Dear families,

For the past couple months the administrative team at Arts & Letters has been mulling over the issue of student use of phones at school. Lately we have become increasingly concerned about the impact these devices can have on friendships and emotional learning.

Our policy around the use of mobile phones has not changed since the school’s founding in 2006: during school hours, they must be turned off and out of sight. When this rule is broken, the phone is confiscated and returned at the end of the day. Traditionally we have made an exception during recess time. Ten years ago, few children owned their own phone, and most who did had a simple and relatively uninteresting flip phone. Over time, particularly the last two years, we have seen a sharp rise in the number of students carrying smartphones to school (at ever younger ages).

We understand the reassurance that mobile phones can provide when students travel to school or home unaccompanied by an adult. However, during recess use of a phone is a privilege, one we are beginning to question. Historically phones were not as interesting as the new smartphones, so students rarely bothered to pull them out -- they used recess to socialize and play. What are our kids missing out on when they choose to spend precious free time engaging a screen instead of their peers?

“...When my phone is in my pocket and on vibrate mode, unconsciously I’ll flinch when it vibrates. I even flinch when it doesn’t vibrate thinking that it vibrates. It ends the discussions [I am having] -- those nanoseconds of distraction I think have a hugely detrimental effect. Everywhere I look I see [these] constant, high-frequency flinches.”

--Jesse Jacobs, commentator and author, in the movie Minimalism

Upcoming Events

**January 12th**- SLT Meeting 3:30

**January 16th**- Martin Luther King Jr. Day (No School for Students)

**January 18th**- Dekalb Parks Share 9:15
Kindergarten Tour 9:15

**January 19th**- Willoughby Parks Share 9:15

**January 24th**- Middle Grade Interviews 4:30pm

**January 26th**- 4th & 6th Grade Roundtables (11:30 dismissal for grades 7-8)

**January 27th**- 3rd, 5th & 7th Grade Roundtables (11:30 dismissal for grades K-2, 4, 6, and 8)

**January 30th**- 8th Grade Roundtables (11:30 dismissal for grades 6-7)

**February 1st**- Winter Arts Expo
4:30-6:30 Visual Arts in gym
5:30-6: Music Performance for 5/6 and 7/8 electives
6-7pm: Theater Elective Performance
We want to involve A&L students in the creation of a new policy around smartphone use during recess. I feel that this is a great opportunity to bring our kids into the democratic process. In our school's vision statement, we emphasize our focus on growing stewards of a vibrant democracy. Our students need practice with self-governance, particularly around issues they have strong feelings about. Children have an intense attachment to their phones (as do adults, most of you would agree). Making these decisions can be hard.

Meg and I have begun to go into the 5th to 8th grade advisories to talk about how things might change. A range of proposals has come out of these discussions. One allows for ten minutes of phone use at the beginning of recess; another forbids phone use completely. A small number of students have dug their heels in and do not want a change of any kind. We are now discussing how we want to decide which rule to adopt. There are a lot really interesting questions coming up in these discussions. Questions like: Should we have a straightforward vote, with the majority winning? Should it be determined through a vote by grade? You would be happy to know that a couple of students asked whether or not parents should have the right to vote on this policy. I am looking forward to the process and feel pretty confident that our (the faculty) worries about the use of smart phones during recess will be adequately addressed by our student body.

Please feel free to write us and weigh in.

-John

P.S. Please check out the first issue of A&L Ink, written, edited, and illustrated by members of the new A&L Newspaper Club. Newspaper Club is open to 5th to 8th graders and is run by two parent volunteers, Bliss Broyard and Ayanna Behin. We are embarking on our second issue, devoted to community, in which we intend to profile various elected officials and local community members. We have four spots open for students, particularly 7th and 8th graders, and we would welcome another parent volunteer to help either with ad sales, visuals, or chaperoning reporting field trips. Please contact Bliss Broyard at bliss.broyard@gmail.com if you or your student is interested.

