



FRIENDS' CENTRAL SCHOOL

Notes from Kelly Pierre's Talk

Lower School Parent Coffee with the Principal, Thursday, October 26

This week, I joined two classes for their Morning Meeting. In a first grade, I came upon them doing an activity called "Grapes, Apples, Bananas, Cherries" in which students come to the middle of the circle and call a fruit, or two, or three, and everyone who had been assigned that fruit gets up and peacefully switch places.

In Pre-K, they were rolling a gigantic sized die to one another. The student who received the die counted the dots and led the whole group in clapping out that number. Each time, the students were reminded to survey the class and find someone that had not yet had a turn.

These are two examples of community building activities that are part of Morning Meeting.

Morning Meeting is one element of a program called Responsive Classroom, an evidence-based way of teaching that offers practical strategies for bringing together social-emotional and academic learning throughout the day. This approach has shown greater teacher effectiveness, higher student achievement, and improved school climate in schools across the country and around the world.

Morning Meeting includes a greeting so that everyone feels seen and acknowledged at the very start of the day. It also includes a message that will often have a query or a question, an activity and a share. This dovetails well with Devotions, a longstanding in which the students gather, learn to listen and express themselves and their ideas and delve into hard topics as a community. As a Quaker school, we have also incorporated a moment of silence.

Six teachers have gone to the four-day training and six more are scheduled to attend a training this spring. All classroom teachers read the book *The First Six Weeks of School*, and specialists read a similar text designed just for them put out by Responsive Classroom. The book lays out how to invest time in creating clear expectations and routines during the first six weeks of school that will impact your entire school year.

Teachers spent quite a bit of time aligning our expectations so that we can all hold students accountable for the same guidelines, like walking quietly through the hallways and safely down the stairs, active listening and raising your hand to speak, and leaving spaces, like the cafeteria, better than we found them.

The feedback from teachers has been overwhelming positive. They feel like they are giving fewer reminders around routines and classroom guidelines. The faculty is using the same language around expectations, supporting one another to hold students accountable, and offering the same logical consequences: take a break, break it fix it, and loss of privilege. This in

turn provides a clarity to students about what is ok and what is not and an understanding of if I do this..then this will happen. As you can imagine, that predictability is very comforting for students.

Now in week 7, we are immersed in the Fall Project. This example of thematic education which unifies subject matter around a certain theme and integrates the students' work across disciplines is a hallmark of the Friends' Central Lower School education. A new theme is chosen every year – this year being The Arts – and teachers choose identities for their classroom related to the theme. The topics selected encourage students to explore and appreciate racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity and expose them to intellectual subject matter that is not a part of a standard lower school curriculum. Movie making, building, plays, markets, and other art-related hands-on projects are opportunities that characterize the Friends' Central fall project and set the lower school education apart.

All of the classes from Nursery – grade 5 have chosen rich and stimulating subject matter to teach *The Arts*. Here is a small sampling of Fall Projects:

One K is studying “Animals in Art” and 5th is studying the “Ancient School of Arts”

- Both were studying ancient written expression
- K read *The First Drawing* about the Caves of Lascaux
- 5 had done drawing on slate inspired by the Caves of Lascaux in art
- 5 is studying different ancient civilizations
- The classes came together to look at each other's work and to discuss the similarities and differences

Both 1st grade classes are studying “Artists of Philadelphia”

- They are taking a close look at the painting *Peaceable Kingdom* painted by artist Edward Hicks
- They are learning “A Wish for Peace” in music
- They are making animals in art
- They are studying the Animal Kingdom in science, and adaptations: migration, camouflage, hibernation and resource conservation
- Students will write scripts and make a class movie filled with different stop motion animation skits
- They will share their movie with Nursery who is studying Peace

One 4th grade class is studying “Philadelphia Sound of Music” and other R&B hits an artists put out by the label Philadelphia International

- They are inviting different artists from the FCS community
- These artists will serve as mentors for independently designed art projects the 4th graders design

The other 4th grade class is studying puppetry

- Reading the autobiography *Who is Jim Henson?*

- They are working with a professional puppeteer who will come into the classroom to teach different styles of puppetry and help the students to create their very own puppets
- The students will write a script for their very own production
- They will partner with one 3rd grade that is studying the middle ages, reading *Robin Hood* and making puppets of their own.

