

# WHY PHILOSOPHY? WHY NOW?



Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization



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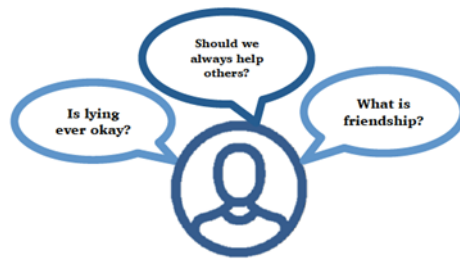
From a very young age children give voice to their curiosity by questioning the world around them.

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## UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR PHILOSOPHY IN SCHOOLS

At one time or another, we all ask ourselves philosophical questions: open-ended questions that explore fundamental concepts and values in human life, questions that are not easily answered but lend themselves to rich reflection. We wonder, discuss, and critically explore the nature of reality, our values, and truth, as we try to understand and find meaning in our lives. Children, too, engage in philosophical inquiry.

In the United States, the study of philosophy has generally been reserved for students and professionals in higher education.



**“Philosophy is the only major discipline not routinely introduced in primary and secondary schools.”**

As a result, a majority of educators, students, and the broader public alike have little opportunity to understand the great value and advantages a philosophical education confers.

The Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO) is devoted to enriching children’s educational experience by introducing them to the benefits and rigors of philosophy before they graduate from high school. Our members include professional philosophers, K-12 teachers, graduate and undergraduate students, and school administrators. We contend that philosophy is a key yet overlooked resource for preparing students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To learn more about our work and how to get involved, please visit our website: [plato-philosophy.org](http://plato-philosophy.org)

**Philosophy gives you the tools to reflect and act through rational judgments.**

**“Many countries in Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America include philosophy in primary and/or secondary school curricula.”** (UNESCO, 2011)

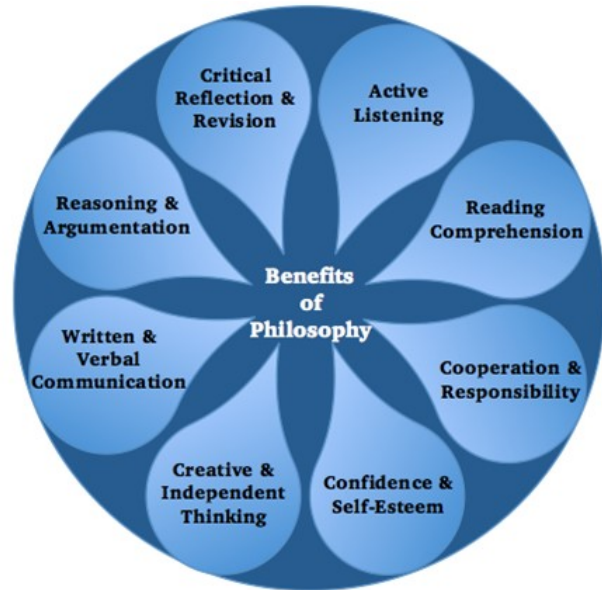
## Philosophy offers both instrumental and intrinsic benefits to students.

### INSTRUMENTAL BENEFITS

Studying philosophy hones analytical reasoning, reading comprehension, logical argumentation, and independent thinking – all important elements of 21<sup>st</sup> century education. Several studies demonstrate the benefits of philosophy for children in these and related areas. Trickey and Topping (2004) show that philosophy programs help young students to improve their reasoning, discussion, and logical argumentation skills. Those who study philosophy also tend to perform higher on the Cognitive Reflection Test (Frederick, 2005), which measures problem-solving skills. In addition, philosophical interventions in K-12 classrooms have been shown to promote social-emotional growth, independent thinking, and positive self-esteem in children and adolescents (Millett and Tapper, 2012; Mohr Lone & Burroughs 2016; Trickey & Topping, 2004).

### INTRINSIC BENEFITS

Engaging in philosophical inquiry together allows students to experience the pleasure of developing as persons – of growing intellectually. In his pioneering work on education, John Dewey maintained that young children enter school curious and motivated to learn (Dewey, 1938). Educational research shows that students perform better academically when they are engaged in their own learning and when they believe it is of personal value (as opposed to a purely instrumental task) (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Martin, 2001). Philosophy offers children the opportunity to raise questions and insights that are of direct relevance to their lives and in turn, engages their interest in learning about themselves and the world around them.



## THE BENEFITS OF PHILOSOPHY IN K-12 SCHOOLS

Although it is sometimes misrepresented as an abstract practice removed from the concerns of everyday people, philosophy is eminently practical. Studied systematically, it bolsters our ability to think deeply about our beliefs, commitments, and values; critically evaluate our own assumptions; construct sound and valid arguments; and evaluate the arguments of others.

Formal logic – the practice of evaluating an argument’s validity – is a key component of philosophical training. This skill, in particular, is unique to philosophical methodology and

helps to reduce the impact of cognitive and emotional bias. It helps make us better listeners, and more reflective, respectful contributors to discussions.

