

A Look at the Sora's Education Philosophy

Preparing Students to Live a Good Life



by Garrett Smiley



SORA

Content

Introduction	4
Part One: Love and Flourishing	6
Meet Alexa	11
Part Two: Motivation	12
Meet Ava	19
Part Three: The Sora Mindsets	20
Meet Hannah	27
Conclusion	28

INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of education?

When I started working on what would become Sora Schools with my co-founders Indra and Wesley, our focus was not on bringing love into the classroom. In fact, as STEM folks from Georgia Tech, love was not exactly in our daily vocabulary at work. Instead, we just knew we wanted to create a new classroom for our dynamic, complicated, volatile world—a world much different than 150 years ago when the current school system was designed. As engineers, we recognize that as our civilization creates more technology, the consequences of our actions increase. Because of this evolving power and responsibility, our children will face systemic, global challenges such as the climate crisis, nuclear proliferation, and misinformation. Responding to those pressing challenges will require creative and collaborative leadership from the next generation of students. An education system built for the Industrial Revolution (mechanistic, time-bound, memorization-above-problem-solving) is no longer suitable.

To begin solving the problem, we decided to start by understanding the purpose of our current school system. But much to our surprise (and horror), there was very little substance to be found. Mission statement after mission statement, they all read more or less the same: “Our mission is to provide a dynamic and inspiring learning experience where all students graduate ready for success.” What is “success?” What about it is dynamic and inspiring? And what business does “graduation” have being in a purpose statement?



That's like saying the purpose of a golf lesson is for everyone to finish the golf lesson. How are we designing our schools and measuring our success if we don't know what we're aiming for? Thus, the first task became very clear very quickly: defining the purpose of education.

After extensive research, including talking to a variety of people in the education field about what they're seeing and their experiences in the classroom, we came to believe the purpose of education is to teach kids how to live a good life. This belief is shared by most who think about it; the purpose can't merely be to know about chemical bonds or read *The Iliad*. Why were those topics chosen from the infinity of other options? You may answer that they are "cultural canon." That is partially true, but why is it the cultural canon? Because at some point, the voters determined that content is morally or professionally good for students. But, through two hundred years of changing opinions about the good life, we are left with a Frankenstein curriculum that panders in small bits to everyone but ultimately fails to accomplish anything. That's the cause of the nonsensical, circular mission statements today. In the words of psychologist Peter Gray, "The schools that we see around us are not products of science and logic; they are products of history."

What then is a "good" life, especially given that it is hard and full of surprises (both beautiful or horrifying)? And how can our education system help us truly achieve it?



The background is a dense, textured field of small, star-shaped floral motifs. The colors are primarily deep red, magenta, and dark blue, with some lighter blue and white highlights. The pattern is irregular and organic, resembling a close-up of a forest floor covered in small flowers or a microscopic view of a biological structure.

Part 1.

Love and Flourishing

Beyond memorizing facts and
figures, what is the purpose of
education?

“The good life is one inspired by
love and guided by knowledge.”

– Bertrand Russell



A good life seeks to promote human “flourishing,” or anything that causes humanity to more fully express what makes it special. Let’s get comfortable with some examples: helping your neighbor pick up the groceries they dropped on the floor? Human flourishing. Teaching your toddlers not to hit their friends? Human flourishing. Destroying your neighbor’s holiday decorations out of boredom? Not human flourishing.

Humans are unique because we can create order out of disorder and sense out of nonsense. We can look at something not flourishing, like a wilting flower or a person with a broken leg, and do something about it. People are problem-solving machines. Anything that is not forbidden by the laws of physics is possible, given the proper knowledge. I quite literally mean anything. Global warming, homelessness, or any other challenge we face are solvable given the correct knowledge.

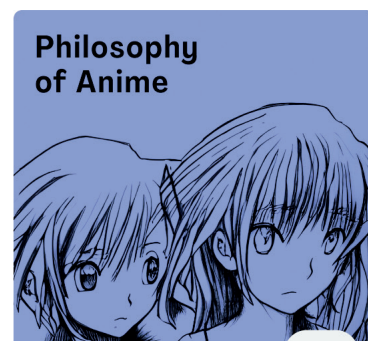
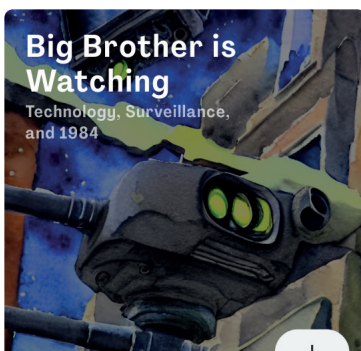
For simplicity’s sake, we believe that working toward flourishing is love. When we talk about love at Sora, it’s not a feeling or emotion; it’s a verb. It’s wanting what’s best for people and building toward our collective self-determination and self-actualization. It’s the creation of knowledge that will remove suffering and elevate everyone.



