

Dear Friends and Families of MMS,

Registration for Darien Summer School and Enrichment programming is currently open. Middle school courses include Quiz Bowl Camp (6/27-7/8), Pop Culture Film Study, Lacrosse, Foundations of Middle School Math, Preparing for PreAlgebra/Algebra, High School 101, and more. For more information and registration, visit www.dariensummerschool.com.

The balance of this email starts with Plato but ends with a verse from the rock band "38 Special." One of Plato's cures for insomnia, I mean one of his longer dialogues, takes place between Socrates and the teacher of rhetoric named Gorgias. They debate over whether it is a good idea to train young people in the art of rhetoric. Socrates argues (if I recall accurately) that we should only teach virtue and the proper use of language and he argues against teaching the techniques that, to paraphrase him, makes the weaker argument seem like the stronger. Gorgias, on the other hand, argues that winning an argument is the goal and using rhetorical techniques should be taught. A handful of students are graduates of Gorgias' program.

As I have interacted with some students this week, I have been thinking of a joke my wife's step-grandfather used to tell my girls when they were tiny. Grampa Dave and Grandma Mary would come up from their apartment in Queens for a day. One day as we were sitting around after a family barbeque, Grampa Dave was on a chair that swivels with our five-year old to his left and Grandma Mary to his right. He turned to our daughter and said, "Did I ever tell you about the fish I caught? It was this big..." and he held his hands about 18 inches apart. Then he turned the chair to Grandma Mary and as he turned his torso he brought his hands together until they were only two inches apart. "Isn't that right, Mary? Wasn't the fish this big?" She agreed that a small fish was correct; Grandpa Dave then turned back to our daughter and widened his hands again. "You see, Grandma Mary agrees with me that the fish was this big!" Our daughter, Katie, delighted in this. He was a merry fellow and always had a smile and a joke for his great-granddaughter, step-great-granddaughter, but I won't go into family details.

I have thought about this big fish, little fish thing as I hear from a teacher or staff-member about an infraction or disciplinary issue. The question I need to answer is what size fish? Is it a minor event that I can address simply by speaking to the student and sending them back to class? Is it more serious and I should engage the family? A young teenager might see something as a goldfish-sized problem, and that is often where my conversations with them start... "But Dr. McMorran, I wasn't doing anything then the teacher screamed at me for nothing..." The teacher might have a different view of the fish, more of a sea bass or trout in size. I'm relating this story not to say that all students will start with a misrepresentation. Rather, I think a young teen can often have a conviction about what happens and attempt to present it as he/she/they experienced it. But in my experience it has been true that what a kid tells me is a guppy could actually be a whopper.

Kids often have a strong sense of justice that has developed prior to their ability to discern a situation accurately. And, I am not naive enough to say that no kid ever tells me what he/she/they think I want to hear in order to get out of trouble. Do you remember Ralphie's story about the icicle in A Christmas Story? "You'll shoot your eye out, kid."

What I tell a student who dials down his/her/their role in an incident and redirects to another kid is that the referee calls the foul he sees. I have assigned myself recess duty this week, and have intervened when some games get too involved. The boy with arms stretched out, huffs and puffs, and tells me that he only shoved in response to being shoved. I tell him that I have to blow the whistle on what I observe. Most kids get that. A

good umpire "calls 'em as he sees 'em." A poor umpire says, "You know if it's a ball or a strike after I call it." A really bad umpire calls it before the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. It's the job of the administrator as referee to seek to be fair and consistent.

There have been times when one of my girls came home and was absolutely convinced that a teacher had infringed on her rights. It was my job as a parent to help her find the truth. Big fish? Little fish? Maybe not a fish at all. If you read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (not seen the movie), you will know that there is a room in the factory with a large door that has a window in it. The words inscribed on the windowpane read "Square cookies that look round." When Willie Wonka pauses his tour to let his guests take a look, one of the fathers peers through the window and says, "Those cookies are definitely square." Wonka replies, "but they look round." An argument ensues. After a few exchanges, Mr. Wonka throws the door open so it slams against the wall. At that point the square cookies look round to see what causes the noise. The father's statement was correct. Mr. Wonka's statement was correct. The perspective or meaning was different.

This is a long-winded way to set up a "shout out" to our parent partners who contacted the school, the teacher, the counselor to get a story clarified. Perhaps in another email I will write about the two carpenters who couldn't agree how to cover a wall. One wanted to use sheetrock. The other insisted on drywall.

As my wife and I navigated the tricky waters of middle school, I would sometimes annoy her by whistling or singing the lyrics of "Hold on Loosely" by 38 Special

"Just hold on loosely

but don't let go

if you cling too tightly

your gonna lose control

Your baby needs someone to believe in

and a whole lot of space to breathe in."

We never wanted our daughters to be in conflict with their teachers or other students, but we also wanted them to learn how to manage such conflicts and be good citizens in the schools.

Thanks for reading, and p.s. think about setting some limits on unrestricted cell phone access.

Respectfully,

Tom McMorran, Ed.D.

Interim Principal