

# Four Rivers Currents

March 2009

## Midyear Check In - Survey results and progress on school improvement

How are things going? Thank you to everyone who completed the midyear survey. We sent it out electronically to 220 of you and sent another 12 by mail to those we knew did not have email access. If you didn't get one, it might be sitting in your email inbox. Our hope is to be able take better advantage of electronic communication, both to get information to you and to get input from you.

The survey results – printed more fully on page 3 – convey widespread support for the work that is going on at our school, with important data and some comments on areas for improvement. We would like to focus on a few key items for this month's column.

**Communication** Many of you are interested in more electronic communication and there is strong interest in having access to students' grades throughout a trimester. We will move forward on both fronts, though we will still send things by mail to those who like things old school.

**Challenge** From last year's end of year survey information and our own desire for growth, we wanted to see how many students and parents want more academic challenge in the school. The data tells us that a significant group of students and just a few parents feel that there is too much challenge in the school, while most parents and students feel that it's just right. While the number of parents and students who feel that there is not enough challenge is relatively small, we feel that it is very important – and ultimately quite doable – to be able to provide more challenge to those students who need it. Because we are a small school, we do not offer different classes to different students. Instead, we work to differentiate instruction, which means finding ways to serve the different needs of individual students within the same classroom. We intend to strengthen these practices so that every student can find more challenge if they want it.

Check In. . . . Continued on page 3

### **From the Director's Desk...**

Our seventh annual admissions lottery, held last Thursday, February 26, included 150 prospective students—the highest number of applicants yet! There were 97 students applying for 36 spaces in our new 7<sup>th</sup> grade, including 17 siblings (also a new high). For grade 8, there were 16 applicants. With limited openings in the high school, there were 26 applicants for 9<sup>th</sup> grade and 11 applicants for 10<sup>th</sup>.

Thursday morning, with a click of the mouse by an official of the Franklin County Council of Governments, a computer-generated random sort produced our lottery results. Welcome to our next 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the Class of 2015, and to the new students who will be joining upper grades!

We are grateful to all the families who applied and showed such strong interest in our school. Thanks, too, to all the teachers, Family Council members, and the student admissions team who represented Four Rivers so generously at our four Admissions Information Sessions. As one applying parent commented to me, "I had already heard good things about Four Rivers, but it was the words of faculty members and current parents at the Info Session that really convinced me!"

Kudos to four of our faculty and administration who are presenting workshops at the annual National Conference of Expeditionary Learning next week in Baltimore: Mandy Locke and Susan Durkee, Andy Stenson (again with Susan Durkee), and Peter Garbus.

Looking ahead, the Spring 2009 MCAS testing begins with English Language Arts for grades 7 and 8 on March 31-April 2, and ELA for 10<sup>th</sup> on April 1 & 2. Math, Science and Social Studies tests follow in May and early June.

~ Ed Blatchford

## 7th Grade News

### An Overview of the Seventh Grade Food Expedition – by Sophia and Emi Link

“Are we really what we eat?” That’s the question the seventh graders have been chiseling away at this month. We have been doing lots of activities related to food.

We had a statistics-based hunger banquet that showed us how many people in the world don’t get enough nutrients or enough food at all. We also made some (quite good) Egyptian bread and a fig spread to go with it. In math, we found percentages, fractions, and ratios about how much food families in different countries eat. Earlier in the month we visited the Western Massachusetts Food Bank and learned about what they were doing for the community. We will continue this expedition by writing about our experiences with cooking and food.

### Hungry Hunger Banquet – by Tucker Jenkins

“Growl,” my stomach said as I slowly sipped the nasty water. I looked around and saw some other students eating lasagna on a nice plate and drinking apple cider in a glass mug. At the other table, I saw a group of students eating rice and lentils on paper plates with plastic utensils. I was jealous and hungry, but I was in the group that represented the poorest people. The hunger banquet really made me think about how many people in the world only eat rice and water every day. Eventually, I became so hungry that I had to have some rice. I used my cup and got a cup full of rice. Deep down in my heart I was happy I at least got something, knowing that some people don’t get anything. The hunger banquet really made me want to do something in the world.