Education should create adults who love themselves, their peers, and society. They should value the potential of humanity and work to expand its reach. A Sora student has these beliefs and values embedded deeply into their worldview. We want our students to explore and discover things that they think are important and beautiful in the world.

This should go without saying, but it's impossible to develop a worldview without viewing the world. But unfortunately, most schools split learning into arbitrary subject buckets like Chemistry or European History. Learning in the real world is rarely scoped by "subject;" instead, learning appears together in a problem or inquiry. We learn because we encounter an issue or a hole in our understanding of the world. We ask questions like "how do we stop global warming?" or "how do I build this gate to keep my dog in the yard?" Students who do not learn in the context of the real world can become like brains in jars. Sure, they "know" chemistry, but do they know when to use it? Or, more importantly, will they ever be motivated to think about chemistry again?

Our solution is twofold: first, learning should be interdisciplinary, relevant, and interactive. In our classes like **"The Philosophy of Marvel," "The History of Anime,"** or **"Getting Rich on the Stock Market,"** students engage in discussion, complete projects, and tie their learning into a meaningful context to them. And second, students will develop a relationship with their Advisor to reflect on their worldview, explore their purpose, and map how their actions contribute to it. When students have an off day or miss an opportunity to demonstrate their learning, we don't try to scare them by referencing their "permanent record." Instead, we begin a conversation about what they find important and whether their actions point toward that love.





Meet Alexa M.
Class of 2021



“Listen, if I had the time and energy, I’d love to take on six more majors and five more minors because I genuinely love to learn. I enjoy learning and love critical thought and analysis. There is a logic to math that you can find present in humanities. Statistics is about getting as close to the truth as you can and being able to define material reality. Of course, defining material reality requires an understanding of the humanities in order to understand the framing of your questions.”

– **Alexa Martinez** (in an interview about her award-winning essay)





Part 2.

Motivation

How traditional schools get it wrong, and how we should understand motivation instead.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the people to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

If a lack of purpose is the biggest flaw in traditional education, their warped conception of motivation is a strong number two. Most administrators, at least implicitly, believe motivation is something you either have or don't. So, for the students who don't, they've designed an emotional torture chamber that makes learning so stressful that only a crazy person would ignore the consequences. "Oh, you forgot your final was today? I hope you didn't want to go to Yale because now you forever have a C on your transcript." That is fearful learning; although it might work in the short term, it's wreaking havoc on students' mental health and creating a society with a Pavlovian association between learning and fear.

Many say that the best motivation is "intrinsic," meaning stemming from internal rewards instead of external rewards, but that is also not the case. Everything in life is a combination of internal and external rewards. This arbitrary bifurcation is nonsensical. Motivation is simply the natural and almost involuntary movement toward the things we think are important and under our control. If something feels both very important and within our control, our motivation is at its peak. If I believed that clicking the elevator button outside my apartment would solve world hunger, I would be sprinting out of the door. Or, for a more practical example, people don't just take care of babies because they're cute; instead, they believe that what they're doing is important and propels them (even enthusiastically) through the tedium (dirty diapers).

Instead, the best motivation is "hard to vary." It must be very precise, and there has to be a good reason for the precision. If someone asks, "Why are you working on this?" your answer should apply very specifically to that thing. It should be difficult to change anything about the explanation and still have it make sense.

For example, imagine two students in medical school. Student A is there because she wishes to be an excellent doctor to save more cancer patients like her mother once was. Student B is there because her parents threatened to cut her off of her sizable inheritance unless she became a doctor. Which would you want when you're on the operating table?

Many of us have seen versions of this story play out. Student A's motivation is much more authentic and resilient than student B's because it's hard to vary. Her motivation is intimately tied with this vision of herself operating on patients to save or improve their lives. The mission itself is what makes this motivation hard to vary. For something else to pull her attention, it will have to fall within the Venn diagram of "saving people's lives," "making little girls like her less sad about their sick moms," "financial independence," and "intellectual satisfaction from learning something difficult."

