

## School Calendar

### This Week

#### Wednesday, February 6

Biography Workshop 6:30-8:30 pm

### Looking Ahead

#### Wednesday, February 13

4<sup>th</sup> Grade Play – The Death of Baldur 9:00 am

#### Thursday, February 14

Valentine's Day Assembly 8:30 am

4<sup>th</sup> Grade Play – The Death of Baldur 2:00 pm

Screenagers Screening, Quakertown, NJ 6:30 pm

#### Friday, February 15

Grade School Ice Skating Party

#### Monday-Friday, February 18-22

NO SCHOOL – Winter Break

### How to Contact Us

info@rivervalleyschool.org

lc@rivervalleyschool.org

bot@rivervalleyschool.org

pc@rivervalleyschool.org

### Pizza Form

It's time to order pizza for the second half of the year beginning on March 1<sup>st</sup>. The pizza form is at the end of the Current.

**Forms are due back Monday, February 11**

### Learning Virtue, Living Virtue

It's time once again for Paul Ritchie's insightful column. You will find it in this week's Current.

## Awakening Connections – Creating Community Biography Workshop

**Tomorrow – Wednesday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, 6:30-8:30**

Center for Biography and Social Art, facilitated by Kathleen Bowen

*"The longing to be seen and heard in our full reality has arisen in every human soul since the beginning of this century and will grow increasingly urgent." Rudolf Steiner*

Through creative activities, conversation and reflection we will practice genuine interest and reverence toward the hidden mysteries to be found in every life. Come with an open mind and heart to explore and be in wonderment. By sharing small pieces of our lives with one another, we step inside our own life story and the stories of others. Listening deepens, empathy awakens and a new level of interest and support can develop throughout the community.

To register, go to: <https://goo.gl/MH3sXt>

### Getting the Education your Kids Get (but you didn't)

by Justin Collins (father of Kivrin, Star Room, and husband of 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Rachel Howard).

Next week there is a biography and social art workshop for the parents and caregivers of the students at River Valley.

What does this mean, exactly? It means that we, as caregivers, have an opportunity to get a little taste of what our kids get - consider it remedial Waldorf education for adults. Why do this? Because our children's education is more effective when those in their community, such as us, are actively working on ourselves and we all have a lot to learn.

This workshop is being paid for with a grant, and may not happen again, so now is the time to take advantage of it!

If you need childcare, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class would be happy to help. You can reach out to any of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders or Ms. Porter. This is an opportunity to raise funds for their class trip.

## Our Neighbors Need Our Help – Deadline Tomorrow

Third Street Alliance in Easton, an organization we have supported and worked with many times over the years, is in need of donations. The government shut down has negatively impacted their residents and to help ease the burden for local food banks and pantries they have put a call out for help.

We, as a community, would like to help and so are asking for donations of non-perishable foods and goods to be dropped off at the school until **Wednesday, February 6<sup>th</sup>**.

### Donations for the Third Street Alliance

The following is a list of some of the items they are looking for:

Canned foods (beans, canned meat, tuna, fruit, soups & vegetables), Pastas, Cereals, Rice, Crackers, Baby Formula, Shelf Stable Milk (small boxes), Baby Food, Juice, Dried Fruits, Jelly, Condiments

### Non Food Items:

Batteries, Gift Cards (Walmart, CVS, Target, Amazon, etc.), Cleaning Supplies

## Grade School Ice Skating Trip

On Friday, February 15<sup>th</sup>, the grade school will have their annual Ice Skating Party. This is a field trip for grade school students only. We ask families who have early childhood children to please send them to school as usual and not bring them on the ice skating trip.

There are many reasons for this. Most importantly, it is not safe for little children to be skating in between older, faster, more experienced skaters. Also, it is not fair to early childhood children who don't get to go, while some of their friends are off skating and they are not invited.

In an effort to avoid hurt feelings and hurt bodies and to give the younger ones something to look forward to when they are in the grade school, we ask that only grade school children come to the skating rink on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

## Lunch for the Ice Skating Trip

This Friday is the deadline for ordering lunch for the ice-skating party on Friday, February 15<sup>th</sup>. The order form is in the Current. Please put your order in the folder on the office door by Friday, February 8<sup>th</sup>.

