“EVEN A BRICK WANTS TO BE SOMETHING”
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Dr. Sarah K. Tyler, UC Santa Cruz
https://datayze.com/readability-analyzer.php
CARRYING LEARNING FORWARD
Culture Shift
Division General Topics 48%

Division Specific Topics 40%

Local/Current Events Topics 12%

Division General Topics 48%
March 30, 2017

Dear Middle School Families,

My earliest memory of standardized test-taking is not a good one. Dresden Elementary School. 5th grade. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The ITBS.

A nervous girl threw up during the administration of the test. The gooey, brown pellets in the girl’s vomitus drew immediate attention. As if part of the standardized test, students raced to identify the mysterious dark blobs.

   A. “Eww. Her teeth were pushed out with the puke.”
   B. “No way, those are rabbit droppings.”
   C. “Gross--maybe they are pieces of her stomach.”
   D. None of the above.

Teachers were unsettled. The testing environment had been comprised. Students were asked to close their test booklets, to tuck the scantron sheet neatly inside, and to put down their No. 2 pencils. Students were then dismissed to recess while Mrs. Potter called the ITBS hotline to get instructions on how to proceed.

CSN middle school students will take two standardized tests in April: the Writing Assessment Program (WrAP) on April 11 and the Comprehensive Testing Program (CTP) on April 17-19. Both tests are products of the Educational Records Bureau (ERB). The WrAP measures writing achievement. The CTP is "a rigorous assessment for high achieving students." Again, the CTP is a hard test. A typical question, for example, can hinge on pre-existing knowledge:

   eider:______::cedar: tree
   snow
   plant
   duck
   pine

Many factors can influence a student’s performance on standardized tests: confidence, testing experience, life experience, attitude, under-thinking, over-thinking, nerves, wellness, and so on. In short, the results are not the sum of any student’s intelligence or future potential. The results from the WrAP and CTP are helpful in assessing individual growth from year-to-year and are the first steps in readying students for future testing situations, such as the SAT and the ACT—in some cases, the GRE and the LSAT.

In the coming weeks, we will try to calm any test-taking anxiousness with information and some practice. And I will tell students, from personal experience, not to eat Raisin Bran for breakfast.

Always,

Colleen O. Potocki
Dear Middle School Families,

I had the privilege of observing a Tom Geyer art class this week.

Mr. Geyer was teaching 6th grade students how to build a perpetual compass to use as a drawing tool for an intricate art project. What Mr. Geyer was asking students to do was insanely hard, requiring complex math, exacting measurement, and meticulous execution. Mr. Geyer was leading students towards frustration and error. The students, however, were ecstatic, leaning forward on stools, asking questions, some even requesting if they could modify the assignment, upping the difficulty level of an already difficult venture.

Mr. Geyer was fearless. The students were fearless. Even though the next few art classes promised the active use of erasers and a scrap heap of flawed beginnings, the mistakes were packaged as part of the adventure. Insanity started to look like beauty. The crazy person in me wanted to interrupt the class and tell Mr. Geyer’s students that today in art class they had discovered the secret of life (or at very least a sane approach to living): dream big, expect mistakes, enjoy both. I stayed quiet. Pointing out the profundity of a moment in the moment tends to ruin the profundity of the moment—with middle school students and adults.

That evening, my son Teddy, a 6th grade student at Community School of Naples, and I were driving home from school. He was happily telling me about his school day and ended with this thought: “The world is a complex place. Middle school is when you realize its complexity.” For a second time that day, I stayed quiet, though internally thanking his CSN teachers for providing him the structure and space to prompt such a realization on his own.

I wish teachers, students and families a beautiful and restful three-day Labor Day weekend! The first 12 days of school have been wonderful and we have a way to go.

Always,

Colleen O. Potocki

The average blog post length is 1,050 words (Source: Orbit Media)
Local/Current Event Topic—Relocation Twinges

August 31, 2018

Dear Middle School Families,

The Franklin Cider Mill in Franklin, Michigan opens the Saturday before Labor Day each year and closes Thanksgiving weekend. Teddy, his sisters, and I have visited Franklin Cider Mill on opening and closing days for the last 16 years—and Jim for pretty much his entire life. Not this weekend though. We moved. Even though we have lived in Naples for a year, I have learned the feelings accompanying relocation play out over time.

