EQUITY

Over the last nine years we have made a steady progression of small changes aimed at improving student engagement, emphasizing certain aspects of learning over others. For example, our focus on using puzzling materials and activities to engage students in discussing “what you notice” before progressing to high levels of interpretation fosters engagement and creativity rather than a “right answer” mentality about learning. What one person notices might also spark new ideas and insight to other students. We emphasize careful observation, collaboration, and real problem solving over teacher telling and quizzing in order to create greater opportunities for participation and more complex learning. Our schedule, the focus on rigorous projects, the new Academic Mentoring Program, inclusion of special education teachers as advisors, greater teacher collaboration, rewiring our learning expectations, our community agreement, and the design of our professional development for teachers all aim at increasing engagement and learning among all our students. Aligning the connections between these changes and equity brings greater clarity and purpose to our work.

Equity and My Teaching Experience

From 1985-1987 I taught in a four-room, cinderblock school in Kenya. There were 40-50 students in a class. Teaching materials were scarce as were schools and qualified teachers to work in them. Elementary education was free, but the cost of uniforms, shoes, and supplies put education out of reach for many kids. High schools charged fees, which ended the education of about half of the 8th grade in the country. Students of the elite attended expensive, high-quality schools. At the end of secondary school, the results of the Kenya Certificate Exam determined who could continue their education, university or technical school. A scant number advanced.

I left Nyaka in December of 1987. In September of 1988 I walked into William Howard Taft High School, 172th street, Bronx, NYC. It was a four-story building with an enrollment of about 3000 low income students from the surrounding neighborhood. Despite the tremendous wealth of New York City compared to the entire country of Kenya, I cannot say that the kids at Taft were educated under better conditions than my students in Kenya. In fact, the teaching challenges were much greater at Taft. The dropout rate was well over 50%. There was no exit exam determining who could continue their education, but only 1 to 2 students advanced to college. The NYC Board of Education closed Taft High School in 2008.

Educational inequity was easier to understand in Kenya than in the Bronx. Kenya was a poor country. I expected scarcity in Kenya. At Taft any school in the US in 1988, I was not expecting to find 1940 vintage iron desks with ink wells in nearly every classroom or pigeons entering my classroom every evening through broken windows to roost in my classroom light fixtures. When Taft was built the neighborhood of the Grand Concourse in the Bronx had been quite wealthy. When the neighborhood began to change to Puerto Rican, African American and Dominican, funding and enrollment dwindled, leaving Taft once world class school, in worse shape than my school in Kenya. In 1988 the inequity between Taft and another school in the Bronx, the Bronx School of Science, was enormous — just as large as between the elite schools of Kenya and my village school. The Bronx School of Science was an exam school, only the best and the brightest, as determined by tests, could attend. There were no pigeons roosting in the Bronx School of Science, and no antiquated desks or equipment.
My experiences in these schools encapsulate equity issues imbedded in larger social, economic and political systems. Change would require actions beyond what any individual could accomplish. Yet, I chose to teach in Kenya and the South Bronx as did the people with whom I worked. There were dedicated, highly effective teachers in both schools that made a difference in the lives of kids. The best teachers tended to be the most subversive. Providing students with an educational environment required breaking rules that didn’t make sense. Larger social structures that create inequality exist at the classroom. Kids in some Kenyan schools, for example, were “caned” (beaten with sticks for breaking rules) in the same way that the British used caning as a form of punishment when they were the colonial masters of the country. Janitors at High Tech High refused to fix broken windows because lack of funding created enormous backlogs of work orders. Social norms are hard to break; the image of a school is relevant to students and families.

The work that we have done at RA over the years has been focused on our quest to create greater equity across the wide range of income levels and types of learners at Rivendell Academy. This quest brought me to RA.

