Mission Hill School News

Letter from Child Street

A Case For the Schoolyard

This article originally appeared in the November 18, 2011 edition of the News. In light of the dedication of our new schoolyard, we share this slightly abridged version.

“Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives.” - Thomas Berry

I have been spending a great deal of time thinking about why I am so passionate about outdoor learning. I thought about how to convey it in a newsletter. I kept getting stuck. It felt a little bit like I was describing the taste of an apple instead of letting someone eat it for herself. Rachel Carson said, “It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world.” I feel the same way about sharing why the schoolyard is so important.

There is a great deal of information that helps the case for more time in the schoolyard. As I collect data about children’s work in the schoolyard, I too am finding what research is saying about the benefits of outdoor learning. In Richard Louv’s new book, *The Nature Principle; Human Restoration and the end of Nature-Deficit Disorder*, he discussed the many benefits of interacting with nature. A study out of the University of Michigan found that participants’ memory, performance, and attention spans improved by 20% after just an hour of interaction with nature. I noticed this too with the children I taught. When I take children outside they are able to focus for longer periods of time than in the classroom. Children with ADHD showed significant reduction of their symptoms. My findings have also been found in a study from the Human-Environmental Research Lab at the University of Illinois. Louv also writes about a Canadian study reporting that, “Greener school grounds not only improved academic performance of students; it also lowered exposure to toxins and increased teachers’ enthusiasm for being teachers.” I have noticed that children write more meaningful, longer journals when they are in the schoolyard. They also write more about things they wonder about.

Another important case for the schoolyard is the need for children to play. Peter Gray’s most recent article, *The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents* in the Journal of Play examines the reduction of opportunities for play. He writes, “The most noticeable and probably greatest decline has occurred in children’s outdoor play with other children.” He continues, “The decline of children’s outdoor play is often blamed on the seductive qualities of television and, more recently, computer games and Internet activities. Certainly, these changes in technology have played a role. In Clements’s survey, 85% of mothers cited television viewing and 81% cited computer play as among the reasons why their children played outdoors so infrequently. However, in the same survey, most of the mothers admitted that they themselves restricted their children’s outdoor play, and 82% cited safety concerns, including fear of crime, as reasons for doing so.”

A strong message that Louv shares throughout his book is, “The more high-tech we become the more nature we need.” On many levels our schoolyard provides our daily needed dose of nature. Let’s get outside!

~Ayla Gavins

REMINDEERS

**November**

Sat. 11/23, 8:30 - 4:00: Descriptive Review Conference @ MHS

Wed. 11/27, 1:30: Dismissal for Thanksgiving Break

**December**

Thu. 12/5, 5:00 - Governing Bd. Mtg.

Fri. 12/6, 6:00 - Coffee House

**Tue. 12/3**, 5:30 – 7:00 pm: BPS* School visit day

Wed - Fri. 12/11 - 14, Book Fair

Wed. 12/11, 10 – 11:30 am: BPS* School visit day

Thu. 12/19, 7 – 8:30 am: BPS* School visit day

**AND**

6:00 - 7:00: Outside the Lines Mtg.

Fri. 12/20, 3:30: Holiday Break begins
From the Classrooms

Room 108
In our classroom we use many open-ended materials. That means we use materials which encourage children to be creative and to use their imaginations. For example, we have many types of blocks. Every time a child approaches a basket of blocks, the child brings his or her own ideas to the table. It is never quite the same creation twice.

Many of our open-ended materials come from nature: pine cones, wood “cookies”, stumps, etc. Wood “cookies” are slices of wood from branches that have fallen. Our students use these small wooden disks for all types of pretend food, money and more. One day, the children decided that the baby dolls were hungry. The children made baby bottles from pinecones and small cardboard rings (see photo).

We could use plastic baby bottles and pretend food, however I prefer to use natural materials that are free, good for the environment, and good for our children’s imaginations. I have a lovely birch branch that fell from our tree outside. Is there someone out there with a saw who can help us turn the birch branch into wood cookies for our classroom?

