

Mission Hill School News

Letter from Child Street

What Brings You Here?

Dear Mission Hill School Families, Friends and Staff,

Last Thursday evening over 40 Mission Hill School families joined staff for a Family Council-sponsored meeting about inclusion at our school. Early in the evening, one by one, each person stated their name, who their children are at the school and why they came. The reasons why people came really struck me. Some people came to learn about inclusion at Mission Hill, some people came because they have a child with special needs, some people just came, not knowing what the topic for discussion was going to be. So many people in the room to discuss this topic was powerful. We watched a film segment together (a small part of *Including Samuel*) that illustrated a slice of life at a full inclusion school in

Cambridge. Following the film we broke up into small groups for discussion.

While our commitment to inclusion as a staff remains steadfast, families have many questions and differ in levels of confidence around this aspect of our school. Bringing different people together, including everyone, is never neat, clean and easy work. This week's newsletter is dedicated to illustrating through stories what this looks like at Mission Hill School.

There are three resources I highly recommend as sources to learn more about inclusion in schools. *Widening the Circle: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms* by Mara Sapon-Shevin is a book I have referred to often as questions have come my way. It doubles as a reference book with useful questions and answers and includes general stories about life with a child who has special needs. You may borrow a copy of this book from Mission Hill through the library or main office. Watch *Including Samuel*, a documentary by Dan Habib. This film follows the life of a family and captures life in several different schools as teachers and other adults work together to meet the needs of students with a wide range of abilities and emotions. I recommend watching this film with others, including your own children if they are in grades four and up. You can see the

trailer to this film at www.includingsamuel.com or on YouTube. Finally, our school has a parent group called **Outside the Lines**. This group gathers each month to learn more about raising and educating children who have special needs, advocating for these children, and/or learning more about available supports.

No matter where you are in your understanding of including all people in schools, or in life in general, there are opportunities available to learn more. As a group of adults at Mission Hill School, staff members are committed to learning and building our capacity. We invite you to learn with us.

~Ayla Gavins

REMINDERS

February

Thu. 2/7, 4:40 - 6:30: Camp Night

2/7-8 Family Conferences

Fri. 2/15: School Closed - staff at conference

2/18 - 22: Winter vacation

2/27-3/1: Grades 5 & 6 to Farm School

March

Thu. 3/16, 5:45: Family Council

Mon. 3/18: No School

Thu. 3/28: Family Breakfast - Ancient Greece

Fri. 3/29 - No school

From the Classrooms

3 and 4 year-olds

Room 108

I am blessed with six brothers and two sisters. One of our brothers was born very sick, and had significant special needs from the beginning. Having a brother with special needs helped shape who I am and what I believe. I learned from an early age that exclusion hurts and that blaming parents destroys trust.

I also learned that there are many ways to be smart and many paths to success. I learned that an IEP (Individual Education Plan) doesn't define you, and that uniqueness is to be valued. I learned compassion and patience. And I learned that I wanted to be a teacher. Through my mom I learned about the importance of advocating for your child. I saw how she fought to make sure my brother's class was invited to join the school chorus, and was allowed to participate fully in the school. This was before inclusion, and when special needs students were in a separate part of the school.

I am thankful that Mission Hill School is an inclusive place. We are committed to making everyone feel as though they are in integral part of the fabric of our community – because they are.

~Geraldyn Bywater McLaughlin
& Donna Winder

Kindergarten

Room 106

I recently had a conversation

with a colleague about lesson plans. Lesson plans were first introduced to me in college. They are designed to help a person think through a lesson they are going to teach. There are sections about goals, materials, procedures etc. I really enjoyed my conversation because it was about the part of the lesson plan that has teachers think carefully about how they might have to diversify the instruction in their classroom to meet the needs of a wide range of learners.

