Dear Rivendell Families and Staff,

We are embarking on an exciting year. Our seniors are a small but powerful group, and we look forward to working with them this year.

Welcome Warren, Piermont, and Waits River families-- five Warren students and five Piermont students and one Waits River student will join our 9th grade class. Also, we are excited to meet our new 7th grade students and families! In total, we have twenty-two new students who have joined us.

I hope you read the entire letter, but feel free to read only what interests you. Section 1 introduces new staff. Section 2 describes the four educational initiatives that will continue to drive our work in the district. Section 3 presents small structural changes for the school year at the Academy.

**Section 1: New Staff**

Paige Radney is taking over for Mary Rizos in Spanish. Paige recently graduated with an MA degree from the University of Vermont. She has a BA in Spanish with a minor in international development, also from UVM. Paige completed her student teaching at Mt. Abraham Union High School. She comes highly recommended from her mentor teacher and university professors.

Doug Pilcher is rejoining us this year. He will be working with our middle school team teaching 7/8 social studies. In 2014-15, Doug served as a student teacher under the mentorship of Ms. Surprenant. Last year Doug taught 7th and 8th grade social studies at Warren. Since 2003, he worked as a program director for the Aloha Foundation. We are thrilled that Doug has returned to RA.

This summer Kate Paxton from the Upper Valley Educators Institute started working at the Academy as a principal intern. She has a doctorate from the Arizona State University in the areas of qualitative research and philosophy. She has been a teacher and worked in a variety of other administrative positions. Kate will be with us for the year on a part-time basis.

Rachel McConnell will be teaching several math courses as a replacement for Mr. Bardos who will spend a portion of his time next year doing work related to his Rowland Fellowship. She will also be teaching some 7th and 8th grade Title I support math classes. Rachel is another returning teacher. Last fall she worked as Doc Brown’s student teacher. Rachel has her BA in physics from Dartmouth and a teaching credential through UVEI. At last year’s robotics competition she demanded that she teach at the Academy. We are very pleased that we could make that happen!

We are currently interviewing for a new 7/8 counselor to replace Ms. McLaren who left this summer to take a position much closer to home.
Dr. Sarah D. Stearns will be working in the district as a school psychologist. She earned her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of Kentucky College of Arts and Sciences and completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Kosair Children’s Hospital/Bingham Child Guidance Center in Louisville, KY. Dr. Stearns has been in practice since 2000, first at La Rabida Children’s Hospital in Chicago, and then at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Psychiatric Associates in Lebanon, NH. Dr. Stearns is skilled at treating disruptive behavior disorders such as ADHD and ODD, and can provide parent behavior management and anger management training in individual, dyadic, or group formats.

Ms. Rizos, although not teaching Spanish, will be working with the district part-time to develop grants and promote the district. She will also be working with the Vermont Folk-Life Council, which could provide us with some great ideas and resources. These connections are important. http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org

Section 2: Our Work to Support Deep Learning
In last year’s spring newsletter I outlined four areas that will focus our professional work. We are committed to the development of deep, courageous thinkers who have confidence in themselves and know how to operate successfully in our complex world. These four areas work toward those ends.

Under each area I have bulleted information related to our planning in each area.

1) Build on and improve our advisory program including morning meeting
   The central purpose of Advisory at RA is to support students in exploring their personal goals and direction in school and in life. It’s a place to build interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. It’s about Rivendell’s three big goals: Character, Community, and Scholarship (See attached advisory mission statement).
   • I sent a letter in July in response to student petitioners who were concerned about the changes of some advisors.
   • We will be working on making small improvements to our advisory curriculum.
   • We are exploring partners and grant funding to provide more support for deepening our advisory work.
   • We re-established our Student Advisory Council.
   • The summer reading work is largely organized through advisories.
   • Jen Ellis will have time in her day to lead advisory improvements and work with the Student Advisory Council.

2) Deepen our expertise using Critical Exploration as an approach to learning www.criticalexplorers.org
Critical Exploration is an approach to learning that supports students in developing deep insights into their own thinking about concepts and ideas that are central to the subjects we teach. The process of Critical Exploration is inclusive to all learners—*all ideas count*. Judgments good or bad are left out of the conversation. We expect that ideas will change and develop, as some ideas become fodder for new ideas. The materials are rich, provocative, and complex. Teachers focus on understanding students’ ideas and push for the development of those ideas in unorthodox ways: not evaluating the ideas or leading students to an idea the teacher has in mind, giving students time to wrestle with their confusion instead of giving them the answer, and most importantly, devising on the spot questions that allow the student to think deeper by probing their thinking. This simultaneously gives the teacher more insight into the student’s thinking. Critical Exploration is based on the truth that teaching toward one set of pre-proscribed set of ideas severely limits the contribution of ideas and thoughts of students in a classroom, *especially those ideas that go well beyond the “right answer given by fast thinking students.”*

