



Merriam Community News

Notes from Ed

Student-led conferences begin Friday, February 10th at Merriam. I'm reminded of the wonderful experiences I had as a parent at these events. I attended 11 of them, four with my daughter Willa, who attended Merriam beginning in third grade, and seven with my younger daughter Jessa, who spent all of her elementary years at Merriam School.

One of the highlights was watching my children be active participants in their learning. When I was in elementary school, learning was a somewhat passive experience. It happened to me; I was like a sponge absorbing as much as I could. But sponges aren't very actively involved in the world around them. As my daughters led me through the conferences, they displayed a tremendous sense of ownership of their learning.

It was also neat to see the variety of ways that they showed me what they were learning. We played math games together. We took a tour of the classroom and observed tide pool creatures. We looked together at math assessments. Written pieces

were read aloud to me, and artwork was shared. All of these were wonderful vehicles for demonstrating what they were learning.

And then there was the organization. They took such pride in pulling out the agendas for the meetings, and checking off each item from the list as we got to it. They were running the show and it was a thrill to have their parents be the audience.

Were there mistakes? Of course. Did they forget some of the material that they knew when they first began to prepare for the conferences? Certainly. Was that OK? Absolutely. We encouraged them and complimented them, and asked gentle, helpful questions when it seemed appropriate. But this was their time to shine and to self-reflect. And making mistakes and having challenges in one's learning is all part of the process.

With Jessa, I was able to witness, first-hand, the developmental progression from grades K-6. It wasn't just the academic growth (which was impressive). But seeing and hearing about the teamwork

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skills and the social skills and the things that she began to take an interest in and care about over time – that was special.

Though I was sometimes pressed for time, I always wrote a note to the girls, for them to save in their portfolios. When we've had moments in recent years to peek back at the portfolios, both girls smiled (just as they did years ago) when they read the words of appreciation and acknowledgment from their parents. It was definitely worth taking those few extra minutes.

Have a wonderful time celebrating your children at the student-led conferences this year!

Respect . Persistence . Risk Taking

Guest Column: Project Based Learning

By Maryann Ayers

At the annual Merriam School presentation to the School Committee, Ed Kaufman, Maryann Ayers, and Carol Leandro celebrated our school and talked about the place of projects and classroom assistants at Merriam. Below is an excerpt about projects.

Each school in Acton has its own culture, which makes it unique. One description of Merriam from our handbook states, “The Merriam School combines the thought provoking qualities of children’s museum with the nurturing of a family, and the focused learning of a school.” From its inception, hands-on, authentic learning experiences, including various types of projects, have been a focal point of teaching and learning here.

As educators have long known, if high levels of student performance are desired, then active involvement by the learner is necessary. One only need look at Bloom’s Taxonomy to see that the lower levels of performance on the familiar pyramid are taught using passive methods. Although these methods are important and have their place, they should not be the sole methods used to deliver curriculum. When combined with more active methods, students not only gain a deeper understanding of curriculum, but also gain additional social and study skills as well.

When a teacher plans a project there are multiple layers of learning to consider. Learning curriculum is the primary aspect of all projects. Projects can be designed

to spark interest and engage students in a new unit of study. Projects may also be designed to take place during a unit or as a culminating activity. Depending on a project’s placement, teachers may use the information gained to modify teaching objectives or methods and/or to assess curriculum objectives. Projects are designed to have multiple entry points by providing opportunities for all students to showcase their individual style and strengths. Before beginning a project (except for introductory projects), students gain foundation knowledge (usually through more passive methods). Students then use higher-level skills, as they are often given the freedom to explore an area of their own interest while making use of their individual strengths. Even with projects that do not allow students complete freedom of choice, students are pushed to take what they learned and apply, synthesize, and evaluate this information. This rich experience leads to deeper learning and promotes responsibility and self-reflection.

