

Four Rivers Currents

September/ October 2019

From the Principal's Desk...

COMMON FACTS/COMMON GROUND ON CHARTER SCHOOLS?

You know the scenario: you're at a sporting event or neighborhood party and the topic turns to your children and school. How many of us pause before we say, "My kid goes to a charter school." Around western Mass, those can be fighting words to some people. For me personally, my wife and I decided to enter our two children into the Four Rivers lottery because we felt it was the best public school option around. If I ever hesitate before admitting my charter school affiliations, it's because I'm deciding whether or not I have the energy to engage in the conversation. In addition to energy, such conversations also require information.

What are the facts on charter schools in Massachusetts? For some basic foundational information, check out [GET THE FACTS](#): "Charter public schools, authorized by the Education Reform Act of 1993, are an important part of the Massachusetts public school system. Since the fall of 1995, the Massachusetts charter public school sector has grown from an initial cohort of 15 schools to over 74 programmatically diverse schools across the state." The association has also put out a [2018-19 FACT SHEET](#) and [FAQS](#).

The point of view of the Charter School Association is obviously in favor of charters, but it seems valuable to see what it's main points are. From the opening screen of the website, the messages are the following:

Charter public schools are accountable.

Charter public schools serve diverse populations, with similar demographics to sending district schools.

Charter public schools provide innovative approaches and methods that help students achieve.

It just so happens that these three statements are very true for Four Rivers. Now in our 17th year of operation, Four Rivers has proven itself, with annual reports demonstrating that the school is an academic success, organizationally viable, and faithful to our mission--the three standards for accountability, and required for renewing the charter. Compared to a composite index of sending districts, Four Rivers enrolls similar populations of economically disadvantaged students and special education students. And Four Rivers has clearly pursued innovative and effective approaches to education, which we offer, year after year, to share with Franklin County district schools in the spirit of collaboration and partnership--as charter schools were intended to provide.

Charter critics, however, say charter schools are the problem, that charters drain public funds for education, and that charters draw away engaged students and their families. For a point of view equally dedicated in opposition, no need to go any further than the [MA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION ON CHARTER SCHOOLS](#) "Commonwealth charter schools are publicly funded schools that are privately operated with no local oversight. They hurt students who attend public schools by siphoning hundreds of millions of dollars from Massachusetts school districts. Most charters fail to serve as many high-need students as their host districts, creating separate and unequal conditions for success."

It is true that charter schools are governed by an independent Board of Trustees. But all meetings, minutes, and annual reports--which include transparent financial information--are open to the public and available. It is also true that Four Rivers does not serve the same



Peter Garbus, Principal

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Grade 7 News

LEARNING TO SEE IN NEW WAYS

Having wrapped up the Mini-Me Expedition, which parents had the opportunity to see on Back-To-School Night, seventh grade promptly embarked on our next (full-size, semester-long) expedition. We hiked up Mt. Sugarloaf to have a look around at our local landscape, notice the human and physical characteristics of the land and wonder how the topography came to be shaped this way. We were met at the top by David Brule, local historian, who told the ancient Pocumtuck story of the great beaver and how it shaped the mountain we were on.

For the rest of the semester, students will be focused on the question HOW DO WE LEARN WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE WE WERE HERE? We began that work in History by considering the human story told by the trash we found in Wheeler Brook during our Green River Clean Up service project. When we looked at the trash as an artifact and considered the clean-up from the creek's point of view, we began to practice the critical thinking skills of archaeologists and geologists.



Grade 8 News

SCIENCE — *Mr. Guillaume*

Sustainable Apartments: a fun way to learn about sustainability, the physics of energy and engineering design!

What features are needed to build a sustainable future? One item is sustainable housing. Students in 8th grade are pretending to be Landlords. They participated in an auction to buy derelict apartments (cardboard boxes), renovated them with their \$100,000 budget (of pretend money) including increasing the insulation value (with, among other things, bubble wrap) as well as air sealing (with packing tape.) The apartments are currently being tested for their energy use before students finish their final renovations. Students are learning to balance the financial realities of housing with the goal of a fully sustainable future.

We did field work by touring a standard apartment, looking at features of a sustainable renovation and touring a sustainably built condominium.

Parent/Guardian help wanted!

For Student Led Conferences, we are asking adults to help by pretending to be prospective tenants. When you come into the 8th grade hall, you will see that students will have put out rental flyers listing, among other things: features of their apartment, the expected energy bills and the rent.

When you come to SLC, please take a "Character Card" which will tell you the size of your family, your profession as well as your monthly income. Then, look at the prospective apartments and put in an application! Students will go through applications and choose the tenant for their apartment.



