

# Four Rivers Currents

April 2015

From the Principal's Desk...

## WHAT SHOULD OUR STANCE BE ON STANDARDIZED TESTING?

On a beautiful spring day in the year 2000, another teacher and I staged a small act of protest against the social studies MCAS. We gave back our pay for the day, set up a booth on the sidewalk in front of the state house in Boston, and administered 5-question versions of the previous year's MCAS test for social studies. We invited every state legislator to come down to try out the questions they were saying every high school graduate in Massachusetts should know. Only 3 took us up on the offer, and they did not do very well. Nor did the 20-30 other adults who stopped by that day.

Now, I'm the one asking our students to try their best on a trial run of a new test called the PARCC -- the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career. I ask myself— as you might—whether this is hypocritical? I based my protest in 2000 on perspectives and research that said the tests were akin to educational malpractice. It wasn't that they took a lot of time or seemed unnecessary. It was that they emphasized memorization over thinking and analysis. They covered topics a mile wide and an inch deep. If enforced as a graduation requirement, they would transform teaching in our schools for the worse. Similar criticisms—and more— are made about the English Language Arts and Math MCAS. Yet educators I respect say that MCAS raised the floor on student achievement when good intentions or other measures didn't. They say the accountability imposed by these tests has forced schools to pay attention to students who had been neglected for years. While I continue to feel that the social studies MCAS was truly misguided, I feel the methods and purposes of the ELA and Math tests are sound, for the most part.

My initial impressions of PARCC and the Common Core State Standards so far are similar. They test skills we all would likely want for our students and our children. The standards say our graduates should be able to read text and understand what it is saying, what it means, and what it implies. They say our graduates should be able to reason their way through a multi-step math problem and communicate their thinking. They say our graduates should be able to evaluate and use evidence. The tests themselves seem more challenging than MCAS. Is that a good thing, to set a higher bar, even when its form is a standardized test? It might be, if the outcomes for students are that they graduate being ready for college and career. There certainly are enough criticisms of both the tests and standards to make us question their efficacy and think hard about how they should be used. But neither the standards nor the test seem evil, though some feel otherwise.

In the end, I feel a responsibility as leader of a public school in Massachusetts to prepare our students to graduate from high school. I also feel an obligation to give them all a shot at the John and Abigail Adams scholarships, which provide free tuition at in-state colleges based on test scores. If you as parents or students take a stand opposing PARCC and the standards, I ask that you do so based on important principles, that you not disrupt opportunities for others, and that you accept any consequences of your actions—as goes with protest or civil disobedience and taking a principled stand.

I share my thinking with you partly to explain my stance, but also to invite dialogue. If there's enough interest, I'd be happy to schedule an evening conversation (let me know by email).

I also wouldn't mind having you experience the tests for yourselves. There are [practice tests online](#) -- you don't even have to go down to the state house to get a sample.



*Peter Garbus, Principal*

## Grade 7 News

### SCIENCE OR FICTION?

The science fiction book we read in English class was called *The House of the Scorpion*, by Nancy Farmer. It left us with many questions about whether or not the science of that book would ever be possible. So we sought expert knowledge for our questions about cloning, mind-control, mutations, organ transplants, Typhoid, water resources, air pollution and human life-span. We traveled to UMASS to hear from three graduate students currently working in fields related to these questions, hosted two parent experts (thank you Ted Castro-Santos and Stefan Topolski), and even heard from one of our classmates as an expert.

We learned that sometimes getting your questions answered can lead to even more questions and debate. As we examined the science of cloning we ended up exploring the newest ideas of epigenetic differences between genetically identical twins and clones. As we learned about inherited diseases we considered the ethics of genetic testing. The discussions were rich, the questions insightful, and the thinking deep! At that point the science fiction has served its purpose: to make us think not only about Could it Really Happen? but also Should it?

