

Westtown School's Chris Benbow Becomes Head of School

By Leah Foster



WESTTOWN
SCHOOL

Chris Benbow '90 was appointed
Westtown School's new Head of
School on January 1, 2022.



From the beginning of his Westtown journey as a student and throughout his path as alum, teacher, and administrator, Chris Benbow experienced a spark within that has been brightening with every step of the way, guiding him to his newest role as Head of School. Driven by this strong sense of purpose, Benbow seeks to ensure that all students at Westtown discover their own unique light and live out their individual passions.

Benbow has deep connections to Westtown School, a private, Quaker, coed, PreK through 12th grade college-prep day and boarding school in West Chester. He has experienced the community from numerous vantage points – as a student, alum, teacher, and parent – and each role has contributed to building a strong foundation for his leadership in this new capacity. Benbow first came to Westtown as a sixth-grade student in 1983; he graduated in 1990. He returned to Westtown again in 1998 and over the ensuing 10 years, he taught English, coached basketball and baseball, was a dorm parent, served as Upper School English Department Chair, and was Dean of Students. Af-



Chris Benbow '90 (pictured third from left) first experienced Westtown School as a student from sixth through 12th grade.

ter a move with his family to Connecticut for six years, Benbow returned to Westtown in 2014 where he was Upper School Principal for five years, and then Associate Head of School for two years. Earlier this academic year, and during Westtown's global search for a new Head of School, Benbow served as Interim Head of School. Westtown's Board of Trustees appointed Benbow Head of School, and he began serving in that role on January 1, 2022.

Purpose, Illuminated

Westtown teaches from its Quaker values of honoring a belief of *that of God* in everyone and seeking to better the world. This belief informs Benbow's life and has impacted his Westtown experience both as a young person and as an adult. "A thread throughout my life has been a desire to serve my community ... by supporting others – especially young people – to realize that Divine Spark, that *Light*, in themselves and each other, to discern what they believe, and then live

their lives accordingly. It is both what I seek to do myself, and what I desire to help others to achieve," explained Benbow.

He is committed to helping students recognize their unique gifts, and appreciates that discovering their purpose is an ongoing, lifelong process. Benbow emphasized we should never underestimate these youngest learners. "They're full of spectacular perceptions and ideas and, while their answers will naturally and appropriately evolve over time, it's never too early to practice the dispositions and habits of mind and spirit which will allow them to experience a lifelong discovery of purpose," he commented.

Benbow witnesses that purpose coming to light in all areas of Westtown's community. "It's in the practice of the challenging and joyful work of connecting with each other every day in a variety of ways, from social-emotional learning in Pre-K to adolescents figuring out, with support and intention, how to live together 24 hours a

Lighting the Way, Westtown's Strategic Vision, describes how the school will further illuminate three vital parts of the Westtown experience: knowledge, community, and environment.



Third grade has a comprehensive unit on Africa which includes a six-week, on-campus residency of Jeannine Osayande and the Dunya Performing Arts Company. This year marked the 20th anniversary of the partnership.



Westtown's residential program develops students who are exceptionally well prepared for college.



day in our residential program with peers of countless different identities and a wide range of lived experiences, whether they're from five minutes down the road or halfway around the world," he explained.

Benbow also observes children's self-discovery in Westtown's natural spaces, as the school is situated on a beautiful 600-acre campus featuring a lake, farms, and forests. Students enjoy the opportunity to explore their unique gifts while experiencing and valuing the natural world and caring for the environment, whether just by simply being in nature or the intentional work of the farming program, environmental science classes, or direct engagement in campus sustainability efforts.

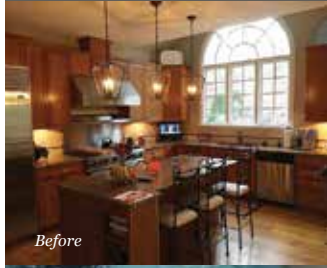
Regardless of setting, Westtown's approach to education is unique. The school believes truth is best discerned in community. Students realize they live in a diverse world, and their worldview is but one of many. Benbow explained that *truth may come from any corner of the room*. Students are encouraged to figure out what they think and believe, and to then give voice to that so they can move toward a collaboratively understood truth. "In everything from a Primary Circle [Westtown's combined Pre-K & Kindergarten] classroom with our youngest students to a Middle School classroom all the way up through seniors in the Upper School and across all sorts of different content areas in the sciences or humanities or the arts, students are encouraged both to find and use their own voices and talents, and to listen to, honor, and learn from the voices and perspectives of others. Thoughtful discussions and collaborative work and this approach of fostering agency in students characterizes their educational experience and presents opportunity for individual growth, learning, and discovery in the context of community," he remarked.

The Future of Westtown School

Westtown School plans to continue prioritizing three vital parts of the student experience: knowledge, community, and environment. Envisioning a future illuminated by mastery and mindful use of technology, a deep sense of belonging throughout a diverse community, and an intentional, sustainable relationship with the environment, Westtown strives to prepare students for a more just, equitable, and peaceful future.

Benbow is excited about the work ahead of him. He is enthusiastic about the oppor-

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Benbow '90 is committed to helping students recognize their unique gifts, and appreciates that discovering their purpose is an ongoing, lifelong process.

tunity to serve Westtown by furthering the community's experience of equity, justice, and belonging, firmly centered in its Quaker identity. He is passionate about helping young people develop the skills, dispositions, and habits of mind to navigate the uncertain future, and continuing to grow their intentionally diverse community while being able to create a sense of belonging for all involved. "We aspire to build a need-blind, anti-racist, genuinely inclusive school. I would love a future where absolutely anyone, regardless of financial means, could attend Westtown. We offer close to \$10MM in financial aid every year, and still, we do depend on tuition revenue. In that way, we're not yet as inclusive as we hope someday to be. I am excited to work toward this longer-term aspiration."

Chris Benbow seeks to ensure that all Westtown students discover their own unique light and live out their individual purpose. **CCL**

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Students enjoy the opportunity to explore the natural world and care for the environment.