



Currents

January / February 2020



[From the Principal's Desk](#)

LEARNING and REPAIRING - TOWARDS A MORE EQUITABLE SCHOOL

Our school community has been through a lot over recent weeks, as we confront issues of race and racism, conversations that are overdue. A long-time member of this community is no longer here. Students, families, and staff were deeply impacted by the incident that led to this teacher's departure and by the school's response. We are grappling with interwoven processes of repairing and learning. It is hard to learn when one feels hurt or angry or disappointed. On the other hand, many of us need to learn more in order to understand what needs to be repaired. So we take on both learning and repairing as we turn the page and start this next chapter.

I see value in me being transparent as lead learner, while I continue the work of school leadership. I've begun reading and listening to voices that call on me to recognize my white privilege and take responsibility for the unearned advantage I've received. The personal side of my learning matters because there are many situations at school where

my decisions are the school's response. I made significant mistakes regarding matters of race and equity in recent weeks and back further. I have no excuses and don't want to defend these mistakes. I want to name them, take responsibility, and describe how I hope to do better.

I made a number of mistakes when in March 2019 a teacher used the n-word when making a point about how harmful and destructive such a word can be. One, I did not realize the impact on students when it happened. A problem of white privilege is not understanding what people of color experience. Two, I did not discuss the issue more broadly with the school community, missing the need to make clear to our students, families, and staff that any use of the n-word in class is not OK and must never happen again in our school. I also missed the need to talk directly about race and racism with our community or tackle racial ignorance, bias, and the racist context in which we live. And three, I did not realize that I myself need to learn a great deal more about issues of race and equity. Right then I needed to recognize how people of color especially might be deeply impacted by something I haven't felt or experienced because of my privilege. I made these mistakes, and I am sorry my mistakes allowed harmful behavior to continue.

When another incident involving the same hurtful racial slur used inappropriately in a teaching example happened a few weeks ago, I again made a significant mistake by not clearly communicating an important boundary had been crossed. With the teacher back in school the next couple days, it looked as if there was no response at all from the school. I should have been more aware of how that would impact the students; I should have realized how unnerving it would be to have that teacher back in class the next day without any intervention. I tried to say immediately that what had happened

was wrong and a violation of school policy and something would be done about it, but that message was muddled by my initial lack of action. A number of 9th grade students and parents made the point very clear: students should be able to go into a class and feel 100% certain every single day that they will not have one of the teachers or school staff say the n-word. It took me several days to gain that awareness, causing further harm.

Initially, I searched for a restorative path, causing delay that made matters worse for many in our community. My analytic, problem-solving brain kicked in to ask whether there was a path forward that might allow this teacher to return. Everyone can learn, everyone can grow from mistakes, everyone deserves second chances and more. I have witnessed over years this teacher's commitment to our students and their well-being. Over the course of a week, however, I came to see that such a path was not in the best interest of our school. My job is not to be reassured by intentions but to focus on the impact actions have on our students. Their learning depends on trusting relationships and a respectful racial climate. If trust and relationships are broken, yes, we want to embrace all members of our community and repair. However, an individual staff member's learning does not have to happen within the same community where the damage was done. The school's repair work requires clarity, defined boundaries, and safety felt by all students that certain things are not OK in this school.

What's the work ahead? Our faculty and staff began our learning process the Wednesday before break, which will continue on Wednesdays from now through early April. Our objectives include establishing common vocabulary related to racism, implicit bias, and equity, building background knowledge on core equity concepts, and starting or continuing internal work that each of us needs to

do to understand ourselves and take on these issues. The work is both repair and learning.

For our students, they want to know that we are actually going to follow through on the issues and concerns that have come up through this episode. Will they be able to learn about the n-word, for example, and why it has the impact it does? Can they develop understanding of the role of racism in our world, and what can be done to challenge its effects? What are the ways racism manifests in our own school community? Our students want to establish clear roles that they can have as the school moves forward. What power do they--and can they--have over the conditions of their own learning? Again, this work is both repair and learning.

