

Dear Friends and Families of Middlesex Middle School,

In this email, I have placed important information first. This will be followed by three additional thoughts about (1) why I am jealous of dentists, (2) why I am always justified to speak out with anger but other people are morally bankrupt when they do, and (3) the essential need to continue reading during the summer. (Feel free to skip my preachiness.)

### **Important Link to 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Promotion Ceremony**

Please share this link with family, friends and distant loved ones who would like to observe our Middlesex Middle School Promotion via Livestream: Thursday, June 16 @ 5PM

<https://youtu.be/abjpoJwa6VM>

### **Summer School and Enrichment Program:**

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](http://www.dariensummerschool.com).

I taught English for nineteen years, and always asked for freshmen. Each fall, some time in early October, a parent would call me or my department chair to demand a meeting. At the meeting, I would be told with firm conviction that I had broken their kid. "My child has never, ever received lower than an A, and now she is scraping by with Cs, you monster!" The monster part wasn't said out loud. As a teacher of writing, I trained my students to look at their grades as an indication of how many revised drafts I thought it would take to make their work eloquent. Some students could earn an A with one revision, others needed two or three and therefore received Cs and Ds. Today I can borrow a phrase from software designers: GiGo Garbage in means garbage out. "Work with me," I would say, "and we will improve your command of grammar, punctuation and voice, but I cannot pretend your writing as it stands deserves an A." My approach at those meetings was to show the parent and child a stack of papers. "Here's your child's work," I would say, and set the sample on the tabletop. Here are other students (with the names blocked out.) If the parent came to agree that the child's work needed a lot of help, I could improve his/her/their writing. One of my joys as a classroom teacher took place in the last week of school as the freshman turned their writing folders into reflective portfolios. Many would ruefully bring their first quarter scribbling to me, "How could you have given this a C-?" they would ask with incredulity. "This is terrible." That was my happiness. The student-as-writer had grown so much that the end-of-year essays put the early stuff to shame. This is, by the way, why I am jealous of you dentists.

A pediatric dentist takes an x-ray of the patient's teeth and then delivers the news. Two cavities and bleeding gums. I'm pretty sure that parents in the waiting room don't jump up and say, "How dare you tell me Jennifer has cavities! She has a beautiful smile and your

negative comments on her daily oral routines are crushing her spirit.” At least, that is what I think happens. It’s hard for me to figure out how to blame my children’s dentists for their unwillingness to thoroughly brush and floss. But as a teacher I was regularly held accountable for a student’s low performance. I think there is an analogy here on personal responsibility for daily hygiene and personal responsibility for diligent completion of assignments. (If I am wrong, I invite the dentists and among us to let me know.) I guess I am anticipating the how-dare-yous when the report cards come out.

Most of you might not be familiar with the term “fundamental attribution error” but you have almost certainly experienced it. All of us, but particularly young teenagers, when we find ourselves in a conflict with other people, have a tendency to diminish or explain away our poor behavior or our use of mean-spirited words. We tell ourselves that we are justified in how we act because the situation caused us to behave in that way. I am not the sort of person to lean on the horn, but that jerk over there cut me off. I am not the sort of person to undertip a waiter, but I had to demonstrate the service was unacceptable. On the other hand, when someone else offends us, we never attribute that person’s actions to the situation; rather, we question their morality or mental acuity. “That person is evil!” “She is a total witch...” “He is a flawed human being.” Why share this, you ask? Oh, no reason other than the relatively consistent way I see some of our students attributing a fundamental error to other kids while justifying their own actions: “All I did was tell him to follow the rules, but he came back at me like a crazy person and attacked me.” “Yes, I did swear at him, but I had to defend myself because he is crazy and is a threat to my safety.” “Well, I was forced to cheat on the test because the teacher has it in for me and she lies to my parents about my behavior.” Generally, my work is to help the student see how the situation, the location, and the incident emerged more naturally.

Finally, when your child tells you that he/she/they hate to read and think it’s all stupid, and why can’t I just watch the movie, you should explain the following: There is no one for whom reading is a natural activity. We did not evolve as a species to be readers, and that is why acquiring this skill takes up most of their public education. Over the last ten thousand years of human history, only 1% of the community were expected to read – from the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt through the sacred texts of the medieval period and right up to the Enlightenment, “We the People...” needed someone else to read *The Declaration of Independence* and other documents to us. It has only been about 50 years since we have tried as a culture to ensure that everyone can read with understanding. So, reading is what defines our adult lives. By noting that the act of reading is not natural, I mean this to be heartening not only to those who struggle with dyslexia (I have a mild case of this) and it is truly a challenge to those who have more advanced cases; nor I am I failing to think about students who struggle with attentional issues. For the ten thousand years that preceded about 1950, what we now call “attention deficit disorder” was actually a prized capacity to monitor multiple sources of input while keeping on the move. Today if a child has ADD, we have, as the saying goes, “a hunter in a farmer’s world.” I insist that my staff never refer to a student as a “sped” kid or a “special education kid.” We have kids with special needs. A child is not disabled; a disability is always in a certain context, and our contemporary culture

requires most adults to sit still and concentrate on what we are reading. Our economic reality makes us act in a manner that is not natural. Sitting cramped on the red-eye or commuting for an hour or trying to read. In order to develop this most unnatural combination, we have to spend years learning to read. Here's our problem: Reading is an "image inducing activity." Read the narration of "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide" by Robert Louis Stevenson and you will be forced to use your imagination and memory to induce an image of the story. Try it for yourself, *"They mounted the stair in silence, and still, with an occasional awestruck glance at the dead body, proceeded more thoroughly to examine the contents of the cabinet. At one table, there were traces of chemical work, various measured heaps of some white salt being laid on glass saucers, as though for an experiment in which the unhappy man had been prevented."* As we read, we induce images, and this sharpens and deepens our abilities to translate symbols into meaning. Those damned cell phones, on the other hand, are "image providing" and they actively prevent the mind from active operations. Our children are saturated with imagery, much of it toxic or wickedly inappropriate. The bottom line is that those who read constantly will over time develop an enormous advantage over the non-readers. Let me say that another way, those who engage in image inductive activities will train their brains to function better. Kids who already spend too many hours per day peering at a screen are voluntarily spending another four hours squinting at their phones. That should be reading and running around time!

So, this is my plea for families to read together. As a high school educator, I can tell you that far too often our kids are bringing fifth grade reading skills to complex and demanding texts. Is it a surprise that our kids' ability to read, and love of story time with their parents, ends at about the same time that we as parents discontinue the once-a-week trip to the public library. May I suggest that a student should be required to earn the right to see a movie only after they have read the book or something about the movie? As a Tolkien enthusiast, as much as I love the Peter Jackson films, I think it is terribly sad that too many kids simply cannot read the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Keep reading.