Dear families,

It was an exhilarating week—large numbers of parents, teachers, and students showing their solidarity against Cuomo’s proposed educational reforms, more than 50 educators in three separate visits hoping to learn from our practices, the first hints of spring, and the second round of student-led conferences. There were numerous moments to both celebrate and to learn from.

For other avid WNYC listeners out there, the week was also framed by the series, Being Twelve: The Year Everything Changes. Each morning listeners heard from kids, teachers, and educational experts about why 12 is such a pivotal year in young Americans’ lives. For those of you who missed it, I’ve included the link. (http://www.wnyc.org/series/being-12/) In a nutshell, twelve is a tumultuous age. Young people’s brains develop more rapidly than at any point in their childhood other than infancy. Peers eclipse parents as the most important spheres of influence. Students are distracted by their changing bodies and by budding romantic feelings. Young adolescents search for who they are and what they believe in.

As a result, middle school is said to be the most difficult stage of schooling to teach and sadly the numbers back it up. In NYC, the majority of middle school teachers leave within 3 years and most students’ academic performances stagnate or decline in their seventh grade year. Many of us look
back on our middle school experiences as years we’d like to forget. Despite the challenges, the Arts and Letters middle school has never been stronger. We continue to hear from education officials who visit schools every day that what they are seeing in our classrooms is “unique”, “moving” or “remarkable.” I’ve been having the same thoughts— but couldn’t really put my finger on what was different this year, because we’ve always had solid instruction.

Listening to the Being Twelve series helped provide some clues. Chancellor Carmen Farina, while speaking about 7th grade, spoke of the importance of increased student ownership and responsibility combined with rigor and structure. Our middle school classrooms are more de-centered than I have ever seen them before. Seventh and eighth graders have period-long Socratic Seminars and class discussions rich with textual evidence and they throw around terms such as “classism” and “cultural imperialism” without any teacher intervention. Sixth grade students lead book clubs and present on human rights issues in China in front of their peers. Teachers have found the wonderful balance of providing access to rigorous and engaging content while utilizing structured “thinking routines” and “feedback routines” to support students to think more deeply and more independently. Students like what they are learning and they get to be the center of attention!

Students are also seen and heard in advisory, student-led conferences, arts classes, off-campus trips, and teacher sponsored events like dances and the Pi reciting contest this week. This year many of our middle grade students have also been actively involved in protests around police violence and supporting public schools. Arts and Letters recognizes the ins and outs of adolescence and we do our best to meet our young people where they are at so that the middle school years can be powerful learning years where our students can practice being powerful thinkers, healthy communicators, and active citizens.

Have a wonderful week,

Meg

CELEBRATIONS

8th: Fayone Brown
     Kayla Marino

7th: Justin Rogers Denniston
     Melanie Acosta
     Melanie Caballero

6th: Shania Akerson
     Skyla Gibbs

Staff: Ms. Swift
      Mr. Fischler
IN THE CLASSROOM

7th Grade Humanities
with Ms. Johnson

The seventh graders began their study of the Civil war investigating the question: “Did the South have a right to secede from the union?” They read primary and secondary resources on the topic. After this they discussed the issue in a Socratic seminar. The inside circle of students intelligently discussed their viewpoints using textual evidence and making inferences. The outside circle evaluated their peers’ discussion.

After this we studied different aspects of the Civil War and created a class museum. Each group was assigned a topic pertaining to it. Then they researched their topic, and created either a power point or poster board presentation. At the end of it they had to display in class.

The students then rotated around the room answering question on each topic using information from the class projects. It was impressive how well some of the groups worked together to create their final project. The day the projects were displayed the students were all engaged and read each other’s work with much enthusiasm.

This week and last week we investigated the question: “ Was Sherman’s use of total warfare against the South justified?” The students again read primary and secondary documents on the topic, and then discussed the topic in a Socratic seminar. The level of discussion in the class was impressive, and the discussion leaders in both classes did an amazing job keeping their groups focused and involved. Next week we will investigate the Emancipation Proclamation. I look forward to hearing the students’ discussion on the document.
We are coming to the end of our Iroquois study in fourth grade. On Friday, March 20th, we will be sharing our learning through historical journals, note catchers, wampums and models of longhouses. Our longhouses represent some of our learning around The Great Law of Peace. The Mohawk, Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida and Cayuga tribes were at war; three leaders approached each tribe, asking them to lay down their arms and join together, keeping their autonomy but working as one. This was the birth of the Iroquois nation. During our project, Building Community through Building Longhouses, students focused on working cooperatively, keeping their independent voices but collaborating on the design and execution of their longhouse. They focused on respecting one voice as they created their structures.
8th Grade Humanities
with Mr. DePasquale

Short Texts and Deep Analysis

Through the use of short texts, students in the 8th grade are sharpening their analytical reading and writing skills in humanities. Our current unit focuses on short stories and informational texts. This is an exciting unit because it exposes students to various authors and ideas in order to build their ‘educational capital’ before high school. The 8th graders’ time at Arts & Letters is now measured in weeks, and this adds to the excitement and urgency of our current unit. We believe it is critical for the students to recognize and know how to spend their educational capital in high school. Through this empowerment, the students will be able to walk into their English and history classes next year with the ability to discuss not only the works of Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, but to also debate the historical complexities of US foreign policy. This is not an insurmountable undertaking because our community has fostered and prepared the current 8th graders for years to meet this challenge.

This analytical work was clearly on display this week when the students read texts exploring the history and implications of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Drawing ideas from an in-depth Times’ article, a primary source letter written by scientists who developed the bomb petitioning President Truman not to use it, and enthralling excerpts from John Hersey’s Hiroshima, students pieced together complex ideas from distinct sources.
**A&L HAPPENINGS**

**Spring Thaw at Recess 3.9.15**

![Images of students playing basketball](image1)

![Images of students playing basketball](image2)

**Pi Recitation Contest Winner 3.11.15**

7th Grader Isha Hasan wins the school-wide contest by reciting 178 digits of Pi at Wednesday’s morning meeting, and is awarded a pie as prize.

![Images of students playing basketball](image3)

![Images of students playing basketball](image4)
Rally against Cuomo’s Education Agenda- 3.12.15

Pi Day Preparation- 3.13.15