For our school, we will review our policies and procedures to ensure there is clear responsibility and accountability for following up on racism, harassment, and employee conduct concerns. The Board of Trustees has clear focus on this need and will instruct me regarding any specifics that need to be put in place. Another area of work is to apply an equity lens to our curriculum, school culture, and outcomes--with a clear focus on anti-racism, in addition to considering other differences as well. Do all students of all backgrounds have an equal chance to succeed in our school? Where are there gaps? How are different students able or not able to have full access to learning and achievement? There are a number of schools in the EL Education network for us to learn from in these areas. Here is a chart that outlines our [PLAN](#): I share it with the caveat that these plans are dynamic; the chart will get filled in and may change as we progress.

I don't take for granted that I have another chance to learn and grow in order to lead this school well. As long as the job is still mine to do, I will lead our faculty in its learning and actions, I will listen to our

students as they seek meaningful participation in the life of our school, and I will follow the board's instructions to shore up school policies and procedures. And I hope to learn what I need to learn so I don't make the same mistakes again.

Announcements

- **HEAD OVER HEELS: The Musical!** Presented by the Four Rivers Drama Club

A hilarious, exuberant celebration of love, HEAD OVER HEELS follows the escapades of a royal family on an outrageous journey to save their beloved kingdom from extinction—only to discover the key to their realm's survival lies within each of their own hearts. Based loosely on the 16th century romance *The Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney, HEAD OVER HEELS updates the classic prose poem with modern understandings of gender, sexuality, and social class, all with a rocking '80s soundtrack from the Go-Go's.

Performances are Friday, March 6th at 7pm, and Saturday, March 7th at 2pm and 7pm.

Tickets are now on sale at Four Rivers, World Eye Books, and online at tinyurl.com/HOH2020. Tickets are \$12 in advance, \$15 at the door, and children under 5 are free.



Community Connections

I-SEARCH

Ninth graders are working on their first big research project and are looking for experts to interview. Contact English teacher Leonda Boateng if you wish to share your expertise with a student on any of the following topics:

- Misconceptions about mental health
- Impact of running diesel cars and truck on vegetable oil
- Elderly people in prison
- Video Games - Team e-sports
- Poaching of African Elephants (i.e. the ivory craze)
- Serial Killers - the mind of a murderer
- Evolution of Film
- Music production: the creation of electronic sounds using a synthesizer
- The lobster industry and by-catch
- Psychedelic Drugs
- Legos
- Gene Editing/Engineering
- Impact of physical activity on mental health
- History of gaming / video games
- Photography
- Living buildings
- Digital photography
- Tattoos in different cultures
- The virtual world and how individuals are connected to it
- Improved methods of Recycling and Up-cycling
- Horror movies
- The history of poison rings
- Sports injuries and the recovery process
- Natural horsemanship
- The impact of caffeine on individuals
- Sustainable/DIY fashion and frugal shopping
- Blacksmithing and Bladesmithing

- History of the ska new wave band Oingo Boingo and the history and content of their 1981 album "Only a Lad".
- How school affects teens' sleep and mental health
- Basketball - history of the game, financial aspects of basketball, and lives of retired players.
- Public defenders and the U S court system
- History of video games
- Use of service animals for mental health
- E-sports
- History of makeup and how to create it
- Chinese history and culture
- Emo history and culture
- U S Civil war time period

Classroom Highlights

7th and 8th grade

Division 1

7th HUMANITIES + SCIENCE

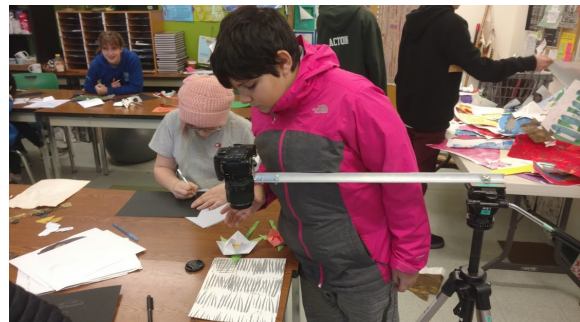
POSTCARDS FROM THE PAST

In Humanities, we polished our Ancient Human Short Historical Fiction stories to get them ready to present to parents at the **Beneski**

Natural History Museum in Amherst on Thursday, February 6th. We revised, edited, polished, peer reviewed, and used local illustrator Micha Archer's techniques to illustrate our stories. We even animated some of them!