We have done a good job growing our Naples traditions. We go to the Naples Farmer's Market every Saturday morning followed by a walk down to Naples Pier. There are no Franklin Cider Mill cinnamon doughnuts at the pier, but watching bottlenose dolphin swim has fewer calories. Okay, confession—I typically eat a spinach empanada at the Farmer's Market, so I have traded a food outing for food outing.

We are still working through our local to-do list—a compendium of SW Florida must-see, must-do advice from colleagues and CSN families. CSN Senior Accountant and Swim Coach Lisa Brice recommended Gatorama Hold and Hatch. Gatorama was opened in 1957 by a local legend named Cecil Jacobs who is referred to as a "scallywag" on the attraction website. Jacobs said, "...that when Yankees came to Florida they wanted to see three things: the beach, an orange grove, and an alligator." Gatorama has passed through a few owners since Jacobs and is now a research partner with University of Florida. The first annual Gatorama Hatching Festival was held in 2006.

Jim, Teddy, and I along with visiting daughter Corrine made the trek to Palmdale, Florida for the 2018 Hatching Festival last weekend. It lived up to its published promise: "a once in a lifetime opportunity to hatch a baby gator in the palm of your hand." We each hatched our own gator. And, when doing so, we each had that new parent giddiness as if having given birth to our own baby gator. Jim may remember the event differently.

With the $32.95 per person ticket price, a hatch-parent gets naming rights. I named my baby gator Suki Thai Stanislaus. In elementary school, my sister Jane and I dreamed of getting a puppy and naming it Suki Thai Stanislaus. Jim named his gator Wojtek—after a Syrian bear adopted by Polish troops during WW II. Corrine struggled to choose between two names: Tater and Potater. She ultimately decided to go with the more formal Potater. Teddy named his gator Owlbear—after his favorite fictional creature in Dungeons and Dragons.

This year CSN middle school has 23 new 6th grade students, 12 new 7th grade students, and 8 new 8th grade students. Some of the new CSN families are local or at least have been in the Naples area for a while; some have recently relocated to Naples from California, Vermont, Maine, and even farther. All in all, I love living in Naples despite the occasional, unexpected relocation twinge. I encourage new-to-the-area families to begin making a local to-do list—be sure to include Shark Valley, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, and the CSN Parent Association Meeting on September 7 at 8:15AM in the SU Dining Hall (shameless plug). And if you hurry, the 2018 Gatorama Hatching Festival runs through this weekend.

I wish you a beautiful, three-day Labor Day weekend!

Always,

Colleen O. Potocki
Ground Rules
OPENING THOUGHT

PUBLIC OR PERSONAL STORY

SCHOOL STORY OR INFORMATION

CLOSING THOUGHT
OPENING THOUGHT
PUBLIC OR PERSONAL STORY
William Henry Harrison, the 9th President of the United States, was the first president to run a full-blown election campaign; he even had a campaign manager, a man by the name of Nicholas Biddle. Biddle created a whole campaign image for Harrison. He presented Harrison as a simple, rural man living in a log cabin. Jeff Greenfield, a writer for Time, outlines the Harrison campaign in his article “I’m Just that Simple”:

One of the classic image-driven presidential campaigns featured William Henry Harrison as the embodiment of rural virtues, the candidate of the log cabin and hard cider, defeating the incumbent Martin Van Buren, who was accused of dandified dress and manners.

Biddle also advised Harrison, as noted by writer Nicholas Von Hoffman in The New Republic, “The more you talk, the less you should say.”