~Geraldyn Bywater McLaughlin
Donna Winder & Angel Nasseh

Kindergarten

Room 106
Friday was The Mission Hill School’s ribbon cutting for our new schoolyard. It was exciting. We gathered around the south yard. Children gathered on the ground and on benches. Families and community members huddled to the side. We sang together as we waited for the Mayor to arrive. There was a big cheer of excitement when he walked in.

I shared about the hard work the team of folks did making our schoolyard a special place. Our team were incredibly dedicated to making our space a place everyone could enjoy. I spoke about how many of the students learned about Monarchs this year. I also shared that they need our help to plant more milkweed. We gave packs of milkweed seeds to our guests at the ribbon cutting. Milk weed seeds need to winter over so it was perfect to give them out now so they could be planted for next spring.

The mayor cut the ribbon and the crowd cheered. Check out the pictures on our last page! Thank you to everyone who did a great job in planning and helping with the event.

~Kathy Clunis D’Andrea

Room 107
Each morning as our students enter the room they are expected to make one of two choices. The first is to sit at the breakfast table and the second is to go to the writing table and work in their journals. This practice, which began early in September, has produced some interesting conversation starters. Here are a few excerpts:

This is a:
…fling car in the sky.
…plane and a boat in water.
…princess dress. She has magical powers in her princess dress. It is beautiful.
… picture of space.
…tornado.
…party with a dinosaur cake and balloons and an airplane and even boats!
…robot monster.
…person drinking rain.
…TV show. They are in the snow at the circus. They are watching tv.
There is a lion and a giraffe.
…house I live in with my mommy, daddy, sister and baby.
…rocket ship. I want to go in a rocket ship and see the moon for a field trip.
…bumblebee. It makes honey. The honey is right here in its bag.
…raindrop.
This is:
…my little brother.
…a tooth that is in my mouth.
…a ghost town.
…me in the ocean with my friends.
…me and a cupcake.
…me, mama and papa sniffing the flowers.
These are numbers and me in high heels.

~Jada Brown
& JoAnn Hawkesworth
Room 109
Part of me can’t believe that we have already spent three months together. Three months, getting to know more and more about each other every day. Three months creating community. Three months learning with and from each other.
I delight in daily observations of their learning. Just today, when Milo wanted to know how to spell a word, he showed his resourcefulness by locating the word in a familiar book in our library. Maya was a little hesitant putting her pencil to the paper to write her ideas along with her drawing. I gave her some gentle encouragement, and when I came back to check on her a few minutes later, she had finished a whole sentence. Every day the children create more detailed and intricate work - with blocks, art material, and through the stories they tell. I absolutely love my work, witnessing children grow day by day, year by year.
I only have a few days left with these brilliant children before taking a few months off to meet my own child. I wonder about what they will learn, and how they will grow, between now and then. I can’t help but be so excited for all that lies ahead.
~Jenny Goldstein

Grades One & Two

Room 205
“We forgot to add the seeds,” Anand exclaimed as a small group of students were working on making a classroom tree, thinking about all the parts they should include. I prompted them by asking, “Well, what kind of seeds will you make; what kind of tree have you started to create?” “An apple tree,” shouted Miles. “No, oak!” blurted Hamse. Euan offered, “Let’s vote.” Quickly the small group of children raised their hands to offer their opinion about the type of tree the class should create. I then added, “What about the rest of the class; what do they think?” Skye quickly grabbed a piece of paper and drew a line down the middle.

Room 217
During most of the school year, 1st and 2nd graders split and go to different teachers for grade-level math. As a 1st/2nd grade team, we decided that this would be the best way to ensure that each child was developing the necessary skills to be a successful mathematician. However, we also believe that unique opportunities can be designed so that 1st and 2nd graders can work together to develop their math skills and understandings. Throughout the year, we will be exploring 10-day math units where 1st and 2nd graders will be working together in their home classrooms. These units focus on skills that both 1st and 2nd graders need to develop. The units are focused on particular themes or contexts that blend well with the school’s emphasis on project-based learning. Right now we are working on one of these units. The context of this unit is about Double Decker buses. Students are developing sounder understandings of the relationship between addition and subtraction and learning how to use special
math tools to help them explain their thinking.
   ~Emma Fialka-Feldman

Grades Three & Four

Room 207
The Role Model Hawks want to share what they are thankful for during a time when many families spend quality time inside or with each other due to holidays and the cold winter days. At Mission Hill we teach children to be thankful and appreciative in life no matter the time of the year. Here is what we are thankful for!