Learning curriculum is undoubtedly important, but not the only benefit derived from engaging in projects. Although students generate individual projects, they are frequently asked to work in partnerships or small groups. Whether students work individually or with someone else, projects require students to manage a large piece of their learning. Successful cooperative group dynamics and executive functioning competence require complex skills that need to be modeled and practiced. These underlying, but critical aspects of any project, (which include social skills, communication skills, organizational skills, and time management

skills, to name just a few), increase a student’s academic achievement and increase higher level thinking skills.

What does this look like in the classroom? Here is an example of a fifth-grade engineering project called How Far Can You Fling A Marshmallow? After learning about the Engineering Design Process, partners were asked to use the process to design, build, and test a catapult that would fling a marshmallow the farthest in their class. All of the work for this project was conducted in school. Students were expected to create a technical drawing, choose materials, create a prototype, test the prototype, redesign, and test again

As students worked through the stages of this project, teachers observed how partners shared and communicated ideas, how partners organized the components of this project, and how they managed time. Conversations about design and materials, as well as the technical drawing and catapult itself, reflected the individual’s level of understanding of the curriculum. As students constructed and tested their prototype, they entered into one of the most important aspects of project work—struggle. Project based learning is learning in depth as students encounter and struggle with the central concepts of the content. It is through this struggle, that most of their learning takes place.

Project based learning teaches 21st century skills as well as content. Today’s students must be taught to think for themselves and to generate new information as they take their place as tomorrow’s leaders in training. As Abigail Adams once said, “Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.”

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PTO News and Volunteer Opportunities

PTO News

Thank you everyone for attending the Camp Fair! Now you have a chance to get a good deal on a summer camp and support the teaching assistants in your child's classroom! Back by popular demand, **online bidding for camps starts Sunday, February 5th at 5 pm and ends Friday, February 10th at 8 pm**. Please go to www.biddingforgood.com/merriamschool/camps.

The **Scholastic Book Fair** takes place the week of Student Led Conferences, and will be open Feb 10-17, 7:45 am - 4:00 pm, except Thursday when it will be open until 1:30 pm. Your children will also have a chance to visit the Book Fair during school with their class. For more information visit our homepage: <http://bookfairs.scholastic.com/homepage/merriam>. *NEW* this year, online orders can be placed Feb 7-18 at the fair homepage.

Also during the week of the Book Fair, the **Classroom Artwork** created by your children will be on display in the Merriam Lobby and Parker Damon library. The Artwork will be sold online again this year so that everyone will have an opportunity to bid on the one-of-a-kind art produced by their child's class. **Online bidding for Classroom Artwork begins Monday, February 27th and ends Sunday, March 4th.**

Cultural Enrichment

Cultural Enrichment at Merriam brings extra-curricular arts- and science-based programs that enhance and enrich our children's education. Support this worthwhile endeavor by coming to our annual fundraiser, Willow Books Literacy Night.

Come to Willow Books in Acton on Wednesday, March 7, 2012 from 6 pm to

8 pm where you and your children can hear their teacher read from one of their favorite books. Willow Books will donate 15% of all book and cafe sales from this evening's fundraiser to Merriam School Cultural Enrichment fund. Please invite friends, relatives, and neighbors to this special evening.

Merriam Auction 2012

Save the Date! Saturday, March 17th, 6 pm at the SpringHill Suites Common Center, Devens.

Visit the NEW Auction Website:

www.biddingforgood.com/merriamschool

Save the Date: Parker Damon International Night 2012, Friday, May 4, 2012.

Come, celebrate being American and learn about the diverse backgrounds that we come from. This is a fun night to enjoy with the family. There will be booths from different parts of the world to visit and each child gets a 'passport' to get stamped from these visits!

This is a potluck dinner with a dish you bring in with your family. The highlight is the show afterwards, with children from McCarthy Towne and Merriam performing for us!

For more information please contact Jayanthi Srinath (jaysrinath@yahoo.com) or Ally Li (allyli88@yahoo.com)

New to Merriam School?

Are you getting weekly PTO e-mails? To get on our e-mail list, please contact Neena Arora (neenaarora@aol.com or 978-263-8402)

Merriam PTO is on Twitter!

Sign up at www.merriampto.org!

