Dear Rivendell Families,

This fall our professional focus on critical exploration and project-based learning has started to take hold. Both approaches create greater equity and motivation among our students while also increasing rigor. Students in “right answer” classrooms tend to clam up. In contrast, a question about provocative materials like, “What do you notice?” opens the door to participation, collaboration and creative thinking. Students come to see that the ideas generated build upon one another in a way that deepens everyone’s understanding. In a similar way, carefully designed projects engage students with complex problems embedded in real experiences. Both approaches engage students in learning from one another and our larger community in a non-competitive atmosphere.

Project work and community participation this fall—Advisory Open House

We had a great night in October for families to get together for dinner and participate in advisory. We watched the student and staff videos related to our summer reading. It was great to see the students’ work. Families didn’t get to see the fun (and struggles) that students had in working together to create the videos within a tight time-line.

Encounters

Our 9th grade humanities students began the year with a new approach to exploring the English colonization of New England. Students spent several days puzzling through detailed readings of primary source documents about the Pilgrims’ departure from Plymouth, England and their landing on Cape Cod, as well as descriptions of their settlement in Plymouth, MA. Students then spent a day at Plimouth Plantation and a cold, wet, windy hour on the Mayflower.
The students’ detailed knowledge, from the vantage point of the documents they explored, created a powerful experience when they arrived at Plimouth. Students constructed boxes, which explored the larger theme of Encounters, a theme also reflected in diverse materials in English class. The boxes were displayed at an evening exhibition, where students did a great job discussing their work.

**The Silk Road**

If you were lucky enough to attend the 7/8th grade Silk Road exhibition, you would have met a friendly camel, traded goods at various markets, tasted camel’s milk, eaten sweet Indian pudding, and met a variety of challenges that might have cost you gold or valuable water or food. The Silk Road project was cleverly designed as a “choose your own adventure” simulation that fully engaged “travelers” in an experience on the Silk Road. Like the 9th grade project, students struggled with complex texts, and maps together. Just as the 9th graders’ readings enriched their experience at Plimouth, the 7/8th grade projects were influenced by students’ critical explorations of challenging materials in class.

**Robots**

In 9th grade physical science the students were involved in a mini-robotics competition. Design teams built and programmed computers to independently maneuver through a covered maze. Students could watch their robots wind though the maze (or crash) from smart phone cameras attached to the front of each robot. The final challenge for the design teams was to create a lesson plan and a programming task for 4th graders from Sammuel Morey and Westshire. The general consensus by the 9th graders was that the 4th grade students were quick learners.

**Our direction**

Again, we believe that carefully designed projects provide each student with personally relevant entry points to work that requires rigorous thinking. As teachers, the work challenges us to shift how we think about learning and knowledge, structure instruction, and assess students’ performance.
This is not easy work, but we are not entirely on our own. This year’s Rowland Foundation Fellowship supported the development of materials used in the humanities projects. We also have a budding relationship with High Tech High, a group of schools recognized internationally for achieving a high degree of innovation and equity though projects. This week Kirsten Surprenant, Doc Browne, and Story Graves have completed another Rowland Fellowship application designed to help us further develop our partnership with High Tech High. http://www.hightechhigh.org

First trimester student performance

Our students’ performance this first Trimester showed a drop in the percentage of total classes failed, from 9.28% to 8.44%. This 8% threshold has been very hard to break. A significant change was the percentage of students failing one or more classes, 19.29%.

For the past five years at least 21% of our students have failed at least one class. This number was as high as 22.86% in the first trimester of 2012.

Trimester 1 Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Failing Grades</th>
<th>11/12 T1</th>
<th>12/13 T1</th>
<th>13/14 T1</th>
<th>14/15 T1</th>
<th>15/16 T1</th>
<th>16/17/ T1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Enrolled Classes</td>
<td>1120</td>
<td>1090</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>1045</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>1043</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Classes failed</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% classes failed out of possible classes</td>
<td>7.59%</td>
<td>8.26%</td>
<td>8.57%</td>
<td>8.13%</td>
<td>9.28%</td>
<td>8.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students enrolled</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students failing 1 or more classes</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students failing 1 or more classes</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
<td>21.62%</td>
<td>22.86%</td>
<td>20.57%</td>
<td>22.68%</td>
<td>19.29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Honor Roll</th>
<th>11/12 T1</th>
<th>12/13 T1</th>
<th>13/14 T1</th>
<th>14/15 T1</th>
<th>15/16 T1</th>
<th>06/17/ T1</th>
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<tr>
<td>High Honors</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students on Honor Roll</td>
<td>44.64%</td>
<td>41.89%</td>
<td>39.52%</td>
<td>44.50%</td>
<td>46.39%</td>
<td>45.69%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The democratic process of school governance

As principal of Rivendell Academy and Head of Schools, school board meetings are an important venue for me to hear from community members.