I am thankful for…
Laudys: “life and everything!”
Luisairy: “the clothes I have and my family!”
Daniel M: “my mom and dad!”
Bryan: “having a home!”
Anais: “my family members and teachers!”
Giselle: “having a family and going to school!”
Sadiqah: “having a family and having clothes to wear!”
Athena: “everything that I have!”
Kalea: “having a family and getting fed delicious foods!”
Tandin: “my family, coming to school, and that my cat came back when she was lost!”
Dalia: “Christmas, birthday, and life!”
Tato: “learning how to read, write, and draw!”
Andrew: “clothes and food!”
Daniel R: “Thanksgiving break, Halloween, and dad’s delicious pies!”
Zack: “wellness during school”
CJ: “all that I have learned!”

AJ: “life!”
Axel: “coming to school and having a family!”
Chantal: “everything!”
Zachary: “my family!”
James: “my family and my dog!”
   ~Robert Baez, Ms. Amanda & Ms. Shaina

Room 216
This past week we have been working more on writing descriptively about our plants and animals. Students are being asked to write several drafts and get feedback from students and/or adults. As December approaches, we continue to get closer and closer to our final project: a field guide to the Arnold Arboretum. Students are learning to take and use feedback to improve their writing and drawings. The goal is for students to begin to see improvement themselves in their own work and begin to see their progress through hard work and effort.

Some students are researching using books and field guides. Others are using books from the public library or our very own school library. Students are trying to figure out what some plants need in order to survive and how animals play a role in plants’ survival. At some point this week we plan to post a few samples of what students have already found and drawn. Please feel free to come by and take a look!
   ~Josh Kraus, Melanie Centeno
   Selina Ruiz & Elsa Batista

Grades Five & Six

Room 210
This week I was fortunate enough to attend the 7th/8th Grade trip to the Farm School. I was excited. I have taught many of those students as 4th, 5th and 6th graders, and maintain a good connection with them. I was happy to see how they have grown as young people since the time were shared a classroom.

I was also curious about life at the farm in the fall. My classes have always gone in March or late February.

The experience was great. Being there with older students presented different challenges and possibilities than the group I normally bring.

Here are a few of the sounds from the farm via the 7th and 8th grade...

“We have a medical emergency, Jahvon can’t see...we were building a fire and smoke got in his eyes.”
“The sheep escaped!”

“Why are you all running...I’m not running, they are either going to kill me or not…”

“Nakia I was driving the oxen!”

“Hey look!...the moon’s right there (pointing to the sky on the left) but the sun’s right there" (pointing to the sky on the right).

“Bro, it’s our last day at the farm school, I wish we could stay like, four days…”

“I don’t want to milk that cow, look how he’s looking at me...I’ll milk the other one.”

“Hey look, the moon is orange.”

“Yo, Gus (the dog) keeps
chasing the sheep!”
“I don’t know why the sheep be running from Gus bro, if I were the sheep I’d team up on him and stomp him!”
“Oh man, you got a glove, I didn’t know they had gloves (one student envious of the pot holder someone was using to stir the scrambled eggs.”
“Love how these feel, they taste good too, can I take some home?” (student commenting on the dinosaur kale)
“Wait….it’s not even four o’clock yet!?! (Given how much work get done, and how early we start, the days are long at the farm.”
“I wish farm school was five days.” “Five days four nights,” commented two boys while sweeping the bunkhouse at 6:30 A.M.