Volunteer Opportunities

Willow Books Literacy Night on Wednesday, March 7 from 6 pm to 8 pm

Help needed with settling in children, keeping track of time for the teachers who are reading, announcing to parents and children that a reading is about to begin and ensuring that children get up quickly and quietly once a reading is done. Time commitment can be as short as 15 minutes. To volunteer, please contact Rita Gupta at rgrite@yahoo.com or 978/263-9517. Please let Rita know if you have a time preference.

Book Fair

If you would like to volunteer during your child's class visit or at any other time, please contact Sonal Mehta at sonal.mehta@gmail.com.

Can You Donate Time on the Night of the Auction?

The Merriam Auction runs smoothly with the help of dozens of parent volunteers who help set up, run, and close-out the event. If you can spare any time (even just an hour, or in 30-minute increments), it would be greatly appreciated. Don't worry, you can still enjoy the night and help at the Auction. Please contact the Event Committee: Lana Paone (lcpaone@comcast.net) and Kathy Simmons (kcsimmons333@gmail.com).

Get Ready for Another Memorable Merriam Movie!

Merriam Parent Jeanne Herring will produce this year's Auction video montage. If you have pictures of students as they are learning, exploring, laughing, and creating, please contact Jeanne to make arrangements to share your pictures or short videos. Email: jeanne@lyman.com. Only digital pictures or digital videos please.

Schedule of Upcoming Events at Merriam

- 2/5 Sunday 5:00 PM to 2/10 Friday, 10:00PM -- Online Bidding For Camps
2/7 Tuesday -- School Council Meeting 6:00 to 7:30 PM
2/10 to 2/17 -- Scholastic Book Fair
2/10 to 2/17 -- Student Led Conferences
2/20 to 2/26 -- Winter Recess. NO SCHOOL
2/27 to 3/4 -- Online Bidding for Classroom Art
3/5 to 3/9 -- Merriam School Literacy Week
3/7 Wednesday -- Willow Books Night 6:00 to 8:00 PM
3/13 Tuesday -- School Council Meeting
3/17 Saturday -- Merriam School Auction 6:00 PM
4/4 Wednesday -- Math Games Night by Merriam Faculty and Staff
4/16 to 4/20 -- Spring Break
Save the Date – May 4, Friday – Parker Damon International Night

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Merriam Community News

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The next newsletter will be published on Friday, March 2. Email articles by February 24 to Joe at jb_campo@yahoo.com.

Recipe: Boot Track Cookies

This quick, no-fuss, chewy chocolate cookie is made on your waffle iron. No need to haul out the big mixer - you can mix the batter with a small hand mixer or even by hand. Kids love these!

3 dozen cookies

Total Time: 30 minutes

Ingredients

1/2 cup salted butter

2/3 cup granulated sugar

2 large eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 cup whole wheat pastry flour

6 tablespoons cocoa powder

2 tablespoons canola oil

1/2 teaspoon espresso powder

(optional)

Confectioners' sugar, for dusting

Preparation

Preheat a nonstick (not Belgian) waffle iron.

Cream butter and sugar in a medium bowl. Beat in eggs and vanilla.

Add flour, cocoa powder, oil and espresso powder (if using). Beat until thoroughly combined.

Drop the batter by rounded teaspoonfuls about 1 inch apart onto the preheated ungreased waffle iron. (To avoid burnt fingers, use two spoons, one to scoop and one to scrape dough onto the waffle iron.) Close and cook until the cookies are puffed and cooked through, 1 to 1 1/2 minutes.

Waffle irons vary, so watch closely and don't let the cookies get too dark. Transfer to a wire rack to cool until just warm.

Dust the cookies with confectioners' sugar while still slightly warm (see Variations).

Variations: Instead of confectioners' sugar, drizzle cooled cookies with melted bittersweet and/or white chocolate. Or make a peppermint drizzle: Mix 1 cup confectioners' sugar, 4 teaspoons water and 1/4 teaspoon peppermint extract; add natural green food coloring, if desired.

Make Ahead Tip: Store in an airtight container for up to 1 day. Dust with addition confectioners' sugar just before serving.