People like student B have shallow, fragile motivation; it's easy to vary. The motivation Venn diagram is simply an overlap of two circles, one that says "appease parents" and the other that says "be rich." This is a shallow form of motivation; when she is frustrated with her parents for whatever reason or sees another opportunity for financial gain, the motivation for being a doctor is also tossed out.

We create robust motivation by investigating our sense of value— what do we think is beautiful and important in the world, and how do we cause that to flourish? The goal of any person should be to valorize their effort, to let the tentacles of every goal reach deep into the core of their essence and worldview. The more circles in their Venn diagram of motivation and the deeper they are into their character, the more robust and sustaining the motivation will be.

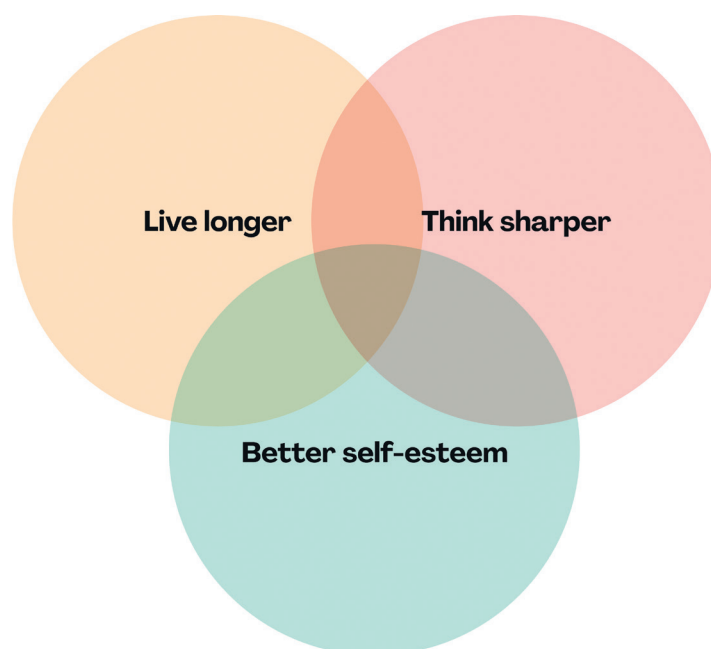
Dr. Gena Gorlin, a psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, writes:

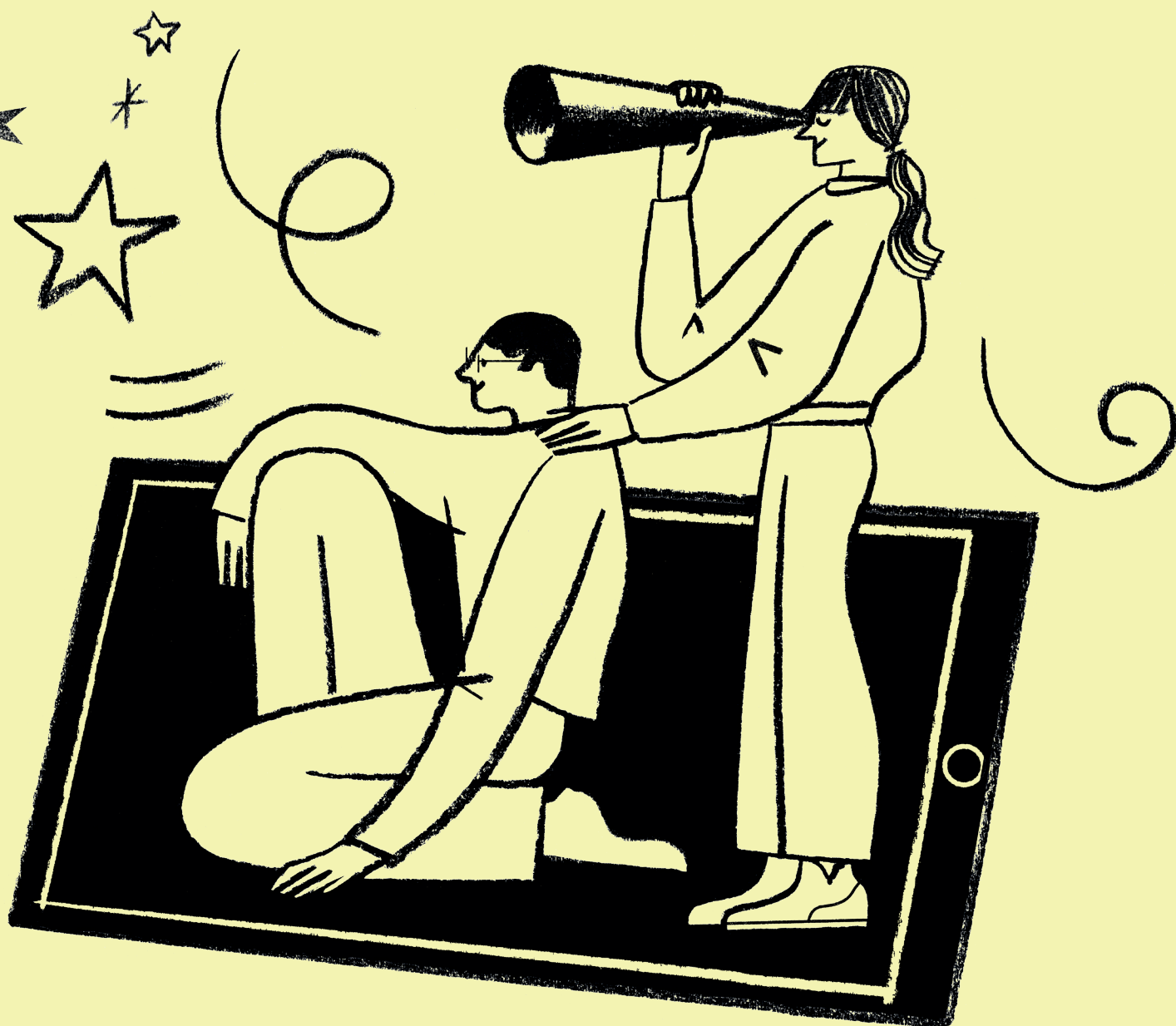
“Don’t distance runners famously enjoy even—or perhaps especially—the most ‘painful’ parts of their runs? Does not that enjoyment flow, at least in part, from a visceral understanding of the greater fitness and endurance they are building for themselves over time through their efforts, and the felt, wordless knowledge of how these capacities will continue to enhance every aspect of their lives long into the future? For that matter, would they still be able to enjoy distance running in the same way, or to the same degree if they discovered—and really came to understand and believe—that it was hurting rather than helping their health and fitness over time? Would it literally feel as good to push themselves through that final mile, if they knew they were chipping away at their strength and mobility, rather than cultivating them, every time their foot hit the floor? I suspect not.”

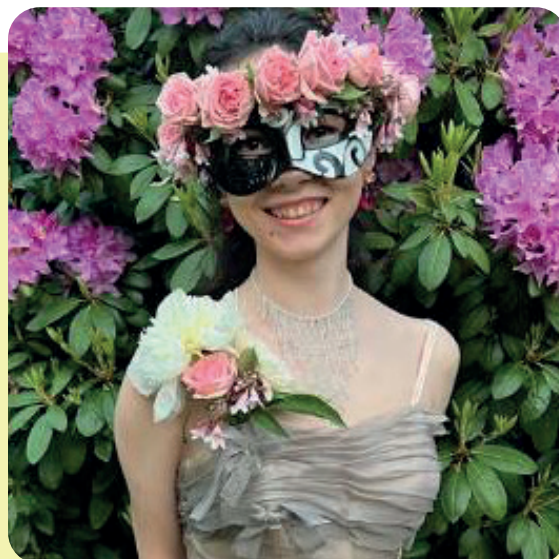


Great runners have built a Venn diagram of motivation that includes “living longer,” “the mental acuity which follows exercise,” “the self-worth which follows doing something hard,” and perhaps even “the respect from our culture for being physically fit.” The best runners then imbue every step with that meaning. And equally as vital they reframe the feeling of struggle. As Chess and Tai Chi champion Joshua Waitzkin says, “world-class performers have simply reoriented their relationship with suffering— they’ve learned to embrace it.” World-class performers love the feeling of struggle because they associate it with growth. They have a growth mindset, believing that all skills can be improved with effort, and feel that existing at the edge of their ability is the best way to accelerate their capacities. As my military mom used to say, they’ve learned to “embrace the suck.”