We talked about teachers new to the field and helping them really understand that the children they will be teaching need different things. We spoke about students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). We spoke about the needs of English language learners and how using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is one tool teachers can use. We spoke about students who are reading and writing at a higher grade level than the rest of the class. We spoke about the fact that differentiation is not an accommodation, but a deep thinking about all the students and how to help each of them access the information whether they have special needs or not.

~Kathy Clunis D'Andrea

Room 107

No news this week

Room 109

In my classroom, inclusion is not about who has an IEP and who doesn't. It is about:
We all belong here.
We all have things to learn.

We all have things to teach each other.

Inherent in these beliefs is the knowledge that there are many different trajectories of learning and growing. Some paths will be similar and some will be vastly different to yours. All of them are paths. Inclusion means everyone gets what he or she needs to support them along their journey.

Inclusion is about viewing all children as strong, powerful agents in their own learning. It is about seeing children not in terms of deficits, but for their unique capabilities and potential. Children are people—like all of us—citizens with rights: social rights, legal rights, political rights, the right to be happy, to be themselves, and to make their mark on the world. It is important for children to learn: not everyone will think like you, believe like you, look like you, sound like you, and live like you.

What is important is that we learn to live and work together, listen to each other, and create a better world together.

~Jenny Goldstein

Grades One & Two

Room 204

“We all belong here.”
“Everyone gets what they need.”
These are signs that hang in my classroom and every now and then one catches my eye. I nod my head in agreement as I continue to fill up paint bowls or put away blocks.

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 are not held 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 importantly...we believe it.

~Jenerra Williams

Juan Cortes & Lexi Delyani

Room 205

Prior to writing this newsletter I reread a piece of writing I did on inclusion during graduate school and I realized my definition of inclusion at that time was narrow. In that essay, I wrote about including children with disabilities in general education classrooms, benefits and common concerns of inclusion, and ways to minimize those concerns or disadvantages. In my mind, the focus of inclusion was primarily

on children with disabilities. Working at Mission Hill has opened my eyes and redefined the word "inclusion".

At Mission Hill, inclusion doesn't simply mean including children with special needs in least restrictive environments with typically developing peers. Who are these children with special needs and how are their needs special? If there is anything I have learned from teaching at Mission Hill, it has to be the belief that everyone, students and adults alike, has needs, and we all have something we need help with or to get better at. All of our students are special and we all have needs that are special to our own. Inclusion is supporting everyone's needs and fostering their strengths to our extent. At Mission Hill, we celebrate differences, strengths, and needs as we support and overcome them.

~Brenda Lau

Room 217

I felt privileged to be sitting in the company of many of you at last week's Family Council meeting focused on inclusion. Looking around the circle, I saw you as representatives of your children, whom you celebrate and worry over; and your questions and concerns were like theirs, like all of ours: Is this going to be okay for me? Who are you? How will we meet? Looking around the circle, I also wondered about those of you who could not be there, and about why, what else might I/we have done to get you there? What were the barriers—time of day, seating, shyness, childcare; uncertainty

about the topic, the language that would be used, the qualifications for being part of the group? These are the very questions we ask in order to include each child in learning moments throughout the school day. What else can I do to bring you fully into the circle so that you and we can benefit from each other's presence and expertise?

Last week, I was struck by language and attitudes that seem to describe the problem or challenge of inclusion. What if we retooled the conversation with the assumption that everyone—every single one of us—is included, invited, welcomed, celebrated and supported... how would that change our language? Yes, there are challenges to making sure it works for everyone, but perhaps changing our assumptions eliminates the question of whether inclusion is a good idea and lets us get on with the how of doing it.

When all of the children in a class are gathered together, they rarely look one the same as the next. They don't all sit cross-legged or sit still or remember to raise their hands to speak, they don't all speak clearly or with language we expect, they don't all stay for the whole meeting. But they join us because they have been invited, and because they are assured that they have something to contribute, and that when they speak or gesture or create, we will listen.

