As I write this on Halloween, I reflect on how quickly this month has gone by. From the All School Hike up Sunday Mountain to the recent Halloween Dance hosted by the Friends of Rivendell, I have had the opportunity this month to witness some of the traditions that the SME community care about. I have also had the privilege of witnessing Elizabeth Duvall, our music teacher, organize and run effective Community Meetings every other Friday to help strengthen the bonds of the SME community.

The SME School Culture Committee for the Fall Trimester elected to have a Gaga Ball Pit installed on the playground as their chosen project to improve the school/school culture. The hardware for the Gaga Ball Pit has been ordered, and the goal is to have the Gaga Ball Pit up and running by the end of November. Gaga Ball is a fast paced, high energy sport played in an octagonal pit. The more players the better! Dubbed a kinder gentler version of dodge ball, the game is played with a soft foam ball or kickball, and combines the skills of dodging, striking, running, and jumping, while trying to hit opponents with a ball below the knees. A goal of mine is to continue to enhance the SME playground and grounds.

In other student news, the Grade 5 & 6 Spelling Team will be competing against Windsor School in the Regional Competition of the Vermont Principals Association Team Spelling Competition on Saturday, November 2nd. The SME team is comprised of two 5th grade students and four 6th grade students. If they are successful against Windsor School, they advance to the State Final on Saturday, November 16th to compete against the other four regional champions. Good luck to our team.

Earlier this month SME teachers who teach science worked with their Westshire Elementary School counterparts and representatives from the Montshire Museum of Science to begin planning an upcoming science unit. I am excited to see how our partnership with the Montshire enhances our science instruction in the coming year, and my goal is to deepen this partnership in the coming years. Also this month, some SME teachers and I had the privilege of having Dr. Louisa Moats visit SME after school to discuss literacy. Dr. Moats has been a teacher, psychologist, researcher, graduate school faculty member, and author of many influential scientific journal articles, books, and policy papers on the topics of reading, spelling, language, and teacher preparation. She also was a contributing writer of the Common Core State Standards. Dr. Moats provided us with many insights into creating a literacy program that is based on current brain research that truly addresses the needs of all emergent readers.

On October 21st, I attended a workshop sponsored by the Vermont Principals Association titled “Practical Strategies for Reducing Anxiety and Defiant Behavior in the Classroom”. The presenter, Jessica Minahan, was very engaging and knowledgeable about this topic. She told the group that the National Institute of Mental Health stated that 31% of 13 to 18 years old have anxiety, and that 22-25% of children 3 to 5 years of age have clinical anxiety. She also stated that our working memory is impaired when anxious, and that we lose 13 to 20 IQ points in a moment of anxiety.

Ms. Minahan stated that students with anxiety cause so much stress for teachers because they are so unpredictable in their behavior, so it leaves a teacher in a constant state of hypervigilance. She also gave us the analogy of thinking of students with anxiety as a shaken can of Pepsi, and that all students may look the same on the outside (like cans of Pepsi), yet the teacher does not know which student is ready to explode due to their anxiety. Her presentation was centered around the following six ideas: 1.) Misbehavior is a symptom of an underlying cause. 2.) Behavior is communication. 3.) Behavior has a function. 4.) Behavior occurs in patterns. 5.) The only behavior an adult can control is their own. 6.)
Behavior can be changed. As you can imagine, there is great deal of useful information that I need to share with the SME faculty and staff around this issue. I am grateful that Superintendent Barrett Williams was the “Principal for a day” so I could attend this important professional development opportunity. It is my hope that RISD can have Jessica Minahan visit our schools and provide much needed professional development to faculty and staff in this critical area.

As I begin to settle into my leadership role at SME and within RISD, I continue to be amazed by and grateful for the tireless efforts of the SME faculty and staff. I enjoy coming to work each day knowing that I work with such dedicated professionals who care deeply about the children who attend SME. As I reflect on my experiences of the past month, my vision for making SME capable of meeting the needs of the “whole child” comes into sharper focus.