

January 16, 2013

TURTLE TRACKS

A WEEKLY EMAIL NEWSLETTER FOR THE VERMONT COMMONS SCHOOL COMMUNITY

UPCOMING EVENTS

January 16-18	January 18	January 21-25	January 21	January 25
Exams	Noon Dismissal	Winter Encounter Week	Encounter Week Parent Dinner 6-8 PM	PACS Encounter Week Luncheon 12-1 PM

PACS News –by Dinah Larsen and Lisa Lillibridge, PACS Co-Chairs

Don't forget our Encounter Week lunch on Friday, January 25th at 12 pm! Please contact Suzanne Mantegna if you have any questions: sdmantegna@comcast.net.

A gigantic thank you to all of you that helped with and/or contributed gift cards to the Teacher and Staff Appreciation Lunch on this past Tuesday. It was a very special moment in time to see the faculty and staff relax before the madness of exams and Encounter Week begin. Thanks to our parent volunteers and again, thank you to our faculty and staff of VCS!



Short Story Contest –by Jennifer Cohen



The winner of our first **UNCOMMON short story contest** is ALEXIS O'KEEFE, with her gripping, descriptive story entitled "Free Anonymous." Alexis read her story during Morning Meeting and will have her story included in our literary magazine *UNCOMMON*. She won 10 points for the Green team, a box of chocolates, and most importantly, the crown, which she will wear the crown until the next contest winner is announced.

NEXT CONTEST PROMPT - The story must begin with the line, "**Why did I agree to do this?**" You must be able to read it within 3 minutes (somewhere around 600 words). Our editors, Jordan Cannon and Aidan Villani-Holland, read and rank the submissions - no author names are visible to them. Anyone in the VCS community can participate. We had faculty submissions last time; this time we would love more of those along with parent submissions. **SUBMISSIONS due in the box in Jennifer's office before February break.**

Board Corner –by Derrick Senior

Vermont Commons School - National Leader: Lessons from the turtle, a navigational superstar

The sea turtle's life, challenging as it may be, is ultimately a story of success. The hatchling embarks on one of nature's boldest feats by first finding its way to the ocean; then for years and over thousands of miles it will navigate its way home, back to a certain, specific location. Throughout this difficult and perilous voyage, through uncharted, unknown waters, the turtle will persevere. It will learn, course correct, adapt, and grow throughout its epic journey. So it seems, a sea turtle's life embodies the process now required by schools and individuals to adapt and thrive in a dramatically changing world. As most of us are aware, America is in the midst of a significant educational shift that will dramatically affect the roles schools play in preparing our children to face life's challenges.

Our school has already embarked on its own destination, as evidenced in our Strategic Plan. I am a new member of the Board of Trustees and have focused much of my time with the Community Engagement Committee. I have been inspired by the forward-thinking work of the Board as well as this committee and the innovative ways our goals are put into action.



Over the holidays, I had the time to reflect on our amazing school and the promise it has to prepare our students for a new millennium. Our Board believes that as a community we need

to continue investing time, talent and/or treasure in supporting a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. We challenge ourselves to embrace those who are willing to take the risks needed to move us forward and we do this without sacrificing our values or high standards.

VCS's current vision statement inspires this school to be a national leader. A bold, specific vision like this has enormous potential. It sets a high bar in establishing a destination that calls us to excel at what we value. The turtle teaches us that *destination specificity* and *depth of commitment* are precisely what make it a superstar. The knowledge and confidence gained from the process of reaching such a bar is more valuable than the destination itself. Our vision sets an imperative: to make manifest our destiny, we will continuously improve and innovate.

Last year, in a *Thoughts in Common* letter, our headmaster Peter Gilmore described the VCS community "as a small, mission-driven, and people-centered community, VCS has little bureaucracy and a culture based on trust and respect. Teachers are the main drivers of curricular reform and implementation, and they take up the task of overseeing what we teach, and how we teach it, with vigor. Creativity and innovation have made our school what it is today, and what it will be tomorrow as well."

The passion and commitment to excellence our teachers and administrators employ in pursuit of the best possible learning environment for our children, is what makes our school so special.

Small nimble schools like ours with a culture of innovation and a peerless, well-loved talent pool are perfectly suited to a voyage like the sea turtle's. This is why we have grown and prospered. The fact that our children genuinely like coming to school every day to learn says so much. The challenge will always be navigational as we in the VCS community learn, course correct, adapt, and grow. Can we go much farther? There is no doubt in my mind, assuming we continue to model the turtle, our navigational superstar.

Further reading: *The National Association of Independent Schools (nais.org)* has created "A Guide to Becoming a School of the Future" informed by the work of Tony Wagner and his list of seven survival skills. (tonywagner.com)

9th-Graders Debate Middle Eastern Foreign Policy

Our ninth graders participated in a Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 9th, in which four groups of students proposed an answer to the very relevant question of what United States foreign policy should be towards the Middle East.

The first group stated that the policy should be similar to policing a rough neighborhood. “It is important to maintain strong alliances,” said Nina Mantegna, “and provide aid to governments fighting against terrorism.” They drew comparisons to the Cold War, in which the United States was one of the only countries to stop the Soviet influence during that period, and the country must take a similar approach to dealing with the Middle East. “The world is dangerous, and we have to use military power to keep ourselves safe.”



Oil was the focus of the second group, because it drives much of the international economy and fuels the entire world. Currently the United States strongly supports Israel, but the country needs a more even-handed response to the Arab-Israeli conflict. “Israel does not produce enough oil for themselves, let alone enough to supply the rest of the world,” said Camille Bartsch, “whereas Iraq produces over two million barrels of oil per day.” That is, US support of Israel brings it into conflict with other Arab countries that provide oil for the west, and consequences of oil disruption would be a collapse of the global economy and a halt to trade, along with excessive chaos and conflict.