## From Administration

### Screenagers Movie Showing Just 20 Minutes Away Thursday, February 14th, 6:30 PM

Franklin Township School Cafeteria, 226 Quakertown Road, Quakertown, NJ

**Screenagers**, the award-winning documentary, takes a deeply personal approach as Dr. Delaney probes into the vulnerable corners of family life, including her own, to explore struggles over social media, video games, academics and internet addiction. Through poignant, and unexpectedly funny stories, along with surprising insights from authors, psychologists, and brain scientists,

*Screenagers* reveals how tech time impacts kids' development and offers solutions on how adults can empower kids to best navigate the digital world and find balance.

### Parenting Workshop on Discipline Starts Today Online

Kim John Payne who has lectured at River Valley and many other Waldorf schools around the world is offering a free workshop online starting today.

A brand-new Discipline and Guidance workshop with Kim John Payne: "Why does everything have to be so hard?" or "What to do when things get weird." The workshop begins Tuesday, Feb. 5. It will be held online in the new Simplicity Parenting Institute website, and is open to the public.

Tuition is free, but registration is required. Register now at [www.simplicityparentinginstitute.com](http://www.simplicityparentinginstitute.com)

### It's Time to Bring in Your Box Tops

The next deadline to mail in your box tops is quickly approaching. Karen Jacobs, our trusty coordinator, respectfully requests that you bring them in by February 15<sup>th</sup>. Thank you.

## Do you ever shop at Giant Food Stores in PA or Stop & Shop in NJ?

### PA shoppers:

- Visit [www.giantfoodstore.com](http://www.giantfoodstore.com); click on Sign In, Manage my Account, Savings & Rewards to log on to your online account or, for **first time users**, click register to create your online account. Once you are logged in to your account, you can select up to 2 registered schools for A+ Rewards. Our school ID is: 06546
- If you have a Giant card but do not know your 12-digit Giant card number, call the Giant card hotline at 1-877-366-2668 and select Option #1. The representatives will be able to provide you your Giant card number.

**NJ shoppers:** visit [www.stopandshop.com](http://www.stopandshop.com) and follow the directions for PA

To earn points, use your registered BonusCard each time you shop at either store and you will earn cash for River Valley Waldorf School. You can confirm your school selection anytime by logging into your account. At the end of each month your points are calculated and converted to cash rewards. These cash rewards for our school are updated monthly. You can track our progress when you sign in to your online account.

Our school will receive a Cash rewards check and can use this cash for any of our educational needs. Please encourage your family members and friends to support our school!

## Enrollment News

To help you plan ahead, here are some important dates to keep in mind and to put on your calendar:

- 2019-2020 Intention Forms are attached to this email – and are available in the Parent Forms box by the office door. They are due by Friday, February 8th. This is not a binding enrollment contract; no deposits are due at this time. Please return completed forms to the folder on the office door. The purpose of these forms is to inform the budgeting process – the clearer the picture we have of enrollment for the upcoming year, the better we are able to plan.
- 2019-2020 tuition will be set and enrollment contracts will be distributed in late-February, 2019.
- Tuition Assistance requests are due by February 28th. You should begin to complete your Parents Financial Statement (PFS) online right now by visiting: <http://sss.nais.org/parents/> It is important to have your Federal Income Tax Return completed as quickly as possible so the committee can do its work efficiently and your request can be given full consideration. Tax returns and PFS are due 2/28/2018 to be included in the primary round of tuition assistance. Tax returns and W2 forms should be uploaded to the SSS website. If you are unable to upload your returns, please speak with me to make other arrangements.
- Contracts and deposits for 2019-20 must be returned by March 29th to take advantage of the \$250 on-time deposit incentive. As of April 1st, the required deposit is \$500.
- As always, your account must be in good standing to re-enroll or to be considered for tuition assistance. Please see Cindy or Kamran Ozair (Treasurer) with questions or to discuss any special situations.

Thanks for your attention and help in keeping things moving along. Feel free to contact Cindy with any questions.

## From The Faculty

### What the Children are Learning:

First Grade – Language Arts

Second Grade – Math

Third Grade – Drama/Language Arts

Fourth Grade – Class Play/Norse Mythology

Fifth Grade – Geometry

Sixth Grade –Physics

Seventh Grade – Asian Geography

Eighth Grade – Asian Geography

## From Parent Council

### Parent Council News

- Parent Council is compiling a list of summer camps that are attended by RVWS students. If you have a recommendation, please email Parent Council at [pc@rivervalleysschool.org](mailto:pc@rivervalleysschool.org). Once the list is completed we will share with everyone.
- Kitchen Shelf Clean Up! Please visit the shelf near the entrance of the kitchen this week to determine if any of the baskets, dishes or Tupperware belong to you. Thank you!
- Faculty Appreciation Meals- There are many open slots available to provide food for our faculty on their meeting days. Please visit the sign up genius for more details if you are willing to contribute. Thank You!  
<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/20f054caca82aa1fb6-faculty>
- We are in dire need of a Mayfaire Chair(s) and assistants otherwise the event will be paired down substantially.
- There will be a table set up in the lobby with auction info over the next two weeks. Please stop by to see how you can help!

