

Mission Hill School News

Letter from Mission Hill

Inclusion at Mission Hill School

Dear Mission Hill School Friends, Parents, Staff and Students,

over the past month Mission Hill, and all Boston Public Schools offering a kindergarten program, have been holding open house sessions for prospective parents. At the last open house, a parent asked a question that caught me off guard. He asked what grade I would give Mission Hill as an inclusion school. I had difficulty answering that question for a number of reasons. I don't think about our work in relation to grades or score cards, efforts do not always equal results, and the work done at home, at school and with community agencies can make the source of learning success with children tricky to

REMINDERS

January

Tue. 1/31: Mtg. for parents:
Making MHS Work in our new
location, 5:45

February

2/8-9: Family Conferences

Wed. 2/8: Screening of *August to June*, 7 p.m., MassArt

Thu. 2/16: Family Night -
Ancient China, 5:45

Thu. 2/16: Camp Information
Night, 5:45

March

Thu. 3/15: Family Council -
Boundary Setting & Negotiating

trace. I can say that I feel good about the environment created at Mission Hill for all students. All children are included in the learning. From the creation of curriculum, to creating flexible small work groups, to tailor-made homework assignments—teachers see their class as a whole group that will move forward in exciting ways. The growth may look different for each child as he or she reaches the next goal, but the belief that all are part of the learning community and will grow is a given. When Melissa Tonachel responded to the same question from the parent, she said simply, "Every child feels included."

Of course the idea of inclusion doesn't stop with academic learning. It is very much a part of the social development in the children of our school. Fairness, empathy, voice, power, language and conflict resolution are all factors that play into valuable life lessons. It's all part of the unwritten curriculum, character development that we value so much. I witness our children with varying abilities to communicate figure out ways to get their messages across, something many adults struggle with. I see our students caring for one another. I hope they will carry that sense of empathy into adulthood. I hear a child defending the rights of another who may be unaware of a wrongdoing. I feel really proud of the school we are in those moments. The blended community of talents, personalities, learners and communicators that we are adds

layers to daily learning about connecting with people, humanity.

There are certainly bumpy areas in a school like ours. While all the Mission Hill adults bring forth an inclusion perspective, there are kids and families who do not. Some challenges to learning and/or community membership that students face are more apparent than others. Families may hear about these challenges as reports about the school day shared at home. Mission Hill staff knows that it's not always easy to respond to questions your child might ask about other children in the classroom. Including others was the topic of this week's Family Council meeting. Anne Trecker, our occupational therapist, along with other teachers, was present for an evening of information and experience sharing.

~Ayla Gavins

From the Classrooms

5 to 7 year-olds

Room 203

Some people question why it is we do what we do. They try to make sense of the fact that even though the work is hard, the hours are long, and our bodies are often bruised, we still show up every day. Not only that, but we fight for all students, regardless of their challenges and struggles, to be a part of our individual classroom communities and the school community at large.

“Why don’t you leave those difficult students behind when you go on your field trip?” is a question I have been asked many times this year. Professionally, I have to make a decision based on the safety of all students but I also have to make sure that students do not consistently miss out on learning experiences because they do not look like the typical student. This idea was most apparent to me on our trip to the Museum of Fine Arts last week. As we walked through the halls and viewed the Chinese collections, all students stood in awe on more than one occasion as they examined the artifacts. While each one walked away with a different experience, all had a mind-altering experience.

So, as cries continue to fill our hallways, we make it our duty to educate our students on how human beings differ, how they process certain situations and oftentimes what it takes to work through various crises. As we get older, the world doesn’t become more homogenous. The beauty of living in this world is the

individual differences we encounter every day. It takes learning tolerance and cohabitation in the early years to create well-rounded future citizens.

So, we do what we do because at one time others thought our civil rights important to fight for and the students who seemingly have the most to learn also teach us a lot about ourselves.

~Jada Brown,
& Jo-Ann Hawkesworth

Room 204

During a recent house meeting we read a section of *Widening the Circle: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms* by Mara Sapon-Shevin. Emily facilitated our reading of the article and the discussion. She selected a section that helped us to look at our roles in the life of our inclusive school.

Sapon-Shevin says, “How teachers, teacher educators, and other professionals respond to differences will set the tone for children, teaching them why, when and how differences should be noticed and discussed.