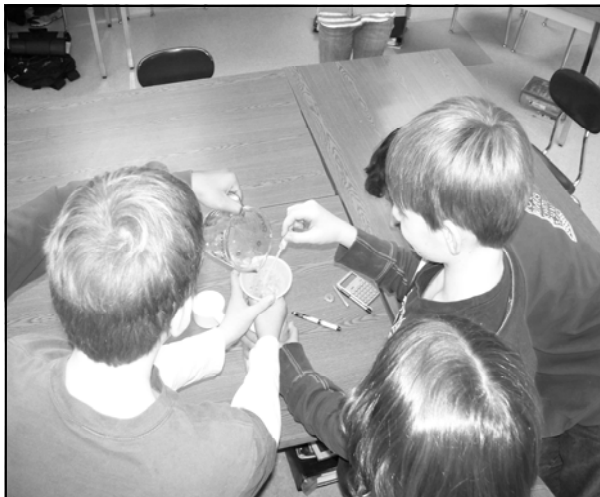
### Making *Ta* – by Angie Flynn

February might as well been named Bread Month for seventh graders this year. The cooks made no less than 12 loaves of Egyptian bread on the day before February Break. The Egyptian bread, called *Ta*, was sweet and smooth—much better than the Mesopotamian bland barley flatbread we made a few weeks ago. Maybe it was because of the honey we added or the fig spread we put on top. Either way, it was so delicious that some students even asked for the recipe.

### Homemade Soda – by Sebastian

TV on.\* Click. \* Soda open. \*Pssst.\* Glug glug.\* “Man, that was good!”

Soda? Homemade? How do you do it? Well, the seventh grade experienced making lemon ginger ale. It is easier than you think. Making soda is a simple process with a key ingredient: yeast. All of the ingredients are mixed in a 2 liter bottle. Yeast makes the soda carbonated by eating the sugar and “belching” gas into the mixture. We grated a ginger root and put that in and squeezed a lemon as well. Over the past 2 weeks the yeast ate and belched and carbonated the mixture. When we opened the bottle, we heard the classic “psssst!” So the next time you plop down to watch the game on TV or eat pizza for dinner, you can drink your own homemade soda. Click. Pssst. Yum!



*Ginger Ale  
Photo Caption -  
by Chandler  
Thoma*

*We made homemade ginger ale in Ms. Locke’s class with water, sugar that was very grainy, yeast that looked like little brown pills, ginger that was stringy when cut up and sticky like cotton candy.*



**Check-In** continued from page 1...

**Engagement** One particular question raised by this midyear data is how to have more of our students feeling a high level of engagement in their learning. When we have done walkthroughs this year where we move through every one of our classrooms for 5-10 minute visits, we have felt and seen consistently strong engagement throughout the school. Yet these survey numbers (21% high, 60% medium, 9.7% low) say that our students aren't feeling what we're seeing. We want students to feel more engaged, so that's something we'll be working on.

~~ Peter Garbus, Principal

## NOTES FROM MIDYEAR SURVEYS

A total of 152 parents (66%) and 182 students (95%) completed the survey.

1. There is strong interest in being able to have electronic access to grades throughout a trimester. Our faculty will consider the best way to accomplish this goal.

51% of parents would likely check frequently and 40% said occasionally.

57% of students would likely check frequently and 36% said occasionally.

2. Many parents are interested in receiving more of the school's communications by email. Every communication to families will still be mailed to those families without internet or those who prefer.

54% would like to receive Interim Reports by email

59% would like to receive end of trimester Report Cards by mail

3. The majority of students and parents feel that the level of challenge at Four Rivers is just right. While these numbers affirm our current approach, we intend to focus specific attention on the significant minority who feel there is not enough challenge. We should always be able to provide more challenge for those who want it.