After a semester of studying geology and weeks of researching in books, at museums and online, in Science we put the finishing touches on the stamps, images and messages of our Postcards From the Past Project.

Please keep in mind: As we start semester 2, we've noticed that students don't always have pencils in-hand as they enter class. Please check in with your child about their supply and replenish as needed. We do our best to scoop up the left-behind pencils and have them available, but we'd also be glad for the



donation of any pencils to have as classroom back-ups for frequent "forgetters".



8th SCIENCE

USING GRAVITY CARS TO EXPERIMENT WITH ENERGY

Eighth grade science is on a roll! Combining the topics of energy transfer, potential and kinetic energy plus data analysis brings 8th grade science to gravity cars. Made from common classroom materials, students work to build a vehicle that can transform gravitational potential energy (as stored in an object that has been lifted off the ground) into kinetic energy (the energy of motion.)

Some student groups are opting for a basic tower design, where a falling mass pulls a string which in turn spins the vehicle's wheels. Other groups are using



more of a lever strategy, where the falling mass rotates a lever. The other end of the lever is attached to a string which then spins the vehicle's wheels. The level of challenge is up to the students.

Data analysis comes into play as students work to determine how far their individual car will travel, depending on how much mass it's carrying. Typically, the more mass the car carries, the shorter it travels. By collecting a host of data, students are able to characterize their car's behavior and create a line graph that represents their car's behavior. Then the fun begins!

The final event is a prediction contest where the winning team is the team that can best predict how far their car goes when it carries a new, untested mass! For example, if students have tested their car carrying 200, 400 and 600 grams, they need to predict how far the car will travel carrying 300 grams. The winning team is the one that is best able to analyze the data their car has generated and use it to make predictions about the future.

While the science room takes on the smell of hot glue, students are also thinking about the question: "what does high quality work look like?" By taking a little extra time while crafting, students are encouraged to not simply make a car that works, but a quality car that will give consistent results.

9th and 10th grade

Division 2

Spanish 3 - *Eliza Beardslee*

Students in 10th grade Spanish researched a real life issue and wrote creative stories including characters, a variety of tenses and fact elements from the research.

Environmental Science - *Eliza Beardslee*

As a part of the Human Impact standard, students in 9th grade environmental science researched and then wrote creative climate injustice autobiographies. Ninth graders researched real people using newspaper articles from recent news and then used facts and evidence from this work to craft their own creatively written auto-biographies inspired by the true stories of the people living in these different places.

Below is one student's climate auto-biography written from the perspective of someone who has been affected by climate injustice:

Maia Lopez (Boston, MA) - written by Drea Retzlaff, grade 9 Environmental Science .

I am ten years old, and I have lived in the US for three years. I live with my grandparents in Allston, near Boston. It is alright, but I really miss my parents. They said they sent me over to get a good education, but I believe there is another reason. You see, on our farm in Guatemala, a drought wiped out all of our corn, beans and squash. Soon as my parents found out that this was happening all over the country they started saving to get us out. So when I was seven, my parents paid a traveler to sneak me across the border to the US. I don't remember much of the trip, I spent most of it sleeping in a box as the paid off driver snuck me to where we met up with my grandparents.

