August 3, 2018

Dear Rivendell Academy Families and Staff,

It is important that we take the time for a remembrance of Jack Isenberg, a remembrance not of our sadness, but of Jack’s approach to living. Jack was an energetic and creative young person. He always had something to say, and he never failed to say it with gusto. He could be outlandish, thoughtful, and sensitive—all at once. We should all aspire to exhibit Jack’s energy and fun-loving attitude toward life. Jack would want us to have fun, engage one another, be kind, and helpful. Let’s give ourselves the best that Jack Isenberg gave to all of us.

Learning
With the help of Rowland Fellowship funding, the Byrne Foundation and the staff at High Tech High and Critical Explorers, all teachers in RISD have had consistent and high quality professional development opportunities over the last three years. We have invested time and resources in developing forms of instruction that emphasize deep, creative engagement with materials and ideas. Students’ ideas now tend to multiply in our classrooms as their observations, questions and ideas build and expand rather than dwindle to a single “answer.” Students display more comfort with ambiguity, shown by their perseverance and curiosity with purposefully complex instructional materials and projects. Teachers are more likely to probe students with legitimate questions about their thinking rather than questions that “guide” them to the answer in the teacher’s head.

The most compelling development for us involves the relationship between Critical Exploration and project-based learning, specifically, astronaut projects—projects defined by a lofty challenge, high authenticity, student choice, interdisciplinary learning, community connections, and a public presentation.

Community
We strive to develop curriculum and instruction that foster real-world connection beyond the classroom. In this way, the school benefits by being much more than an institution for educating the community's youth; it also becomes a center of learning, wonder, entertainment, and excitement for community members who engage with us. For example, the Quebec bike trip grew out of a Global Studies course. We received over $10,000 in community financing for the trip. The people our students and teachers met along their expedition were amazed that a school would create such a powerful learning experience for students. Both the Journal Opinion and Valley News (https://www.vnews.com/Rivendell-Academy-bicycle-trip-14878142) wrote stories about the trip. We are proud of the ambitious adventure of our students and teachers.

Students’ Work
Assessing the quality of students’ work and allowing the public to examine their work are our primary forms of assessing our success. Our students’ work has progressively improved in its overall quality, and the quality has become more uniform across all students. When you enter the Academy you see beautifully designed info-maps depicting the impact of bicycles in different countries created by Global Studies students. There are unusual plaster masks organized in genealogy trees looking down at you. Middle School students created these as part of a Genetics unit. The genealogies demonstrate students’ understanding of dominant and recessive traits across generations. If you turn down the hall, work by 10th grade Biology students beautifully conveys the impact of genetics and cell division on the structure of protein molecules associated with genetic diseases.

Fairlee, Vershire, West Fairlee, VT and Orford, NH
Although the 9th grade monuments are no longer on display, I went to every 9th grader during the exhibition of their monument projects and asked them to explain the thinking behind their monuments. I met with students who looked me in the eye and spoke with confidence and pride about their work. Both 9th grade sections also published a book of personal writing that showed students’ creativity and skill as fiction writers and cartoonists, and artists. The food and drinks prepared as part of the 7th and 8th grade Africa exhibition were delicious and their brochures all displayed qualities of well-designed print material. The Summer Academy students recently created a display of art and poetry. The art catches your eye. The poetry makes you think.

We will be holding more frequent exhibitions. We invite everyone to participate in these events and engage with students about their work. The exhibitions are designed not only to show what our students think and do, but they also are designed to make you think and learn.

Transitions
The last two years in the district have been marked by transitions. Mike Harris’ role as our transitional Superintendent ended July 2017 and Elaine Arbour moved into the position with new ideas for structures, policies and procedures. Michael Foxall’s tenure as a two-year interim Principal at Samuel Morey ended this July. Julie Donahue has taken over as Elementary Principal with Tammy MacQueen as Assistant Principal. There have been some small shifts in teaching assignments in the Elementary Schools. Relative to the last 3 years, we have an influx of talented, new staff.

At the Academy
We have three new teachers, a new Middle School Counselor and a new Title I Literacy Teacher. Two teaching assignments have also shifted. Eight years ago, Michael Galli left an Elementary Principal position to serve as RA’s Dean of Students. Michael has moved back into an Elementary Principal position, taking over as Principal at Warren Town School. At my urging, the staff developed several changes to our schedule that offer some exciting possibilities. Our advisory will also undergo some small changes.

➤ New Staff

Emily Cousens is taking over as our new Middle School Counselor. Emily recently finished her MA in Counseling after earning her BA in English and Creative Writing from New York University. Emily completed her internships at Kearsarge Elementary, Indian River High School and Mascoma High School. She served at the girls’ Track Coach at Sunapee High School and Assistant Coach at Hopkinton High School. With the support of the board, her position is now full-time. Besides working with our 7th and 8th graders, she will spend two half-days with Counselor Ann O’Hearn working with the 5th and 6th graders at Samuel Morey.

Paul Ronci is our new High School English Teacher. Paul has a MA in Education from Plymouth State and a BA in Family Studies from the University of New Hampshire. He first taught High School English and Social Studies in an alternative program at Newfound Memorial High School before moving to the Middle School in 2008. He will be teaming with Kirsten Surprentant in 9th grade Humanities/English as well as teaching upper-house English electives with a focus on Journalism and Media. Paul is also a musician, playing guitar in a local band.