- This year Rivendell principals and ten district teachers will attend three days of work with the Critical Explorers staff at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Rachel Sanders and Laszlo Bardos will begin working with teachers at Watertown, MA Middle School and the Critical Explorers staff. We hope other teachers can go to Watertown to work with their staff. Rachel and Laszlo will also begin working with teachers to develop high quality materials for Rivendell classrooms. The Rowland Foundation is supporting this work.
- The District’s Committee on Learning will continue to support district professional development focused on Critical Exploration.
- I am in the process of writing a chapter in a book on Critical Exploration. The chapter presents some new insights into the work.
- We need to decide when and how to be more explicit with students about Critical Exploration, so they develop a deeper awareness of their own learning process.
- We hope to have the Critical Explorers staff come to Rivendell to help support professional development.

**3) Develop projects leading to public exhibitions**

[http://www.hightechhigh.org](http://www.hightechhigh.org)

Project-based learning was a founding principal of our district. All classes at the Academy utilize project work as part of the curriculum. The scope of projects varies. When Eric Reichert teaches Writer’s Café, the project culminates in a book of meticulously revised student writing. Students this summer produced five videos of interviews with people with visible and invisible differences. Doc Brown’s flashlight project has been a staple of a unit in 9th grade physical science.
There are many important purposes for project work:

1) Projects ask students to put knowledge and skills to work in complex ways.
2) Most people remember and value school activates that required them to make something, perform, or be active in the community.
3) People learn from working together and learning to work productively with others is a valuable skill.
4) Projects offer people opportunities to assume different roles.
5) Audience is important. The reaction of an audience, good or bad, has more meaning than a grade.
6) Projects ask teachers to assume different roles and relationships with students—one more like mentors and coaches.

- Last spring Kirsten Surprenant and Story Graves spent two days in San Diego at High Tech High.
- My friend, Rob Riroden, is the co-founder of the school. He will be coming to Rivendell on September 2nd to work with all district staff. We will watch and discuss an award-winning documentary about High Tech High, *Most Likely to Achieve.*
  [http://www.mltsfilm.org](http://www.mltsfilm.org)
  **September 2nd is a day off for students, but we want to include students. I will be asking different teachers to provide extra-credit incentives or community service hours for students who attend and participate in the day’s work.**
- We will be looking for funding to further our relationship with High Tech High.
- Summer Academy students completed five video interview projects. These will be used as part of our summer reading curriculum in the fall for a real audience.
- Kirsten Surprenant and Story Graves are designing a project for advisories to complete this fall. The projects will culminate in an evening *Video Café* at the Academy on October 6th from 6:00-7:30 PM. We expect parents and community members to attend this event (All staff are also completing the same project.)
- 9th grade humanities students will work on a project leading to an exhibition first Trimester. The 7th and 8th graders will also work on project leading to an exhibition the first trimester. Project work will rotate to other teacher partners 2nd and 3rd trimester.

4) **Develop our curriculum documents**

   For over a year the Academy staff has worked to develop a unique curriculum framework. The purpose of the framework is to give all teachers a common structure in which to create public documents that outline every Academy course.
We have worked on this slowly and the process has been difficult. We want our written curriculum to truly reflect our philosophy and educational values. The complexity of our work is testimony to the quality and dedication of our teachers.

- We believe that Rachel Sanders has solved a nagging problem related to accreditation requirements that demand that we have rubrics to evaluate our “learning expectations.” Our curriculum committee will finalize these changes.
- We will devote professional development time to writing our curriculum documents.
- Gordon Christi-Maples has articulated the Academy curriculum work to the elementary teachers. We will add another 5/6th grade teacher to our committee to build continuity between 5th/ 6th and the middle school.

**The Rationale for this work**

These four professional areas put student learning in the center of what we do. **Advisory** is an about personal relationships, *with specific purposes in mind*--becoming reflective learners able to develop a strong community and individual character. **Critical Exploration** puts students’ ideas at the center of the learning process. **Projects and public exhibitions** unify understanding and action with the purpose of having an impact in the world. **Curriculum** that rests on a framework of truth, choice, systems and change supports complex thinking, relevance, and impact. No amount of testing, standards, textbooks, or lectures compare to the virtues these ideas and practices can bring forth in our students.

