



*Incoming Head of School  
Namita Tolia*

## **“A Place of Joy, Engagement, and Achievement”**

*Last week, incoming Head of School Namita Tolia attended the Co-op’s General Membership Meeting and introduced herself to parents with an inspiring speech, outlining her vision for the future. The following is an excerpt.*



**G**ood evening. I’m honored to join you tonight at the Montclair Cooperative School. I’m looking forward to getting to know everyone and each of your children. As a start tonight, I’d like to share some thoughts that I hope will help you begin to get to know me and my vision for the Montclair Cooperative School.

I’ve been a teacher and then a division head in independent schools for 20 years. In that time, I’ve developed into a passionate progressive educator. Like the progressive reformers of old, I want school to be the best possible experience for children – a place of joy, engagement, and achievement. I see myself completely rooted in the progressive tradition.

**I believe so strongly that a progressive education forms the best foundation for success in high school, college, and life.** I’ve seen that a strong, thoughtful progressive education does this by **conferring four gifts** on our children, four areas of mastery, that are essential for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

- **A lifelong love of learning;**
- **Critical thinking;**
- **Creativity;**
- **Emotional intelligence.**

My vision for the Co-op is for it to become the very best place to prepare for academic and life success. That means it will be the place where these four gifts are fully internalized by students and taken forward by them; a place where learning is held to a high standard and where students are excited, engaged, and challenged.

Commenting on the education we must give our students, the economist Daniel Pink has said, “We need to prepare children for their future, not our past.” In his compelling TED talk on Creativity, Sir Ken Robinson reminds us that much of today’s outmoded education apparatus was designed to serve an outmoded era and to put children in boxes: good at math, not good at

reading, A, B, C, D. The traditional school system separates the parts of learning as if they are discrete: spelling as a separate skill from writing, science as a separate subject from art, reading as a separate domain from social studies.

I like to imagine that if John Dewey, the father of progressive education—who was a reformer—could come back from history and have lunch with Ken Robinson and Daniel Pink, he’d say Thank You. Thank you for bringing my message to a modern audience. He’d also say that he’s shocked to hear that one hundred years after his time, those books and reforms and conversations are still needed because so many schools are still getting it wrong.

During this imaginary luncheon of great minds, if I were invited too, I’d ask them what they think about a question that is on the minds of many parents today: whether a progressive education is rigorous. I imagine these great minds would agree with me that it is an important conversation, but that the choice between progressive and rigorous is a false choice, because we don’t need to choose between the two. A progressive education, in my twenty years of experience, not only can be rigorous, but can outshine others in excellence.

Which brings me back to describing what is so essential and powerful about the four gifts that a progressive education at the Co-op will impart.

The first gift is a **lifelong love of learning**. At a progressive school like the Montclair Co-op, it’s part of the mission to honor children’s natural curiosity and to recognize their passions and let them flourish. Progressive educators know that as often as possible, we should get out of the way of children’s innate curiosity, help shape the path, facilitate the learning experience, but then not stifle their drive. A love of learning can’t be imparted as an afterthought at graduation after the kids spend their school years having it bored

out of them. Play is an essential ingredient in this alchemy. Children need to take apart a computer so they get excited about designing a better one some day, they need to build a pulley system that will deliver milk and cookies to their loft so they'll get interested in engineering, they need to understand the way mathematics really works, and its inherent beauty and patterns, so that they'll *want* to take higher mathematics at university and not avoid it like the majority of people.

The second gift is **critical thinking**. In a progressive school, critical thinking is not an isolated skill in an advanced reading class reserved for a few tracked students, it's a habit of mind, a muscle to be developed. It has four different dimensions. One is developing an opinion and being able to express it. A second aspect is the flexibility to consider multiple perspectives – going beyond your own opinion, perhaps through research, perhaps through empathy, perhaps through trying on a role in history. A third aspect of critical thinking is questioning. Questioning why things are, the way things work, and questioning the status quo. The fourth aspect is independent thinking. This is what gives you the courage to follow your own idea, even if it isn't in the majority (yet), and perhaps be a leader who has the courage to put thinking into action.

*“They’ll be the leaders, they’ll have impact, and they’ll be innovators. Montclair Cooperative School students will make the world a better place ...”*

The third gift of a progressive education is **creativity**. People tend to think of creativity as the arts or freedom from rules, but it is so much more than even those two important meanings. Creativity in the most important sense is giving birth to an original idea or finding a new and better way of doing things. Ken Robinson has called it *the* crucial 21st-century skill we'll need to solve today's pressing problems. I tend to agree with him. In their future, not our past, our children will enter a world in which their excellent grades and master's degrees are going to be less the guarantees to a well-appointed life than they were in our generation. The world is flat, as Thomas Friedman has famously explained. Our children still need to get excellent grades and higher degrees, but it is imperative that our

children also have great entrepreneurial skills, outside-of-the-box thinking, and a drive to innovate. They have to be creative.

The fourth gift is **emotional intelligence**. In their future, our children must develop as high E.Q. as I.Q. They must develop kindness, respect, patience, empathy, confidence, self-knowledge, and reflection. Not only so that they'll be wonderful people, but so that they'll be able to work with and lead colleagues from different cultures, with different values and customs... and lead them with the skills that spell success for the group, and a deftness that gets them the high score on their 360 degree review. They need EQ so that they'll be resilient and develop the growth mind-set that the most successful athletes, musicians, scientists and entrepreneurs have. That's the mindset described by Carol Dweck's work at Stanford in her book of the same name, *Mindset*, and confirmed by the latest research in neuroscience as well. This mindset for success says that, “I celebrate and learn from my mistakes; I

incorporate feedback and I grow in expertise and mastery... because I understand and own my brain's neuroplasticity; I don't accept labels especially ones that come too young and too early in life...like good at math, not good at reading.”

The strength of a progressive education is that it confers on our children these **four gifts: a love of learning, critical thinking,**

**creativity, and emotional intelligence**. By helping students internalize these four gifts, the Montclair Cooperative School is giving its students the advantage of a foundation that will propel them to academic and life success. They'll be the leaders, they'll have impact, and they'll be innovators. Montclair Cooperative School students will make the world a better place no matter what their chosen field.

*Currently Principal of the Lower School at the prestigious Little Red School House in Manhattan, Namita Tolia will assume leadership at the Montclair Cooperative School on July 1, 2015.*