

Parents Night 2010

Welcome and welcome back! It is a pleasure to be here tonight, and to celebrate the beginning of our 13th year of instilling the joy of learning in our students.

Let me begin by expressing on behalf of the faculty and staff, how much we appreciate our parents. Thank you for all the hard work you do to make sure your child is prepared for school each day. Parents make a tremendous investment here at Maple Street— an investment that includes time, energy, money, but perhaps most importantly, sharing your child with us. Thank you for trusting us. Trust is based on healthy communication and being open to all dialogue, constructive criticism, and compliments. Your trust is a priority, and we cannot be successful without you.

Maple Street is a beacon of excellence and a recognized school of distinction because we demand more of ourselves each year—and you demand more of us every year, and you should. The faculty and I talk about your feedback, the summer surveys, and the e-mails you send us. We value your ideas, which are critical to our growth, especially this year, as we embark on our NEASC evaluation and begin to construct a new five-year plan. I ask that you continue to add to our dialogue and take advantage of Grade-Parent meetings and the Parent Association network, as well as picking up the phone, dropping by to talk or e-mailing us.

One piece of feedback we received about a year ago was to make our web site more interactive and have an on-line calendar of events. I am proud to say we have done just that, and I encourage you to take a good look at the information on the site. We are also looking at ways to make our reports a more effective and consistent feedback tool, and we are re-invigorating our parents association under the leadership of Kristen Bowen and Kelli Calder. These are just three of the many suggestions you have made, and we will continue to make thoughtful changes in response to your ideas.

This summer, I watched with great interest the news on the oil spill, or disaster, in the Gulf: its catastrophic environmental consequences; its economic ripples on many industries of the South; and its effects on our morale as a country. I received an e-mail from a friend that superimposed the area affected on New England (if it was my home), and it opened my eyes to the massiveness of this problem. The oil would span from St. Albans VT to North Adams, MA and from New Hampshire to Toronto, Canada. If Apple Computers can have a team that invents a new gadget every few months, NASA can discover a new sun this summer 300 billion pounds more than our sun, and engineers can tackle ambitious buildings projects world-wide, why did it take so long to cap a silly well in the bottom of the ocean. How hard can it be?

I asked myself this question—and then I thought—at Maple Street School, how are we preparing students to solve problems like this? What and how are we teaching our students today so that they can be effective members of a team that will find solutions to the unimaginable problems of tomorrow?

Perhaps my question was inspired by Stuart Brown's book *Play, How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. He recounts a recent story from Cal Tech's Jet

Propulsion Lab. This lab is the home of scientists and engineers whose major design breakthroughs include robot vehicles on Mars and the Hubble telescopes. Brown states, “No matter how big and ambitious the goal, the researchers could always be relied on to say, ‘We can do that.’” But in the late 1990s, JPL was having a very hard time replacing its engineers and scientists. No doubt, the graduates from MIT and Stanford continued to be outstanding students—the highest grades, the best resumes, but they were not very good at problem solving. They could grapple with the theoretical and mathematical, but they lacked the ability to translate theory into practice. Interestingly enough, the head of JPL asked some friends about his situation, and a pal who ran a machine shop specializing in race cars found the same problem-- top students from top schools with top grades lacking in authentic problem solving skills. What did the old engineers have that the new hires did not? What they found was the older employees had a mental agility that enabled them to play around with ideas and people. Success depended partly on academic achievement and partly on sustained curiosity and an ability to play.

When I use the word “play,” I am not referring to all types of “play” but rather a kind of sustained curiosity sometimes known as “flow.” The opposite of this type of play is NOT work. The opposite is joylessness. This type of play and work, especially at Maple Street School, are mutually supportive. We need the newness of play, its sense of flow, its liveliness and discovery, being in the moment. It compliments the purpose of work, the stability it offers, the sense that we are doing service for others, that we are needed and integrated in our community and world. The qualities that this type of play and work have in common include imagination, creativity, and authentic interactions with peers. The outcomes are similar too, compassion and wisdom. Although we can give our children many things, we cannot directly give them compassion and wisdom. It is through the experience of solving problems, of being in relationships, of sustained curiosity, that we allow them to develop these aspects of themselves.

Learning to play with others, being in relationships with others, and valuing imagination and creativity are cornerstones of the independent school experience at Maple Street. Just look at the artwork in our halls, experience our authentic classroom lessons, read our students’ essays. Fundamental to intellectual growth and human development is sustained curiosity, imagination, and play. However, it is not just playing with your friends; it is learning to play with ideas and with other people. John Paul Lettermark, author of the *Moral Imagination and the Art of Peace*, asserted, “Progress emerges through unlikely relationships. Naturally, people choose to be with others who think similarly. The more difficult work of finding solutions is creating a quality of relationships with people who do not think alike.” We all know that the kindergarten year begins the transition from parallel play to cooperative play, and the elementary years are the crucible in which empathy for others is refined. Play involves multiple centers of perceptions and cognition across the whole brain, and the imagination and creativity it requires are essential to developing future problem solving skills.

I found myself thinking about this unique concept of “play” and imagining a sandbox full of Palestinians and Israeli children, or pro-oil drilling advocates and environmentalists, perhaps in Vermont, the sandbox is full of school choice advocates and the NEA. How can we learn/teach “play” that opens hearts rather than close them? One of my favorite authors, Terry Tempest Williams calls for “an open space”—a type of playground where we encourage diversity of thought and perspective. She states, “I have always believed

democracy is best practiced through its construction, not its completion—a never ending project where the windows and doors remain open, a reminder to never close ourselves off to the sensory impulses of eyes and ears alert toward justice.” Likewise, Maple Street School is an open space and a never-ending project.

This year, we are looking for this open space to play with ideas during our NEASC review process—playtime to generatively think about our school-- problems, solutions, and ideas. Something new may emerge from our shared creativity. NEASC is a voluntary accreditation process that is structured around carefully considered standards and peer review. We are dedicated to fostering educational excellence and improvement in our students, and we look forward to modeling this as a school. This will be an important learning experience for our whole community, and I invite you to play.

As part of honoring this idea of “open space” and creating a quality of relationships with people who do not think alike, we will embark on the project of creating a multi-cultural statement. This statement is our launching point, and we hope to tailor it and make it our own throughout this year. It states,

We believe that there are many ways to understand and experience life and that these ways are shaped in part by gender, class, ethnicity, race, religion and sexual orientation. We also believe that a diverse and inclusive community strengthens, expands and empowers us all. By teaching children to appreciate and respond to differences, we are preparing them for the complex and multicultural world in which they live. By exploring our similarities and differences, by examining stereotypes, and by acknowledging the range of perspectives that comprise any truth, we create a learning environment that validates each child, promotes community, and provides an honest and useful framework for understanding the world.

Finally, I want to end on this. To truly play with your heart, our children need to feel safe, valued and loved. This is at the core of human experience. I promise that your child will feel safe, valued, and loved at Maple Street. I make this promise at the start of every school year, and I want you to understand how important and significant it is. For a child, feeling that everyone at your school knows and loves you provides a critical foundation for learning and an important reason for trying one’s best. Being known and loved does not always mean constant happiness and constant success. We, as parents, know that there are times that our strongest love requires us to say “no” or “you can do better,” or address an uncomfortable situation. But it does mean personal growth, joy, and experiences that develop compassion and wisdom.

I look forward to a wonderful year with you.

September 2010, © Dr. Mary F. Bisselle, Head of School