Dear families,

Welcome to the 2016-2017 school year at Arts & Letters. As usual, our building got a thorough cleaning this summer, and a number of rooms even got some new paint. The floors have been buffed to a shine. Our staff has put up descriptions of personal learning moments from the summer and we are trying to create as welcoming an environment as we are able.

Before we went on summer break I had the honor to be on a panel at a Department of Education event with the educational scholar and activist Jonathan Kozol. If you are not familiar with his work, I strongly encourage you to check it out. Mr. Kozol’s writings about children in the South Bronx in the 80s and early 90s are what inspired me to become a teacher. His books Savage Inequalities, Rachel and Her Children, and Shame of a Nation are extraordinarily powerful. The passionate sense of justice that comes through in each of these works sets a high bar for those of us who feel committed to combating segregation and inequality here in New York City. It was a big deal for me to meet him and then talk with him in front of an audience of educators.

During Mr. Kozol’s presentation he asserted that, “children have the right to happiness,” sweetly clarifying that they need and deserve, “times of spontaneous and uncontrollable laughter.” He then challenged the audience to think of ways that schools can provide daily opportunities for students to smile, laugh, and be silly. Mr. Kozol knows all too well that the closed, urgent, and scripted standardized test-driven instruction that is so pervasive here in New York, and especially in schools with high percentages of low-income children of color, has greatly restricted opportunities for these times of joy to happen. He then emphatically asserted that building and safeguarding this happiness was vital for our young ones to grow to be “powerful and whole adults.”

Upcoming Events

Thursday September 15th- 8th grade High School Meeting 6pm-7pm

September 21st- PTA Kick off and Social 6pm-730pm

September 29th - Curriculum Night

October 3-4 Rosh Hashanah ( No School)

October 7th- Lower Grade Family Sing

Important Announcements

Forms/Paperwork- Your student received important paperwork in their backpacks last week, including:

- Lunch Form (everyone should fill it out, regardless of your lunch plans)
- Media/Walking trip form
- Blue Cards
- Medical Forms

Please return these ASAP.

Buses are running- However, it always takes OPT a few weeks to work out the issues. If you have questions about busing, see Ms. Williams in room 304.

Scooters- To leave a scooter outside room 309, it must be folded. This guideline allows us to store scooters in a safe and orderly way, so please make sure to deconstruct or fold it every day. Helmets should be stored in classrooms.
When Mr. Kozol finished speaking, each panelist was asked to share thoughts about his presentation. I talked about Mr. Kozol’s comments on children’s happiness and how important it was for schools to attend to the emotional lives of children. I said that I wanted to go back and revisit Arts & Letters’ vision statement to make our commitment to the healthy internal lives of our students stronger and more clearly defined.

While I love Arts & Letters’ utopian vision statement, Kozol’s talk wasn’t the first moment that I thought it could use some revisions to better address our dedication to children’s internal growth. The second paragraph of our vision statement states that:

“...we at Arts & Letters promise to cultivate joy, rigor, and meaning in each child’s education; an education built on a belief that through a rich and challenging questioning of the world, we can and will develop creative, confident, and courageous people who will make our world more just, enriched, and compassionate.”

The primacy that is placed on an education centered on “a rich and challenging questioning of the world” feels to me now too outward and narrow to describe what we do every day. Many of you over the years have talked to me about finding ways to bring greater mindfulness and reflection to the education that our children get here at Arts & Letters. I want us to work on this together.

First I want to get feedback to a revision to the vision statement that the staff made two weeks ago, hoping to bring greater importance to the development of our internal selves. We have added two words to the sentence above so that it now reads “an education built on a belief that through a rich and challenging questioning of the world and ourselves, we can...” We feel that this small addition elegantly gets at what we strive to accomplish at Arts & Letters. We want more time for all of us, both young and old, to grapple with the huge essential questions like “Who am I?” “What do I believe?” “What makes me happy?” or “How do I become ‘we’?” Times when we focus on these questions are opportunities for us to discover/uncover/recover our internal voices and passions.

Additionally, we want to work together with you to build more moments for happiness, quiet, and reflection in our young people’s day. This needs to be done at school and at home. There are many constraints on our time, so we want to start small. We are looking to lengthen routines that promote happiness, quiet, and/or reflection that you/we already use in our daily lives. Prioritizing these moments and prolonging them by 90 seconds or five minutes each day would be a profound change. This tiny time shift is not only doable, but creates a sense of satisfaction and success that leads to new routines and more of these opportunities. I think Mr. Kozol would agree with me when I say that creating a multitude of these small moments each day is a wonderful practice for the happy, resilient, and whole people we all want to grow into and to be.

We had a great first two days. I hope you enjoyed your weekend. See you tomorrow.

-John

Side Notes:

1) Thanks to the money raised by our PTA every room at Arts & Letters now has air conditioning in each room, so we should all be cooler during the hot September days to come. Our new portable air conditioners will also help us maintain comfortable room temperatures in the winter when our boilers fight to heat the building’s lower floors and wind up overheating the upstairs classrooms. This is a wonderful and very welcome improvement to our learning environment.

2) Attached you will find an informational flyer and application for the Churchill School and Center Reading Initiative after-school program for students in grades 1-3 in public schools in New York City who are struggling learning how to decode. The free program, which is funded by Foundation grants, is a 54-session program which begins in October, and they begin assessing applicants in late-September.
IN THE CLASSROOM

Willoughby 1st Grade
With Ms. Cabrera and Ms. Tyson

Movement and Theater
with Mr. Rolle and Myrtle
A & L HAPPENINGS

August Staff Institute 8.30-9.7
Learning the Lunchroom Routine
(A&L teachers support students by eating lunch in the cafeteria)

Recess Corner