The goal should be to make the process of inclusion hypervisible rather than invisible, allowing all participants to engage in “inclusive thinking” and problem solving, figuring out how everyone can be included, and can become agents of inclusive practices.”

The other importance piece is including families. Sometimes when families first join our community they are unsure about inclusion. They are not sure where their child fits within the model of our school. They have questions, and sometimes they are afraid to

ask. It is very important to be, as Sapon-Shevin says, Hypervisible.” If you have questions, it is important to ask them and to make sure you keep asking them until you understand.

~Kathy Clunis D'Andrea

Room 205

Is this hard for you? Is it easy? In the book *Cleversticks*, the main character, Ling Sung, is frustrated by all the things he sees his classmates doing that are hard for him. He feels like he can’t do anything right, and he doesn’t want to go to school anymore. That changes when his peers and teachers discover that he can use chopsticks; suddenly he feels he has something he can contribute and, therefore, a place in the community.

It’s hard for some children to do some things: to read, to sit at meeting, to control impulses, to draw, to make conversation. . . Unfortunately, it’s easy to judge someone based on what she can’t easily do. Fingers get pointed, feelings get hurt: *She can’t do that. It’s always her fault.* Young children especially tend to speak unabashedly about what they notice, and we encourage doing so with kindness and sensitivity. We all have to find the delicate balance between acknowledging/accepting each other’s struggles and letting those struggles identify one another. Articulating ideas may be challenging for me, but that doesn’t make me a person who does not have something important to say.

Including everyone requires adopting the habit of stepping into someone else's shoes to understand what it feels like when something is challenging. It requires going beyond just noticing that someone is struggling and asking a question of compassion: How can I help you with that?

~Melissa Tonachel
& Leia Baylor

7 to 9 Year-Olds

Room 201

"I think he's trying to tell you something," I begin, trying to mediate between two children, "but he's not using words that work for you." We are sitting outside the classroom, one child crying into his hands and the other sighing, frustrated but unsure of what he has done that is so upsetting to his friend. When the story was unraveled, it became clear that there had been a miscommunication.

"You kept saying mean stuff and then saying 'I was joking' after. That's mean. And you do it all the time." The other boy acknowledged this to be true. "But you didn't tell me what we were doing, you just kept building and not telling me what I should do."

The first boy agreed, yes, maybe that was true. Together we tried to read between the lines. After fifteen minutes had passed, and with support, the boys recognized that they were both trying to communicate in a way that didn't make sense to the other. They agreed that in the

future, they would try to say what they wanted from one another. When we see yelling, crying, or stony silence as a form of communication, we become more aware of one another. And when we discuss this openly, rather than letting the moment pass, we do the challenging work of including one another fully.

~Emily Schubin, Donna Winder
& Lydia Krooss

Room 207

"We all belong here."
"Everyone gets what they need."
These are signs that hang in my classroom above my easel and every now and then one catches my eye. I nod my head in agreement as I continue to fill up paint bowls or grab an art box.

On reflection, I think I might take these words for granted from day to day—making assumptions that everyone thinks this way and everyone believes in these two statements. Working in a place like Mission Hill where these words are lived day to day can make one forget that there are many places where these same words do not hold true. From a Mission Hill viewpoint, our differences are the foundation of these statements. Because we all bring unique gifts and needs to the table, we all need different supports and challenges. We see differences as stepping stones to understanding each other, ourselves and the world around us better. So why wouldn't we all belong?

It is the unique individuals who make up this distinct and powerful community we call Mission Hill School. It is in the

holding up of these statements that our school becomes a place that doesn't just give lip service to our mission statement. We live it and more important—we believe it.

~Jenerra Williams,
Amina Michel-Lord
& Jesse Belfeger

9 to 11 Year-Olds

Room 202

I asked our class to discuss and write about the word "inclusion" last week, before any activities involving "Inclusion Week." I was curious about their thoughts prior to my providing any definitions or guidance. Several students said they had heard the word before and knew that we had discussed it in class and around the school. They quickly made a connection with the word "include." From there students began to discuss how everyone at our school needed to be and feel included, and that it was not "okay" to exclude anyone at our school. At first, the discussion was framed in the context of play. The phrase "you can't say 'you can't play'" was mentioned, as were several examples of situations from recess. Students related stories of times when they had either invited another student to join them in a game or activity or had been invited to do so when they were in need. Students also related how it felt to be excluded and described examples of when they had felt left out. Eventually, the comments expanded to include working and studying together. "Some students need different things, so people work

together and if someone needs something different that's okay," was one student's way of describing inclusion. Another responded, "It is okay for some students to get extra help with some things because not everyone is the same and if you don't need help you should do it yourself, but if you do need help you should get it." We will be discussing inclusion with the rest of the school to deepen our understanding, but I feel confident that our class is starting from a solid foundation.

