



## February Newsletter 2009

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[www.friendsschoolofportland.org](http://www.friendsschoolofportland.org)

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Link to Giving & Donations Online  
<http://www.friendsschoolofportland.org/giving>



3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Red Day with GBSD

### News

**Website** has new structure and new features. Check it out!

- <http://www.friendsschoolofportland.org/>
- <http://www.friendsschoolofportland.org/featured-auction-items-services>
- <http://www.friendsschoolofportland.org/summer-adventure-program>

For those in the Portland area, *Aon Center for Innovative Bodywork & Holistic Skincare* in Falmouth will again offer a day of massages and facials on Saturday, March 21 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with all proceeds benefiting FSP. To make an appointment call 781-2370

**Mime and dancer**, Karen Montanaro, will be artist-in residence at FSP and Governor Baxter School for the Deaf (GBSD) in the last two weeks of March. She and the students will have a culminating performance, open to the public, on Friday, March 27 beginning at 6 p.m. Admission is free to families from the schools and for others \$10 for adults, \$5 for children. This is funded in part by a grant from the Maine Arts Commission, an independent state agency funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The **3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Auction & Brunch** is Saturday, April 4 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Admission is free and includes brunch appetizers, children's programs, live music, and, of course, a fantastic selection of items and services. Deadline for donations to the auction: March 4.

### Calendar

|  |            |   |
|--|------------|---|
| February Break   | NO CLASSES | Monday, February 16 – Friday, February 20 |
| <b>Community Chorus rehearsal</b>                              |            | <b>Monday, February 23, 3 p.m.</b>        |
| Potluck dinner & <b>Contra Dance</b>                           |            | Friday, February 27, 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.     |
| <b>with the band, Crooked Stovepipe</b>                        |            | <b>6:30 – 8:30 p.m.</b>                   |
| Board of Directors Meeting                                     |            | Tuesday, March 3, 5:30 p.m.               |
| <b>FSPPA Program: Sex Ed for Parents</b>                       |            | <b>Wednesday, March 11, 6-8 p.m.</b>      |
| <b>with Real Life Real Talk facilitators</b>                   |            |   |
| Professional Day   | NO CLASSES | Friday, March 13                          |
| <b>Aon Therapeutic Massage Fundraiser</b>                      |            | <b>Saturday, March 21</b>                 |
| Voices Off! mime & dance                                       |            | Friday, March 27, 6 p.m.                  |
| <b>with Karen Montanaro &amp; children from FSP &amp; GBSD</b> |            |   |

## Reflections from the Head of School

One of the reasons that I considered coming to FSP was the realization that I would have a steep learning curve. I was at a point in my career where I was content with my decision to return to teaching full-time after 14 years as a dean of students and I felt that I had crested a hill. In taking an unexpected turn off the road, so to speak, I saw an opportunity to stretch myself to be that "life long learner" that we want our children to become. I would "let my life speak," as Quakers often put it. I also knew that at a very small school, life would not be dull. The head of school could be called on to do everything from unclogging the toilet to greeting major donors. I was advised to remember which hand did what.

One area that has taken far more of my attention than I had imagined has been the web-side of life. Without getting into the gory details of a complicated birth, we have a newly structured website. While it does not look very different from the old one, it has given me and, better yet, others on staff, the ability to easily edit text and photos. Previously, only I changed text after learning some rudiments of writing *html* code. (I told you it has been a steep curve! Thanks to parent Four Hewes who was my teacher.) Why bring this up in a reflection? Well, perhaps obviously, I want you to go to the website and admire my handiwork with the new features. A couple features are cited above. But more importantly, I want to report that I have had fun this past week or so exercising these new skills. That was an unexpected outcome since I had virtually no interest in web design and only tolerate the necessity of using the web in my daily life.

This was an important lesson for me. It was a reminder to try new and unfamiliar things, like moving to a new school in a new position, or even familiar and distasteful things, like spending quality time with my computer, for the sheer (joy of) learning and accomplishment. Isn't that the essence of the educational task of our schools? It was good to be reminded of what many of our students are doing every day and why they are, by and large, such a happy group.