The drought was caused by irregular rainy seasons. My father told me that farmers used to be able to predict and rely on when rains would come, but that doesn't work anymore. The pattern of rainy seasons was thrown off by climate change, which we learned about in school. Three years ago, the climate crisis got worse and suddenly we had no way of knowing if or when the next rains would come. For a long time, the rain didn't come, and we were all very thirsty. The plants were thirsty too. Now (in Boston) I have water that comes from a tap, and nobody is thirsty. We learned that climate change affects the whole world, but how come Boston still has water? They never seem to run out of food here, why can't they just share with the hungry people back home? The people here don't seem to care about people like Mami and Papi, that's not fair. It's not fair that these people don't have to worry about that stuff and others do. It's not fair that the people in Guatemala are hit way harder than the people in Boston. It's not fair that everyone here has so much stuff, while some have nothing. It's not fair that the people here throw away so much and still have enough. It's not fair that Mami and Papi who have thrown away so little still don't have enough. It's not fair that I am ten years old and already know the pain of loss. It's not fair that I had to leave my country, my home, my family, just because the people here aren't worried. Nothing's fair.

11th and 12th grade

Division 3

Junior Modern World History

Juniors are wrapping up a study of the World Wars of the 20th century. They took on a monologue project where they had the choice of looking at the time period through the perspective of a Holocaust rescuer or as a soldier on the front lines. Students delivered some memorable performances. Now they are reconciling the motives and effectiveness of the Nuremberg Trials, which aimed to hold the Nazi leaders accountable after the war. They will compare and contrast these trials with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the years first long term writing assignment.

Junior English: Satire

Spring of junior year means satire! Juniors started the semester by reading and discussing *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. Our first writing project will be spoken word poetry, a modern medium for social commentary. Students will be writing and delivering original poems before spring break.

Senior Documentary

We finished the senior documentary, *Electrify Everything*, about the electrification movement in the Northeast. Students spent the last few weeks of the project in chapter groups editing portions of the movie, which was then handed off to a team of seven students for final editing. This team worked for one and a half weeks to turn our rough-cut chapters into a polished final product. Our premiere was at the Greenfield Garden Cinemas on Thursday, February 13th. The evening included a gallery walk of artifacts, followed by accompanying short features and then the film itself. Thanks for the fabulous turn-out for the premier of *Electrify Everything*.

Senior American Civics

Seniors participated in a History of Democracy Case Study on the fight for free public schools in New York state in the 1840's. While we now take for granted the fact that all students are entitled to an education, there were moments in the history of the republic where this was not the case. In this discussion, students described the historical context that gave rise to the common school movement in the early 19th century, identified and analyzed the complex

motivations behind the common school movement, and assessed the pros and cons of the NY State Free School Law of 1849.

Senior English: Creative Writing

Seniors began normal classes again after finishing their documentary film, and for English, that means a semester of creative writing. Students will read and discuss poetry and short fiction while also practicing writing their own. We'll have weekly critique circles as well. At the end of the year in May, seniors will each produce a portfolio of their best work.

Junior Math

Juniors wrapped up fall semester by going back in time and solving historical problems, such as how the ancient Greeks calculated the size of the Earth, and how to determine the distance of a far away star. Students became experts at various topics and presented their findings to the class. This semester, juniors are focusing on algebra, starting with factoring and soon, solving quadratic equations.

Senior Math

Seniors spent the end of fall semester editing their documentary chapters during math blocks. As we transition back to math content, students will be applying their understanding of derivatives to the context of motion, learning about higher order derivatives, and using calculus tools to sketch curves. We also have an upcoming trip to Greenfield Community College for their "Reality Fair", an experiential financial literacy program in which students can try out a future financial life.

Junior Chemistry

Real-world applications of molecular concepts abound this winter in Chemistry. We'll wrap up stoichiometry soon after February break, then dive into plastics

Senior Physics

The wires were live and the learning is active in Physics in February. During our study of circuits and electricity, students were trained in soldering, breadboarding, identifying components, and a variety of other skills relevant to building our own electronics. Principles such as Ohm's law and the differences between series and parallel circuits undergirded our discussions around how and why our

devices function using electricity. By the end of the month, students had planned, tested, and built their own micro-devices such as voltage detectors, lie detectors, and plant-watering alarms.

Four River Charter Public School is dedicated to educating young people for lives of learning and service. The school offers a rigorous academic program aligned with the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and an emphasis on character development for moral and social responsibility. Three central themes – nature, technology and community – pervade the teaching and learning at the school. Four Rivers works closely with parents and seeks both to serve and learn from the many resources of Franklin County.

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