

The Boston Globe

Editorial

Thompson Island offers a new way to excel on MCAS

Monday, November 12, 2012

To the more than 6,500 young people who visit Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center each year, the trip 2 miles into Boston Harbor might as well be a journey to a faraway land. That, and the chance to push one's physical limits at the island's six challenge courses, should be enough to make the trek mandatory for every student in Boston. So it was disheartening two years ago when some Boston school principals declined to send their students there because it wasn't helping them improve their MCAS scores.

Instead of accepting that outdoor education is a distraction from the classroom and not an extension of it, the center shifted its programming from character-building to bolstering students' math and science skills. After staff members heard complaints that students were getting stumped on the MCAS about the scientific concept of density, they developed a hands-on activity to explain it. Now, students who visit Thompson Island collect water samples from three different areas, measure their salinity, and analyze the density of each. Watching the students in action, you can almost see the light bulbs popping on, one by one.

Activities like these have paid off: For two consecutive years, independent evaluations have shown that students who attend classes on Thompson Island improve in mathematics, their ability to communicate, and their engagement with learning. Teachers also report that students seem to have a more concrete grasp of academic concepts.

The work on Thompson Island shows how important learning in the real world can be for young people who don't always understand why they must learn what they learn. The education center's effort to connect classroom lessons to experiences outdoors shows what can happen when passionate administrators and teachers refuse to use standardized testing — a helpful and necessary tool — as an excuse to make learning more bureaucratic. More schools should partner with the Thompson Island education center. Most importantly, schools around Boston should look to the work on the island as an example of how teaching to the test can be done productively.

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Letters | CLASS IS IN SESSION ON BOSTON HARBOR ISLANDS

‘Living lab of discovery’ has grown through collaboration

November 17, 2012



A view of the Boston skyline over Thompson Island.

Globe photo by Aram Boghosian

Re “A new way to excel on MCAS” ([Editorial](#), Nov. 12): We wholeheartedly support your insights on the educational value of the Thompson Island experience, from which many of our students benefit each year. However, we want to underscore how this program has grown in recent years, and how much Boston’s public school teachers, principals, and administrators have contributed to this partnership.

In the past year, 35 Boston Public Schools brought more than 4,000 students to Thompson Island (up from 31 schools and 3,500 students in 2011), and leveraged the island as an important foundation for their curriculum. The school science department has collaborated with educators on the island to create the activities that bring the school curriculum alive.

Hundreds of students, from schools like Orchard Gardens in Roxbury and Curley K-8 in Jamaica Plain, come with their teachers for overnight visits. For the past three years, BPS students have enjoyed five consecutive weeks on Thompson Island integrating academics and experiential learning. This partnership is blossoming in our sights.

Boston school principals are thrilled to have Thompson Island’s treasures to explore with students, and Thompson Island is grateful for the close collaboration that has created what Superintendent Carol R. Johnson has called “a living laboratory of discovery” in our city’s backyard.

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