~ James Grumbach, Head of School



Experiments: with buoyancy & boat design in grades 5-6 and snow & ice in PreK/K

## Learning Update

One of my strong beliefs as an educator is that giving children what they need at their present stage of development is the best preparation for what they will need in the future. This is true at every age, but it is perhaps a more noticeable issue when children are easing into reading, and writing. There is a "window of opportunity" in brain development for the cognitive tasks of literacy at ages six to seven. Although it is possible to teach letters, sounds, and words to five-year-olds or younger, it may come at the expense of other valuable experiences. Young children need to use their bodies in active ways, they need to handle objects, to build, draw, paint, and imagine, and very importantly, to socialize. It is the verb *easing*, used above, that describes our approach to building literacy readiness, and letters and sounds are only part of it. In Preschool children learn how books are held, which way we turn the pages, and how we tell stories with a beginning, middle, and end. They play with rhyming words, which research shows is critical for developing the ability to hear separate sounds in words. These are not separate lessons, but are part of the pleasures of playing together or enjoying a story.

In PreK/K, children are formally introduced to letters and sounds beginning in mid-winter. There is still ample time outside and inside to move, create, solve puzzles, listen to books, and invent dramas. Their own experiences are being written down and messages appear with spaces for missing sounds they can recognize. Suddenly book-making will take hold and the children will

want and need letters and words. It is so motivating to be an author! When they arrive in first grade, most are ready to sit still longer, eager to practice good letter formation, and to put together sounds of words. By second grade almost all children are reading, and if not, we will have been watching carefully and talking with parents. What can families do during these early years of school? Read aloud every day and talk about what you read. Play games and talk, take walks and talk, make dinner together and talk. Learning new words is something every child is ready for at every age.

~ Mary Tracy, Curriculum Coordinator

## **An excerpt from *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* by Vivian Gussin Paley**

### Chapter Nine: Big "A" and Little "a"

When did first grade lose its status in the United States as the beginning of formal learning? That was a time when kindergarten children were called the "little ones" by the other teachers who came by to watch them play. Even the older children recognized the difference between pretend and real schoolchildren. "Kindergarten babies, first-grade ladies" was the refrain heard on the playground, and there was some truth in the ancient tease.

Kindergartners were expected to be somewhat "babyish," and "immature" was a stage of growth and not an accusation when I began to teach. Yet, compared to nursery school children, the kindergarten girls and boys had entered the graduate program in fantasy play. The themes were lengthened and deepened and their conversations were more complex and analytical.

First-grade teachers approached their tasks slowly, knowing that their newest students still had one foot in fantasy play. "This is a big A," the teachers announced on the first day. "We'll do big A's for a while and then be ready for little a's." This was how the alphabet was introduced in first grade when I was a child and even when I began teaching in New Orleans in the fifties. The goal was seldom to teach the letter A; all the children knew their A's plus a few other letters as well. Some had begun to read on their own. But the display of the alphabet was the opening salvo of real school, where reading and writing would begin in earnest.

First-grade teachers were among the strongest advocates for the sanctity of kindergarten, warning us to stay in our own territory and not invade theirs. "Don't get into lowercase," they told us. There would be dire consequences, such as bad handwriting, nervousness, stuttering, and, in general, the self-defeating attitudes that often accompany the too-early introduction of formal lessons.

Behind kindergartners' attempts to write or read there were attributes, we were told, that we couldn't see and might misjudge, eye-hand coordination and aural discrimination being a few examples. And there were characteristics of kindergartners that were plain enough for everyone to see: restlessness, impulsivity, timidity, and a general state of dreaminess. The children themselves continually reminded us that play was still their most usable context. It was not the monsters they invented that frightened them in kindergarten; it was being told to sit still and pay attention for long periods of time.

Short attention spans were not yet considered a deficit in my schools in Great Neck, N.Y., and Chicago in the sixties and seventies. We saw that the children's concentration was intense when they played and we filled the other times with playful rhyming games, songs, and poetry, to which we added picture books and fairy tales. The children's own chants and shouts rang out as they ran, climbed, jumped, pushed, pulled, and rearranged their environment, all in the name of fantasy play. Restlessness, impulsivity, and timidity faded in the quest for a dramatic role, and daydreams awakened into social play and big arcs of paint.

