



## **2017-18 Curriculum Report**

### **December 2017 Entry**

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#### **Community and Daily Routines**

The first month of the school year was focused mainly on building community norms and cohesiveness. To intentionally support this goal students spent all of their time the first week in our classroom, digging deep into the essential question we are examining this year, how do we make the world more sustainable? We began with a classic anthropological reading, *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema*. In this reading, originally published in 1956, anthropologist Horace Miner describes the “strange rituals” of the Nacirema (American spelled backwards). By describing our culture using generalized and stigmatized terms, he highlights that each culture, when viewed from the outside, can be seen as strange. We then used this concept to reflect critically on Miquon culture and the underlying and often unexamined practices we go through on a daily basis.

It was from this deep understanding of the creation and practice of culture that we began to develop our own classroom norms and practices. Using a constructivist approach, students identified their learning needs and Miquon practices and rituals that work and they find challenging. We also identified what we need from each other to move forward as a community of successful learners. We followed up this week of activity with a class trip to Refreshing Mountain retreat center for a day of community building activities and exercises.

After our first nine days as an insular group we began to settle into a regular rhythm and routine with specialists and half groups. Each day in our classroom (with the exception of Wednesdays where we have an all building 5/6 sing) begins with morning meeting. Morning meeting is a time to center ourselves into a mindful place where we are ready and eager to learn. Many days, morning meeting begins with a reading or question that encourages deeper discussion. It is also a time where students are given direct instruction in social skills.

Students spend most mornings either in math class or with a specialist before returning to class for choice time. Jeri and I firmly believe in empowering students to take ownership over their own spaces and routines. As a result, students have their own jobs during various transitions during the day including taking care of our class chickens, setting out and cleaning up snack for the day and cleaning tables after each lunch.

Students spend the rest of their day in various groupings ranging from whole group, with all fourteen students to half group working as a smaller group of seven. The activities seen in these time periods can range vastly from students building their own scales as teams, writing grants with our director of development, expanding their sense of the physical world with geography or graphing any number of issues currently facing the world. Regardless of the way the rest of our day is spent, students almost always end the day with a student led version of math bingo, a beloved tradition started by Lynn.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

Our social/emotional curriculum centers around both the current needs of the classroom (responsive) as well as the emerging needs required to be a successful middle school student (proactive). Broadly, our curriculum is divided into several domains: conflict resolution, communication patterns, self-awareness or mindfulness and leadership.

At the heart of conflict resolution lies a need to understand why conflicts happen and what patterns of communication commonly lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings. We began the year reading a section from the book *Difficult Conversations* from the Harvard Negotiation Project. In this book, students were exposed to a conflict, as well as the internal narratives that each participant in that conflict had about themselves and about each other. Through this reading and a TED talk by Chimamanda Adichie called *The Danger of a Single Story*, students learned that we all carry our own narratives about the world, but the existence of a “single truth” is a myth created by our ego. Thus, the goal in most interactions should be to search for other’s truths as much as it is to explain our own.

As members of the fifth and sixth grade community, our students naturally see themselves as leaders. To support their leadership capacity, we introduced students to John Maxwell’s book, *The Five Levels of Leadership*. Through this reading, student’s learned that they occupy a position of leadership (Maxwell’s lowest level). In this place, people only follow you as far as your position extends. To become a high level leader, Maxwell argues that people must follow you because of what you represent. Connecting this to our curriculum, students looked at social activists and identified their guiding principles. We are currently in the process of writing biographical sketches of these activists and how their life events shaped the emergence of their guiding principles. This will couple with our social curriculum as we begin the process of writing our own guiding principles just before and right after winter break.

Underlying all of these concepts stands the skill of being self-aware enough to practice these ideals. We have been working with the students to recognize their own patterns of behavior using self inventories, mindfulness practices and individual goal setting. Self-awareness is both the most challenging and important part of transitioning students from a conceptual understanding of social/emotional skills to a habitual understanding. At the same time, this is the most rewarding part of this process.

## Language Arts

At the fifth and sixth grade level reading and writing skills and concepts are beginning to overlap in many areas. As we read, we are not just simply looking to understand a text and gain fluency in reading. We are also looking at readings to gain critical insights into the decisions authors make when creating these pieces of writing, particularly in non-fiction texts.

In examining our essential question of “How do we create a more sustainable world?”, students have been reading a wide range of nonfiction, sustainability related texts that they organized into topics on the environment, economics and society. Creating a more sustainable world is a challenging task that requires students to read and understand complex texts, record and synthesize information and develop theories using textual evidence as support.

As a way to both this skill, develop effective writing techniques and deconstruct texts, students were introduced to the Cornell notetaking method. This method asks students to identify the single key idea that authors are aiming to communicate in each paragraph and differentiate it from the supporting evidence presented in the rest of the paragraph. By using this method of textual analysis, students are gaining an understanding that authors write to communicate a central idea, that this idea is broken down into key ideas and that each key idea is supported by details and facts.

These skills have been immensely useful as students have begun writing their biography portraits of influential activists. Reading about the lives of these activists, students identified key turning points in activist’s life that influenced their core ideologies as well as their actions. Reflecting on these major turning points, students synthesized this evidence into a thesis statement about their activist’s guiding principle. At this point, students were well on their way to creating an outline for their papers and either began the process of writing or realized that they needed to go back to their original sources to find more evidence.

In addition to creating outlines for our written pieces prior to writing, we examined three different biographies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. Each of the biographies featured different aspects of Dr. King’s life, development or strengths. These readings were followed by discussions on the author’s focus, style and main thesis. In writing their biographies, students referenced back to these texts to determine the stylistic form their narrative will take.