75% of parents feel the level is just right, with 4% saying there's too much and 11% saying too little

59% of students feel the level is just right, with 17% saying there's too much and 7% saying too little

4. The majority of parents feel that the amount of homework given is just right, while a plurality of students feel that there's too much. According to both parents and students, most are doing between 1-2 hours a night with a significant portion doing more than 2 hours.

56% of parents feel the level is just right, with 11% saying there's too much and 13% saying too little

42% of students feel the level is just right, with 45% saying there's too much and 3% saying too little

5. More students and parents feel that the level of engagement in learning is medium as opposed to high or low. We want many more students and parents feeling that there is high engagement in learning at the school and will be particularly focused on improving this area.

43% of parents say the level is medium, 40% say high, and 16% say low.

60% of students say the level is medium, 21% say high, and 9% say low.

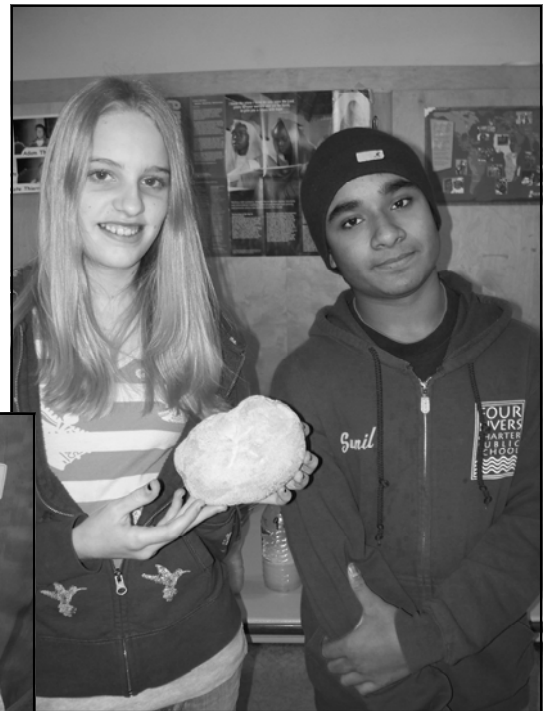
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***SURVEY RESULTS continued from previous page...***

6. On some other issues:

- a. Most high school students (67%) want to continue with Community Meetings by division.
- b. Most students (54%) prefer our traditional field day while 46% would like to consider something different.
- c. Most students (70%) would not want to give up their ASCs for more Art, Music, Nature, or Technology.
- d. Most parents (63%) feel that the Report Cards are very informative while most students (51%) feel they're only somewhat informative.
- e. More students (44%) and most parents (59%) feel that the current after school opportunities are adequate.
- f. Most students (64%) feel that there is a medium level of respect demonstrated in the school culture while most parents (54%) feel that the level of respect is high.
- g. For most parents (65%), convenient meeting times is the most important determinant whether they could participate more in the Family Council, though there was a completely even split among which of 4 evenings would be most convenient to meet.

In thinking about the set up of Division 3, most students (68%) feel that it is more important to be able to have some choice of courses over providing a core schedule that allows more fieldwork.



*Ms. Lockes' and Ms. Ritchie's 7th graders make bread and prepare fig spread for their Hunger Banquet.*

## DIV III NEWS

### SPANISH ~ Mr. McDonnell

**Spanish 2**—Students helped prepare a culinary treat to help kick-off the February break. With the help of Four Rivers parent Melinda Garcia Watson, the class learned how to make a traditional Mexican breakfast dish called "Miguitas." The class is also wrapping up a unit on Puerto Rico and students participated in group investigations and presented their findings to the class.

**Spanish 3**—Students in this class have started giving 2-3 minute oral presentations on a variety of topics. We've already heard interesting topics including descriptions of marriage ceremonies, concerts, trips to Mexico, and paint-ball battles. The class is finishing a unit on Central America and each student will design travel posters demonstrating knowledge of specific countries.

**Spanish 4**—Right before break the class shared two scenes from their telenovela at a Division 3 community meeting. It got great reviews and the class received valuable feedback on how to improve the quality of the final product. Students also just finished a Latin music investigation. Each student researched different genres of music and chose one to present to the rest of the class.

