

Dear Friends and Families of MMS,

**HERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT UPCOMING EVENTS:**

1. Please join the Athletic Dept. on Monday June 6 at 6p in the Darien HS main gym for an **athletics orientation for any incoming freshman** interested in playing a fall sport. Parents & students will also have an opportunity to speak with our fall coaches to gain some insight into their programs and to answer any questions they may have. We look forward to seeing everyone on the 6<sup>th</sup>!

2. **THE MMS BOOK FAIR AT BARRETT BOOKSTORE JUNE 7TH - 9TH**

Shop Local and Support the Middlesex Parents Association during the **MMS Book Fair at Barrett Bookstore: Tuesday June 7th - Thursday June 9th!**

Tuesday & Wednesday - 10am - 6pm

Thursday - 10am - 8pm

\*\*\*join us for a beverage and snack from 6pm-8pm on Thursday while you shop!

It's a great way to keep your kids reading and help raise funds to support the MPA. Barrett's will have all the required summer reading, teacher-recommended titles and many other fun, age-appropriate books. And be sure to check out their other book sections, too—Graduation Presents, Beach Reads or a Father's.

3. **Virtual Workshop for Parents of Middle School Students**

**“Supporting Students and Families Through Challenging Times”**

**Presented By: Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut**

**Dr. Jessica Welt, CEO and Clinical Director**

**Thursday, June 9, 2022, 5:00 PM**

**Zoom link:** <https://darienps.zoom.us/j/91711078244>

Meeting ID: 917 1107 8244

Here are some thoughts about middle-school-aged-students:

When I look at a middle-school student, I often play a game with myself. If this kid is 14, what will he be like at 28? This student is 13; how will she be contributing to society when she is 26 or 39? I find this helps me to maintain context. The kid who is play-wrestling his best friend could be an orthopedic surgeon in a residency in just double the current years he/she/they have lived. This student who is sitting out a lunch detention might become the next tech innovator. I play this game in the other direction, too. What was Elon Musk or Warren Buffett or Elizabeth Warrant like when they were in seventh grade? I find that helps me to help them. I am giving a behavioral consequence to a kid in order to help teach the long lesson that their future is actually in their own hands. I am respectful of

the distinction between the role of a school teacher or administrator and the duties of a parent. Together, we can help that future artist, author, Fortune Five Hundred executive, or celebrity define who they will become.

The adolescent brain is definitely not a fully mature adult brain, and this means that something they are absolutely certain is right, could be sort-of right. It's our task to help them borrow the grey matter we have up front above the eyes, that they are still growing into. Here is my not-so-scientific approach to the teenage mind: The crocodile, the puppy, and the thinking cap.

The crocodile loves to lurk just below the surface. If it is well-fed and not feeling threatened, it is content to sleep in the muddy riverbank, but it's also ready to be all teeth and nothing held back if its most basic needs are not met. This is the brainstem and oldest part of a human noggin. In a school context, we need to keep the kids well-fed, well-rested and with their emergency response systems set at standby. It's very difficult because we put more than a thousand of these crocs in the same river each day. Sometimes their teachers and fellow students serve as game rangers; other times they look like lost antelope and it's time to bite. Sleep, no cell phones at night, plenty of good food at breakfast and lunch, and constant signaling that at school you are not at risk is necessary. Yes, that last is very hard to convey in a time of anxiety and uncertainty. Here I think the routine of the day can help.

In the middle of the brain is the puppy – that growing scamp that wants to be loved, given treats and hugged while also more than willing to bite the hand that feeds it. Puppies love to push the boundaries, test to see if we really mean that they can't have treats from the table and if the couch is really off limits. This is the hippocampus and the amygdala, those areas of the brain that process emotion and serve as our alarm systems. These are fully operational in adolescents, and they tend to drive all teen thinking. The puppy part of the brain can wag its tail and growl menacingly at the same time. The young teenager is already adept at weighing all interactions through the emotions, and they tend to have much more intense reactions than adults. What seems to an adult to be a relatively minor thing – say, for instance, a bad haircut, can have the puppy howling with shame. Our task here is to help the middle brain not live on the raw edge of every emotion. The challenge, as I see it, is to shift our language from hyperbole to a less intense version. We hear a distraught child say, "I didn't get invited to the pool party, and that means I will never have friends, and on Monday everyone will make fun of me." We need to honor that emotion and invest some time to help them get into a better perspective. Telling a child, "You are being ridiculous, and you don't even like to swim" is true from a logical perspective, but the crocodile and the puppy don't do much critical thinking.

The 'grey matter' is the last part of the brain to mature, which is why decision-making, logic, and rational thoughts are also rare and need a lot of scaffolding. It's also why car insurance rates don't drop until drivers turn 25. Most of what teachers are trying to develop is this capacity for abstract, critical thought. The dreaded algebraic explanation of why asymptotic relationships are always approaching but never transecting certain lines, or how the subjunctive verb tense in French requires different sentence structure or that battles fought in 1944 have an enduring impact on contemporary geopolitics all need that wee bit of "thinking cap" (at this age maybe "thinking beanie") to function. And for that to happen, the puppy needs to be happy and the crocodile fed.

So, to return to the theme I find I always myself trying to underscore, our kids need family time, lots of sloppy not-particularly-efficient, time with their parents. I cannot tell you how many episodes of "Say Yes to the Dress" and "Survivor" and "So You Think You Can Dance" I sat through. But that was one

way I could keep the croc in the bottom of the pool and the puppy happy on the leash. (And as I have indicated, not every moment guiding my kids from “Blues Clues” to “The PBS News Hour” went as planned. If we had more time together, I might share about how the know-it-all administrator turned into the frightened parent with a kid in danger.)

My practical suggestion is this: You can never ever get to the end of your to-do list. But you can decide which three or four roles you want to fill. As a son, I had the great fortune to have parents who signaled in every way they could that Mom and Dad came before career and personal interests, and I strive to live up to that example. That sounded preachy, but I don’t mean to be. What I want us as teachers and parents and community members to continue to think about is how collectively those thousand kids can be young thinkers, a kennel full of puppies or a dangerous river crossing, and how the school should operate to help them grow.

Thanks for reading,

Tom McMorran

Interim Principal