It was notable that Harrison even talked to the people (the voters) because up to this point in history it was considered beneath a presidential candidate to campaign on his own behalf. Other campaign strategies included a slogan, “Tippecanoe and Tyler, too,” campaign souvenirs—a handkerchief with Harrison’s face on it, miniature log cabin whiskey bottles, and Tippecanoe shaving soap—as well as slogan balls, described in Time magazine as “10 to 12 feet across—made from rope, leather or tin, and covered ... with paper slogans. They rolled the giant balls from town to town to symbolize Harrison’s snowballing popularity.” Strategies used in Harrison’s presidential campaign are still around.
PERSONAL STORY

Today’s event, reminded me of my own dad. I was brought up in a household where there was right and wrong, no gray areas. My dad was larger than life—a 1960’s dad. He only had an 8th grade education, but had started his own business, and worked from 6AM-7PM Monday-Saturday. He was successful and, to be honest, intimidating. Even when he played with me and my siblings, there was an edge of fear—a good fear, though still scary. He made up this game to play with us called “blanket monster.” He would turn off all the lights in the house. Tell us to hide. He then put a blanket over his head, and a howling blanket monster would try to find us. We loved it but I am sure I wet my pants once or twice.

A particular exchange I had with my dad when I was 13 years old has always stuck. One Saturday morning, before my dad left for his office, he told me to clean the garage. I worked from morning until after lunch, making sure the garage looked spotless and orderly. When my dad got home, he said, “Well, let’s take a look at how you did on the garage.” My dad surveyed the garage, his eyes moving from corner to corner, finally resting on a sizeable pile of long boards. “Colleen,” he said, “move one of those boards.” I walked over to the pile of heavy boards and moved one. Underneath the board was some dirt and a few leaves. I had not thought to clean under the neatly stacked boards. My dad said in a calm, resonating voice, “Colleen, if you’re going to do something, don’t do it half-assed.”

I felt my failure. My dad went into dinner. I stayed and dragged the boards out of the garage and swept under them. Weirdly, though the moment also felt wonderful. I was guiltily thrilled. “Half-assed.” My dad had used “adult language” with me. The first and only time. In my head, in that moment, I became an adult. Maybe a half-assed adult but an adult. My dad would probably dislike that this is the memory that stays close in my mind and heart.

EXAMPLE
SCHOOL STORY OR INFORMATION
I went on my first Teen Angel excursion this Tuesday. I was a little worried as I traveled on a bus to Walmart filled with 8th grade students who carried envelopes of money to buy gifts. Teenagers, money, shopping.

As we entered Walmart, students in pairs went in search of gifts for a child with little more to go on than name and clothing size: Stella, size 5. Some students had only gender and size: male, size 8. The near anonymity mattered little to students. Each student team readily adopted “their child” and tried to imagine the particulars that were missing.

It immediately became apparent that our students did not just want to buy gifts but also wanted to somehow give happiness with their purchases. They did not want to fail a child. They felt the vulnerability that comes with trying to give a gift and a feeling wrapped together in one package.

Students were thoughtful and mulled over gift-giving quandaries:

- If you were a child would you rather have many small gifts or a few larger gifts?
- What if I pick Spiderman and he likes Superman?
- What if I do not have enough money for what I want to buy?
- Is Play Doh too messy to give as a gift?
- Do you think this stuffed animal is soft enough?
- Who invented size 6X?

Two musically gifted boys looked longingly at a guitar they wanted to buy their 4-year old. New fathers with big dreams. I found myself telling students to make sure to get a pair of underwear for their child. I was remembering my childhood spent wearing Salvation Army clothes and underwear from a drawer shared with two sisters.
CLOSING THOUGHT
CLOSING THOUGHT

Opening (Personal Story)
Even though I am an English teacher, I still sometimes feel a rookie when it comes to textual analysis—as in interpreting the meaning of the texts I receive on my cellphone. My older sister Jennifer texted me the following message on New Year’s Eve: “Happy New Year.” The text instantly felt off. It felt cold—as if my sister was electronically reminding me of her superiority: first daughter trumps third daughter; 5 feet, 8 inches outdoes 5 feet, 7.5 inches; federal judge beats middle school principal. Why not “Happy New Year!” with a warm, accepting exclamation point? In a millisecond, I was emotionally affected by a three word text, because the sender selected a period over an exclamation point. The lingering baggage of our childhood came with that period.

