



Head of School

October 26, 2007

Heard in the Halls...

Nan's Notes:

There have been two parent parties so far this year for grades 1-2 and 5th grades. Thank you so much to Hanneke Steenmetz /Steve Hayward, and Ruth Epstein for hosting these gatherings in their homes. It's nice to mingle with other parents and teachers in a "non-official" social event. Other class parties are on the calendar, so there is more fun to come!

We had two "official" events this week that I wanted to mention:

To everyone's great enjoyment in assembly yesterday, Ms. Gough's "hula hoop" lab students put on a demonstration of hula hoop prowess using the hula hoops that they had made. It was great fun, especially when Ms. Gough took the stage herself! Overheard from a Kindergartener as they left the room, "Wow assembly went so fast today!"

From youngest to oldest:

On Wednesday night 10 of our alumni came back to school for their annual reunion and to talk to our 8th grade students about the perils and pleasures of high school. 8th grade students asked them about lots of things, among topics discussed: class schedules, homework loads, making friends, sports, ability to drive to school, scary stories about finding your way around, how hard was it to approach teachers and what they most fondly remember about RMDS (the week long trips; visual and performing arts; discussion-based learning and their teachers). In typical Ring Mountain style, our older students again, and again, are a great support to younger ones.

Additional notes: Two articles you may want to read that appeared recently:

San Francisco Chronicle article Thursday, October 25, 2007, "Science in Lower Grades Near Extinction", about the lack of science teaching in Bay Area schools.

The Wall Street Journal, October 24, 2007, "Worse Than You Think", about the study by the Pacific Research Institute, on public school performance in affluent neighborhoods in California.

Worse Than You Think

October 24, 2007; Page A20 Wall Street Journal

Proponents of educational choice tend to focus on the underprivileged, which is understandable given that low-income kids are overrepresented in failing inner-city public schools. But an

Preschool, Pre-K 215A Blackfield Drive Tiburon, CA 94920 (415) 381-8181

K-8 70 Lomita Dr. Mill Valley, CA 94941 (415) 381-8183 Fax (415) 381-8484

emphasis on the plight of the poor can leave the impression that middle-class public school students are doing fine. And that would be a false impression, according to a new book-length study by the Pacific Research Institute, "Not as Good as You Think: Why the Middle-Class Needs School Choice."

Conventional wisdom holds that upscale communities tend to have "good" schools, and parents often buy homes in expensive neighborhoods so their kids have a shot at a decent public education. But the PRI study, which focused on California, found that in nearly 300 schools in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods, "less than half of the students in at least one grade level performed at proficiency in state math and English tests."

Many of these schools were located in the Golden State's toniest zip codes, places like Orange County, Silicon Valley and the beach communities of Los Angeles. In areas such as Newport Beach, Capistrano and Huntington Beach, where million-dollar houses are commonplace, researchers found more than a dozen schools where 50% to 80% of students weren't proficient in math at their grade level. In one Silicon Valley community where the median home goes for \$1.6 million, less than half of 10th and 11th graders scored at or above proficiency on the state English exam.

Schools serving middle-income kids are also doing a poor job of preparing them for higher education. Some 60% of freshmen in the California State University system need remedial courses. And it's not because they grew up in Watts. At Dos Pueblos High School in ritzy Santa Barbara, only 28% of high school juniors tested college-ready for English in 2006, slightly better than the 23% of students who did so at San Marin High School in Marin County, where the median home price recently hit \$1 million.

"Many middle-class parents don't think they have a stake in the school-choice debate," says Lance Izumi, the lead author of the study, in an interview. "They assume their schools are doing better than they are." In reality, these families would benefit from vouchers, tuition tax credits, charter schools and other educational options as surely as the inner-city single mom.

And the competitive pressure would help make the surrounding public schools better. "When you show people in these communities how their schools aren't doing so well, how they're not getting the bang for their buck," says Mr. Izumi, "they can begin to see how the debate over school choice affects them, too."

Science courses nearly extinct in elementary grades, study finds

[Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Thursday, October 25, 2007

The third-graders looked puzzled when asked what they liked best about science. No answer. OK, then, next question: "What *is* science?" a visitor asked the children in a hallway at Bessie Carmichael Elementary School in San Francisco. "Science is like art," said Manuel, 7, who let that cryptic response hang in the air as he ducked away. He might have meant that both can open the heart to beauty. Or maybe he was saying that science, like art, is something students don't get much of these days in elementary school. If it were the latter, a new survey of 923 Bay Area elementary school teachers would agree.

About 80 percent of those teachers said they spent less than an hour each week teaching science, according to researchers from the Lawrence Hall of Science at UC Berkeley and from WestEd, an education think tank based in San Francisco. In contrast, a national study seven years ago found elementary school science instruction averaged more than two hours per week, said Rena Dorph, the lead researcher on the new study.