## From the Committee for Social Justice

Please join the Committee for Social Justice on Sunday, March 31 at 779 Cafferty Road in Upper Black Eddy from 1 to 4 for another book discussion! We will be talking about *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nahisi Coates.

The Committee for Social Justice meets every 3rd Monday from 3:30 to 4:30 in the second grade classroom. However, next month we will meet on the second Monday, February 11. Please join us!



Have you heard the Buzz?

### We need YOU to make our Auction a success!

Share your talents, creativity or time! We need 3 auction items from each family -- Nourish a belly or soul, host a game night, offer your services or solicit gift certificates from your favorite shops. For more ideas or suggestions reach us at [auction@rivervalley.school.org](mailto:auction@rivervalley.school.org)

### For ONE DAY ONLY, Thursday February 14<sup>th</sup>. Get a sweet deal on your auction tickets!

- ❖ The Bees Knees -- Sponsor a faculty member and save \$5
- ❖ Queen Bee -- Save \$5 on an individual ticket
- ❖ Honey Bee -- Bring your honey and save \$10 on two tickets
- ❖ Bee Mighty -- Bring 2 friends from outside River Valley and save \$20

<https://rvws.ejoinme.org/2019auction>



### What do you love about River Valley?

Check out what our community loves about our amazing school on Facebook and Instagram and receive an auction raffle ticket for each share!

## Class Fundraisers

### Handcrafted River Valley Jewelry for Sale to Support the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

Emily Langmade has handcrafted jewelry with the RVWS crest especially for an 8th grade fundraiser. Choose from pendants, earrings, beads, and attachable charms. All items are available in brass or silver, and with or without oxidation. Samples will be available in the lobby on the 8th grade fundraising table this coming Wednesday and Friday. All proceeds will benefit the 8th grade for their class trip. The jewelry has been generously provided for the cost of the materials only; learn more about the artist and visit her online store at [lockandspoon.com](http://lockandspoon.com).



## 8th Grade Lunch for Ice-Skating Party

The 8th grade will be preparing lunch for the Grade School Ice Skating Party on Friday, February 15th. **Lunches must be pre-ordered by this Friday, February 8th.** An order form is in this week's Current. They will also be serving hot chocolate, herbal tea and bags of popcorn for \$2 a piece on a first come, first-served basis.

## From Development

### Annual Appeal Update

As of January 23<sup>rd</sup> our community has raised \$50,754.75!

Thank you to all who participated in making this year's Annual Appeal such a tremendous success.

The Annual Appeal donation box is no longer in the lobby, but if you would still like to participate please bring your donation directly to Charlene in the business office.

## From the Community

### Free Film Screening - "Angst: Raising Awareness Around Anxiety"

**February 27th, 2019, 7:00 pm**

Join The Lotus School for a film screening (56 min.) and panel discussion about how anxiety disorders are real, common, and treatable.

Delaware Valley University, Life Sciences Building, 700 East Butler Avenue, Doylestown, PA 18901

Reserve a Ticket at: <https://lotusla.org/angst-movie>

Producers Scilla Andreen and Karin Gornick have one goal: to start a global conversation and raise awareness around anxiety. Through candid interviews, they utilize the power of film to tell the stories of many kids and teens who discuss their anxiety and its impacts on their lives and relationships, as well as how they've found solutions and hope. "Everybody needs to know that anxiety disorders are real, common and treatable instead of viewing them as a personal choice or something to be ashamed of," said Dr. Jerry Bublick, Senior Director of Anxiety Disorders Center, Child Mind Institute. "Getting help early is crucial in giving people the tools they need to feel better. We just need to start the conversation."