Body (School Story)
As a teacher and administrator, I know quite well the highs and lows of emotion that middle school students experience as they begin to navigate cellphone usage and social media, both as sender and receiver. I also know quite well the concern and accompanying raw emotion that parents experience when their child is caught in the middle of a painful, hurtful text or post situation. An electronic communication “incident” is a near-avoidable coming of age experience for iGen students. iGen?

Just before Winter Break, CSN parent Ellen Goldberg, mother of 7th grade student Max Goldberg, gave me a wonderful book to read: iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood, by Jean M. Twenge, PhD. I loved this book! Yes, exclamation point. While the title is a little over the top, the book expertly defines and explores the research-based trends of the iGen generation, meaning students born from 1995 to 2015; in short, babies born into a world with Internet, never existing in a world without it (iGen immediately following Millennials). As a mother of a 6th grade student, I am glad to have read this book. It will inform my parenting and, by extension, help Teddy embrace the possibilities of a connected world and perhaps help him also avoid some of the electronic pitfalls that might come with being an 11 year-old in 2018. As Ms. Goldberg suggested the book to me, I enthusiastically recommend it to CSN parents.

Along the same topical lines, CSN parents are invited to hear Josh Ochs, a social media safety expert, speak on the topic of “Smart Social” at the Headmaster’s Roundtable On January 10 at 8:15AM in the Lecture Hall of the Student Union. Additionally, Mr. Ochs will be presenting to middle school students that same afternoon, discussing positive and polite usage of social media.

Closing (Circularity)
I wish you a beautiful weekend. And a Happy New Year. Kidding. Happy New Year!
WHY?
Whatever good things we build end up building us.

– Jim Rohn
Professional Identity

TEACHER

ADMINISTRATOR
WHAT ARE MY STORIES?
WHAT ARE YOUR STORIES?
#2. INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT

Architecture starts when you carefully put two bricks together. There it begins.

– Ludwig Mies van der Roche
The door handle is the handshake of the building.

– Juhani Pallasmaa
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Colleen,
Somehow I made it through 55 years without hearing anyone call the end of the bread the heel. I have always known it as the crust. With a little research, I discovered most people do call it the heel, however most people from Michigan call it the crust. My grandpa used to trick us into eating it by saying it grows hair on your chest, which I guess seemed like a good thing to a young boy.

Thanks to the university of Wisconsin for sorting that out!
https://www4.uwm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/staticmaps/q_111.html

Doug,
Thank you for the word maps. My parents are from Canada so maybe I picked heel up from them. I told Teddy about the hair on the chest lore. He giggled.

Colleen,
How funny - my grandpa immigrated to Canada, where my mother was born (Windsor Ontario) from the UK before coming to the US much later. For unrelated reasons, ***** and ***** were born in Toronto, but Brent came to Florida when he was 4 months old.

What do you call the end of a loaf of bread?

a. end (17.29%)
b. heel (59.15%)
c. crust (15.21%)
d. nose (0.17%)
e. butt (3.53%)
f. shpitzel (0.05%)
g. I have no word for this (1.97%)
h. other (2.63%)
(10665 respondents)
That was a beautiful message in the weekly news. For me it was my headmistress, Mrs. Lim, who made me head prefect in primary 6. I didn't realize she had been watching for 7 years!.....

We have all had a friend like Tracy!

Hi Colleen, Just an idea, here is a topic that maybe you would write about in your weekly address to parents...

Your Weekly Window made me laugh out loud twice, and I was crying laughing at the end. Don't reply. I know you get a million emails.

Just a note to let you know how much I enjoy your Weekly Window pieces. They are very thoughtful, and provide helpful insights into middle school happenings.

Your letter was beautiful, funny, and endearing. I am sorry I did not realize your mom was in the area hit hard by Michael, but I'm so glad to hear your family is safe.

Thanks for the Dad story. I never thought I'd see “half assed” in the MS WW. The point was well made and the imagery of the story was perfect.

Colleague Connections
#4. REFLECTION
“EVEN A BRICK WANTS TO BE SOMETHING”