~Melissa Tonachel

Grades Three & Four

Room 207

It's inclusion week at the Mission Hill School. Throughout the year room 207 has participated in a school-created program called, "All Class SPOT (SPeech and Occupational Therapy)". The idea of this program is to create an inclusive atmosphere, which many of the needs our students can be met. During this time our school occupational and speech therapists work on students' abilities in social skills, handwriting, story grammar structure/practice, and sensory integration. All Class SPOT occurs bi-weekly on Thursdays between 11:30-12:30. Here are some examples of how we use our time: (1) we practice new methods to gather information about text and how to record it using different graphic organizers, (2) we practice and learn how to use social skills character to help defuse emotional situations among ourselves, and (3) we practice handwriting skills through a grade level Handwriting Without Tears curriculum. Having this program allows all children to experience how useful these skills are for all students, whether they are classified as special education or typical. Here at the Mission Hill School we strive on finding ways to make all teaching practice inclusive and progressive.

~Robert Baez

Room 216

Over the years many students have asked me why I teach, why I do what I do. I continue to explain that I do so "to make a difference in the only real way I know how." Schools like ours try to make a difference. When we hear that a young person is "disruptive and can't relate to others," we make it a priority to help that young person learn to connect. When a student feels unappreciated or unsuccessful, we find ways to help them believe in themselves. We have always believed that every student deserves to be a part of a learning community that recognizes and respects their individual needs and strengths. So, our community strives to include everyone, despite our differences, without judgment, leaving none behind. This goal of being collectively inclusive has not always worked out as well as we would have it. People are complex, with many needs, and sometimes we fall short of our goals. The important thing is that we do not give up on anyone. Ultimately, as it says in our school mission statement: *[Public education] aims at producing youngsters who can live productive, socially useful and personally satisfying lives, while also respecting the rights of all others.* As members of the MHS community we all make a difference by standing together and supporting values such as empathy, dignity, and inclusion, and taking the time to raise our children to live up to these qualities with compassion and

respect.

~James McGovern

Erica Switzer & George Merrill

Grades Five & Six

Room 210

"Zinkoff" is the title of the last chapter of the book *Loser* and the last name of the lead character. Names play a big role in the story. "His name is Zinkoff," says Hobin... "he went to my school. He's a nobody." These are the words of a former classmate of a now middle school-aged Donald Zinkoff who, though not stated, has many characteristics of a child on the autism spectrum. Up to that point, many of his former classmates had taken to calling Zinkoff "loser". The new B.M.O.C, Bonce, is in the painful process of selecting players from a wall of hopeful adolescents to participate on teams for football.

Aside from it being a great story, we have been reading this to open more dialogue about differences among us as people and learners. "I think it starts to change around fourth grade," commented one student. "That's when you can start to tell if someone is different or weird ...before then it's not as big of a deal." Other students chimed in that a big part of being "Noticed" (another chapter from the book) has to do with social status and all that comes with pre-adolescence. Many more thoughtful and candid comments arose during the discussions of the story. More importantly, I

was able to see evidence of those thoughts in action on occasion.

One thing that stands out to me occurred during a recent trip to the gym to play community-building games. One student who normally does not get the opportunity, and is usually not willing to participate in such activities had a chance to do so in a controlled and safe environment. Not only did the child participate, but excelled. This prompted one of the more athletic, alpha students to exclaim, “Wow, did you see ____?! She is a beast!”(a good thing) “Did you see all of the people you got out?”

The chapter and book draw to an end as all of Donald Zinkoff’s “frienemies” do their best to color Bonce’s perception as he scans the few remaining kids, deciding who is worthy enough to join the teams. He is not quite swayed however. In fact he is left with more questions than he is with judgements. This is goofy he thinks. He thinks of a thousand things to say, a thousand other ways this could go, but in the end there’s really only one word, he knows that, one word from him and who knows where we go from there? He points, he says it: “Zinkoff.” And the game begins.” Sometimes all it takes is saying a kid’s name.