Preschool, Pre-K 215A Blackfield Drive Tiburon, CA 94920 (415) 381-8181

K-8 70 Lomita Dr. Mill Valley, CA 94941 (415) 381-8183 Fax (415) 381-8484

"It's alarming because it's a very short amount of time per week dedicated to a subject that's considered a core subject in schools," said Dorph, who is director of the Center for Research, Evaluation and Assessment at the Lawrence Hall of Science. Understanding science helps children learn to think and solve problems while questioning the world around them, Dorph said.

There is also evidence that people who go into scientific fields generally learned to love science as children, she said. And as a practical matter, colleges require applicants to have taken science in high school. "And how are you going to understand high school science if you haven't had it before fifth grade?" Dorph asked. Her research team - reviewing responses from more than 80 Bay Area school districts as well as the teachers - made other sobering findings about elementary science instruction in Bay Area schools:

- About 16 percent of the elementary teachers said they spent no time on science at all. (Most taught at schools that had missed the reading and math benchmarks of No Child Left Behind and were trying to catch up.)
- Most kindergarten to fifth-grade students typically had science instruction no more than twice a week.
- Ten times as many teachers said they felt unprepared to teach science (41 percent) than felt unprepared to teach math (4 percent) or reading (4 percent).
- Fewer than half of Bay Area fifth-graders (47 percent) scored at grade level or above on last spring's California Standards Test in science. (Only fifth-graders are tested in science at the elementary level.)

"The demands of No Child Left Behind have made it almost impossible to devote enough time to science," said Melinda Dart, a fourth-grade teacher at Wilson Elementary School in Daly City's Jefferson Elementary District. Dart was not among the anonymous hundreds surveyed by the researchers. But she agrees with the findings.

Dart is planning a field trip to the Exploratorium in December and is preparing her students by teaching them about electricity and magnets. In one lesson, she had them rub balloons with various materials so they would see the effects of positive and negative charges. But she has had time for only three 30-minute science lessons since the semester began. "It's very rushed," she said. "In order to develop a scientific way of thinking, the thing you need most is time. And in our test-driven schools today, time for experimenting and exploring is what we have the least of."

In San Francisco, Principal Jeffrey Burgos of Bessie Carmichael Elementary agreed - but said teachers can find ways to be creative beyond the limited time already set aside for science. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that you can't get everything into one day," which is about five hours of instructional time, he said. So you shoehorn it in, sneaking science into reading and math lessons. Second-grade teacher Bernadette Ison is a master at that. Her classroom at Bessie Carmichael is filled with children who are learning English and who come from lower-income families - just the kind of challenges that policymakers say is why basic reading and math should trump science and social studies. "So we integrate science into our literacy," Ison said. "Our reading curriculum is called "Nature Walk," and we have a theme called "Animals." On Friday, the students will take a nature walk around Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. Afterward, they'll write an essay on what they saw and learned, Ison said.

This year, the California Board of Education has purchased new elementary science textbooks and materials that are just now reaching classrooms. The reviews have been mixed. Some teachers said the materials were clearer than what they replaced, though they covered less ground. Others said they were overwhelming. One teacher counted 1,199 pages in the teachers' edition science workbooks, as well as flip charts, four large boxes of materials, vocabulary and concept cards, CDs and DVDs. Perhaps it's no wonder that teachers have little time to teach it all. They barely

Preschool, Pre-K 215A Blackfield Drive Tiburon, CA 94920 (415) 381-8181

K-8 70 Lomita Dr. Mill Valley, CA 94941 (415) 381-8183 Fax (415) 381-8484

have time to learn it themselves. The other day, the textbook company came to the Jefferson Elementary District in Daly City to show teachers how to use all the new stuff, said third-grade teacher Janet Harrison. The textbook instructors stayed 90 minutes, Harrison said. And then they were gone.

Got science?

Some of a new study's findings about elementary school science instruction in Bay Area schools:

-- 80 percent of teachers say they spend less than an hour each week teaching science.

-- 16 percent of the elementary teachers say they teach no science at all.

-- Ten times as many teachers say they feel unprepared to teach science than feel unprepared to teach math or reading.

-- Fewer than half of Bay Area fifth-graders scored at grade level or above on last spring's California Standards Test in science.

To see the full report, visit www.lawrencehallofscience.org/rea/bayareastudy.

Until next time....

Preschool, Pre-K 215A Blackfield Drive Tiburon, CA 94920 (415) 381-8181

K-8 70 Lomita Dr. Mill Valley, CA 94941 (415) 381-8183 Fax (415) 381-8484