When you combine a hard-to-vary motivation with a growth mindset, you get a person who enthusiastically pursues the edge of their capabilities in a field they feel is deeply significant. Although students will still occasionally need a gentle nudge to continue when times get tough, this is a much healthier framework for the design of a school.







Meet Ava T.

Class of 2022

“I always knew that I was interested in philosophy and mythology before Sora, which is kind of funny because it doesn’t have much to do with my Biophilia research project. But I’ve always liked philosophy and mythology, and I’ve taken practically every philosophy class that Micheal has offered, since Sora started, and I just can’t get enough of it. I want to go into classics in some way in college, maybe it’s a minor in classics, I don’t even know. There’s so much that I still have to learn. But I really like sinking my teeth into it.”

– **Ava T.** (in an interview reflecting on her time at Sora right before senior graduation)



A person stands on a dark, silhouetted hill under a vast night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way galaxy. The sky transitions from a deep purple at the top to a warm orange and yellow near the horizon. The Milky Way is visible as a bright, pinkish-purple band of stars stretching across the upper right portion of the frame. The person's silhouette is positioned in the lower right, looking up at the stars.

Part 3.

The Sora Mindsets

How do we cultivate the
disposition of a lifelong learner?

“The first and greatest victory
is to conquer yourself.”

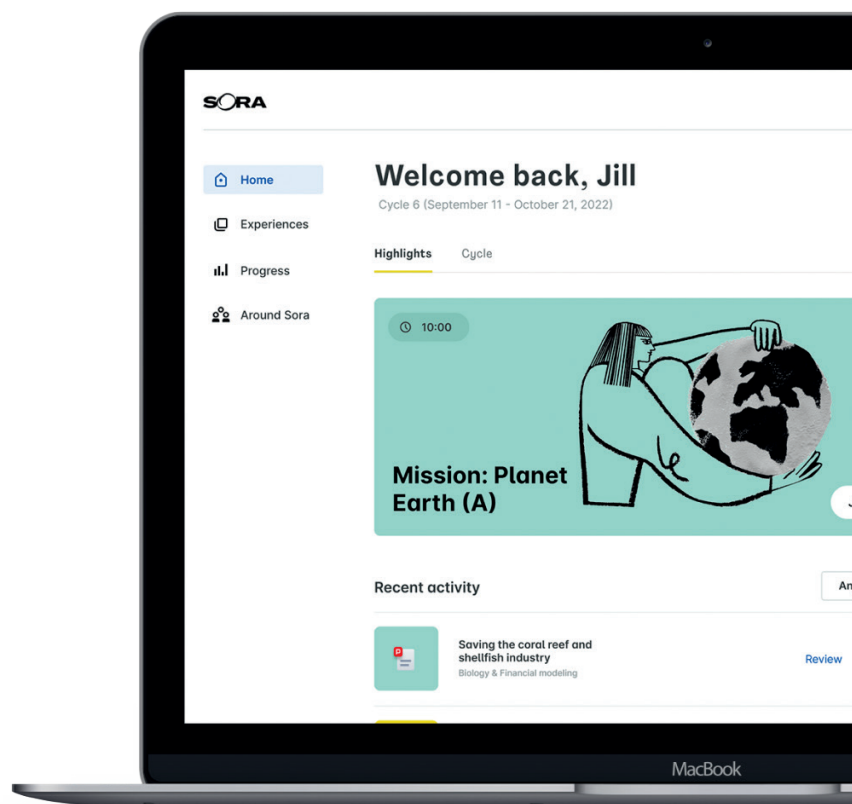
– Plato

In our quest to cultivate an enthusiasm for learning, we believe learning facts and content is only half the battle. Students, of course, do need hard technical skills. They should understand fractions, why the periodic table looks the way it does, and the formative events in our history. But our beliefs and patterns often are the most significant bottlenecks to learning. No matter how well young Albert Einstein learned the rules of math or physics, he never would have revolutionized our understanding of the universe if he was not curious or rebellious. No matter the size of a boxer's biceps, they'll never be a champion with the disposition of pacifism. It's just as essential to change how we think about problems and the world around us. Let's call these thought patterns "mindsets." We have seven key mindsets at Sora, but today we'll focus on three: **Agency**, **Growth Mindset**, and **Metacognition**.