Allison Lary will be teaming with Jennifer Bottum as our new Humanities/Social Studies Teacher. Ally has a BA in History from the University of New Hampshire and an MA in Public History from Southern New Hampshire University. Recently she has been working as Special Education Paraprofessional at Indian River Middle School. She has previously taught Middle School History in Tennessee and Florida and coached track. Before teaching she worked as a Museum Educator in Tacoma, WA.

Christian Peterson is a new 7/8 Special Education Teacher. Christian has a BA in Justice Studies from Roger Williams University and MA degree in Human Resource Management from University of Phoenix and an MA in Special Education from Plymouth State. Christian has worked as a Special Education Teacher and Elementary Teacher at Piermont Village School since 2014.
Carolyn (“Carrie”) Lang will be the Academy’s first full-time Title I literacy Specialist. Carrie has degrees in Communication Sciences and Disorders and Education of the Deaf from the University of New Hampshire and Smith College. She also has a degree in Remedial Reading and Writing from Southern Connecticut University. Carrie has taught teachers at the university level, while also serving as a Teacher of the Deaf in Trumbull, CT and New Haven, CT.

Laszlo Bardos will move from full-time math teacher to become our Digital Culture Leader and Calculus Teacher. With the help of a $10,000 grant from VSAC, Laszlo has created a wonderful maker space in the room at the top of the stairs. Besides a new 3-D printer, the room has workbenches, hand tools, sewing machines, and power tools. Laszlo is currently looking for grant money to buy a laser cutter.

Rachel McConnell will move into full-time Math position after student teaching with Doc Browne three years ago and filling in as a Math and Science Teacher over the last two years. Rachel has taught Chemistry and a variety of Math courses.

As I write this letter, we have not yet filled the Dean of Students position, but plans for interviews are underway. We expect to have someone in place in early August.

➢ **Schedule modifications**
The staff and I worked very hard to make small changes. We set out to design a schedule that would better support:

- Collaboratively designed, rigorous, interdisciplinary projects
- Common planning time and an expectation of collaboration
- Better utilization of staff expertise to create high quality, rigorous projects that integrate skills and content and well sequenced Critical Exploration materials and practices
- Grade level teams that support one another in coaching students on the skills of life and develop the culture of the school
- Time to offer flexible support tailored to the changing needs of students

➢ **Teaming**
With these goals in mind we came up with a schedule that gave teachers flexibility in teaming in a particular course on a trimester-by-trimester basis. For example Kirsten Surprenant will co-teach with Paul Ronci trimester one. This will allow them to work together to develop an integrated project in 9th grade Humanities as well as provide students with extra support, particularly in writing.

➢ **Support blocks**
The schedule has two 26-minute blocks of time for teachers to provide more targeted support for students with particular needs. For example, if some non-special education students need targeted support in reading, there will be time in the school day for Carrie Lang to provide the support. Some students might simply need support in organizing and planning and getting a jump-start on homework. For one or two trimesters, juniors or seniors might take a SAT prep course. Students have these support blocks four days a week. All students will be required to focus on academics during this time.

➢ **Clubs**
Once every two weeks students will have a “clubs” block. We have been squeezing club time into lunch and other study blocks for years. A designated time gives all our students access to a variety of clubs at the Academy. Some of current clubs include Leo’s Club, Queer Straight Alliance, Robotics, Makers Club, Student Advisory Committee, Chorus/ Theatre, Environmental Club, Outdoor Club, Travel Groups, Fencing, and National Honors Society. Teachers not currently affiliated with a club can co-advisor or students can also approach them to start a new club.
Grade Level Teams
These teams will serve as an ongoing educational support team for students at each grade. One priority will be to make sure that students are getting the services they need to be successful in school, in particular that they are moved in or out of the correct support block. If the team sees that a student in a math intervention block has improved his or her math skills, they would move the student to a homework group. If we notice a change in a student’s behavior, we can make a call home and notify a counselor to check in with the student. In the past, these types of discussions only happened once a week at the middle and high school level. They will now happen 4-days a week for 26 minutes. Expect more communication from teachers.

Advisory
Advisors will continue to meet with their advisory group for the first 15 minutes of every day. In order to accommodate clubs and our support blocks, students will meet for a 30 minute advisory block once a week rather than two. Each advisor will be responsible for preparing students to use their digital portfolios to lead three-way conferences twice a year. The conferences are a time for students to present examples of their work, community, service and extracurricular experiences that demonstrate areas of strength and areas for growth. It will be a time where students can review their personal learning plans with their advisors and family members. In addition students and advisors in 8th, 10th and 12th grade will hold a round table each spring. This is a student led presentation by the student on his or her personal development and goals. In 9th grade advisories, students will be expected to at least plan a Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) experience with the expectation that they complete a CYOA experience by 10th grade prior to round tables. Of course all students can have completed a CYOA at any time.

We have set a challenging agenda for ourselves—teacher collaboration and integration of content across disciplines, the creation of original and rigorous projects that engage students and community members through student-led exhibitions and provocative displays of students’ work in the school and the community, more targeted academic support for students, greater communication with families, expanding the three-way conferences and round tables, engaging all students in clubs, and creating grade level teams that have time to discuss students’ needs.

These changes build on what we feel has worked to engage students in meaningful learning and personal growth. More importantly, we have an extremely skilled and committed core of returning teachers, new staff with exceptional recommendations and credentials, and new resources with the Title I Literacy position, a new Middle School Special Education position, and an excellent maker’s space to improve the skills and products of our students. This will be an exciting year. We hope you can join us often for exhibitions, sports, theatre, music and more.

Best,

Keri Gelenian
Head of Schools / RA Principal