Our school board meetings take place on the first Tuesday of the month at 6:30 PM. The meetings rotate between the district office conference room in the West Wing (lower building) and Westshire Elementary School. December and January include special budget meetings in preparation of the Annual Report and presentation of the budget at the town meeting.

The development of our schools requires increased community participation. These meetings provide community members an opportunity to address concerns to the board, hear reports from each principal, and the superintendent. There are usually one or more special presentations to the board by students or community members.

Upcoming dates:
Board meeting 1/3 Westshire
Budget meetings 1/10 Academy, 1/17 Westshire

Sincerely,
Keri Gelerian
The ninth grade class has been exploring what it was like for the Pilgrims to encounter a new culture, new foods, and a new environment. Instead of reading from a history book or having their teachers lecture on the topic, students dove into a firsthand account written by a member of the original settlement. Each day, a new piece of information was added to the discussion—a document, an image, or a video. Each layer answered some questions but also raised new ones. With these material to guide them, the class pieced together a picture of what it was like to be there—well, almost. Students were left with a number of unanswered questions. Did Ms. Surprenant or Ms. Robison jump in and give spoilers? No! Instead, they arranged a field trip to the Plimoth Plantation where students were able explore the site to answer their own questions.

Rachel Sanders and Laszlo Bardos have been working with staff to encourage more of this style of teaching and learning at Rivendell: one where students explore rich materials to develop their own deep understanding of a topic. The teacher’s role is to make student thinking visible so that everyone benefits from nascent ideas. Students are given the time they need to collaboratively answer questions that they, not the teachers, formulate. It turns traditional teaching on its head by trusting students to wrestle with complex materials to uncover their own meaning.

This work is funded by a grant that Bardos and Sanders received from the Rowland Foundation. In the fall eight teachers from grades one through twelve and two principals attended a workshop exploring this approach. These teachers stepped into leadership roles to share their
Seniors!

VSAC Scholarship Books have arrived!

Seniors received scholarship books during advisory in the beginning of December. For an electronic link, visit Guidance Web site under Financial Aid/Scholarships. Opportunities for NH residents are included too. Early bird deadline 2/3/2017.

Governor’s Institutes
Winter Weekends
VT or NH residents—Grades 9-12
Weekend I: Feb. 10th—12th
Programs: Architecture Invention, Animals & Law, Bioinformatics, Social Entrepreneurship, Vocal Performance Masterclass

Weekend II: Feb. 24th—26th
Programs: Youth Leadership, Intermediate Robotics, Advanced Painting & Drawing, Actors’ Audition Masterclass, Astrophotography
Apply now at www.giv.org.

Rivendell graduates returned to speak with current students (grades 7—12) and staff about their experiences. Thank you!!

Maija Bradley—University of Vermont
Cameron Day—Franklin Pierce University
Jennifer DeBois—University of New England
Heather Dexter—Johnson State College
Shania Garrow—Lyndon State College
Tali Gelenian—University of Vermont
Carly Ghio—Lyndon State College
Emily Ghio—Vermont Technical College
Sam Kamel—Coastal Carolina University
Kimberlie Sobeck—Drew University
Marie Sobeck—Drew University

For more information visit Guidance on the RA Web site at http://www.rivendellschool.org/schools/rivendell-academy/guidance
I’m very excited to be the new school counselor at Rivendell Academy for the seventh and eighth grades. I have numerous ideas on how to be supportive and continue to build the already nurturing environment established at Rivendell Academy. One way I am looking to be successful at building a supportive counseling program is to look to both students and parents for ideas on how to be helpful. I welcome and encourage both parents and students to reach out to me. I find it very helpful to hear feedback, ideas and suggestions from parents.

While I have already had the opportunity to meet with many students individually, I look forward to building relationships with all of the students in seventh and eighth grade. I encourage all students to visit my office as a safe place to take a break, relax, or simply pop-in and celebrate exciting moments in their lives.

I look forward to getting to know each of you as the year progresses. Again, I encourage each of you to reach out with any feedback or questions regarding the school counseling program here at Rivendell Academy.

Holidays STRESSing you out?! 

STRESSquicktip

Try taking a break and blowing bubbles! It sounds silly and fun...and it is! It’s also a great way to slow down breathing. Taking time to focus on deep breathing is a quick way to send the message to our brains that things are O.K. which in turn helps calm our bodies down during times of stress.