responsibility to nurture a child’s “...heart, soul, mind and strength.” We also take seriously the highly-relational charge to “...love your neighbor as yourself”.

*Despite these remarkably intentional relational emphases, Rivendell School continues to wrestle with the tension to be both academic and relational. We choose to be both. To effectively accomplish this piece of our mission, it is necessary that we provide a clear rationale for why such great energy must be put into relationships, and a comprehensive definition for what this relational education should look like year-to-year and day-to-day. As a school that values the integral quality of God’s creation, we desire that our education model reflect God’s wholeness, not a relational—educational dualism. Our emerging desire to clarify and develop a “Relational Model of Education” to merge our school’s heart for an academic*

*community which combined Christ-centered education and Christ-honoring relationships provided the inspiration for my Van Lunen Project*

My Project...Where to begin:

We believe that Rivendell School's relational values are based in the truth of Scripture, and we are convinced, through 20 years of practice, that they are highly effective, transferrable, and worthy of building into our curriculum. These methods begin with the practice of knowing each child: **Children who are known, understood, and appreciated for who they are by their teachers and peers are more likely to be at ease in the classroom, to feel safe, to be less self-conscious and ultimately to learn more easily, more completely, and more likely to develop a life-long love of learning.** This is one fundamental truth that drives our educating. Even greater in significance is the following principle: we believe that people are created in the image of the Creator God. And God seeks to be in a healthy, growing relationship with every person He has created. We also believe that in order to live a life of significance one must broaden his or her four essential relationships: me with God, me to others, me to creation, me to myself. At Rivendell School we sink considerable time into helping children practice habits of relational growth in each of these areas. This is both a tremendous asset which sets a Rivendell education apart and also an incredible luxury which is possible due to our small size, our school culture of gentleness and kindness, and our emphasis on knowing every child.

Methods, Process, Discussion, Developing a Definition

Phase One: Meetings and Discussions.

My project had both school-related objectives and personal significance. Over twenty years in education I have witnessed innumerable students for whom a sense of connection with the teacher made all the difference in how that child performed in class. Conversely, an academic superstar would occasionally struggle through a class and express how the teacher didn't like them, or "really only cared about the material" not the students. Over the past ten years as Headmaster, the idea of developing a "relationship-based school" has recurred multiple times and in multiple conversations. The opportunity to pursue a subject that had both personal and professional significance was a primary factor in why I sought to be a Van Lunen fellow. Finally, I approached the Board of Trustees to ask for their blessing as I would be investing a great deal of energy and time in this project on behalf of the school. The Board provided an immediate and unanimous positive response.

Phase Two: Gathering Information/Research.

Multiple hours were devoted to reading, and digging for studies that peeled apart the layers of student-teacher relationships to try to discover whether there was enough evidence to indicate that healthy relationships led to or played a significant part in effective educating. I accumulated an extensive bibliography of articles and studies that piece together the data which indicates a tremendously positive academic effect that results from emotionally and relationally connected/healthy students.

Phase Three: Collect informal data and personal responses from fellow educators

Part of what inspired my enthusiasm for this project was my own experience with students in the classroom. I know that when students felt like they were connected with me, the subject of our studies always seemed to make a stronger connection. Students with no interest in Geology became fascinated by the subject simply because they knew I knew them, loved them, and that I insisted on a classroom environment in which student relationships were honored. It made sense, then, to seek to find out if my experience was unique. Moreover, if other stories echoed my own, those stories would provide depth, meaning, and context to the overall project. Over sixty fellow educators were solicited and asked five questions about the significance of relationships with their students and how that impacted that child's academic progress. Eighteen respondents told their stories and confirmed that not only was this project well worth the effort, but their experiences were such that they all wanted feedback (and hoped for confirmation!) on the conclusions that were drawn.

Phase Four: Read, Summarize, Condense, Extrapolate

Phase Five: Refine the Definition of the Relational Model of Education

Rivendell School's Board of Trustees and I engaged in a round-table discussion over the purpose of a definition for our Relational Model of Education. Then for nearly an entire scheduled board meeting, we addressed the definition, pondered how it would impact our mission, and wrestled with whether it should serve as another "pillar" of the school or if it was even more "overarching", "umbrella-like", or "bedrock" –a fundamental, sustaining principle of truth upon which our schools approach to education finds its footing.

After numerous variations and modifications of terminology were considered, a definition for a Relational Model of Education at Rivendell School was established.

Phase Six: Create a Curricular/Measuring Component

Establishing a connecting point between the Relational Model and our current curriculum will be undertaken by our school during a subsequent phase of curricular development. Clear standards within our flexible curriculum will set out specific responsibilities for teachers as they work to connect with their students and provide an ideal academic environment. Our teachers will develop benchmarks for their classrooms that incorporate general behavior, reconciling with each other, service, character development, and conflict resolution. Additionally, teachers will establish standards for their own interactions with students, and will determine, in specific terms, what they should do to nurture healthy and connected relationships with their students.

### Summary of Project Goals and Results

*Goals: This project will attempt to define and employ a Relational Model of Education at Rivendell School for the following purposes*

- To hone and focus Rivendell School's uniquely relationship-based educational philosophy for current and future Rivendell School teachers, trustees, administrators, and families and to create a measureable standard for how to practice the Relational Model of Education
- To accurately articulate Rivendell School's educational philosophy to our guests and our broader community who are unfamiliar with the school and/or inquiring about the school.
- To ultimately expand the impact of the Relational Model of Education. To provide a philosophical and practical rationale for use of the Relational Model of Education to all interested educators.

**Results:**

- The Board of Trustees at Rivendell School fully embraced this Relational Model of Education conceptually. Moreover, in conjunction with the Headmaster and the Curriculum Committee, the Board has encouraged the development of a curricular component for the model which will provide teachers with direction as they implement the Relational Model of Education.
- As new families attend Rivendell's Information Night and Observation days next year, the Relational Model of Education will be formally presented as a foundational philosophical tenet upon which Rivendell School is established.

- The impact of the Relational Model of Education on Rivendell School is only beginning to be measured. Meanwhile, educators from various institutions have already asked for a summary of the model and have engaged with me in numerous conversations about how to put it to use in their schools. As for the long-term impact of the model on schools beyond Rivendell, that remains to be seen. As classroom-specific work continues on the Model over the next phase of curriculum development, we excitedly anticipate it being implemented at Rivendell School and beyond.

*Project Analysis and Commentary—What I Have Learned*

- God’s deep desire is that we abide in healthy relationships with Him, with others, with regard to creation, and with ourselves. To fully honor these relationships, we recognize that we must allow ourselves to be accountable to certain relational standards.
- Our Christ-centered school that seeks to be academically excellent will more completely and effectively fulfill its academic and spiritual mission when teachers, administrators, parents, and students put energy into maintaining healthy relationships.
- Our school does many things well and intentionally. Wise planning is a gift of God that allows our school to pursue excellence as we seek to nurture the whole child. We are blessed, at Rivendell School, to have a forward-thinking, prayerful, open-to-change culture. This allows us to take risks as we seek to always improve our academic program.
- A Relational Model of Educating is built on research that affirms this fact: love for our students, students who feel safe, connected, appreciated, known...this teacher-student connection is one highly-significant component of an ideal learning environment...and research indicates that this is a significant piece of what allows student to learn effectively.
- A Relational Model of Educating recognizes that relationships are eternal, and have the ability to impact academics positively or negatively.