~James McGovern

Room 206

Mission Hill School has always been home to all kinds of people and all kinds of learners. Every child, adult and family member in our school has a story, as well as things that come easily for them, and things that take more time and more work. I am proud of the way our school continues to grow, year after year, in its ability to create rich and robust academic and social lives for every kind of learner.

Through differentiation of instruction, we work to make certain that everything we teach has enough access points for all learners. Oftentimes, this means tapping into each other's strengths. Some of us do better with visual cues. Others benefit from taking short motor breaks. Some shine when demonstrating their understanding through building. While others do so through written words or pictures.

In recent years, the culture of

our school and our classrooms has grown even more in ways that reflect our inclusiveness. We talk more openly about what is easy for each of us and what is hard. And we offer help when we see someone might need some. When we notice someone is strong in an area that we may struggle in, we are practicing asking for help. This is true in our book groups in the classroom, at Friday Share, during our math classes, in the art room, and out at recess.

~Nakia Keizer

Grades 6, 7 8

Room 211

Inclusion does not mean exclusion. I posed this quote to the sixth grade during our class meeting the other day. As a class we defined the words *include* and *exclude*. After we defined these words I asked them what this quote meant to them. Here is what some of them said:

"Even if you don't like the person you shouldn't leave them out." – Chris.

"Everyone has a part in everything." – Maddy

"It's better to include someone than leave them out. When you are playing a game it wouldn't be nice to say you can't play." – Gavin

"Inclusion is like having someone there always and letting them participate. You can't say no to them; it's not fair." – Suleman

"This quote means helping other people." – Samanta

"It means being together." – Yimara

"Inclusion means to listen to

other people's thoughts." – Essence.

~Sarah DeCruz

Room 209

Last week, Elsa and I attended a workshop at CAST, an education research organization that seeks to expand learning opportunities for all individuals. CAST's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework is a set of principles that proposes to replace a "one-size-fits-all" approach to curriculum design with a set of flexible scaffolds to meet individual needs. Tufts University professors and BPS Noyce math and science teachers and teaching interns worked with the CAST staff to identify barriers to learning present in curricular units and individual lessons. The objectives of the three-part UDL Guidelines seem made for Mission Hill's approach to developing life-long learners who know how to use their minds well.

The UDL definition of curriculum includes the learning goals, teaching methods, materials, and assessments enacted in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged, from the start, to provide students with multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression.

Of course, the day was not without tension as we worked to reconcile what we know about effective teaching and learning with the current political emphasis on standardized goals

and single form of assessment. I look forward to continued work with CAST throughout the year. The Mission Hill School commitment to inclusion requires us all to learn new ways of teaching.

~Ann Ruggiero & Elsa Head

Room 208

Being an inclusive school has made our experiment with the middle school Workshop class in an interesting and enriching experience. The diverse nature of the projects developed by students mirror the diversity of learning styles. Because there are so many different approaches to the projects, it means that students are challenging themselves to acquire new skills and content, and to try out new ways of learning that may be difficult for them or may come naturally. Some students who typically find math challenging and need the support of others for it, find that planning and measuring for a construction project comes easily to them.

Making room for so many techniques and projects allows everyone to find an area of strength that they can share with others. This year, with the introduction of Workshop, I have seen more peer-to-peer teaching in my classroom than I have seen before. In many cases this type of instruction crosses barriers of learning style and grade level. With more choices available, more kids are finding areas of expertise, and other students seek them out or are directed to them for instruction

in a technique or topic.

I still have many questions about the value of this type of learning environment compared to the ones I have created in the past, especially with regard to students with different learning abilities, but so far this year has given me much to think about and work with in the future.

~Jacob Wheeler

Inclusion and Learning Differences in Mission Hill School

When talking about multicultural education, Gloria Ladson Billings says, “it is the infinite permutations that come about as a result of the dazzling array of combinations human beings recruit to organize and fulfill themselves. When I think of learning differences, I like to think about these “infinite permutations” instead of the particular labels that tend to seclude students with different needs.