The work to show the connectedness of information. Teachers integrate students' reading, writing, and social studies, as well as Spanish learning and the arts, around a central theme providing a deeper, more meaningful understanding. Students learn how historical events from a time period affect literature and music. Second grade was studying the Mona Lisa and why the painter might have intended her to be smiling and learned that Leonardo Da Vinci was not just an artist but a scientist and an inventor. This inspired the students to sketch inventions of their own.

This intellectually rich, experiential based and hands-on work is balanced with a focus on excellent academics.

Math at FCS is more than a workbook and teachers working to get through it by the end of the year to prepare students for a standardized test. Each grade has a scope and sequence of skills that they need to cover and incorporate throughout the year, but our teachers delve into each concept providing hands-on projects to ensure that students understand the concepts and aren't just memorizing an algorithm. In one fourth grade the teacher had students bundle popsicle sticks in groups of tens, hundreds and thousands so that they could feel the comparison as they reviewed place value through the hundred thousands. This prepares students to better understand what a reasonable answer is when they perform multidigit addition and subtraction.

Students learn to ask and discuss big questions. In a fifth grade class I stopped by this week they were learning how to multiply decimals. The teacher explained that if the problem is 1. something times .something then a reasonable answer would be less than 1. "But why?" a student wanted to know and a discussion ensued.

In second grade, they are working to memorize their addition and subtraction facts and using fact triangles that show the reciprocal relationship between the two operations. This rote memorization of math facts is an essential tool for their toolbox. The teachers were meeting with each student for an individual conference to discuss personal goals in this area (for example, some children have repeated mistakes in the same fact family, some children are working on increasing their automaticity with the math facts, some children are working on accuracy, etc.).

Teachers give pre-assessments to inform teaching and learning and post assessments to see what has been mastered. They create different follow up activities to the lesson and sometimes offer different homework as a response to what they have learned about each mathematician.

In third through fifth grades there are problems of the week offered each week as additional math opportunities.

One exciting enhancement to our science and math curriculums is that I asked Sue Kirk, Brie Daley and Tiffany Borsch to come together to create a scope and sequence for coding Nursery – grade 5 and find ways that this work could be naturally woven into math, science and making in the Lower School. Jobs that require programming are growing 12% faster than the market average. As Sue Kirk described to the faculty in June, it is a language, it is a form of poetry, it is creative and programming is controlled by a small and group of people. We need to make sure that all of our students have the opportunity to be represented in this field.

Teachers are continuing their work with Dee Kloss our Reading Consultant and they have worked hard to strengthen their teaching of reading weaving a common thread through whole group lessons, reading groups and independent reading. There is a layered approach to skills taught as students apply them to a shared text, their instructional level text and their independent books. They are becoming more powerful readers that do things such as look for clues about what kind of voice to read the text allowing them to create movies in their mind and thinking about they ways they can review what they have just read to retell it and cement their comprehension of the story.

Blogs are written by teachers every two weeks. The focus of these blogs is to tell you what is happening in the classroom and the why behind the work. These blogs provide you with a window into your child's day and often also have helpful resources like math games, spelling lists, schedules, and more. I encourage you to sign up for notifications which will alert you every time there is a new post and please give your child's teacher some feedback. They work really hard on these blogs and would love to hear what you think about the work they are doing with your child. Blogs are also an easy way for you to share what's happening at your child's school with family and friends!

Specialists are posting once a month for each class. See Saw is an online portfolio that allows students and teachers to post photos, videos and projects to each student's page. Families ee only their child's work and can comment and give their child feedback. If you haven't gotten information about how to sign-up please contact your child's teacher.

If you were unable to attend and have further questions or would like to discuss any of this further I would be happy to schedule a time to meet in person or to talk on the phone.

Best,

Kelly