

September 23, 2011

Dear Elementary School Parents:

The dust has settled from the beginning of the year, students are happy, and learning is happening in every classroom. Over the last three years, the elementary school has undergone a metamorphosis indicative of a second decade transition. Math changes, multi-age changes, curriculum work, schedule changes, and faculty changes all have accompanied these years. Our goal is to maximize the opportunities these changes present and provide students an extraordinary experience through the school's second decade. We believe the school is in the best shape it has ever been and our strategic plan outlines some excellent refinements in the years ahead. We want to take an opportunity to provide a few reminders and clarifications for the 2011-12 school year.

- 1. Challenge and Acceleration:** All students and parents have access to the Learning Needs Program at Journeys School that serves students with extended needs – both remediation and acceleration. Each classroom teacher is an expert in adjusting and customizing your child's experience. The teachers are happy to provide recommendations and experiment with different ideas to ensure your child is properly challenged. However, if a student in grades three through five needs increased challenge, he/she has the option to complete an Orbital Study. Orbital Studies are assigned when the student shows significant understanding on pre-assessments prior to a unit of study as well as high level independent work habits. These studies involve independent work with the mentorship of parents and teachers and a required final product and presentation. Contact Travis Gay or the classroom teacher for more details.
- 2. Literacy and Math Student Placement:** Throughout most of the school's history, students were placed in literacy and math ability level groupings based on the recommendations of experienced faculty. At the beginning of each year faculty evaluated assessments, social maturity, strengths, and weaknesses and grouped students accordingly. Adjustments were made during the year as appropriate. Over the last few years, more and more parents have asked for different placements for their children. On occasion, these requests have been contrary to what the school believes is in the best interest of the child's learning. In order to clarify this process we have outlined (attached to this letter) a clear timeline and set of criteria for student placements. We hope that this will allow parents to understand our process more clearly. Please remember that it is our priority that all children reach particular benchmarks by the time they leave elementary school and that all children are pushed to their full potential. Developmental theory strongly supports the differential rates of student cognitive and social-emotional growth. Our goal is to provide your child with the best experience every year – regardless of classroom placement.
- 3. Classroom Observations:** We welcome any parent to observe any class in our school. Unlike many schools, we believe that parents are partners in the process and can learn about our school through this open door policy. However, we ask that you follow specific rules for classroom observations. First and foremost, you must let the teacher know at least a day in advance that you plan to observe. Second, you must stay for the entire class period. This is to ensure that you see a class in its entirety and not just a 10-15 minute segment. Finally, spend five minutes after class or later in the day asking any questions of the teacher. Our faculty spend countless hours planning lessons down to

the minute detail – including consideration for all of the different abilities in one classroom. We thank you in advance for respecting these policies. They will allow you to better experience the classrooms and allow faculty/students to know when to expect visitors.

4. **Communication:** Please communicate with classroom teachers first if you have ideas or concerns. The classroom teacher knows your child the best. If you have further suggestions or questions, go to Betsy Trowbridge or Shannon Shuptrine. If after that, you still have questions, please contact Nate McClennen directly. As always, a phone conversation or in person conversation is far better than email if the discussion is anything more than factual.
5. **Multi-age Groupings:** In our last letter, we outlined the new arrangement of multi-age groupings in the afternoons (K-1, 2-3, 4-5). The team spent time discussing the merits of 3-year v. 2-year grouping and decided to make the change to 2-year groupings for the following reasons. First, multi-age groupings of 3-years are less common and occasionally detrimental due to the large age range – especially in the 3rd through 5th grade. Second, a three year rotating curriculum has proven complicated in terms of both improving the curriculum and improving the related instruction. Third, to better match curriculum with student age. Fourth, to provide three (rather than two) opportunities over the course of six years for students to be the youngest (or oldest) in a class. We do realize that in this transition year, some students and parents have been expecting a different model than what emerged. To accommodate this, the following changes have been made to the schedule *for the 2011-12 school year*. Jill Wright will teach all 3rd grade students social studies using her current 4th and 5th grade curriculum. Bridget Killian will support this class where needed. This class will be with the 4th and 5th grade students on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This hybrid model will allow for one transition year into this new schedule structure. Extended journeys, community meetings, and social times will continue to be 3rd through 5th grade oriented. Given this change, this means that for this year, 2nd and 3rd grade students will be separated in science and social studies, but together in the arts, Spanish, and physical education. The second grade students will use this time for capstone social studies with Bridget and capstone science with Bari.

We feel very fortunate to have your children at Journeys School and we know that they are evolving nicely into kind, intelligent, thoughtful – and successful – human beings. Thank you for being in partnership with us. Through trust, open dialogue, and honest communication, your child's experience is and will be extraordinary.

Please contact Betsy Trowbridge with further questions.

Sincerely,

Betsy Trowbridge and Shannon Shuptrine

cc. Nate McClennen, Head of School