

Dear Families,

September 14, 2006

We are almost half way through our first grading period and wow! what a great 23 days it has been! We continue to learn and grow as a faculty and your children continue to grow into what it means to be a member of the Carolina School for Inquiry Community. I know we have said it a million times or more but we are so pleased you have joined us!

Normally, I will include a curriculum report each week with your newsletter from Ms. Dixon-Mokeba in order to keep families in the know about what is happening curriculum wise in our classrooms. This first report is also your child's interim report as noted on the school calendar. Some, but not all, school districts send home interim reports halfway through a 9 week grading period. We won't normally send home an interim report. However, our 9 week grading reports are very comprehensive and informative. You will get much more information about your child's progress than from a standard report that simply lists a letter grade. Our first and third grading period progress reports are lengthy narrative reports and our second and fourth period reports are standards based reports. Of course, we always encourage you to call or stop by anytime in between if you need more information about how your child is doing as a learner at CSI.

Our next Curriculum Night is September 28<sup>th</sup> and it will focus on understanding inquiry based learning. I encourage you all to attend so that everyone can gain a deeper understanding of our educational system and what to expect from your child and from the school. For example, an important thing to keep in mind at this early stage of the school year is building "community". This isn't just an abstract, "warm and fuzzy" ideal but it is a vital part of inquiry learning. One of our most important first steps is to establish the classroom Rights and Responsibilities. We have spent a considerable amount of time on this endeavor and it is beginning to pay dividends. Building a solid classroom community allows children to feel free to take risks as learners and not fear being mocked or shut down by fellow students in the classroom. Children need to feel that they can go out on a limb with their thinking and they will be supported to think through to understanding. In many traditional classrooms teachers spend very little time teaching children to be invested in one another's lives and as a result they struggle for students to show empathy, respect and basic kindness. Their school year is a chaotic learning and management nightmare because the groundwork hasn't been done in the first months of school. This has a detrimental effect on student learning.

No one is comfortable exploring outside of their knowledge base in the midst of people who do not respect them. The only way for inquiry to work is to establish a community partnership that lets children know that we are all learners (teachers included) and we are here to respect and learn from one another. Of course, like all things in inquiry based learning, we have been using the development of the Rights and Responsibilities as a "jumping off" point to learn a variety of skills. For example, you will find Rights and Responsibilities posted in your child's classroom. Those were created by the students with the guidance of the teacher. They were written in front of the students with their input. Teachers took this opportunity to talk with children about various writing skills (depending on student age) such as how to begin a sentence or simple letter structure or spelling strategies when coming to words you aren't familiar with. This is considered an integrated approach and what happens naturally in the world. From day one we have tried to connect what we are doing to real life experiences and we will continue to do that throughout the school year. In other words in other settings children might have to write a bunch of sentences that are not connected in order to "practice" the idea that sentences begin with a capital letter. At CSI you would see teachers making that learning explicit while writing up classroom Rights and Responsibilities.

I would also like to take a moment to describe some of the types of activities that our classes are engaging in at this time in a little more detail.

**Our children as Readers...** Research shows that in order to become a better reader you have to read daily and for real purposes. While this sounds pretty simple it isn't happening in many of our schools. We at CSI are dedicated to providing students with ample time every day to interact in a variety of ways with great children's literature. We are not using a traditional "basal reader" (a reading text book filled with stories aimed at a

particular grade of children) because we have a wide range of reading abilities in our classrooms, which occurs even in a traditional classroom. Basals don't meet the needs of all readers. You will find your children engaged in many curriculum structures such as shared reading, guided reading, literature circles, read aloud, and independent reading just to name a few. As the year goes on we will provide an in-depth look at each of these literacy structures. All classrooms spend a great deal of time interacting with books for a variety of purposes with solid comprehension at the center of what we are striving for.