Agency, or the ability to originate and direct behavior toward a goal, is the first and most important mindset we seek to cultivate in our students. A person who understands their agency is ultimately in touch with their inherent power as a human. They understand their voice and can wield it; they know how to use questions to guide them where they need to go. A student with agency views the world as malleable; they see themselves as an agent in the learning process and ultimately take personal responsibility for their life and mind.

There are a few ways we seek to promote student agency at Sora. First, we require them to be active participants in their program design. They can't sit back and go through the motions. Instead, they select a new series of learning experiences every six weeks that match their curiosities and school essentials. There are hundreds of things to choose from, and their Advisor is there to help if they get overwhelmed, but Sora students must start building that muscle of agency and personal responsibility. They take life by the horns. When their advisors determine they're ready for extra freedom, Sora students often propose an independent study expedition (or ISE). These are like thesis proposals: inquiries they want to explore for 12 or more weeks. They tag it to academic credit they still need to graduate, but the angle of their discovery is up to their curiosities. A faculty member marches alongside them, ensuring their project demonstrates quality and rigor of thought. Our students must lead their own voyage of discovery—not just passively absorb whatever is in a textbook.





Another mindset essential to the learning process is a **growth mindset**. Sora students learn to love failure and see it as information to guide their learning. A person who utilizes a growth mindset consistently reframes failure away from a personal attack to an exciting and necessary step toward the final destination. Understanding how to “fail well,” see instruction in roadblocks, and embrace iteration is foundational to the learning process. We believe this so strongly at Sora that we utilize a different methodology for assessing student performance. Instead of the classic grade-point system in which students are penalized for not remembering a fact or understanding a concept the first time, the faculty at Sora use mastery-based grading.

In this approach, students are awarded credit based on their demonstrated mastery of the material and, crucially, are given many opportunities throughout their journey to earn credit for each unit at an increasingly deeper level. In other words, if at first, you didn’t understand photosynthesis, try and try again. In this way, students can “overwrite” past poor performances (I’ll add, for those who might be wondering: yes, this still generates a transcript and GPA for universities.) We want to instill within kids that the main driver of “greatness” is iteration. The only thing between them and any goal is a thousand instructive failures. Whether it’s a chef going through a hundred versions of a dish before making the menu or an engineer tweaking a drivetrain for months, failure and error correction is the creation process.

Lastly, we focus on Metacognition, the ability to examine your thoughts and behaviors and reflect on their alignment to your worldview. People never accomplish their goals if they don't sustain their effort and attention. We are often our own worst enemy, we say we care about something but never spend any of our time working toward it. We are perpetually captured by whatever is bright and shiny that month and find ourselves stagnating. Practicing metacognition is essential for living a values-aligned, and therefore happy, life. Metacognition allows us to examine our thoughts and catch ourselves before we make a poor decision.

Sora students engage in frequent self-reflection to build this capacity and associate it as part of the learning process. At the end of every project, we ask students to reflect on the quality of their work, allowing them to think through their performance and audit their abilities. This honest self-inventory especially comes to life in our twice-yearly student-led conferences, where our learners share with their parents and advisor what they consider to be their most significant areas of strength and weakness. Knowing you're bad at something is not a threat to self-esteem when you have a growth mindset—instead, it's an exciting opportunity to become even more helpful and loving.

9:41

There it is!

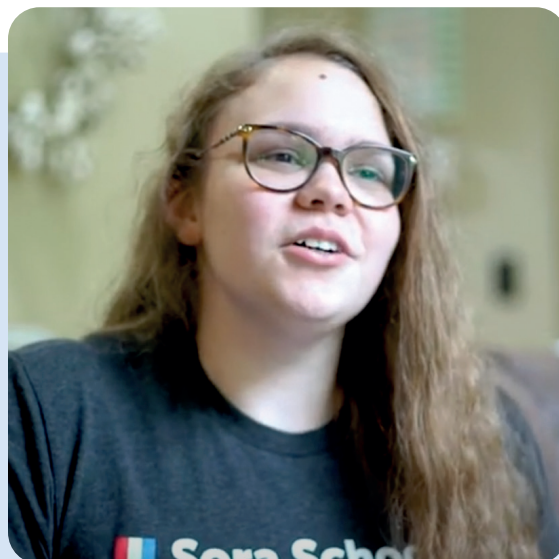
How well did it go?