**How are Advisory, Critical Exploration and Projects and Exhibitions Connected?**

There are several ways to answer this question. One way is to identify common educational values common to each area. Each of these areas of our learning culture places a high value on:

- Rich and engaging materials
- Complexity
- Personal effort based on skills that go far beyond traditional “academic” skills
- Academic skills learned in more authentic and personal ways
- Teachers as highly skilled mentors and coaches rather than “authorities” dispensing knowledge
- The multiplicity of good ideas rather than “one” right answer
- Collaboration and learning from peers and adults in the community
- Performances that reflect “real life” skills
- Autonomy and choice
- Respect for others’ skills and ideas
- Different roles and individual skills and abilities
- Revision and practice
- Low-pressure learning situations
- Creativity and imagination
- Fun
- Truth, choice, systems and change as an organizing principle for learning in all areas

We believe these common values can build an even more powerful and inclusive learning environment at Rivendell Academy and in the district.

**Outcomes**
Do these initiatives work in the larger educational environment that still focuses on test scores and right answers? Our SBAC and science NECAP test scores have ranked us as one of the top Vermont schools for the past 3 years. We do well despite the fact that we do not pander to the standards or the tests.

On August 24th I received our ACT scores. Last year, Academy students beat state averages in every area - college English comp (100%/86%), college algebra (100%/70), college social studies (100%/69%), and college bio. (80%/49%). The combined score ranking proficiency in all areas placed us at 80% compared to the state average of 49%. Unlike the SAT, the ACT tends to be taken by only the most serious students. Thus, these scores indicate that Rivendell’s best do better than the best in the rest of the state.

Overall, 83% of our students last year passed all their classes.

**Section 3: Small Structural Improvements at the Academy**

**Study time**
We responded to students’ suggestion to provide one longer block of study time, two days a week. Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays remain the same as last year. The column on the right in the chart below shows the new schedule for Wednesdays and Fridays.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday and Tuesday (no change)</th>
<th>Wednesday and Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:59-12:20 Lunch</td>
<td>11:50-12:42 Flex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:20-12:42 Study (with advisor)</td>
<td>students must first check in with advisor for attendance before leaving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The “Office”**
We have decided to implement mandatory academic support based on high school students’ Tri 3 grades last year. Responding to another student suggestion, we have created “offices” for these students, complete with their own desks and cubicles. Mr. Galli and Ms. Hall are creating the offices in the room at the top of the stairs in the East Wing and the Workshop room in the West Wing. Students will be required to be in the offices during Study and Flex times. They cannot leave. We will have
teachers in these rooms to assist students. When students are above a 69% in all their classes they can challenge out of mandatory academic support.

Ms. Hall and Mr. Galli will be meeting with every mandatory academic support student each week to check up on their progress and develop strategies for success. Additionally, Ms. Hall is investigating a computer-based program that will help keep students organized.

**Better Data and Analysis**
Mr. Galli, Ms. Oakes, and Mr. Ackerman are creating a data base for us to track the factors associated with students who fail classes at Rivendell. In the past we identified 3 factors: 1) missing assignments, 2) not taking advantage of opportunities for extra credit or test retakes, and 3) refusing help when it was available and offered. We firmly believe that the reasons for failure often are not related to students’ abilities, but a sense of futility that their effort will make a difference. Our goal is to try to address the sense of futility with more consisted support, strategies, and clearer structure.

**New Handbook**
Mr. Galli has rewritten the student handbook and Ms. Gray has reformatted the document. We will eventually combine our handbook with our program of studies in e-book format. We will also print a small number of hard copies to help support recruitment efforts.

**Yearbook**
Ms. Gray is heading up the yearbook, and we are using a new format that will give us greater flexibility in our layout and allow greater flexibility in ordering. The company that we are using is Picaboo in Hanover. Our yearbook chief last year, Megan Landgraf, worked at Picaboo and they might be willing to hire someone from Rivendell again this year. We need 2-5 dedicated students to begin work immediately. This could be a great Upper house project. [http://yearbooks.picaboo.com](http://yearbooks.picaboo.com)

**Back to School BBQ**
We have not set a date for a back to school BBQ. We will make this decision as a staff when everyone returns.

**Bus to Hartford Tech**
We have made arrangements with Hartford and Thetford to run a bus to Hartford Tech. in the afternoon program. In the past students had to provide their own transportation.

**Title I Support in 7/8 Math**
Rachel McConnell will provide Title I support to students in math in 7th and 8th grade. The first trimester the support will be in the classroom and during flex time
on Wednesday and Friday. Second trimester will schedule students in an extra support class. Every day.

**After School Programing**

We no longer have an after school Visions program. Students interested in afterschool opportunities should consider sports (including the fencing club) and robotics.

We will be asking for parent support to create an after school art program (Rivendell Arts Alive) and to organize a winter fundraiser to support the program. We have an initial $5,000 donation to begin the work. Our limited resources and faculty will require family leadership for this project. It has enormous potential for our students and school/ community partnerships.