**“Philosophy encourages reflection, cultivates an appreciation of complexity & encourages diversity of opinion and divergent thinking.”**

Philosophical inquiry doesn’t treat knowledge as a commodity or a set of facts to be passed on to children, but rather as something that is created collaboratively and emerges in classrooms in which questioning and discussion are encouraged.

## WHY PHILOSOPHY IS UNIQUE AMONG THE DISCIPLINES

At one time or another, we all ask ourselves philosophical questions: open-ended questions — Philosophy is uniquely positioned to provide meaningful educational experiences to students. Other subjects may introduce elements of critical analysis and logical thinking, but only in philosophy are these skills deployed in the service of questioning, examining and discussing central questions pertaining to human life. Studying philosophy, students see how an academic pursuit can inform their personal experiences and development. Thus, philosophy is not just a collection of skills that can be replaced by a course on textual analysis or critical thinking. Rather, philosophy provides students with these and other skills (reasoning, reading comprehension, and discussion skills, for example) while also providing a robust educational experience. Philosophy provides an experience that

promotes independent thinking, questioning and collaborative learning with others through dialogue. Through personal and group reflection, students have the opportunity to consider their assumptions and implicit biases, their own views and those of other students, and explore multiple, diverse perspectives on the issue under discussion. This gives students both the intellectual space and permission to articulate their own informed and critical perspectives, an experience in which all engaged citizens should be familiar and fluent. Philosophy doesn't teach students to just answer questions, but also to “question answers.” Students are often asked to reply to teacher supplied questions that have clear-cut answers. In contrast, during philosophy discussions, students learn to pose questions and challenge their own assumptions, while exploring questions that do not have clear-cut answers.

**The international educational movement, Philosophy for Children, began in 1974 in the United States at Montclair State University and is now practiced throughout the world in countries such as Italy, Germany, England and Argentina.**

**“The way that we are taught to learn in high school and even college is to memorize or compute things a single way for a test that will prove your ability to ‘think critically.’ Until I took a philosophy class I never quite understood what it really meant to think critically and how far off those things were from it.”**

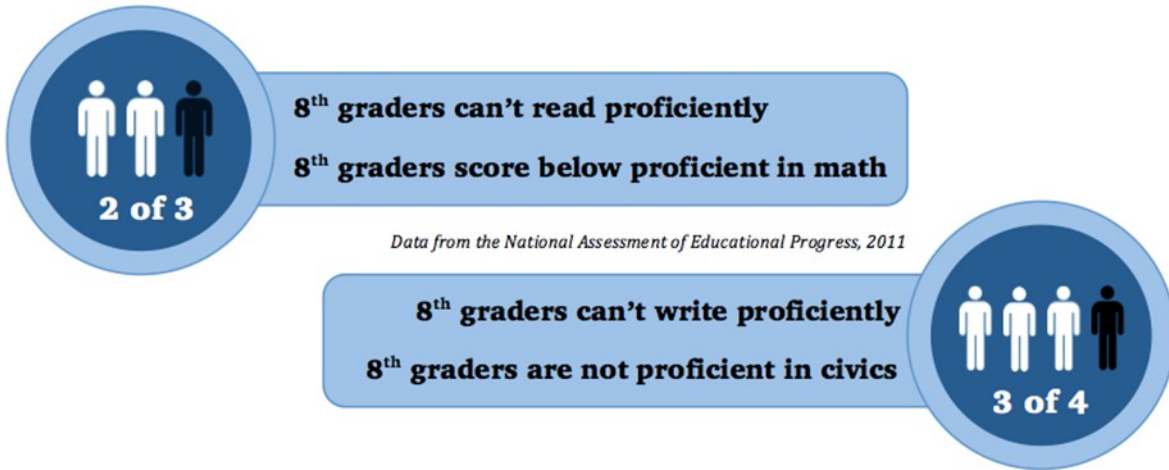
– Danny Asztalos, High School Student

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**“I had spent so much of my school career learning what to think, that it was a breath of fresh air to discuss how to think. It was one of the only classes I took in high school that was so based on student engagement.”**

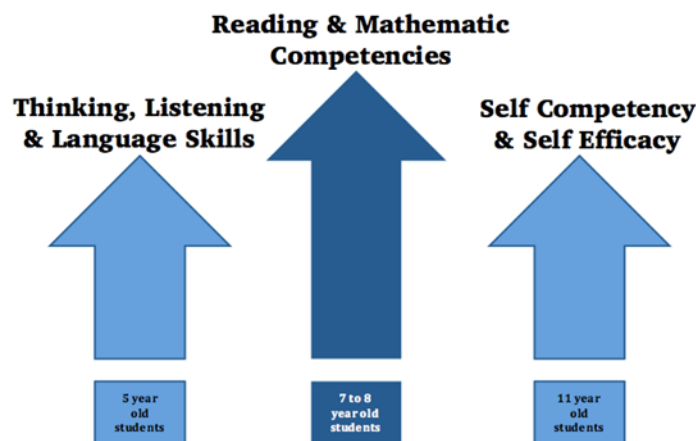
– Paige Evans, High School Student

## THE CASE FOR PHILOSOPHY



With education at an inflection point – as we debate the value of high-stakes testing, Common Core, and the value of public education – including philosophy in the K-12 curriculum is increasingly relevant. Today’s students are called upon to be critical readers, to engage in close textual analysis, to improve their reasoning skills, to become more discerning consumers of information, and more creative and divergent in their thinking. However, for many reasons (including competing priorities and resources) we are not providing them with the skills they need to master these tasks.

