I teach at Friends Select, a Pre-K through 12th grade, Quaker, independent school in center city. Tuition for grades 6th, 7th and 8th runs around $23,000 for the 2009-2010 academic school year. About 35% of our families receive financial aid assistance of one sort or another. The school is deeply informed by Quakerism; as a community, it values independent thought, critical engagement, progressive, student-centered education that works to address the “whole child.” About 30% of our students are students of color while 19% of our teachers are. There are no administrators of color. Students come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, however the school ethos reflects a commitment to middle-class values. Negotiation, questioning, active parental advocacy, confidence and rationality are all forms of student and parental expression that are often rewarded. Students from communities of difference whether the difference is socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, ethnic or racial tend to encounter difficulties. Elements of elitism and entitlement inform the school.

Here is the school’s mission statement: “Friends Select School’s mission is to provide a challenging, college-preparatory academic program to its diverse, coed student population, from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade. Members of the Friends Select community believe in the Quaker values of respect for all, simplicity, the peaceful resolution to conflict, and a constant search for truth. The school works to achieve a balance between the needs of individuals and the community, in an atmosphere of cooperation and concern for the betterment of all. It values the rich diversity of its urban setting and the opportunities and challenges it provides for the education of its students. Under the caring oversight of dedicated faculty and staff, Friends Select students gain the knowledge, skills and character that will help them to live full lives.”

Recognizing “that of God in each student” translates into no tracking or AP classes at the school; students are not grouped according to ability because there is an inherent belief in the potential and possibility which resides in each student. Recognizing “that of God in each student” also means a greater degree of informality with a move towards equality and simplicity; lower and middle school students address adults in the community as “Tr. First Name.” Upper school students are on a first name basis with their teachers. One teacher at another Quaker school noted that these schools empower students to such an extent where students feel empowered to challenge and question adults in ways she felt were not entirely appropriate or respectful.

My 8th grade English class is a heterogeneously-grouped class; 8th grade World History and World Literature are taught in an inter-disciplinary manner. As students are reading works about and written by individuals from ancient, world civilizations, they are learning about ancient, world civilizations in World History. The 8th grade World Literature course is a year-long course; students read: Lord of the Flies, The Ramayana, Sunjata, Julius Caesar and Antigone. The class emphasizes critical thinking, active reading, argumentation, writing, visualization and performance. While the class is a mixed group regarding abilities, most students are motivated and invested in doing well; most of our students work very hard at the school. Students and families, no matter their family backgrounds, tend to be invested to a large degree in middle-class values. In addition to their school responsibilities, many students are involved in a number of activities outside of school like music, dance, the study of Arabic, Mandarin and Hebrew, horseback riding as well as tennis, choir and martial arts. Students, who encounter academic difficulties, are often sent off to specialists and tutors for additional support with an action plan coordinated with the school; many parents are heavily involved in the school, and the school expects, requires and often rewards those parents are vocal and active advocates for their children.

Friends Select School is an independent, college-preparatory school with 545 students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelve. Friends Select draws its identity from its Quaker heritage and beliefs and from its Center City location. Framed by this basic identity, the school provides a challenging academic program to a diverse, coed student population.

Learning at Friends Select is an experience full of energy, creativity, and real-world connections. The school is situated squarely at the center of Philadelphia’s government, museum and business districts.

The Friends Select educational program creates meaningful learning—engaging children’s critical and creative powers to investigate, connect, and express ideas. In the early years, children discover that to be a student means exploring one’s world, asking questions, and finding answers. By the upper grades, a rich and rigorous curriculum has endowed students with the conceptual skills and confidence needed to meet the challenges of college. A Friends Select education is notable for its continuity, which links concepts in each area of study from year to year, for its strong focus on scholarly research, writing, and oral presentation, and for the imagination and insight teachers demonstrate each day in shaping the classroom experience.

Writers Matter relies on a great number of people to ensure its success in enhancing the writing of middle school students, but it relies most, perhaps, on the creativity and enthusiasm of the many teachers who implement the program in their classrooms.