DIVISION 2 NEWS

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE - Ms. Beardslee

Ninth graders kicked off their study of Food Sustainability by visiting local farms to learn directly from farmers about methods of agriculture used locally. A huge thank you to the farms (and farmers!) who took time out of their day to host and respond to questions written by 9th graders. The farm visits this year included: Nourse, Manda, Old Friends, Abundance, UMass Permaculture garden and Barstow's. Here are some sample questions 9th graders asked: If you have a lot of pests on your farm, how do you control them? What method of agriculture do you use and why? If you farm meat, why? Where does water from your farm run off to? Do you use any elements of permaculture on your farm? What do you think is the future of farming?



WELLNESS — Division 2 students completed a 5k run on Friday, October 4th! Both 9th and 10th grades have been spending two days a week in Wellness class training for the 5k. Many people opted to walk, but a lot of students ran the course. The top 10 runners, in order, are as follows: Kole Broderick, Isaac Larkin-Harmon, Owen Stewart, Simon Bukowick, Isaac Morton, Katie Deso; Olivia Vassar; Ms. Hobbs; Afri Flynn (tied with Liv Kingsley), and Liv Kingsley (tied with Afri Flynn).

It was a fun and active way to start off a Friday! Thanks to all the teachers who participated and helped: Coachie, Mrs. Walk, Ms. Haxo, Ms. Hobbs, Senora Rodriguez-Salas, Ms. Beardslee, Ms. Plotkin, and Ms. Sun!



DIVISION 3 NEWS

MODERN WORLD HISTORY

The Juniors started Modern World History by analyzing their summer reading assignment, *Abina and The Important Men*. The book is a graphic novel about a girl from the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, in the 1800's, who takes her former slave master to court. More than a good story, the book itself is an example of historiography, a study of the work historians actually do. This work has set us up well to move into our next content unit-The French Revolution. The Juniors are also in the process of creating, researching, and writing their own blogs focused on current global issues. They will maintain them throughout the first semester.

JUNIOR ENGLISH

It's been a busy start to the year. Juniors in English have already finished the first whole-class novel, *The Woman Warrior*, and are writing their first essay. They've been studying literary theory to practice using particular critical lenses to look at literature. So far, they've practiced using these lenses: reader-response, new criticism, gender, social class, postcolonial, and archetypal. By looking at the same text in different ways, we analyze how meaning is constructed and gain the freedom to play with different forms of analysis.

SENIOR DOCUMENTARY

It's October, and that means we are well into the annual senior documentary. Students kicked off the expedition last month by looking at the larger energy issue in our country and world, and then by talking with documentary filmmaker Aimee Corrigan at the Garden Cinema. After a few weeks building background knowledge, we moved into more specific film planning. Students are in groups based around different possible topics for this year's documentaries. On Thursday, October 10th, they gathered in our own "board meeting" where each team presented a different documentary film idea. Students were to vote on which topic will become this year's documentary. After considering several possible topics, including *The Political Climate of Climate Change in Massachusetts*, *Vineyard Wind*, *The New Age of Nuclear*, *Transportation Paving the Way*, and *Laboratories of Innovation*, the class chose to create a documentary on the question of "Electrify...Everything?"

AMERICAN CIVICS

The Seniors began the year in Civics debating a proposal by James Madison at the Constitutional Convention. The proposal was the idea of the "Federal Negative" or a structure that would allow the federal government to veto any state law. While the notion might seem absurd today, there were very real reasons why this was an appealing idea in post-revolutionary early America. The Madison case is the first in a series of discussions about critical or illustrative moments in American Democracy. Next up: Alexander Hamilton, the battle over a bank and the limits of federal power.

SENIOR MATH

Seniors started the semester by observing patterns in polynomial functions and making connections between their graphs and equations. Recently, they have been interpreting in-context graphs to describe what "story" a graph communicates. Seniors have just begun learning about derivatives and translating situations involving changing rates into the language of calculus. We have also been carving out time to explore financial and quantitative aspects of the energy expedition such as compound interest, discount rate, capacity factor, and levelized cost of energy. Students are now more equipped to compare energy generation technologies of unequal life spans, project sizes, costs, and capacities.

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number of students with significant special needs, but we have the same percentage of students with moderate to mild special needs and we work very hard to serve them well. What about the money? And are there any objective analyses of charters and their impact on district public schools? I found one neutral source that addressed the question: [DO MA CHARTER SCHOOLS DRAIN FUNDING?](#), which concluded the following: "Although charter schools do compete with traditional public schools for state funds, we found the unions' underlying argument that charter schools benefit at the expense of public schools to be false."