### Need Help?

Aaron McKay, father of Lily (Grade 2), is a local carpenter offering services ranging from home repair and renovations (drywall, framing, doors, windows, trim, built-ins, kitchen installations, crown) and made-to-order handcrafted shelving, cabinetry, and furniture (barn board dining tables, benches, cubbies, desks, bookcases, doors, bed frames, dressers, work benches). Basically, if you can imagine it, Aaron can build it. Style is clean and simple with all hidden fasteners and mortice and tenon joinery. Projects incorporate reclaimed wood, whenever possible. Feel free to email or call Aaron to discuss your carpentry needs: [welcometothewoodshop@gmail.com](mailto:welcometothewoodshop@gmail.com), (908) 274-0731

### Help for a Friend

Hi Friends:

Pamela Hobson, mother of Olivia, is in need of financial assistance while she fights cervical cancer. We have set up a fundraiser where those who wish to help can set up a monthly donation to assist with food and other bills. The link is:

<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=2568187>

Thanks, Andy Wander

In addition to ongoing donations, RVWS is collecting money to purchase gift cards for Kimberton Whole Foods for Pamela. Please see Cindy, Robbie or Tiffany to leave your donation.

### POP-UP CHOIR!

**Saturday, February 9th, 7 PM, at ArtYard in Frenchtown**

Pop-Up Choir is a unique experience of community, musical celebration, and helping others! Kira Willey, backed up by our own pro musicians Eve Sheldon and Noah Jarrett, will lead singers of all skill levels in a joyful, judgment-free atmosphere. Attendees will learn a simple and fun arrangement of a familiar tune. When it's ready, the final performance will be streamed live online!

As a no-commitment, no-rehearsal choir, Pop-Up Choir is open to all. Truly no musical experience is necessary to join! Admission is free; all donations made will benefit a community non-profit organization.

Register at <http://artyard.org/>. Join us!

## Upcoming Events at Solebury School

### Solebury School Presents *Cabaret*

Come to the *Cabaret* at Solebury School to see River Valley alumni in this classic musical,

Thursday, February 21, 7:30 pm; Friday, February 22, 7:30 pm; Saturday, February 23, 2 pm & 7:30 pm; Sunday, February 24, 3 pm

The Barn Theater at Solebury School, 6832 Phillips Mill Rd., New Hope, PA 18938

## Open Day at Sunbridge Institute

Wednesday, February 13, 2019 @ 9:00 am - 12:30 pm

An opportunity to explore Waldorf teaching and Waldorf teacher education, Open Day is designed for prospective students of Sunbridge Institute's Waldorf teacher education programs (Early Childhood, Elementary, World Language, and Music) as well as individuals interested in finding out more about Waldorf Education.

Sunbridge Institute is in Chestnut Ridge, NY. For more information go to: [www.sunbridge.edu](http://www.sunbridge.edu)

## Lemniscate Arts Presents Two New Plays by Peter Oswald

**Steiner** – Saturday, March 2, 7-9:30 pm & **The Circle Widens: The Working of the Spirit** – Sunday, March 3, 2-5:30 pm  
Single Ticket: \$30, Senior or Student: \$25, Bundle (both plays) \$50, Senior or Student \$40

Threefold Education Center, 260 Hungry Hollow Road, Chestnut Ridge, NY 10977 [info@lemniscatearts.org](mailto:info@lemniscatearts.org)

Tickets available online or at the door – [www.lemniscatearts.org](http://www.lemniscatearts.org)

## Come join the fun at Ottsville Traditional Arts Center 250 Durham Road Ottsville

### OPEN MIC NIGHTS

Warm, fuzzy and friendly space to step out, reach up and share what you've got or what you're working on! Open Mic sign up list plus a featured performer/musician set. Coffee House will feature 2 or more performer/musician sets plus Open Mic sign up. Sea Shanties and sing along with Grace! \*\*\*Early sign up for kids!!! OTAC is a Great Space and has the most appreciative audience

**OTAC Wednesday Jam and Songs 6:00-8:00 and Open Mic Nights - \$5 per person**

For updates & further details check out [ottsvilletradarts.weebly.com](http://ottsvilletradarts.weebly.com) Facebook page  
Questions, interest in a fundraiser, event, performance, workshop, etc. contact Grace Morgan  
[gracefulm@aol.com](mailto:gracefulm@aol.com)

Ottsville Traditional Arts Center is a multi generational and varied community that provides service through what we all have to share

## Artyard

**Exhibition: The Creative Commons: Progressive Studio Practice - January 12 – April 15**

### Upcoming Events

**Saturday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 7 pm**

Pop Up Choir with Kira Willey, Noah Jarrett and Eve Sheldon

**Saturday, February 16<sup>th</sup>**

The Chalkboard Chronicles, 6-7:30 pm – Exhibition Opening, 7:30 pm – Film screening

**Saturday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 7:30 pm**

Screening of two phenomenal films (one short and one long): *The Watchmaker* and *The Price of Everything*

**Sunday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1-3 pm**

Artist Talk and Drawing Workshop with Paige Donovan and Mary T. Bevlock

**Saturday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2 pm**

Capturing Grace followed by a talk by Dave Leventhal from the Mark Morris Dance Group

**Sunday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1-3 pm**

Build Your Own Bird Costume for Artyard's 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Hatch

**March 23 - 24 & April 6-7**

Sacred Harp Singing School Workshops with Gregory Corbino, (singing & potluck on May 19<sup>th</sup>.)