There were faculty discussions in the sixties about the "new" superhero play. Did the growing access to television change the children's behavior? Now that Superman and Batman could be *seen* in action, was play becoming too aggressive? It was clear that the boys felt compelled to copy the look and sounds of every new superhero that appeared on television and in the toy stores, but the play itself was little different from the cowboy and army play of earlier generations and could be tolerated. Soon Barbie would arrive and the kindergarten girls did not take long to remake her into a mother, sister, or princess. In other words, little seemed changed in terms of kindergarten play and the opportunities it provided for expansive social interaction, innovative thinking, and endless subjects for conversation.

What we may have overlooked was the fact that young children were spending far more time watching television than ever they had listening to the radio. None of us imagined that children at home would voluntarily limit their own playing in order to watch television. We still took play for granted and talked about nearly everything else except its literary or philosophical potential. It was as if, in a discussion of library books, we spoke about the paper, the print, the bindings, and the cover, and ignored the stories that compelled the authors to write the books. Nonetheless, we found enough to admire in play to keep it center stage in classroom life.

Then, midway through the eighties and nineties, a new sentiment began to be heard. With the growth of nursery schools and childcare centers came the notion that there was too much play. Since children were entering school at a younger age, wouldn't they have had enough play before kindergarten? The need for play, in other words, was considered to be a factor of the number of early years spent in school. Furthermore, these early years were designated as the optimum time to introduce the shapes and sounds of letters rather than the shapes and sounds of characters in a story.

The principles of child development were being rewritten, unaccompanied by a huge outcry of disbelief. One began to hear the word "boredom" attached to play, probably for the first time in human history. It was an odd concept to tag on to the single activity children loved best, but there was a growing nervousness about what was going on (or not going on) in kindergarten. The "academic kindergarten" was offered as the antidote to boredom and, further confusing our logic and commonsense, children labeled "at risk," who often had less opportunity for play and talk at home, were allowed less time for these activities in school as well.

At educational conferences in the nineties, kindergarten teachers continued to defend play, even as they had to allow more and more paperwork to clutter the tables and walls. Some teachers tried to recapture the certainties of the past by collecting antique block sets and doll-corner cribs, ancient dolls, and little wooden cars and trains, resisting anything that came in a catalogue. But we overlooked the real villain in our midst. It turned out to be not so much the "academics" we were adding but the *time* we subtracted from the children's fantasy play that would begin to make the difference.

Having not listened carefully enough to their play, we did not realize how much time was needed by children in order to create the scenery and develop the skills for their ever-changing dramas. We removed the element—time—that enabled play to be effective, then blamed the children when their play skills did not meet our expectations.

Although we feared the influence of television, we were cutting down on the one activity that counteracts the mindlessness of cartoons. We blamed television for making children restless and distracted, then substituted an academic solution that compounded restlessness and fatigue. The children may have been the only ones capable of making sense of the confusion, and they did so when-ever the schedule was cleared so they could play.

The misplaced academics of kindergarten affected the first grade as well. When kindergarten was the place for pretending school, first-grade teachers could take their time beginning formal lessons. It was always assumed that there would be ordinary children, without exceptional handicaps, who benefited from extra time to grow into academic areas. We called it maturation, and it was an important concept when we talked about children. Is it maturation or personality, we would ask when a child did not adapt to our activities? We were more inclined back then to look for fault lines in the curriculum than in the child.

We now have reversed the order of events. It is generally believed that the earlier we begin to train a child in reading and writing skills, the better off everyone will be. In many classrooms, the "pretend writing" of fours and fives looks real enough to begin keeping progress records. By the nineties a "chicken-and-egg" dilemma became apparent to me. Since the earlier we begin academics, the more problems are revealed, were the problems there waiting to be discovered or does the premature introduction of lessons *cause* the problems?

This conundrum does not exist in the abstract. Expectations for incoming first-graders are quite precise, and the tension begins even before the teacher and student meet. The potential for surprise is largely gone. We no longer wonder "Who are you?" but instead decide quickly "What can we do to fix you?"

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/644871.html>