The challenge was trying to see if and how an already existing, “neighborhood” school (as opposed to a school of choice or exam school like Bronx Science) could benefit from ideas and professional development from three highly successful schools that I knew well. One of the three model schools was the Academy of the Redwoods, a school that three veteran teachers and I designed and launched from scratch. It has grown and continues to do great work. The second school was High Tech High in San Diego. A friend of mine was a cofounder of the school. The High Tech High schools garner international recognition as one of the most innovative sets of schools in the country. The third school was University Park High School in Worcester, MA. In my first year at RA I took thirteen students and five teachers to visit University Park.

Each of the three “model” schools are unique in that they were explicitly designed to create greater educational opportunities for low income kids. The turn-of-the-century University Park building sits in a low-income neighborhood of Worcester. At Academy of the Redwoods over 50 percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. High Tech High accepts a limited number of kids from each zip code in San Diego, assuring that a significant number of kids are from low income neighborhoods. All three schools send nearly 100% percent of students on the college. But all three are schools of choice -- students chose to end these schools rather than their “regular” neighborhood schools, which gave them an implicant advantage in achieving their results. I believe that this element of choice, however slight, creates a more homogenous student population in terms of student aspiration and motivation. Students and families knew that these schools were designed to deliver a rigorous, college-ready education.

Besides the issue of choice, these schools had the benefit of being intentionally designed from the ground up by teams of educators with a clear vision and purpose. The schools’ design teams were supported by high tech firms, universities, and/or regional and national educational organizations. And ultimately, if students didn’t feel the school was a good fit, they simply returned to their normally designated school.

My quest was to figure out how to successfully adapt the best ideas from these schools to a “neighborhood” school, the type that most students in our country end up in, in order to improve learning, creativity, and confidence for all students. Rivendell Academy had features that made it a good choice for me because the founders of Rivendell had equity in mind when they designed the school:

- No tracked or leveled classes
- Full inclusion of special education students
- Statements about learning that spoke to a sense of project, community involvement, and authentic work for students
- Commitment to meaningful, team-designed professional development
- The mission to pool the resources of four communities to improve the educational opportunities for all students
- A core of solid teachers and community support

But Rivendell Academy had struggled. The founders and designers of the district and high school left the schools opened, and there was constant turnover of high school principals and changes in school structures. I arrived during one of those structural upheavals, the middle school was closing, the sixth grade moved to SME, and the 7th and 8th grade students were being integrated into the high school. Also many teachers decided to leave the school.
In October of 2010, I sketched a simple map of ideas and structures to follow in reorganizing the school. I presented it to the school board, and since then the plan has been slowly fleshed out. We have explored much of the terrain but not all of it. In following the map, we have paid close attention to the unique nature of RA. For example, we acknowledge that college is not for everyone; while also creating a structure and curriculum that intentionally gives every student exposure to the core classes that colleges would expect students to have taken. This aspect of our structure assumes that we can’t assume what students will eventually do in their lives. For students who initially enter the military or workforce, college or a technical education might eventually become a goal; thus, the curriculum and structure at RA keeps that door open for them. For students who know they want to go to college, we have designed honors challenges to provide additional opportunities to dig into important questions and material.

Equity Work at Rivendell Academy

Equity work at RA begins with a commitment to supporting all students and all staff in “governing” themselves successfully. We want people to be masters of their own lives. In this regard equity work means engaging one another in the pursuit of what is “right, good and worthy”, be it ideas, skills, or accounts toward others and oneself.

Thus, equity work at Rivendell Academy includes the freedom of our teachers to structure curriculum and collaborate. We hire interesting, intelligent, and passionate teachers. Students know that our teachers work from their passions and interests, not a canned set of standards that “higher ups” are sure to change every two to four years. Collaboration promotes conversation and innovation. Two teachers thinking together can create exciting opportunities for learning that would be difficult for one teacher to imagine, design, and teach on their own. When teachers and students work together, it creates a culture of mutual support.

