

August 24, 2009

Dear Families,

Welcome to my first Monday E-Letter!

This has been a wonderful day. As our Annual Giving slogan says, "IT'S ABOUT THEM." The return of our children to empty halls and silent classrooms is like a sudden coursing of water through dry riverbeds.

Margay and Becky did a superb job this morning of organizing Tiger Tracks and it was a great way to begin the year.

There is so much for us to tell you about our plans for this year. Faculty and staff have been working extraordinarily hard all summer to be ready for this day, and I have felt so proud of the collegiality and joy that has characterized our preparations for the opening of school.

Every Monday I will be writing to you to talk about some aspect of our life at St. Luke's. Each Wednesday our Associate Heads of School, Nancy Harwell and Cindy Cabello, will send out "TigerTalk", with details of the week and news about their students and teachers. We want to make sure that the whole community is aware of the work, the striving, and the joy, that bursts within our walls.

Today I want to address two developments in our program. The first is the departmentalization of all middle school grades 5th to 8th.

The departmentalization of Middle School is of great consequence. In essence, staffing of this entire division now follows a high school model rather than an elementary school model. This transition will be both exciting and challenging for our 5th graders in particular, as all transitions must be for them to be meaningful growing experiences. We will take care of their needs.

I feel the most significant benefit of this departmentalization is that our teachers bring a sharper, more defined expertise to their individual subject areas. They now have the opportunity to teach their favorite discipline, with the very particular modes of intellectual and imaginative seeking that it entails. It was love for that discipline which guided them to consider in the first place a teacher's life. Departmentalization will allow our middle school faculty to more easily participate in discipline-specific professional growth with others in the same field. Such networking is crucial to maintaining freshness and sustaining a faculty culture of continual learning.

The second change is that we are bringing rigorous benchmarking to math teaching in Lower School, and are offering some more strenuous math classes in earlier grades to those Middle School students for whom a more astringent math

experience is appropriate. In Lower School we want to clearly define what children must master by the end of a given grade. At the end of the year they will be given blind assessments that will alert us to any gaps or weaknesses that must be remedied.

This development is only the first step in an examination of our math program that Alison Urbanowski, our Math Chair, is leading next year. For instance, we will be studying Singapore Math to learn if it would be appropriate for our children; this teaching method and textbook series were developed in Singapore, the nation that regularly wins first place in the competition that judges the strength of a nation's math education. The method places a high emphasis on "mental math," and encourages students to solve problems that are not just simple applications of the problem that the teacher has put up on the smart board.

Our guiding spirit in math teaching at St. Luke's is simple: **we want our children to be creative problem-solvers in their mathematics classes.** We want them to experience the joy that comes from meeting a challenge, from finding a solution to a riddle that at first seemed unbreakable, and from learning that they can perceive meaning in the world, creating and building, through the austerity of numbers. Such an experience in middle school math classes will prepare them for high school and university, indeed for their entire professional lives.

For them to be creative problem solvers they must face challenges that will test them and which yet are not clearly beyond their powers. Nothing is more deadly in a math class than to be lost because the conversation is conducted in another language, or just plain bored because you worked out the answer ten minutes before. This is Fran Lebowitz on the first experience: "Stand firm in your refusal to remain conscious during algebra. In real life, I assure you, there is no such thing as algebra." This is Bertrand Russell: "Mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty..." Umm...

At issue is that little phrase, "rightly viewed". Our goal at St. Luke's is to offer a math education that is as congruent as possible with the present capacities of our students. All students will continue to graduate from 8th grade having completed a rigorous Algebra I course. This means that they are firmly on the path to studying calculus in high school; and in the college race, that is the finish line our poor children must race to, whether we wish it or not.

Yet we also have students whose conceptual grasp of the subject is such that they can study Algebra I earlier in their developmental growth, and we want to ensure that these students have the chance to challenge themselves in an appropriate manner. Thus the Middle School math program will evolve over the coming years to the point that we will offer as a part of the curriculum, if it is needed, Algebra I in 7th grade, and a complete year of Geometry in 8th grade. This year we will also run a class in which a group of 7th graders will make a difficult leap to Algebra I - not because we are interested in acceleration for its own sake, but because this is the

class that these students need to take to match facility and understanding with challenge.

Tampering with a math program is always a move that is fraught with concerns. In part this is because math has become a key marker on the high school transcript that will help determine future college acceptances. In that regard no student or parent at St. Luke's should be concerned.

At a deeper level, I think, ability grouping in math can stir troubled memories for some of us who are now parents, fears that we will introduce divisiveness into our community, and most importantly, that our children will just "settle" into whatever box a group of adults have decided fits them, and never break out again in their educational career.

We are very aware of these worries, for they are all legitimate. How then have we addressed them?

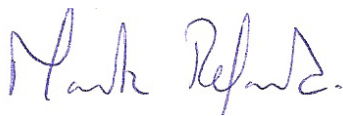
How are decisions made? A broad range of factors are examined: a group of teachers and administrators examined Stanford test scores, SAI scores, algebra readiness scores, academic performance in class and teacher ratings of each student.

The math program will be as fluid as possible: a child's progress will be reviewed in 3-weekly cycles, with a significant review at the end of the first semester. Classes in the same grade will use the same textbook: this means that changing classes is not made more complicated by a change in book or style of enquiry.

Above all, in making class assignment decisions, the benefit of the doubt is consciously given to any child on the cusp: our goal is not to balance classes but to empower our students with appropriate challenges.

I would ask you to look back at those battling quotations and remember that one of the things we must teach our children is that their lives and spirits are too large and too interesting and too vital to be defined by any one academic discipline. There are other qualities that matter more: do we work hard and push forward with the team, are we good friends, when someone needs our help do we offer our service?

Lastly, I want to let you know that Mr. Weinberg, our Chess Teacher, will not be returning to St. Luke's. The Chess program is highly valued in our community, and it will commence as soon as our search for a new teacher is completed.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Reford". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr. Mark Reford