~Nakia Keizer

Room 215
There is much discord and disagreement in the United States regarding who belongs and who doesn’t; who fits and what should be done with those who don’t. And girding these harsh questions is who gets to decide the criteria on which such decisions are made. It’s not like MH, where you hear adults reminding students, “Everyone gets to play.” In seeking to “other” each other, we’ve seen that physical, emotional, and social harms are inflicted on humans (citizens & non-citizens).
Unfortunately, despite our best efforts to teach and encourage, our White Lions classroom (which is a microcosm of the U.S.) community members are currently struggling in their efforts to become a mindful, caring community. You may hear your student proudly state that he/she knows that every member of our class is important. But lately, they aren’t treating each other well. Sometimes students are naming each other’s differences as “weaknesses” and utilizing various methods of making each other feel weaker and less valuable. As a result, members of our classroom are sometimes drawing lines as fortresses against each other.
Your children are still trying though, because they really don’t want to be those people who push other people out when they know better. There have been beautiful moments: when one of your children invites another to join; encourages a classmate who’s less confident; or supports a class member’s right to be “different”. As a classroom, we are learning not to measure each other with a "better than/less than" metric. We are learning that this way of naming and calculating parts of our classroom is not only mean-spirited, it is an insufficient means of identifying/accessing the wonderful power of our wholeness.

~Letta Neely

Grades Seven & Eight

Room 213
Recently, Jenerra, Amina, and I attended the Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum in San Francisco. We presented a workshop in response to our staff commitment after the NDSG meeting in Detroit last February. We agreed then to consciously make race and education a part of our questions and discussions as a teaching staff.

For our Fall Forum workshop, we recorded some of our conversations about race and education then selected segments to play. After each selection, a set of focus questions guided participants to question and respond in small groups. The groups had lots to talk about, found the questions helpful and provocative, and during each section had to be stopped so we could move to the next topic. Participants were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and gender. We appreciated the active role they played in speaking honestly about their experiences and sharing their commitment to grow as individuals and professionals.

We also attended other workshops and spent a wonderful long morning with Deb, reminiscing about Mission Hill and talking about education and philosophy, which she reminded us was a lifetime conversation.

~Ann Ruggiero

Room 214
Last week, we continued learning about the origins of life on this planet, and did internet research on soil in preparation for this week’s trip to Farm School. When students returned from the farm this week, they investigated the life forms that live in soil and how they help grow the food we eat. Many of the simpler organisms we will see in the soil are probably the same or very similar to
the single celled organisms that lived on Earth three billion years ago. Students used microscopes to see these tiny organisms, but there were plenty of larger ones that didn’t require a microscope. Students drew what they saw and then went online to try to identify these creatures.

Once they identified the organisms, students learned each one’s role in the soil ecosystem.

Speaking of soil and bugs, the animals on our athletic field will have a rest as soccer is over for the season. Our soccer players had a great time and represented our school well with their determination and passion. Soccer will start up again in the Spring for a longer, ten week season. Go Mission Hill!!

~Teresa Strong

Hot Topics

¿Recibe las llamadas de la escuela en inglés? Si quiere recibirlas en español, contacta a Joel Webb en (617)548-7523 o jwebb@missionhillschool.org.

Coffee House Returns
The third MHS “Show Me What You’re Working With” Coffee House will be on Friday Dec 6, 2013 at 6pm in our school auditorium. The Coffee House will end at approximately 7:15. Any participants who anticipate needing a ride home after the coffee house, please have your families contact Letta Neely or Jenerra Williams by December 3. Additionally, if you are able to provide a ride to a student, please contact us as well.

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.

Room 216 need short-term volunteers
Thursdays and Fridays from 2 - 3, starting December 12th, we need a few adults to help our class with writing. Four sessions only—help with one, or more! Please contact me at jkraus@missionhillschool.org.

Thanks.

Mission Hill School
A Boston Public Pilot School
Deborah Meier, Founder
Ayla Gavins, Principal
20 Child Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
617.635.6384 (office)
617.635.6419 (fax)
www.missionhillschool.org

Mayor Menino cuts the ribbon
The schoolyard design team, with Mayor Menino

Parking Announcement
We ask families and visitors to please not park in our staff parking lot. As staff, we often carry in many items for our students to use and need to be able to park close to the entrance so we can carry everything in. Please park on South Street, Child Street, Verona Street, Carolina Ave. or any of the many other neighboring streets when you come to visit. Thank you.