**Sunday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 7:30 pm**

Crank Night – This year's theme is *Questions*.

Go to: [artyard.org](http://artyard.org) for tickets and more information about all of these events.

Artyard, 62A Trenton Avenue, Frenchtown, NJ 08825. Gallery Hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 11:00 AM - 5:00 PM.

# Learning Virtue, Living Virtue

## Learning Virtue, Living Virtue by Paul Ritchie

February – Patience

To develop a depth of patience we must first acknowledge the unhappiness caused by our impatience and anger in its many manifestations.

*Allan Lokos, Founder, Community Meditation Center, New York City.*

Large-scale studies confirm this, perhaps not surprisingly, among automated functions. In a 2012 study involving **tens of millions** of users who watched videos on the internet, researchers Krishnan and Sitaraman showed that online users lose patience in as little as two seconds while waiting for their chosen video to start playing.

These and other scientific studies of patience have led many social commentators to conclude that the rapid pace of technology is rewiring humans to be less and less patient.

### **How can we fight back against these rewiring trends?**

First, through self-diagnosis. Impatience with oneself is a universal infirmity. It wounds our capacity for self-love and vexes us, making us prone to giving up on patience at the very moment it is needed to cure our infirmity. It disturbs the heart and discomforts the soul. We must take hold of patience and commit to it.

### **What if we don't like what we find?**

It's likely we will find things we don't like about ourselves. Anxiety troubles the mind, strains the heart, distresses the soul and confuses judgment. There is but one remedy: using patience to keep these anxiety imposters in their proper place outside our feelings and being. There they are diminished by humility and patience.

### **How can we bear to look at ourselves that way?**

M.J. Ryan, author of *Attitudes of Gratitude*, wrote "In the cultivation of patience, we are really being called on to love ourselves in all our brokenness and beauty. The longer I've pondered patience, the more I've come to see that impatience is actually a symptom of perfectionism."

### **This sounds like more "soul work."**

It is. The whole labor of virtue consists of getting out of narrow selfishness. The only insurmountable obstacle is want of humility, which requires the greatest labor of the soul. All of this requires that we be subject to trials, which are not borne but once and never cheaply.

In the words of St. Francis de Sales, "Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself. . . every day begin the task anew."

*What does this mean, "every day begin anew?"*

Just what it says. As Longfellow put it,

Let us then, be up and doing  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labor and to wait.

**RVWS 8<sup>th</sup> Grade** is offering **pre-ordered lunches** for the **annual ice skating trip on February 15.**

Proceeds will help offset the cost of the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Class Trip.

*Order now and skip the bagged lunch!*

**Pre-order**

Italian hoagies -- homemade vegetarian chili -- homemade mac & cheese  
*Also available at the rink: hot chocolate, herbal tea, and bags of popcorn (\$2/ea.)*

**Italian hoagies (\$8 each)**

<input type="checkbox"/> Italian Hoagie #1:	tomato <input type="checkbox"/>	lettuce <input type="checkbox"/>	cheese <input type="checkbox"/>	\$8.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Italian Hoagie #2:	tomato <input type="checkbox"/>	lettuce <input type="checkbox"/>	cheese <input type="checkbox"/>	\$8.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Italian Hoagie #3:	tomato <input type="checkbox"/>	lettuce <input type="checkbox"/>	cheese <input type="checkbox"/>	\$8.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Italian Hoagie #4:	tomato <input type="checkbox"/>	lettuce <input type="checkbox"/>	cheese <input type="checkbox"/>	\$8.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Italian Hoagie #5:	tomato <input type="checkbox"/>	lettuce <input type="checkbox"/>	cheese <input type="checkbox"/>	\$8.00

**Hoagie Subtotal:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Homemade Vegetarian Chili**

# of bowls \_\_\_\_\_ x\$5.00/bowl

**Chili Subtotal:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Homemade Mac & Cheese**

# of bowls \_\_\_\_\_ x\$5.00/bowl

**Mac & Cheese Subtotal:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Lunch orders must be placed by Friday, February 8**

**The RVWS 8<sup>th</sup> grade will prepare and deliver your lunches to the ice skating rink on 2/15.**

**Total Pre-order Amount:** \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to RVWS with  
"8<sup>th</sup> Grade Fundraiser" in the memo

From The Atlantic

**The New Preschool Is Crushing Kids**

Today's young children are working more, but they're learning less.