Please share how well you thought the task went.

★ ★ ★

Send





Meet Hannah H.

Class of 2021

“I grew up being enthralled with medicine and mathematics. At Sora, I learned that I am kinetic learner – I love to learn with my hands. It’s funny, I’m known as “rocket girl” at Sora because of the rocket project I did there. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it and enjoyed learning with my hands. I’m also a big proponent of learning through making mistakes. The rocket project was fun, but it also helped me redirect me to the intersection of engineering and medicine. That’s why I’m majoring in it now at Mercer. That might change, but I know I want to stay in my research.”

– **Hannah Higgins** (in an interview spotlighting her research interest in college.



Conclusion

A Loving School



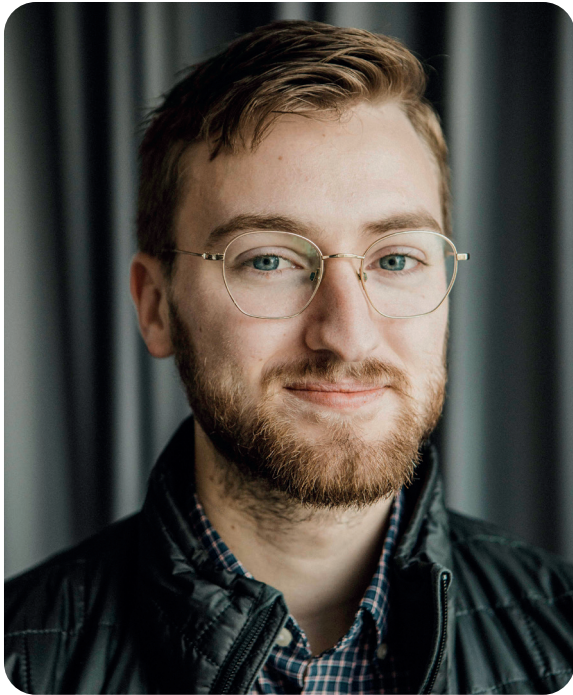
So, what place does love have in school? Well, it's everything.

Education is about teaching kids how to live a good life—and at the heart of a good life is love. Not romantic or giddy love, but love as an action; we must actively love ourselves and the people around us by how we live. We hope, by the end of our students' time at Sora, they are excited about contributing to humankind's overall betterment and flourishing. We see this in our alumni's eyes when they come back to visit and share about their latest project in medical research or art. They're working hard not out of fear of failure or judgment but because they think what they're doing is deeply important and they can make it happen.

We hope a student's time at Sora reframes their often-broken relationship with learning. We want them to feel the excitement of discovering a new viewpoint or fact, following it in pursuit of more profound knowledge, and then feeling the world and its possibilities open up to them. Their motivation will naturally increase as they learn more about the world and feel more capable.

People are capable of anything allowed by the laws of physics. Although it may be difficult and take multiple generations, yes, you can make a flying pig—or most of anything else in your imagination. World hunger? Solved. Interstellar travel? Yup, that too. But, first, you must know how. Love cannot exist without knowledge.

With this ethos, we built Sora Schools: to be a place where students learn to love together. For us to live in a flourishing democracy that clears these existential hurdles over the next generation, we cannot be solo travelers on this journey—it has to be a global priority, but it starts with us.



About the author

Garrett Smiley

CEO Sora Schools

Garrett, a child of a military family, developed an early passion for education by bouncing between radically different cities and school models, curiously exploring the vast difference between the approaches. In high school, he fell in love with and explored topics not offered in his rural school, like programming and modern physics, with early versions of websites like YouTube and Khan Academy. As the

first generation of kids with access to those tools, he understood the still-untapped potential of the internet to radically reshape education.

During and after his time at Georgia Tech, he co-created a new game-based program for Georgia's foster youth to learn financial literacy and life skills. Since then, he's become a prolific and unlikely leading voice on education innovation, frequently appearing as a guest writer and speaker in popular publications, blogs, the nightly news, and podcasts. Now, as the CEO of Sora Schools, he's on a mission to provide a world-class, innovative education to the world, not just the 1% who can afford it today.

Twitter

@gw_smiles

LinkedIn

@gwsmiley

A Look at the Sora's Education Philosophy

Preparing Students to Flourish



SORA