Group three believed Middle Eastern foreign policy should focus on democracy and human rights, because so many countries in the area are presently protesting against their governments. They stipulated that motivations should be based on the principles that founded the United States—equality, peace, freedom—as opposed to oil. Doing so would not only improve the international reputation of the US, but supporting a developing democracy might guarantee an ally in the future and decrease the likelihood of war, which would be a mutual benefit. “Human rights and democracy are important things to push for,” said Merle Beach. “A powerful nation falling into chaos would have many ill consequences for the rest of the world.”

The fourth and final group stated that the best option was to completely break free of all entanglements. For over a decade the United States has been spending billions of dollars trying to resolve conflicts between Palestine and Israel, when that money could be better spent solving internal problems. With a thick history of forcing ideals on other nations, getting deeper and deeper into the internal problems of the Middle East may create more allies, but it also creates more enemies. “Our solution is to slowly retreat out of the Middle East,” said Anna Leffler. “We’ll stop spending as many resources on foreign environments and start enabling them to supply for themselves, which will help them become a stronger country.”

Following the completion of each group’s presentation, the panel of senators had the opportunity to pose questions, ranging from finding alternative sources of energy to the likelihood of Middle Eastern nations to embrace American democracy in their own countries. Each group offered well-informed and persuasive responses, and at the end of the panel, the senators were responsible for considering each position and coming up with a solution.

“We believe that group three won the debate,” Senator Ben Maksym stated in his write-up, “due to the superior arguing of their point, and their values being the best of the four choices.”

Kitchen Chemistry at St. Mike's –by Luke Donforth

The chemistry classes took an end of term field trip out to Saint Micheal's College for a special session with Professor John Suchocki (the author of the textbook we use in class). The 9th grade and 11th grade classes each had to give up a lunch period to fit in a two hour off-site lab, and they did so graciously. We send a special thank you to the parents who volunteered to drive the bigger-than-van-load 9th grade class.

Our students did an exemplary job representing themselves and the school. They asked good questions, offered insightful observations, and fielded his questions with vigorous enthusiasm. Professor Suchocki's presentation brought the term full circle, revisiting earlier experiences and pushing the students to cement their understanding of matter at a fundamental level. After a few 'kitchen chemistry' experiments and discussion, he finished off with some liquid nitrogen and liquid oxygen demonstrations, prompting some students to exclaim it was the most fun they'd ever had in science and that now they were really looking forward to college. Make sure to ask one of the chemistry students what their favorite part was the next time you see them.



Sharing the Service Learning Experience –by Nora Hill, '15

Our sophomore Social Studies class visited the Sustainability Academy in Burlington last Thursday to present and discuss our work with Challenge 20/20 and SUDEF (Sudan Development Foundation) to the 4th and 5th graders. We talked about our own experience with digging deep into a global issue by identifying a local project where we could be of service. We shared the process, activities and challenges that we experienced, as well as the ways in which this service work has affected us.



The Sustainability Academy's 4th and 5th graders are currently doing a unit on Global Citizenship and will be meeting with SUDEF soon, so our presentation was applicable and timely. The Sustainability Academy students shared their projects, both local and global, with us as well. The young students were wonderful listeners, asked inquisitive questions and engaged in lively discussion. Personally, it was fun and inspiring for my classmates and me to see such young students really engaged in the Service Learning process and caring about their world so deeply.

Math 9 Geometry in Art and Computer Science



Math 9 students just finished a unit on coordinate geometry. As a final project, they were given the choice between an art or a computer programming project to demonstrate their understanding.

“The ninth grade class was given the opportunity to develop a proposal for a museum seeking funding for an exhibit of M. C. Escher’s work that would help teach the public about math. M. C. Escher was an incredible 20th century graphic artist who used a great deal of math in his work. Even though he wasn’t a mathematician, he used a lot of math, particularly transformations, in his work. We looked at Escher pieces that demonstrated transformations, and then created our own pieces using transformations. In my piece, I used 90° rotations, and horizontal and vertical translations to create a tessellation of stars.”

-Jordan Cannon, ‘16

“Recently, Math 9 has gotten the choice to do one out of two project topics. One of the topics was to create a calculator program. The program involves punching in four coordinates into a calculator and having the calculator tell you what shape it makes (a square, a trapezoid, etc...). Everybody who chose this topic has approached the challenge in different ways and has had different obstacles. A common challenge that students were faced with was when the line between two points had an undefined slope (when the line goes straight up and down). Although the project has been difficult at times, it has also been fun. If you are in Math 7 or 8, you should definitely consider doing this project when you get to Math 9.” -Lauren Howe, ‘16

Luke Donforth to Join the VCS Community Full Time –by Cara Simone



Please join me in welcoming Luke Donforth to the Vermont Commons School community as a full-time faculty member. This spring, Luke will be teaching two sections of 8th-grade science, as well as juniors and seniors.

Luke’s educational background is impressive; he has earned a Bachelor of Science from the University of California at Davis, and a PhD in Physics from Cornell University. Recently, he has been teaching as an adjunct member of the faculty at Champlain College, was a staff scientist and educator at the Connecticut Science Center, and held the position of Science Lead at the Dallas Museum of Nature and Science. In addition to his varied interests outside the field of physics, Luke is a founding Member of Mad Robin Callers Collective and Contra dance teacher. Luke resides with his wife, Sophia, in Burlington.

Welcome, Luke!

This Week In Photos



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