Equity work includes interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum and instruction that integrates a variety of skills, involves choice, gives voice to students’ ideas and interests, engages the students with the broader community, and has a high degree of authenticity. The most authentic projects tend to address large questions about real issues in the world that also connect students to people and places outside of school. In Environmental Literature students built and ed a chicken coop to demonstrate how people can take charge over their own food production. The students raised over $610.00 with their because it was beautifully constructed and could hold enough hens to keep a family loaded with eggs. Audience for students’ work is important. At RA we ask students to present their work during exhibitions that are open to the entire community. The Holocaust class riveted the audience last year with their documentary analysis of the Holocaust stretching from the rise of Nazism to the liberation of the concentration camps.

Equity work means giving the school to the student. If we had a program or an opportunity that seems to be a good fit for a student, we try to make the program available to the student and even cajole a bit if necessary—we want students to gain the confidence to reach slightly beyond their grasp.

Equity work at RA means maintaining a culture that produces the Gift of Community, a school that lives the values of acceptance, respect, and personal relationships. Our Community Agreement, a document co-created last year by students and faculty, fully captures these values. It asks all of us to reflect on our thinking and behavior with these values in mind.

Equity work means being relentless in the pursuit of creating a powerful learning environment for all students. It means looking for support and providing support in the quest to improve. It means improvising and breaking rules when necessary. It means being politically active, asking hard questions. It means not being afraid to get it “wrong” and start over. Equity work is what we do around here.

Sincerely,

Keri Gelenian
TESTING
Wed., Oct. 16th AM
Juniors will take the PSAT.
Sophomores will take the practice ACT.

FINANCIAL AID NIGHT
Moira Valenti from NHHEAF will provide a Financial Aid overview on Columbus Day, Monday, October 14th at 6PM in the RA Library.
This is open to all students and parents (any grade and both NH and VT residents).
Sara Vargo from VSAC will host a FAFSA Forms Night Oct 21st 4—8 PM in Library Media Lab, to provide senior families with assistance filing financial aid forms:
• FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)
• CSS Profile
• Vermont Grant

NEW HAMPSHIRE COLLEGES & UNIVER MINI–FAIR
Grades 7-12
Students had the opportunity to speak with New Hampshire college and university representatives who visited Rivendell on Friday, Sept 20th in the format of a mini-fair.
Dues included representatives from public, private, 2– and 4—year colleges/universities:
Colby-Sawyer College, Franklin Pierce University, Keene State College, Institute of Art & Design @ NEC, Lakes Region Community College, New England College (NEC), Plymouth State University, River Valley Community College, Rivier University, Saint Anselm College, Southern New Hampshire University, University of New Hampshire.

ACTIVITIES/CLUB FAIR
Students had the opportunity to learn about co-curricular opportunities available at Rivendell during an all-school assembly that included representatives speaking about:
Athletics/Sports, Chorus/Theater/Band, ECO Club, Leos Club,
Makers Club, Outing Club, QSA (Queer Straight Alliance),
Robotics Club, Special Olympics, Spirit Club, Ukelele Club
Selecting colleges and applying for admission can be overwhelming.

There are applications to be completed, deadlines to meet, essays to write and policies to understand. Join us for a free 90-minute college overview workshop at our Concord campus on October 9th, as we educate high school seniors and their families about the college application process.

In this fast-paced workshop, our college counselors will discuss the following topics of immediate interest to college-bound high school seniors as they navigate the college admissions process:

Review the application timeline
Understand components of the college application process
Explore the main components of the Common Application
Discuss sending of SAT and/or ACT scores
Provide college essay pointers

Register online by visiting nhheaf.org and clicking on College Overview Workshop under Signature Events & Initiatives
Welcome! Rivendell Interstate School District has partnered with My MealTime, a fast, secure online service for making credit or debit card deposits and monitoring your student’s lunch account. You may also be able to make other school payments such as sports fees, yearbook purchases, library fines, fundraisers and more.*

Go to: www.mymealtime.com

Download the mobile app
Use your device’s web browser and go to mymealtime.com. If you’re on a mobile device, from the My MealTime sign-in screen, choose the appropriate button to download the My MealTime app.