When we asked students to tell us what they learned by listening to experts, here is what they said:

"I learned that on average women live longer than men." – *Hjordis*

"Life expectancy has increased through human history; people live longer now because of modern medicine." - *Gaelen*

"Humans can only be grown in human mothers, because another mammal's immune system would kill the human baby before it was even grown." – *Hailey*

"Water pollution is capable of causing mutations; it has caused frogs to have abnormal bodies, sometimes with more or fewer legs than normal, and other things of the sort." – *Lexy*

"The brain is fragile; there are certain nerves that can't be stimulated, and it's impossible to completely be rid of one's opinion or memories." *Tara*

"We have not discovered the nature of consciousness so we can not control it. Brain implants can be used to help people who can't hear to hear, and people who can't see to see a small black and white pixelated section of what we actually see." – *Maddie*

"It is not possible to use brain implants to control a human brain because we don't know enough about conscience to create a device that works. Brain implants can be used to help someone hear, move limbs and see." – *Ben*

"Lauderium is a real thing, but it's not used any more for it was unhealthy and even potentially deadly." - *Nikkie*

"Typhoid is a deadly disease. It does still exist, just not where we live today." – *Elsie*

"A clone is an organism that is identical to another organism. It is an exact copy, but it is not born at the same age and does not have the same experiences. Clones are also more prone to disease and severe mutations. Dolly, the sheep, was cloned using invitro-fertilization, and was very sick. Cloning humans is not currently possible because of the way that humans' epigenetics are set up. There are two layers of DNA, and we can only get one." – *Noah*

"Almost anything can be transplanted except the brain. Some things are harder than others, like the heart and skin, but they still can be transplanted." -*XiHu*



## Grade 8 News

### IT IS ROCKET SCIENCE

Four Rivers alum Max Perham returned to campus in March to lead a rocket-building workshop with the 8th grade. Students learned the basics of rocket science and then designed and built model rockets. On launch day our rockets soared, filling our spirits with surprise and delight. Max graduated from Four Rivers in 2011, and is now a senior in Mechanical Engineering at UMass and the leader of a pioneering team of rocket-designers participating in NASA's Student Launch competition. He'll be heading off to graduate school at Stanford University in the fall.

*Adam Loubsky-Lonergan, Riley Porter, and Isaac Slaymaker co-designed and built this awesome rocket.*

*Far right:  
Max Perham*



### AND JULIET IS THE SUN

Eighth graders read aloud Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* during February and March. Students felt a sense of success and satisfaction when they handed in their daily summaries for each act and scene, and performed their final projects (*photos at right*).



### CREW TEAM CHALLENGE



We participated in Crew Team Challenge this winter! Some of the challenges included the Costume Race, the Web, Pyramids, Flashlight Sing and Valentine's Trivia—lots of fun!

*Left, Paige and team perform an exercise in trust and physics in the Web Challenge!*



## DIV 2 NEWS

A lot has been happening in Division II over the past few months. On Friday, February 13th, the tenth graders facilitated workshops for the rest of the student body. These workshops were a part of the English/Social Studies “Do Something!” expedition, which combined research and presentation skills with the history of activism and the Civil Rights movement. Students presented on issues they were passionate about; topics included substance abuse, anxiety, gender, a variety of environmental issues, and many others. The tenth graders also created and implemented plans in which they did, indeed, do something about their topic. One group facilitated a class called “Discrimination within Our Lives” at GCC; many raised money to donate to local organizations; others focused on raising awareness.

The ninth graders have also been busy. In English class, they wrapped up their eight-week I-Search project, where they researched and presented on a research topic they got to choose. On Friday, March 13, they presented what they learned about their topics at the I-Search Fair at GCC.

Topics ranged from women in rock ‘n’ roll, to Islam, to how sugar affects the brain. The ninth graders are now embarking on an English/Social Studies expedition on immigration, and in science class, they are collaborating with ninth graders at Springfield Renaissance Expeditionary Learning School on a research project that investigates local water quality.



### CREW

Crew time in Division II continues to provide lots of opportunity for celebration, cooperation, competition, and fun. Students have celebrated the spring by throwing a baby shower for Spanish teacher Rebecca Rice (*left*), having “overwear competitions,” and eating delicious homemade treats (*right*).