In terms of Literature, students have been reading books that all relate to environmental sustainability and/or interactions between the humans and natural world. These books include *The Last Wild*, a novel set in a dystopian future with no animals, *The Wild Robot*, in which a robot crash lands on a deserted island and learns to interact with the natural world and, *Saint Louis Armstrong Beach*, in which a boy struggles to find his dog after Hurricane Katrina. In addition to the various novels we have been reading at home, the whole class has been gathering periodically to read *The Seventh Most Important Thing* a story about a boy who finds beauty and meaning in the trash that surrounds him.

## Math

During the first months of school students have math in their individual classrooms. Around the beginning of October all fifth and sixth grade students are broken into around seven or eight mini-groups based broadly on learning style, need and orientation. This means that students get a rich mix of math concepts that apply directly to the broad themes that they are studying for the year as well as practice working on skills and concepts through direct instruction and investigation.

The lunch sales that our classes create as a part of the 5/6 program represent a valuable service to the community, an authentic environment to practice real-world mathematical skills and also function as a fundraiser to pay for our end of the year trip. As a result of these goals, students spent a lot of our in-class math time creating a new lunch menu and completing calculations to estimate the net revenue we could expect to collect from these sales.

Our students decided that they wanted to poll the other classrooms at Miquon and worked with Jeri to design a form. After getting all the data back from the various classrooms, students produced stacked bar graphs which allowed us to analyze both how individual grade bands felt about each menu item as well as project an estimate of what total sales could look like. While students were completing this data analysis in class, at home they were calculating the cost of individual portion sizes for each meal. Using several supermarket circulars as well as websites that compare shopping prices, student's recorded the minimum, maximum, and range of prices they discovered and also used this data to develop a national average price for each item. From this data we were able to calculate the overall average cost of materials of a meal, overall lowest cost of materials of a meal and overall highest cost of materials of a meal.

Students also used a great deal of math to investigate our overall essential question of "How do we make the world a more sustainable place?". To begin this investigation students examined the book, *If the World Were a Village* which breaks down world-wide statistics on literacy, poverty, access to healthcare, pollution and other sustainability related topics into factors of 100. This approach created a great opportunity for students to graph and analyze large scale data that is often challenging to do when looking at numbers in the billions.

As October arrived and students broke into individual math groupings, fifth graders tackled a wide range of topics from continuing to develop and solidify a conceptual understanding of multiplication and division to applying these functions to solve complex word problems. Fifth grade math groups also spent time working to draw conceptual connections between division and fractions with some groups progressing to completing more complex functions with fractions.

In sixth grade students applied their understanding of multiplication and division to solve multi-step problems using order of operations, were introduced to exponential notation and in some groups, had the opportunity to compare the difference between graphing linear versus

exponential equations to help build their conceptual understanding of exponential growth. Sixth graders also spent time working with multiplying and dividing fractions and mixed numbers with many groups baking delicious treats for the building (the best real world application of this skill!). Regardless of grade level or math range, all students spent a great deal of time playing math games and examining fun and challenging problems that extended their mathematical reasoning abilities.

### **Social Studies**

As previously mentioned, our students this year are examining the essential question of, “How do we make the world more sustainable?” We began this investigation by letting students know that we would be taking real-world action steps both as a class and as individuals to make the world a more sustainable place. At the same time, solving real world problems can be complex and often times activists can create more problems as they attempt to develop solutions. The key to this kind of work is research, act, collect data and reflect.

After developing a broad framework for our processes this year we examined a large amount of statistical data using several texts including, *If the World Were a Village*, *What’s Really Happening to Our Planet*, *What Do You Do With a Problem?*, *It’s Your World*, *The Human Footprint*, as well as many other articles from Junior Scholastic, the New York Times and various other news sources. In addition to these print resources we examined ten thousand years of human rights through a video produced by the United Nations, ran a brief poverty simulation in which we attempted to make ends meet on a minimum wage salary and, investigated the current protests in Charlottesville. All of the case studies that we examined were designed to give students a look into the broad range of challenges facing the world.

From this work we developed hundreds of sub questions that we organized into four main groups: activism, protest and change; society, politics and government; economics and money; and environment, energy and nature. After some discussion, students determined that digging into issues relating to environment energy and nature would be the best place to begin, with a specific focus on Making Miquon more sustainable. Over the last several weeks our students have been studying issues such as the impact of recycling, methods to repurpose trash, how to reduce consumption, the effectiveness of alternative energy sources and more. We were also joined by parent and Sustainable Landscaper Sarah Endriss for two data collection sessions and charette. In the coming weeks the class will be deciding their first action which we will take in the spring.

In addition to our all class work, students have been identifying and working towards their own individual action research projects related to sustainability. The issues students are working on include examining solutions to the heat island effect, causes of deforestation, improving electric car batteries, comparing organic and conventional farming methods and more. The main goal of these projects are to introduce students to the concept of action research, the need to support ideas with evidence and practicing real-world skills that are needed to create change.

## **Looking Ahead**

As we look towards the winter, the class is preparing to transition into examining sustainability through the lens of society, politics and government. Through this study we will explore the societal structures that help humans to organize and sustain themselves and how these structures emerged historically beginning with the neolithic revolution. There will also be time spent looking at the issues that challenge our ability to sustain our societies such as racism, political divisiveness and economic inequality. As we emerge with a deeper sense of these issues we will also work towards solving some of the problems that are right in our backyard.