ERIKA CHRISTAKIS

Step into an American preschool classroom today and you are likely to be bombarded with what we educators call a print-rich environment, every surface festooned with alphabet charts, bar graphs, word walls, instructional posters, classroom rules, calendars, schedules, and motivational platitudes—few of which a 4-year-old can "decode," the contemporary word for what used to be known as reading.

Because so few adults can remember the pertinent details of their own preschool or kindergarten years, it can be hard to appreciate just how much the early-education landscape has been transformed over the past two decades. The changes are not restricted to the confusing pastiche on classroom walls. Pedagogy and curricula have changed too, most recently in response to the Common Core State Standards Initiative's kindergarten guidelines. Much greater portions of the day are now spent on what's called "seat work" (a term that probably doesn't need any exposition) and a form of tightly scripted teaching known as direct instruction, formerly used mainly in the older grades, in which a teacher carefully controls the content and pacing of what a child is supposed to learn.

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One study, titled "Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?," compared kindergarten teachers' attitudes nationwide in 1998 and 2010 and found that the percentage of teachers expecting children to know how to read by the end of the year had risen from 30 to 80 percent. The researchers also reported more time spent with workbooks and worksheets, and less time devoted to music and art. Kindergarten is indeed the new first grade, the authors concluded glumly. In turn, children who would once have used the kindergarten year as a gentle transition into school are in some cases being held back before they've had a chance to start. A study out of Mississippi found that in some counties, more than 10 percent of kindergartners weren't allowed to advance to first grade.

Until recently, school-readiness skills weren't high on anyone's agenda, nor was the idea that the youngest learners might be disqualified from moving on to a subsequent stage. But now that kindergarten serves as a gatekeeper, not a welcome mat, to elementary school, concerns about school preparedness kick in earlier and earlier. A child who's supposed to read by the end of kindergarten had better be getting ready in preschool. As a result, expectations that may arguably have been reasonable for 5- and 6-year-olds, such as being able to sit at a desk and complete a task using pencil and paper, are now directed at even younger children, who lack the motor skills and attention span to be successful.

Preschool classrooms have become increasingly fraught spaces, with teachers cajoling their charges to finish their "work" before they can go play. And yet, even as preschoolers are learning more pre-academic skills at earlier ages, I've heard many teachers say that they seem somehow—is it possible?—less inquisitive and less engaged than the kids of earlier generations. More children today seem to lack the language skills needed to retell a simple story or to use basic connecting words and prepositions. They can't make a conceptual analogy between, say, the veins on a leaf and the veins in their own hands.

New research sounds a particularly disquieting note. A major evaluation of Tennessee's publicly funded preschool system, published in September, found that although children who had attended preschool initially exhibited more "school readiness" skills when they entered kindergarten than did their non-preschool-attending peers, by the time they were in first grade their attitudes toward school were deteriorating. And by second grade they performed worse on tests measuring literacy, language, and math skills. The researchers told *New York* magazine that overreliance on direct instruction and repetitive, poorly structured pedagogy were likely culprits; children who'd been subjected to the same insipid tasks year after year after year were understandably losing their enthusiasm for learning.

That's right. The same educational policies that are pushing academic goals down to ever earlier levels seem to be contributing to—while at the same time obscuring—the fact that young children are gaining fewer skills, not more.

Pendulum shifts in education are as old as our republic. Steven Mintz, a historian who has written about the evolution of American childhood, describes an oscillation in the national zeitgeist between the notion of a "protected" childhood and that of a "prepared" one. Starting in the early 2000s, though, a confluence of forces began pushing preferences ever further in the direction of preparation: the increasing numbers of dual-career families scrambling to arrange child care; a new scientific focus on the cognitive potential of the early years; and concerns about growing ability gaps between well-off and disadvantaged children, which in turn fueled the trend of standards-based testing in public schools.

Preschool is a relatively recent addition to the American educational system. With a few notable exceptions, the government had a limited role in early education until the 1960s, when the federal Head Start program was founded. Before mothers entered the full-time workforce in large numbers, private preschools were likewise uncommon, and mainly served as a safe social space for children to learn to get along with others.