Thursday’s Book Talk

with Ms. Ballantine

At the heart of the play stands the ornately carved upright piano which, as the Charles family’s prized, hard-won possession, has been gathering dust in the parlor of Berniece Charles’s Pittsburgh home. When Boy Willie, Berniece’s exuberant brother, bursts into her life with his dream of buying the same Mississippi land that his family had worked as slaves, he plans to sell their antique piano for the hard cash he needs to stake his future. But Berniece refuses to sell, clinging to the piano as a reminder of the history that is their family legacy. This dilemma is the real "piano lesson," reminding us that blacks are often deprived both of the symbols of their past and of opportunity in the present.

Word of the Week

corroborate

: to support with evidence or authority

: make more certain

Celebrations for 1.6

5th Anastasia Sichel Hahn- SHoW
6th Lemaj Williams- Courage
7th Lucien Rahim- SHoW
8th Kayla McMillian- Confidence

Staff: Ms. Casey- Clarity
1st Grade with Ms. Song

The kids came back to school and slid back into the groove of school. They’ve been busy at work constructing their parks, writing stories about parks, and doing math about parks! We’ve settled on a share date. Although they wanted January 28th they’ve seen that they’ve been chugging away and will be ready to share on January 18th!

The pieces the students have made at home have been inspirational to others and have sparked a trickling of ideas! Collaborative work like this is so rewarding for me to witness as an educator. We’ve seen students work through disagreements, cry, compromise, laugh, be playful, and very importantly—enjoy their learning. The room gets messy and there’s a good solid buzz in the room. Mr. Allgood has come to visit a couple times to ask the students what they are working on and how it will be used or why it’s important.

What I’ve found very impressive with this group is there is a lot of intention in the pieces they build, the strokes that they paint, and the paper that they cut. These parks are truly researched, planned, and designed by children!
Some weeks ago I had the opportunity to learn about my students in advisory in a different way than we had ever shared. We begun a unit on Identity with a chart consisting of twelve descriptors which included race, culture, appearance/popularity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age.

The four questions asked were:

- Where do you feel the most safe and comfortable?
- Where do you have the most power and privilege?
- What is most important to you?
- Where do you feel the most unsafe or discriminated against?

The students further expressed why each issue was safe or unsafe to them and reflected on what experiences may have formed their perspectives. After going through and assigning the chart we spent day moving forward on each specific topic. Given what is going on in society’s current atmosphere, race and culture were the most pressing matters to talk about. As the conversation got started, stories of skin tone and perceptions, stereotypes and expectations, police/community relations were told out loud. These conversations not only included their experiences of the outside world around them but even the community that resides within the Arts and Letters building. I was impressed by the honesty and comfortability of speech the students were able to voice. To finish up our segment on Identity we will be making collages that tell a story of who they are and the experiences that make up their lives.
On December 22nd, we invited families into the classroom to participate in our 4th grade Arcade, our first math share of the year. In preparation for this share, students were hard at work, planning, designing, and now building their arcade games using recycled materials. We observed students applying a variety of skills through this process, including:

- measuring and recording lengths and widths of a variety of surfaces;
- calculating surface area and perimeter of rectangular objects;
- converting measurements to different scales;
- using protractors to measure angles;
- asking questions about design problems that they have to figure out;
- testing solutions to a problem through trial and error; and
- revising their models and designs based on new information.

In addition to these important mathematical skills and concepts, students worked together in teams and learned how to collaborate successfully with each other. We saw students:

- challenge each other’s thinking;
- offer each other new ideas;
- revise their thinking based on suggestions from their peers;
- support each other through frustration;
- balance voices among each other so all ideas are heard;
- resolve conflicts independently; and
- have fun :).

We have been impressed with how much students have been able to do in a very short time (we introduced this project just two weeks ago). We consider this an informal share, giving students an opportunity to celebrate and discuss their work while having fun and raising money for a good cause (TBD after the share).
A & L HAPPENINGS

6th Grade Egypt Museum
Adelphi Tree Share

6th Grade Jamaica Bay Documentary Screening

Notable Shirts
LG Family Sing

Recess Corner