Easy steps to use My MealTime

Step 1: Register. Click or tap the Register button and follow the onscreen prompts to create your My MealTime account.

Step 2: Link Your Student. Click or tap the ‘Add Student’ button, then find your student’s school. Link them to your profile by using their student 7 digit ID number that was provided by your student’s school. You may need to call the school office or email Celise at cjohnson@rivendellschool.org

Step 3: Make a Deposit.** You may choose to store your credit/debit card for quick and easy repeat use.

My MealTime keeps you current
Stay informed. Monitor your student’s lunch account. Email reminders tell you when your student’s account is low.

Schedule deposits. Weekly, monthly or in any frequency you choose.
Make secure payments. Using your credit or debit card.**

Need help?
Read the ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ (FAQ) under the ‘About’ section of the menu.
Email your questions to our Support Team at: support@mealtime.com

*Your school or district chooses which fees to make available on My MealTime.

** A small transaction fee will be assessed.
Fast, Secure
Online Payments

1. Download on the AppStore
2. GET IT ON Google Play
3. Norton SECURED
This year, Rivendell Academy received funding for Title 1 literacy services to be offered to middle school students. To determine who might qualify for Title 1 services, RA staff will be looking at recent SBAC performance, STAR Reading scores, writing performance tasks, and teacher recommendations. Parents will be notified next month if their child was recommended for Title 1 services. Literacy support will continue to be available for high school students as well.

Mark your calendars! On October 10th, a Title 1 Parent Night will be held in conjunction with the Advisory Open House. See Mrs. Lang in the Café if you have any questions regarding Title 1 services for your child.

New this year, all students in grades 7—10 will take the STAR Reading Assessment. This screening measure is a computer-adaptive assessment that measures students’ reading comprehension abilities, monitors achievement and growth, and tracks understanding of focus skills aligned with the learning standards. This assessment will also provide staff members with student’s Lexile levels, or reading levels. We will be using the information gathered from this assessment to identify students who might qualify for Title 1 Services, as well as, to ensure that block 4 instructional time is meeting the needs of all students. If you have any questions regarding your child's STAR performance, feel free to contact clang@rivendellschool.org

The Rivendell Academy Players are in full swing preparing the fun show “Clue: Onstage” Save the date! November 7, 8 & 9th!
Rivendell Athletics

Basketball registration is now open for grades 7—12.
Registration will close on November 5th.
Please visit the Rivendell Academy Athletics page to register through FamilyID.

Middle School Guidance

Thinking about Thinking about Thinking!

In guidance class, we have been thinking about thinking about thinking. Thinking about thinking, or metacognition, is an ability that develops right around middle school. When we think about thinking about thinking, we think about if our thinking is accurate or not and if our thinking is helpful to us or not. And when we think about our thinking is that, quite often, our brains give us a highly red, unhelpful version of reality. This is what we call a cognitively dissonant. Cognitive dissonances are different ways reality gets skewed by our thoughts.

Cognitively dissonances are very normal. Of course our brains only give us a small slice of reality, reality is big and messy and multifaceted and our brain is designed to give us the easiest, simplest interpretation. But cognitively dissonances can make us feel unnecessarily frustrated, exhausted, upset, and otherwise crappy. Some of the most common types of cognitive dissonances are: jumping to conclusions, overgeneralizing, and black-and-white thinking. Others include personalizing (blaming yourself), catastrophizing (assuming the worst), and “should”-ing (making unrealistic demands of yourself). Do any of these sound familiar?

Now that you know about cognitive dissonances, don’t go on a rampage scolding yourself every jump to conclusions. The purpose is not to shame ourselves about making errors in our thinking, but to recognize when we do it so that we can make things easier for ourselves and avoid getting sucked into cognitive dissonance. When we are ourselves thinking irrationally, we can help our brains out by reminding ourselves that reality is much bigger than what we see. Take some time to think about your thinking, are you thinking in a way that is helpful?

For more examples of cognitive dissonances as well as fun cartoons visit: h$s://iqdoodle.com/cognitively dissonances/