In the past few decades, however, we have seen a major transfer of child care and early learning from home to institution: Nearly three-quarters of American 4-year-olds are now in some kind of nonfamily care. That category spans a dizzying mix of privately and publicly funded preschool environments, including family-run day cares, private preschools in church basements, and Head Start programs in public elementary schools, to name a few. Across all of them, the distinction between early education and "official" school seems to be eroding.

*(Continued on next page.)*

When I survey parents of preschoolers, they tend to be on board with many of these changes, either because they fear that the old-fashioned pleasures of unhurried learning have no place in today's hypercompetitive world or because they simply can't find, or afford, a better option. The stress is palpable: Pick the "wrong" preschool or ease up on the phonics drills at home, and your child might not go to college. She might not be employable. She might not even be allowed to start first grade!

Media attention to the cognitive potential of early childhood has a way of exacerbating such worries, but the actual academic consensus on the components of high-quality early education tells another story. According to experts such as the Yale professor Edward Zigler, a leader in child-development and early-education policy for half a century, the best preschool programs share several features: They provide ample opportunities for young children to use and hear complex, interactive language; their curriculum supports a wide range of school-readiness goals that include social and emotional skills and active learning; they encourage meaningful family involvement; and they have knowledgeable and well-qualified teachers.

As an early-childhood educator, I've clocked many hours in many preschool classrooms, and I have found that I can pretty quickly take the temperature from the looks on kids' faces, the ratio of table space to open areas, and the amount of conversation going on in either. In a high-quality program, adults are building relationships with the children and paying close attention to their thought processes and, by extension, their communication. They're finding ways to make the children think out loud.

The real focus in the preschool years should be not just on vocabulary and reading, but on talking and listening. We forget how vital spontaneous, unstructured conversation is to young children's understanding. By talking with adults, and one another, they pick up information. They learn how things work. They solve puzzles that trouble them. Sometimes, to be fair, what children take away from a conversation is wrong. They might conclude, as my young son did, that pigs produce ham, just as chickens produce eggs and cows produce milk. But these understandings are worked over, refined, and adapted—as when a brutal older sibling explains a ham sandwich's grisly origins.

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting this type of learning. A 2011 study in the journal *Child Development* found that preschool teachers' use of sophisticated vocabulary in informal classroom settings predicted their students' reading comprehension and word knowledge in fourth grade. Unfortunately, much of the conversation in today's preschool classrooms is one-directional and simplistic, as teachers steer students through a highly structured schedule, herding them from one activity to another and signaling approval with a quick "good job!"

Consider the difference between a teacher's use of a closed statement versus an open-ended question. Imagine that a teacher approaches a child drawing a picture and exclaims, "Oh, what a pretty house!" If the child is not actually drawing a house, she might feel exposed, and even if she is drawing a house, the teacher's remark shuts down further discussion: She has labeled the thing and said she likes it. What more is there to add? A much more helpful approach would be to say, "Tell me about your drawing," inviting the child to be reflective. It's never possible to anticipate everything a small person needs to learn, so open-ended inquiry can reveal what is known and unknown. Such a small pedagogic difference can be an important catalyst for a basic, but unbounded, cognitive habit—the act of thinking out loud.

Conversation is gold. It's the most efficient early-learning system we have. And it's far more valuable than most of the reading-skills curricula we have been implementing: One meta-analysis of 13 early-childhood literacy programs "failed to find any evidence of effects on language or print-based outcomes." Take a moment to digest that devastating conclusion.

I was recently asked to review a popular preschool curriculum that comes with a big box of thematic units, including lists of words and "key concepts" that children are supposed to master. One objective of the curriculum's ocean unit, for example, is to help preschoolers understand "the importance of the ocean to the environment." Children are given a list of specific terms to learn, including exoskeleton, scallop shell, blubber, and tube feet. At first glance, this stuff seems fun and educational, but doesn't this extremely narrow articulation of "key concepts" feel a little off? What's so special about blubber, anyway? Might a young child not want to ponder bigger questions: What is water? Where do the blue and green come from? Could anything be more beautiful and more terrifying than an ocean?

*(Continued on next page.)*

The shift from an active and exploratory early-childhood pedagogy to a more scripted and instruction-based model does not involve a simple trade-off between play and work, or between joy and achievement. On the contrary, the preoccupation with accountability has led to a set of measures that favor shallow mimicry and recall behaviors, such as learning vocabulary lists and recognizing shapes and colors (something that a dog can do, by the way, but that is in fact an extraordinarily low bar for most curious 4-year-olds), while devaluing complex, integrative, and syncretic learning.