During this year as a Principal Intern at Mission Hill, I have witnessed how the particularities of each student can be acknowledged, valued, and respected in an inclusive school. I believe that part of this comes from MHS’s culture of high expectations of every single student’s ability to learn, which is nurtured by teachers’ persistent and careful assessment of individual students’ needs, preferences, styles and rhythms. In every classroom I observed, I have noticed students from different backgrounds and ages working and learning from each

other in a rich environment, mindfully set up by adults to enhance collaboration, to foster the unique learning opportunities that come from the interaction among diverse individuals.

There are still challenges and improvements to be made as our school prepares to move and our community continues growing and learning. As our society becomes more and more diverse, we will have to come up with new and innovative ways of including, valuing and acknowledging learning differences. We will need to examine, for instance, how our programs meet the needs of those students who are newcomers to the country and whose mother tongue is not English. Yet we have what it takes: an incredible staff that is eager to learn and collaborate and a community of families and friends that are amazingly supportive.

~Paula Cano

SY '12 Principal Intern

Hot Topics

Courtney’s Corner

Check out Courtney’s Corner, outside Room 101, for information on various programs and resources for you and your family.

Rincón de Courtney

Mira la información que esta fuera en el “Rincón de Courtney” en salón 101 para información sobre varios programas y recursos para ti y tu familia.

BPS Parent University

Join the Boston Public Schools' Office of Family and Student Engagement for Parent University on January 28th at Northeastern

University. This day-long event features workshops in multiple languages covering everything parents need to know to help their child succeed in school - from MCAS and math to positive discipline and encouraging a positive body image. Registration ends on January 24th.

Universidad para padres de BPS

Únase a la Oficina de Familia y Estudiantes en su Parent University (Universidad para padres y madres) en enero 28 en Northeastern University. Este programa de un día tendrá talleres en varios idiomas que cubren todo lo que los padres deben saber para ayudarle a sus hijos a tener éxito en la escuela (desde el MCAS y las matemáticas hasta disciplina e imagen personal). Deben registrarse antes de Enero 24.

Get Movin'

Simmons Goes Fit is offering a short, five-week program on Saturdays in March and April for our students. All ages are welcome and each session will focus on healthy living. They will have movement, nutrition, and mindfulness sessions. Please call Courtney asap for more information because slots will go fast, and we anticipate a waitlist.

¡A Moverse!

La Universidad Simmons ofrece un programa corto de 5 semanas los sábados de marzo y abril para nuestros estudiantes. Todas

las edades son bienvenidas y cada sesión se enfocará en estilos de vida saludables. Habrá sesiones de movimiento, nutrición, y relajación. Por favor comuníquense con Courtney cuanto antes para más información porque los cupos son limitados...seguramente habrá lista de espera.

Campers Have S'more Fun!

Yes, it's time to start thinking about camps! Winter may have just gotten here, but before we know it, it will be summer. Camps are gearing up for summer and registration for many of them has already started! Please see Courtney in Room 101 for all your camp connection needs. Also, mark your calendars for Thursday, February 16th – MHS will be hosting a Camp Night that evening, with representatives from some of the most popular camps. See you there!

¡Marquen sus calendarios!

Sí, llegó la hora de empezar a pensar en campos de verano. Es cierto, el invierno acaba de llegar, pero el verano vendrá rápidamente. ¡Los campos de verano ya están preparándose y muchas de las inscripciones ya comenzaron! Por favor comuníquense con Courtney en el salón 101 para hacer los contactos necesarios. Marquen sus calendarios para el Jueves 16 de febrero- la escuela sostendrá una Noche de Campos de Verano (Camp Night) donde vendrán los representantes de los campos más populares. ¡Espero

verlos allí!

Move Logistics Meeting

Are you concerned the move of our school to Jamaica Plain next year will result in a hardship for your family? If so, we invite you to join staff and other families for a brainstorming meeting that we hope will result in solutions.

The meeting will take place on Tuesday, January 31, 2012, at 5:45 PM, in the school library. Childcare can be provided if you RSVP to Joni in the main office 617-635-6384, no later than Friday, January 27th. Please see Ms. Amina with questions.

Mission Hill School

A Boston Public Pilot School

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