Introducing philosophy, however, addresses both the timely and timeless goals of education: it improves students’ test-taking abilities and sharpens their intellectual skills (Trickey & Topping, 2007). It also provides opportunities for authentic, student-centered learning, which are often limited because of the crowded curriculum and pressures associated with standardized testing that strain and limit collaborative education. The graphic below illustrates a few benefits that practicing philosophy has for students in K-12 education.



Students who participate in philosophical discussions with their peers on a consistent basis see significant benefits in various academic areas, as demonstrated by the graphic above (Trickey & Topping, 2004, 2006 & 2007; Millett & Tapper, 2012; Daniel, Pettier, & Auriac-Slusarczyk, 2011).

# PHILOSOPHY IN THE CLASSROOM

## 1 Ask Questions

## 2 Develop & Evaluate Responses

## 3 New Understanding

Philosophy can be introduced in schools in several ways. It can be offered as a stand-alone class, elective or required. It can also be offered “across the curriculum” – that is, philosophical modules or units can be included within and to highlight the philosophical dimensions of other academic subjects. PLATO and several regional pre-college philosophy centers support the introduction of philosophy in schools.

In the classroom, philosophical education can take place within a “community of inquiry,” a transformative type of discussion derived from and modeled on constructivist and social learning theory. A community of philosophical inquiry is “a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding” (Garrison, 2011, 15).

This activity can be developed in any K-12 classroom and in relation to any subject area, thereby obviating the need to develop a stand-alone philosophy course (though many schools do choose and benefit from this option).

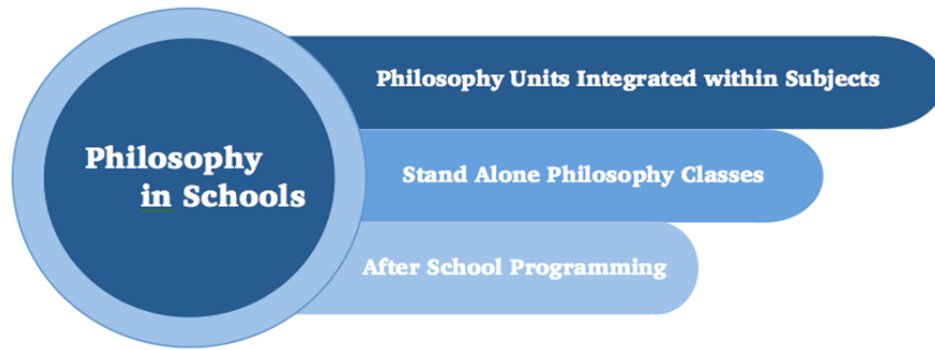


Although philosophy in K-12 classrooms can take different forms (Goering, Shudak, and Wartenberg, 2014; Lipman, 1980; Mohr Lone and Burroughs, 2016; Wartenberg, 2014—see below for examples), it emphasizes a process whereby students and teacher raise questions,

discuss and evaluate responses, and develop knowledge and understanding of the topic under consideration. Further, it challenges students to construct valid arguments demonstrating that they have reached their conclusions by employing good reasoning and sound philosophical methodology.

Philosophical pedagogy, as expressed and experienced within a community of inquiry, reinterprets both the student-teacher relationship, and our understanding of knowledge. Its hallmark is the active role of the student. Whereas students are often passive learners in other classrooms, students participating in a community of philosophical inquiry are invited to be actively engaged throughout the lesson while instructed and guided by the teacher. This process creates an educational partnership that enhances understanding, knowledge, and classroom learning.

**For just a few examples of philosophy in classrooms, see: the Teaching Children Philosophy program at Mount Holyoke College; the University of Washington’s Center for Philosophy for Children; the Winning Words Program at the University of Chicago; The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University; the University of Pennsylvania’s Philosophy Outreach Program; and Philosophical Ethics in Early Childhood at Penn State University.**



**The need for responsible, reflective, systematic thinkers could not be greater; these are precisely the habits of mind that studying philosophy cultivates.**

Students and teachers would benefit greatly from studying philosophy together. Philosophy is important both for its instrumental value – as a discipline that will help students perform better in school and in higher education – as well as for the intrinsic rewards it promises. Now more than ever students need to become engaged in the world as skilled thinkers, as citizens in a democracy, and as global citizens. The stakes couldn't be higher, or the need for responsible, reflective, systematic thinkers greater.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PHILOSOPHY IN SCHOOLS,  
VISIT OUR WEBSITE:  
<http://plato.philosophy.org>**

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