### ENGLISH ~ Mrs. Plath

#### Speech and Debate

Students in Mrs. Plath's Speech and Debate class have spent the last few weeks building cases to debate the National Public Forum Debate resolution for March: "Resolved: that, on balance, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has improved academic achievement in the United States." They have been investigating both sides of this controversial issue, since in Public Forum debate, students won't be assigned "pro" or "con" until a coin toss right before the debate. They've been hard at work in pairs to research this issue and find evidence to support their arguments. We are about to hold a debate tournament wherein students from both sections of the class will debate each other in bracket-style elimination to find a winning team. Good luck, debaters!

#### Crafting the Novel

After a month of steadfast work, students in Crafting the Novel have finished writing. Still, many students are choosing to continue their novels in their own time. Several students managed to write over 50,000 words (~175 pages) in only a month! They have been tracking their word counts all month, and while not every student reached his/her goal, the effort was tremendous and they should all be very proud. Now they move to the equally arduous task of revision, selecting an excerpt from their novel to revise and present as their best work. Congratulations to all our aspiring authors!

### Ricia Elwell-Socci ~ People To People Delegate

Ricia-Elwell-Socci, a sophomore at Four Rivers, has been invited to be a delegate for a People To People Ambassador Program. The delegation will be representing the USA on a "European Heritage" program traveling to six countries throughout Europe this summer. She will earn high school and college credits. Ricia is trying to raise money by selling frozen cookie dough and butter braids and having an ongoing bottle and can drive. Also, if you wash your car at Sandri's Smart-Stop, please save your receipt and turn it in to Ricia. The Sandri Corporation will sponsor her \$2 per receipt. Sponsorship is also greatly appreciated.

Please contact Ricia at 773-7845 or at 214 Wisdom Way #A, Greenfield, MA 01301 if you would like to help in any way.

## DIV III NEWS cont...

### IMP-3 and IMP-4

IMP-4 students are engaged in a broad review of function families -- linear, quadratic, exponential, logarithmic, trigonometric, and reciprocal -- which will take much of the rest of the school year and will prepare them well for calculus and other future math courses. In IMP-3 we just spent two weeks doing explicit preparation for the SAT exam. Those three letters used to stand for "Scholastic Aptitude Test," but in recent years the test makers have acknowledged that aptitude is only a small part of achieving high test scores. Much more important is knowing the test's rules, strategies, and math content, plus practice ... practice ... and practice. Although some colleges no longer require it, others weight it very heavily in their admissions decisions. You can help your student by developing a preparation schedule together and checking in about progress. The school also purchased a Princeton Review preparation guide for each student, which has guided our work in class. Details of test registration are at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).

### Psychology

Last trimester, while studying positive psychology, we adopted the practice of starting each class with a silent minute of focusing and meditation. It became popular, and on days when I forgot or felt there wasn't time, students inevitably requested it. After a few weeks, two students announced that they had started their previous day's band practice with a moment of quiet meditation, and that it helped them transition and focus. Teachers *love* when things like that happen, and it highlights the importance of a little quiet in all of our busy lives. For our class work in recent weeks, each student has selected a mental disorder of particular interest and done writing and analysis of case studies and journals related to that disorder. We have also watched clinical films, looked at artwork done by psychiatric patients, and reviewed actual clinical documents related to psychiatric treatment.

### Physics

February has been a month of laboratory experiments. We ended our investigation into Newton's Second Law ( $a=F/m$ ) by studying the phenomenon of air resistance and terminal velocity. The students used motion detectors to measure and analyze the rate at which different numbers of coffee filters fell to the ground. Students then used force sensors to prove Newton's Third Law - that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Students witnessed first hand that one cannot pull on something without that something pulling on you with equal, but opposite force.