Last year, I observed some preschoolers conversing about whether snakes have bones. They argued at length among themselves, comparing the flexible serpentine body with dinosaur fossils and fish, both of which they had previously explored. There was no clear consensus on how these various creatures could contain the same hard skeletons, but I watched, transfixed, as each child added to the groundwork another had laid. The teacher gently guided the group as a captain might steer a large ship, with the tiniest nudge of the wheel. Finally, a little boy who had seen a snake skeleton in a museum became animated as he pantomimed the structure of a snake's spine in a series of karate chops: "One bone, one bone, one bone," he informed his friends. "I think we're all going to have to do a lot more research," the teacher replied, impressed. This loosely Socratic method is a perfect fit for young minds; the problem is that it doesn't conform easily to a school-readiness checklist.

The academic takeover of American early learning can be understood as a shift from what I would call an "ideas-based curriculum" to a "naming-and-labeling-based curriculum." Not coincidentally, the latter can be delivered without substantially improving our teaching force. Inexperienced or poorly supported teachers are directed to rely heavily on scripted lesson plans for a reason: We can point to a defined objective, and tell ourselves that at least kids are getting something this way.

But that something—while relatively cheap to provide—is awfully thin gruel. One major study of 700 preschool classrooms in 11 states found that only 15 percent showed evidence of effective interactions between teacher and child. Fifteen percent.

We neglect vital teacher-child interactions at our peril. Although the infusion of academics into preschool has been justified as a way to close the achievement gap between poor and well-off children, Robert Pianta, one of the country's leading child-policy experts, cautions that there is "no evidence whatsoever" that our early-learning system is suited to that task. He estimates that the average preschool program "narrows the achievement gap by perhaps only 5 percent," compared with the 30 to 50 percent that studies suggest would be possible with higher-quality programs. Contrasting the dismal results of Tennessee's preschool system with the more promising results in places such as Boston, which promotes active, child-centered learning (and, spends more than twice the national average on preschool), lends further credence to the idea that preschool quality really does matter.

It's become almost a cliché to look to Finland's educational system for inspiration. As has been widely reported, the country began to radically professionalize its workforce in the 1970s and abandoned most of the performance standards endemic to American schooling. Today, Finland's schools are consistently ranked among the world's very best. This "Finnish miracle" sounds almost too good to be true. Surely the country must have a few dud teachers and slacker kids!

And yet, when I've visited Finland, I've found it impossible to remain unmoved by the example of preschools where the learning environment is assessed, rather than the children in it. Having rejected many of the pseudo-academic benchmarks that can, and do, fit on a scorecard, preschool teachers in Finland are free to focus on what's really essential: their relationship with the growing child.

Here's what the Finns, who don't begin formal reading instruction until around age 7, have to say about preparing preschoolers to read: "The basis for the beginnings of literacy is that children have heard and listened ... They have spoken and been spoken to, people have discussed [things] with them ... They have asked questions and received answers."

For our littlest learners, what could be more important than that?

# PIZZA FRIDAYS!

Mrs. Atkinson's 3<sup>rd</sup> graders will continue to offer pizza and organic lemonade for lunch on Fridays, starting March 1<sup>st</sup> to raise money for our Farm Trip.

**Please return this form and payment (made out to RVWS)  
by Monday, February 11th**  
to the folder on the office door labeled "pizza"

Pizza will be from The Little York in Milford and will be delivered to the classrooms by the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders each Friday at lunch.

*This payment is for 12 weeks of pizza: 3/1, 3/8, 3/15, 3/22, 4/5, 4/12, 4/26, 5/3, 5/10, 5/17, 5/31, 6/7*

***Thank you for your support!***

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade and Teachers name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 slice & lemonade: \$47.00

\_\_\_\_\_ 2 slices & lemonade: \$80.00

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 slice/no lemonade: \$32.00

\_\_\_\_\_ 2 slices/no lemonade: \$64.00

\_\_\_\_\_ Lemonade Only: \$15.00

\_\_\_\_\_ Gluten-free individual 10" pie: \$144 (possible to share with a friend!)

\_\_\_\_\_ Gluten-free & lemonade: \$150

Questions? Please contact Sara Fishkin at [sarajoyfishkin@gmail.com](mailto:sarajoyfishkin@gmail.com)

***Thank you again for your support!***