**Our children as Writers...**naturally follows our children as Readers. Our students are writing for real and meaningful purposes every day. At the heart of our writing instruction is to teach children to live writerly lives, to be able to express themselves on paper in a coherent and meaningful way, and to not be afraid of getting something wrong thus impeding their ability to put words on paper. We are constantly making the connections between reading and writing and allowing the children to think about the moves authors make in their favorite stories and then stand on the shoulders of those authors to write grand things themselves. Spelling is an important part of the writing process as it is imperative to a clear message but you will not see spelling tests of the usual fashion. You will instead see word study (looking at words and letters and learning them in real and meaningful contexts rather than in random unconnected lists) and "Have-a-Go" (a way to look at a word and write it down a number of times with teacher assistance in order to get to a conventional spelling) and much discussion around words and how they are made in order to help kids think more deeply about spelling rather than memorize words for a test that they soon forget. If you are concerned about your child's spelling give it a few months and watch how their spelling improves as we are flooded with reading and writing every day.

**Our children as Mathematicians...**we are implementing a math curriculum called Investigations in Number, Data and Space. This is a "research based curriculum" (in other words, it is based on sound scientific research of how children learn) that is ideal for multiage and inquiry based settings. The curriculum really focuses on teaching kids to have a deep understanding of numbers and how they work rather than just memorizing facts. Children spend a great deal of time talking about mathematics, playing number games, and using "manipulatives" (any small items, like buttons, beans, or coins, that children can use to count, sort, add, subtract) to deepen their understanding of mathematical concepts. While there is usually only one answer to any given math problem there are always numerous ways to get to the answer and Investigations teaches children how to find those ways. Math will be the focus of an upcoming Curriculum Night but, in the meantime, you can check our website to find links to information about Investigations.

**Our children as Scientists...**We are going in many directions right now with science investigations. Our Upper Elementary became very interested in Pluto being demoted as a planet and we are now working on expert projects (in-depth studies on a particular topic ending with a presentation of some sort) about different planets. The teachers are providing essential content information that is in the SC standards but our children have already blown the top off the "requirements" in the SC standards. One of our Early Elementary classes is working on life cycles. The class had a great interest in frogs because of their classroom pet frogs and as a result they jumped into expert projects on life cycles of different animals. Our Primary students are learning about the human bodies. They have been learning a lot about Me and this flows naturally from that study. As you can see all of the curriculum sprung from the interests of the children but it is all included in age appropriate SC curriculum standards.

**Our children as Historians and Social Scientists...**In all classrooms we have worked on Rights and Responsibilities which have led to discussion on many levels about living in a democratic society and what that means. We have talked about what has happened in history when people didn't get along or agree with others and we have shared many read alouds that have addressed topics such as slavery and civil rights. These are ongoing conversations that will happen throughout the year because we again want to always come back to creating a community of caring individuals who care about the world around them as much as themselves.

**Our children as Community Members...**we continue to work on being kind and considerate to the fellow learners in our classroom and throughout the school. Sadly, many of our children have never been in settings where they were encouraged to help one another and where their questions and answers mattered to anyone

other than themselves. Many have been in settings where teachers have managed their behavior rather than teach them how to manage their own behavior. As a result it takes time to establish these understandings, but it has been time well spent. We aren't where we want to be yet but we are sure a lot further along than we were on the first day and every day we learn a little more about how to function in a community.

It is my hope that this letter has answered some of your questions, clarified some misunderstandings and given you a tool to talk further with your child's teacher about what is happening with your learner. Attached to this letter is a conference sign up form. Please fill that out and get it back to your child's teacher as soon as possible so that we can get conferences arranged for every parent.

Remember that you are always free to stop by and talk with me or contact me at school (691-1250), or via email ([smandrell@carolinaschoolforinquiry.org](mailto:smandrell@carolinaschoolforinquiry.org)) if you have any questions or concerns related to curriculum. It is only with your feedback that we can become the amazing learning establishment that we strive to be.

Thanks so much for your time!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stacie Mandrell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stacie Mandrell

Curriculum Coordinator/ Upper Elementary Teacher