

Haley Pilot School Boat Building:

Boats play a central role in Boston's economy, history, culture, and ecology. The Haley is surrounded by ponds and rivers, and is close to the ocean. But building boats with children is out of the ordinary. Many of my students do not think that they can build a boat. Overcoming the hurdles in the building process is empowering.

Building boats develops a variety of skills and habits of mind transferable throughout life. Spatial thinking -- nimbleness with three dimensional perception and recall-- is a key to academic success. According to the National Academy of Sciences, "We suggest that spatial thinking is at the heart of many great discoveries in science, that it underpins many of the activities of the modern workforce, and that it pervades the everyday activities of modern life." Our testing shows that students' spatial thinking skills grew by 56%. In addition to spatial thinking, building boats is a real-world application of mathematics. It also requires hand-eye coordination, safety skills, and above all, teamwork.

I love teaching boat building at the Haley because the students are so eager—they've been looking forward to building a boat since kindergarten. Students who do not love school will often lead their teams and ask for more. I overheard: "why is it that you're so good at math here but in class you stink at it?" Reply: "I don't know. I just get it here!"

In the 2016-17 schoolyear, each team of four 5th grade students built one 15' canoe from start to finish. After building, teams painted their boats creatively in art class. In previous years, students at several Boston public schools built the rental rowboats used at the Jamaica Pond Boathouse.

Although we call the program "boat building," it actually includes a variety of hands-on experiences. Students collaborate with professional boat builders at Boston BoatWorks, take swim lessons, and canoe/kayak/row on Jamaica Pond. As students use the canoes they made, they learn to balance their bodies, the boat, and nature to achieve a goal.

For more information, please contact Sarah Besse, Boat Building Instructor:

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Educators are always welcome to observe in my workshop at the Haley. I would also be happy to provide teacher training.

Note: Haley Boat Building is affiliated with the nonprofit Community Boat Building.