### Environmental Science

Students had an incredible time visiting two homes that produce all of their own power. The highlights of the trip included hearing just how quiet wind turbines are and how amazing a passive solar design is for heating a home. Students were able to gain first hand knowledge about the advantages and disadvantages of life off the grid. This knowledge will be applied to their final project of the trimester which they are working on now. Students are creating an informative pamphlet answering the question "Is Living an Energy Independent Lifestyle Right For You?"



# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Heads to Gettysburg

Save these dates

For what has become an established expedition for our school, the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade trip to Gettysburg will take place May 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup>. So that families can plan ahead, each student will be expected to contribute \$100 towards the cost of the trip, though financial assistance will be available for students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. The remainder of the costs will be paid for through fundraising. Speaking of which, we are looking for at least 2 parents willing to help coordinate "Spaghettisburg" (our traditional Spaghetti dinner fundraiser), another of our growing traditions. Please get in touch with Mr. Garbus if you're willing to help.

**Advertising Deadline for Yearbook Ads extended to March 20<sup>th</sup>! Yearbooks are on sale until March 31<sup>st</sup> for \$30.**

## NURSE'S NOTES

### Student Health Screenings

**March 16 though 19, 9:00 am to Noon**

Parents: yearly screening information was mailed before vacation. If you did not receive this please call me at school. G.C.C. nursing students will be assisting me again this year. Return the signed form ONLY if you do not wish your child to be screened. Screening is not a substitute for yearly physician examines. A notice will be mailed home for any student testing abnormal for posture, hearing, and vision; this must be followed-up with a M.D. assess. Postural Screening will be done on all students in grades 7, 8, and 9. These are the years children are more apt to experience growth spurts. Curves of the spine that have already developed can be prevented from worsening with early detection. Several reminders:

1. If students wear eyeglasses, they must bring them.
2. The back bone must be easily visible for accurate assessment. Students should be prepared by wearing a thin t-shirt or a bathing suit under their clothing.

Please call me if you have any questions or concerns. It is helpful to know if your child(ren) are currently being observed for scoliosis.

Jeanne Milton, R.N.

## DIVERSITY FORUM

A small group of Four Rivers parents and administrative staff have had a couple of very good conversations about diversity issues at the school. As this is an important issue, we all think it would great to widen the discussion to involve others in the Four Rivers community.

Ultimately we envision parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the board getting together on a regular basis to discuss these issues. If you are interested in participating, please let us know by Friday, March 6. If we have enough interest, we plan to meet together to begin a wider conversation on

**Tuesday, March 24**

**7-8:30 pm in the Common Room**

## Gentlemen, Start Your Engines

We are looking for an old small engine that we can use for a science experiment. It needs to be in working condition. After we are finished with our experiment, it probably will not work anymore. Pretty much anything would work, such as a weed whacker, a lawnmower, etc. We are testing to see if small engines can be run on renewable fuels. **Thank you!**

*Will Beebe, Jeremy Stevens, Sebastien Bassett  
and Troy Harrington-Woodard*

## NOT MY CHILD

### Substance Awareness Night

This is a parents only event, providing an opportunity to learn about the various substances that have presented in the teen population around the Commonwealth. The presentation will be led by Peter Buck, the Athol School Police Officer, in collaboration with Chad Softic, a representative from a treatment program in Western Massachusetts, and at least one parent who struggled with her own child's battle with addiction. The presentation will be followed by an open discussion between attendees, school officials and presenters.

Thursday, March 5th, 6:30 pm

at Mahar Regional High School, Orange

For more information contact: Student Support Services Officer

978-544-2535 [mbaldassarre@rcmahar.org](mailto:mbaldassarre@rcmahar.org)

Four Rivers Charter Public School

Presents...

# The 6th Annual Variety Show!



The Shea Theater  
71 Avenue A  
Turners Falls, MA



Thursday March 12, 2009

7:00 pm

Doors open at 6:15

Tickets \$6.00 Adults

\$4.00 Students

*Four River Charter Public School is dedicated to educating young people for 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.*



Four Rivers Charter Public School

248 Colrain Rd., Greenfield, MA 01301