*9th graders work on I-Search above*



## DIV 3 NEWS

### JUNIOR CHEMISTS TACKLING WORLD PROBLEMS

In Chemistry class, Juniors have embarked on a collaborative effort with Dr. Julian Tyson from UMass Amherst aimed at designing and improving arsenic water testing kits which could be used to protect communities worldwide from harm caused by polluted groundwater. Dr. Tyson is an analytical chemistry professor whose research on arsenic testing is aimed at improving the quality of life for people who live in areas, such as parts of Bangladesh, where arsenic in drinking water is a serious problem.

As part of their expedition, juniors researched the prevalence of arsenic in rice sold here in the U.S. and have experimented with different ways to detect this dangerous element. Their experiments have mostly focused on improving a commercially available arsenic test kit. The kit is notoriously difficult to use correctly, and leaves much to be desired in terms of time and money required for each test. Students are testing a variety of ways to make the test cheaper, more accurate, faster, and easier to use.

In the lab, they are using digital photography along with spatial analysis software to generate precise, replicable results which will hopefully tell us more about the reaction that drives the arsenic test. Juniors will soon take their findings and report them out to the greater scientific community by writing scientific research articles. Next time you come across a Four Rivers junior, ask them how their arsenic research is going - you may be talking to a soon-to-be-published scientist!



### VARSITY BOYS ULTIMATE OFF TO A STRONG START

The Four Rivers varsity boys ultimate team won it's first game of the season against Northampton H.S. 15-10. A strong zone defense and smart offense led by Jack Conant carried the game.

Don't miss the RVAL tournament on Wednesday, April 29 1:30 - 6:30 at GCC, or our home tournament, also at GCC, on May 9 and 10.

## OFFICIAL LAST DAY OF SCHOOL SATURDAY, JUNE 20

Four Rivers has decided to hold its last day of school on Saturday, June 20 rather than the following Monday (provided, of course, there are no more cancellations). It will be a noon dismissal with Super-Clubs activities within or across grades. *Usual bus for Greenfield residents provided. More later.*

The Stepping-Up Ceremony will be held on Friday, June 19 at 10:45 a.m.

## NURSE'S NOTES

We are finally enjoying spring! Along with better weather comes the usual increase in injuries. As a reminder: any student evaluated by a licensed medical professional for ANY injury MUST have a signed medical note from the professional. Return to work/school/sports should be explicit about the level of participation.

~ Jeanne Milton, RN

## PERSONNEL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Perhaps you've heard that Sena Becca Rice, is having a baby. Starting some time in April, she will go on maternity leave through the end of the year. Her classes and crew will be taken over by Marco Yunga. Marco is originally from Ecuador. He has five years of high school teaching experience at an Intercultural High School in Cuenca, Ecuador, where he taught Music, Drama, Andean Philosophy, and English. He also taught Andean music classes and gave seminars on Ecuadorian immigration to North-American university students who were studying abroad in Ecuador. He served as a teaching assistant in Anthropology classes at the University of Lethbridge, in Canada, where he is currently finishing his MA in Anthropology.

John Schatz, our 9th and 10th grade Math teacher, has accepted a new position for next year as an academic dean at the Academy at Charlemont where he used to teach. We have begun a search to fill his spot and we wish him all the best as he takes this next step in his career.

## SEEKING PARENTS FOR A FOCUS GROUP

On Thursday, April 30, a team from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will spend the day at Four Rivers for an official site visit. In addition to spending significant time in classrooms, they meet with focus groups of trustees, administrators, faculty, students, and parents.

If you are interested and available from 9:15-10:00, please contact Leslie Taylor. We will set up a group from there.

***ltaylor@fourriverscharter.org***

## SUMMER ULTIMATE

Interested in playing ultimate this summer at Four Rivers? The school is offering a Summer Ultimate Intensive the week of June 29 - July 3. We will play lots of ultimate, learn new skills, visit a nearby disc golf course, and have fun. There is a fee.