*~Nakia Keizer
Kyle Ford-Withrow
& Cady Hrasky*

Room 215

Last spring, I took the Pathways program to become certified in special education. When I think

about inclusion and what it means to teach inclusion I find myself looking back at what I learned last spring. The other adults and I who support the Highlighters and the 6th grade Math Bots have been composed flexible groupings for literacy and math. This has looked like smaller pullout sessions to work on reading comprehension, spelling, and fluency with math facts. We meet weekly to discuss how these groups are going and the progress students are making and deciding when the groups will change. Just because a student may need additional support in an area or they just benefit from a smaller, quieter setting doesn’t mean that is what they will always need. Our goal is to have every student working to her or his full potential while accessing grade level curriculum.

~Sarah DeCruz

Grades Seven & Eight

Room 213

It always feels a little awkward when something that should be a way of life is celebrated as a week. Perhaps the purpose of designating this week as Inclusion Week is to help us to reconnect to core beliefs, acknowledge what is going well, and strive to understand how we can do better. Inclusion Week only works if the awareness it brings leads to action.

When the 7th and 8th graders in Room 213 watched and read President Obama’s Inaugural Address, many of them chose

this paragraph as their favorite:

“We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths — that all of us are created equal — is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth.”

If we believe that we are created equal, each in her or his own wondrous uniqueness, then we can recognize exclusion as a practice that denies freedom, a practice that has no place in our schools and communities. Throughout our history, we have fought, and continue to fight, to secure equality for all. Inclusion is more than the right thing to do. It is a practice that strengthens and enriches our shared humanity.

*~Ann Ruggiero,
Laura Nixon & Kendal Schwarz*

Room 214

The Workshop classroom is a place where students have a chance to explore old and new interests, learn new skills, and hone old ones. The work that we do encompasses many different types of learning. We often see students who struggle in many areas of the curriculum find new ways of learning and expressing themselves in the Workshop. Sewing, word study, drawing, design, scientific experimentation, statistics, foreign language, microscopy, construction, and deconstruction are some of the areas

in which 7th and 8th grade students have worked this year. Everyone has completed projects and reflected thoughtfully on them.

The Workshop classroom provides multiple entry points for students to find work that engages them. The trick is then to find the connections that lead naturally into other types of learning that might be difficult or less attractive to students. Chemical reactions are fun to perform and watch, but it takes knowledge of atomic structure to understand why they happen, as well as an ability to work with ratios to balance their chemical equation in order to predict and describe them. It's fun and challenging to build a table, but without strong measurement skills and an ability to work comfortably with fractions and mathematical operations it won't be possible.

Students have many chances to be experts and learners, and to work cooperatively in the Workshop. One moment a student might be teaching another how to draw in three dimensions, and the next learning from another how to safely and accurately measure chemicals.

~Jacob Wheeler & Chris Barnes

Hot Topics

School Choice and Student Assignment news

On February 4th, the Boston Public Schools External Advisory Committee (EAC) will be hosting a community forum at 6:00 PM at Orchard Gardens K-8 School at 906 Albany Street to hear from

the public about the proposals and take testimony. More information on that can also be found at <http://bostonschoolchoice.org/> Parents are encouraged to attend!

Courtney's Corner

Check out Courtney's Corner 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" para información sobre varios programas y recursos para ti y tu familia.

2nd Annual MHS Camp Night!

Mark your calendars for our upcoming Camp Night to be held Thursday, February 7th 4:30-6:30. Yes, it's already time to start thinking about camps. Camps are gearing up for summer and registration for many of them has already started! There will be representatives from different camps and academic programs both near and far for all ages. Something for everyone! Stop by and hear how to apply for financial aid or what transportation is available for the different camps. Don't see a camp there that you're interested in? Talk to Courtney about getting more information.

¡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 114 para hacer los contactos necesarios. Marquen sus calendarios para el Jueves 7 de febrero (4:30-6:30)- la escuela sostendrá una Noche de Campos de Verano (Camp Night) donde vendrán los representantes de los campos más populares. ¡Espero verlos allí!

Mission Hill School

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