

**Family Matters 28, 2007-08**  
**Our Children's Strengths Will Shape the Future**

What will your child remember about elementary school?

We had the opportunity to see a vision of the best possible memories when our doorbell rang yesterday afternoon. There, unannounced, but appearing with full court press, was Jenifer Fox, 1975 graduate of St. Robert School and author of the book *Your Child's Strengths*. She was in Milwaukee as part of a cross-country book-signing tour and was drawn magnetically back to the grade school that forms the foundation for her life's work. With cameras rolling, she told us that her strength and goodness came from this place, and she recalled in vivid detail many specific experiences that occurred in particular rooms and places inside this building. "It feels the same," she said. "It still feels good."

What will your child remember? Ms. Fox is trying to revolutionize our thinking about the purpose of education. It should not be to master content, she says, but to guide children in discovering who they were born to be and how they can contribute to the world. Kids are not problems that need to be fixed, but mysteries to be solved, she says.

If she's right – and I believe she is - we should feel remarkably affirmed. We have been using our own version of a strengths program at St. Robert for a number of years. We refer to it as a "wellness model" to contrast it with the disability model that shapes public education. We believe every child should get what he or she needs to thrive, and our mission is precisely to "inspire the unique achievement potential of each learner."

Our world is changing at a dizzying pace. Information can no longer be contained or controlled. It comes from anyone, anywhere, and for any reason. It is not merely a product to be consumed, but digital, raw material that can be re-shaped in infinite ways. And it must compete for attention among an exploding universe of information and messages.

More and more, the skills and ethics of accessing, using, and producing information are becoming the new literacies of education. Content is becoming less valuable than the ability to invent new answers. One of our only certainties of the future is that success will depend on knowing what we're good at and chasing and using those strengths to keep learning, to solve problems and to create. No matter what the content is, relevance, success, and happiness, can only come from matching our own particular gifts to real needs in the world. And, as Ms. Fox so eloquently professes, teaching without that kind of purpose is like trying to teach someone music before they've ever heard a song.

Our children's strengths are what will energize them to shape this unknown future – and to derive joy from whatever work they do in life. St. Robert School is working to create a model school that will do for new generations of children what it did for Jenifer Fox. Let's give our kids memories of an elementary school experience that made them strong

and good. Let's build a school that gives every child the inner tools to build a better world.