There is a difference between charter school tuition costs (Four Rivers average per pupil funding is around \$17,000) and what it costs one district to pay another for school choice (\$5,000). However, the structure of school choice is where a full funded school has an empty seat in a classroom, which costs a fraction of the tuition rate to fill that seat. For a charter school, the full tuition represents the average cost of educating that student in his or her district school. That full amount is also what it should be expected to cost to educate them in a charter.

Some people say they have nothing against charter schools, but the funding formula needs to be fixed. Senator Jo Comerford, for example, has put herself in the middle of this fight, suggestion a statewide commission be established to study issues related to charter schools in Massachusetts and to make recommendations. She says she wants to try to address the concerns of the MA Teachers Association, an organization that provided her significant support and that has nothing good to say about charter public schools, while recognizing the passionate defense of charters expressed by some of her constituents (families at our very school!). Here's how she summarized her stand in a recent email:

"I understand charter schools are endeavoring to provide meaningful educational opportunities for children in Massachusetts. I also believe that our traditional public schools are critical for ensuring that all children throughout Commonwealth receive the best education possible."

Can these two sides be reconciled? Is there common ground to be found? We who believe in the importance of excellent public schools for all children and who at the same time chose to send our children to Four Rivers perhaps are the common ground. To develop a short list of common facts we all might agree on, I invite you to check out and contribute comments to [COMMON GROUND ON MA CHARTER SCHOOLS](#), a document under construction. Add statements and comments and I will moderate. So the next time you're asked where your children go or went to school, there will be no need to pause; you'll have the energy--and the information--to engage.

~~ *Peter Garbus, Principal* ~~

NURSE'S NOTES

It is hard to believe we have completed 2 months of school! It is good to see old and new faces. Unfortunately, there are two issues that are present every year.

IMPROPER SHOES FOR SPORTS/WELLNESS. Over the last 2 weeks there has been a total of 4 injuries to ankles and outer feet. Luckily all have been minor. Please ensure that your child has sneakers to wear for all running activities.

WATER BOTTLES: Students in all grades are relying on the water fountain for their daily fluid intake which is inadequate to meet their daily needs. I know mornings are extremely hectic but make sure there is a water bottle in their backpack.

Let's work together to have a safe and healthy 2019-2020 academic year. ~ *Jeanne Milton, RN*

COLLEGE ADVISING

The College Application Process – Senior Year at Four Rivers

Typical Timeline:

September – December: Continue researching, identifying schools and visiting schools. (Web, guides, college rep visits, local fairs, open houses etc.) Meet with Mr. Stenson as needed. Finalize list of schools. We typically recommend a list of 5 – 8 schools; this should include target and safety schools, and should be consistent with the family's financial resources.

November and December : Complete any early applications. Request letters of recommendation at least 2 weeks in advance.

October – January: Complete any outstanding testing requirements.

October – February: Complete and submit applications (including any school specific financial aid forms)

October 1 : The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) becomes available. Complete as early as possible. You will be using data from your 2018 tax return.

Jan – April: Apply for local scholarships. Information will be available at school, but also be on the lookout locally for scholarship opportunities.

March – April: Review offers of acceptance. Attend accepted students days. Visit colleges again if needed. Review financial aid awards.

May 1.: Deposit!

At school we....

- Provide support during Senior Seminar.
- Meet individually with seniors to review and monitor the status of their post Four River's plans.
- Work on college essays during English.
- Host weekly visits from college admissions representatives.
- Mr. Stenson is available to meet with students and/or families as needed.

At home you should.....

• Research the costs associated with different schools and discuss with your child the funds that are available for college. Help them create a realistic list of schools to apply to.

• Help kids sign up for SAT's and ACT's =====>>

<http://sat.collegeboard.org>

• Support your kid in terms of visiting schools

<http://www.actstudent.org/regist/>

• Help with deadlines, paying special attention to Financial Aid forms and deadlines.

Question? Email astenson@fourriverscharter.org or call (413) 775 4577, x114

FOUR RIVERS CURRENTS: The Currents is moving! Four Rivers is transitioning our newsletter, The Currents, to a newsletter platform. Please sign up to stay informed about the latest happenings in and around Four Rivers:

<https://fourriverscharter.org/newsletter.html>



"This institution is an equal opportunity provider. To file a complaint of discrimination write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Washington, DC 20254"

Four River Charter Public School is dedicated to educating young people and lives of learning and service. The school offers a rigorous academic program aligned with the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and an emphasis on character development for moral and social responsibility. Three central themes – nature, technology and community – pervade the teaching and learning at the school. Four Rivers works closely with parents and seeks both to serve and learn from the many resources of Franklin County.



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