STEM, STEAM or The Three R's? What is the best education for my child today?

The honest answer is that you do not have to feel forced to make a choice. It is, indeed, possible to have it all, especially during the early childhood and elementary school years. The fact is that any good educational institution, serving the needs of preschool through elementary school children, is going to have well-established, rigorous and engaging reading, writing and mathematics curricula (the Three R's). These three subjects should serve as the strong foundation of the entire academic program. However, along with these critical academic components, focusing on nurturing close, personal relationships; providing for the healthy growth and development of a child's self-confidence; and training these young children in the ways of living full, productive lives in their communities are also critically important skills.

Is having a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) or STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) program also important for young children in order to be ready for their adult lives? Yes and no! Certainly, exposing young children to these areas of content in meaningful and engaging ways is important. Often, it is through the study of these subject areas that a teacher can find content that is especially engaging for children, and therefore inspires a child's desire to learn more. Increasing a child's reading, writing and mathematics skills as they plant seeds in a garden, build bridges with blocks, watch a video about orca whales, count their Halloween candy, create a piece of artwork or perform in a play is what makes going to school fun and engages the imagination. It brings context and meaning to the academic skills.

The core of a STEM or STEAM curriculum, however, is more than these discrete content areas. A true STEM/STEAM program provides students with opportunities to work in teams to solve unique problems. The problem is that many schools are adding amazing academic content in the STEM areas without teaching children how to work on a team. Students are put in teams without possessing the skills necessary for doing successful team work: work in which every member of the team has a voice and is able to make a meaningful contribution. The extroverts take over the work, and the introverts sit quietly and watch. That is not team work. That is group work done with one powerful leader.

What are the skills that support effective team work and can also be taught? Well, think about successful athletic teams. On these teams, each individual is recognized for the gift/talent he/she has to offer. The gift or talent is then offered for the benefit of the whole. If a soccer team loses, the goalie is not held soley responsible for having allowed too many scores from the other team. The team recognizes that it is also because the defenders did not do their job of keeping the ball away from the goal and the forwards did not keep the ball on their scoring end of the field. The team loses out on success, not the individual. Schools can do a better job of teaching children that their own success can also be their team's or class's or school's success. Everyone is more successful when the whole is successful.

At a very young age, we can teach children how to be good listeners, recognize and honor the gifts of others, receive the gifts of others, offer their own gifts for the betterment of the whole, appreciate cultural differences and provide support to others so that all can achieve the task at hand.

STEM or STEAM? Awesome. The Three R's and a heart for others? Non-negotiable.

Christ Episcopal School (CES) offers a program called Learning Integration for Tomorrow: A Values-Centric Education on the Digital Frontier (LIFT) that addresses these important components of a 21st century education in preschool 2's through 8th grade classes. As the preschool 2's work together to clean up their room, they are taught, "We sink or sail together." CES elementary and middle school students? They are coached to listen actively to understand, be positive and respectful, appreciate differences, offer help willingly and contribute to the community .   CES is a beautifully diverse community, where immersed in quality curricula, students are being trained to think and work as teams of scientists, technology experts, engineers and mathematicians work every day.

You are invited to visit on any Friday morning at 9:00am for a tour. Come on by!

Dr. Caroline Chapin
Head of School