If you are interested in this program contact [terryplotkin@gmail.com](mailto:terryplotkin@gmail.com) or get more information at the school web site:

[www.fourriverscharter.org](http://www.fourriverscharter.org) Click on - Our Program - and then Summer Ultimate Intensive. ~ Terry Plotkin, Athletic Director

## COLLEGE ADVISING

### Juniors and the College Application Process

Earlier this month, Four Rivers hosted a College Admissions Information Evening with Karen Kristof, Associate Director of Admissions at Smith College. For those of you who weren't able to attend, here are a few key take-away points:

- The single most important item for college admission is your transcript. It's a record of your academic performance throughout high school and the best indicator of likely success in college. Do your best work in all of your classes.
- Visit Campuses. Be sure to check in at the admissions office and register. While the formal information sessions and tours are helpful, spend some time walking around and talking to students.
- Test scores (ACT and SAT) are taken into consideration at most schools, but not all, and can help paint a picture of you as a student. Different schools have different testing requirements – some require just SAT's or ACT's, others require SAT's plus subject tests or ACT with writing, while others are test optional. Start looking at the testing requirements for schools that you are interested in and making a timetable to meet those requirements.
- Many schools offer Early Decision (binding, one school only) and Early Action (non-binding can apply to multiple schools) programs as well as regular admission. There are different deadlines for each of these approaches ...these deadlines are important and will start to come around quickly once senior year begins.
- All colleges are now required to post a Net Price Calculator on their website. These are great tools for getting a sense of what an individual family might expect to pay for their child to attend a specific college. The College Board website also has a Net Price Calculator page with links to member schools. This saves time as you only have to enter your information once to get net price estimates from a number of schools. This is available here:

<http://netpricecalculator.collegeboard.org/>

For other schools, visit the website and look under financial aid.

Mr. Stenson also suggested two print resources: *Paying for College Without Going Broke*, published by Princeton Review, and *Right College, Right Price* by Frank Palmasani

- Apply for Financial Aid, even if you think you're not eligible. Apply for both Federal Aid, via the FAFSA, as well as institutional aid. Be sure to look at the financial aid pages of colleges that you wish to apply to for financial aid information. Schools often have scholarship deadlines that are different from the application deadlines. These deadlines are FIRM!

**COLLEGE FAIRS** — College Fairs are a great way to connect with admissions staff from a wide range of schools. The junior class will be visiting some Regional College fairs, listed here: [http://www.neacac.org/cf\\_spring.cfm](http://www.neacac.org/cf_spring.cfm)

Also, the organization, "Colleges That Change Lives" is hosting an evening event in Boston on May 20. Information is available here: <http://www.ctcl.org/events/boston15>

**SAT REMINDER** — We highly recommend that all juniors take the SAT's in June. Some support and preparation will be covered in class, but students are encouraged to prepare independently. The date for the test is June 6; the deadline for registration is May 8. Details and registration is available here: <https://sat.collegeboard.org/home>

**Questions? Contact Andy Stenson, [astenson@frcps.org](mailto:astenson@frcps.org) 413 775-4577 ext. 222**

# EXPLORING NEW ACTIVITIES AND FINDING NEW PASSIONS

## A Sneak Peak at some of this week's Intensives

Students in grades 8—12 dropped regular classes this week and are participating in an intensive 4 days of alternative activities. For example, one group is off camping; another group is in New York for a marathon of live theater. Below left, students in the LARPing Intensive (that's "Live Action Role Playing") stage a mock battle across the playing fields on campus; don't worry, the weapons



are cardboard and duct tape. The Food and Farming group is service oriented. They are visiting several local farms to work alongside farmers and build their understanding of what it's like to live and work on a small farm, and the roles that small farms play in our communities. At right is Matt Turner taming a turkey tom at Manda Farm in Plainfield.



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Four River Charter Public School is dedicated to educating young people for lives of learning and service. The school offers a rigorous academic program aligned with the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and an emphasis on character development for moral and social responsibility. Three central themes – nature, technology and community – pervade the teaching and learning at the school. Four Rivers works closely with parents and seeks both to serve and learn from the many resources of Franklin County.



Four Rivers Charter Public School  
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