

BHI Academy and Its Acorns

By Sheree Vaickus, Curriculum Operations Solutions and Marketing Officer, BHI Academy

Sowing the Seeds of Successful Knowledge Transfer into the Next Generation

Human beings are complicated. It makes sense our children would be, too. So, why would we think that teaching our kids would be uncomplicated? The educational complexity becomes even more challenging with each child’s state of mind: dyslexia, ADHD, autism, high IQ, high functioning, shy, disruptive behavior, etc. And then what about those children with issues such as hearing loss and/or sensory deficits. At Bald Head Island Academy (BHIA™) we have an educational approach, with the right formula of a high teacher to student ratio, plus exceptional empathy embedded throughout where we have the compassion to find — and actually *see* — and teach each individual child.

With its small class size and teachers who are equipped with a variety of teaching modalities, BHIA guides children to discover (and celebrate) how they learn best, helping them become independent thinkers and lifelong learners. We cultivate children’s innate leadership skills so that when they get that “Aha!” moment, they will naturally share what they’ve learned across peer and age groups, and help the younger children rise up. This applies both academically and in social skills.

If a child has dyslexia, BHIA deploys proven learning techniques to engage the scholar, from special tools, phonetics exercises and games to praising each small win. For children with

ADHD, we have created a carefully structured environment within our blended, small classroom to support their learning adventure, complete with leadership components and a strong athletic program. We find that kids (particularly those with ADHD) thrive academically when they have a rigorous athletic regimen; revving up their physical engine calms their mindset so they can tackle the work and handle the tasks.

Because of our in-the-moment, applied learning methodology, what our scholars are learning matters. Rather than memorization or other old-school, antiquated modalities, our little Acorns are engaged because they have a vested interest in what they are learning, and it applies to them *now*. For example, one of our students who is passionate about robotics is leading younger scholars in an exploration of technology. Another student is mentoring younger peers in nature photography, inspiring an appreciation and love for not only art but also the natural world (and there is no better natural habitat than the one on BHI). All of this is happening every day with these sometimes goofy, always amazing children. That’s how we teach, in a nutshell, but there is more to our secret sauce as to why it’s working.

BHIA’s whole-child methodology allows our educators to teach lessons unique to each child’s strengths and needs, giving

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the scholars more confidence, immediate academic improvement from previous pain points and incredible adaptability for dealing with life's lessons. This bespoke, fit-for-purpose, tailored approach is different from public schools and larger schools — often with one teacher for every 12 to 30 students (and all the disciplinary issues that come with large class sizes that detract from the learning experience). There, you can liken teaching to a lawn mower — some blades of grass (children) will be trimmed just right, others too much and yet others not at all.

Continuing the analogy, and in contrast, at BHIA we have bonsai scissors to transform the raw Acorns into works of art!

The key to our secret sauce is “The Isle of Ideas” that lives within our talented volunteers and a commitment to teaching. BHI is the nexus for the best and brightest. BHIA utilizes engaging and fun activities to pique each Acorn's interest, but still teaches solid fundamentals so that the children see how “boring” learning is applied in everyday life. In addition to our experienced, full-time teachers, Sarah Tennant and Andrew Hano, our incredible school is supported by a volunteer K-12 math teacher, Barbara McCarthy, who shares her passion for all things math and science. Over the summer, scholars experienced a living history lesson at the McCarthy's home, the Old Coast Guard Station. They discovered



that math is everywhere, even on a yacht. And they talked turtles with our world-class BHI Conservancy experts. They enjoyed a painting lesson with corporate executive-turned-artist, Meredith Bourne and are exploring their love for photography with Dr. Ted Peck. Former chemist and aviator, Doug Oakley, will expose older students to an ecosystem preservation-focused flight experience. Our scholars are learning entomology and commerce through beekeeping, with plans to commercialize their product in 2024. Politician Bill Bennett presented the school with his *Book of Virtues*,

and Elayne Bennett shared lessons on respect based on her Best Friends Foundation. The students are enjoying eating healthy foods, thanks to Chef Tonya Jenkins, and will learn how to cook with our culinary community. Robin Prak read her book titled *Ellie on the Island* to the children, they will study dental hygiene with Deb Feeny and there is much more.

Our Academy Board also gives much of their time and resources to ensure success. Each day we are approached by brilliant individuals willing to gift their knowledge to our scholars, making BHI Academy the Isle of Ideas and where our future lives. This is why these children are thriving. Stay tuned for more, as this is just the beginning of the Academy's story. The best is still unfolding.



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