

Principal Thoughts November 2005

Trick or Treat

I love being read to. I loved it as a child and I love it as an adult. I especially love having children read to me. I love the stories that they read, but I also love that they CAN read. In my book, there are only a few moments in life that are better than being with a child when they first realize that they can read! Much like capturing the moment of a baby's first step, being with a child as they realize that they can read is sharing a moment in which a new world is discovered. What a treat!

This year I've had the chance to be read to by several first graders. Some of these students have mastered many of the skills of a beginning reader. They read fluently, they can sound out new words, they can use the pictures in books to help figure out words on which they might get stuck. They enthusiastically grab me and say, "Can I read to you?" I smile and settle in for my treat.

There are also those first graders who struggle to read. They work diligently through letter sounds, combining them to make familiar words. They labor to put together a sentence and they might not understand what the sentence means when they come to the period. But, they see me come into the room and they enthusiastically grab me and say, "Can I read to you?" I smile and settle in for my treat.

I didn't get enough treats last month. Most of my time in October was not spent being read to. Instead I poured over the results of last year's MCAS test. I found myself looking repeatedly at the results of the few Douglas students who received performance levels of "Need Improvement" or "Warning" on the test. I continually ask myself where we failed these students. This seemed like a nasty trick.

The MCAS test is designed to inform educators how we're doing, where we're succeeding and where we're failing. In the world of standardized testing and the State Department of Education, teachers teach, students learn, states test, schools declare success or failure, administrators write student improvement plans or change curriculum, and students do better. Unfortunately, this is the fairy tale version of the complex world of teaching and learning. Failing grades, or MCAS warnings do not help us help children learn to read or learn. This type of negative feedback does nothing to help students become better learners. This is the trick of this type of standardized testing.

In this month of Thanksgiving, I give thanks for the teachers at Douglas who talk to children about their learning. Instead of giving students a grade on a paper or a test, they work in partnership with students. Our teachers sit down and talk with students about the great parts of their work and then the teachers say, let's figure out how to make it better. Douglas teachers understand that learning is a contract the learners make with themselves. The primary goal of education should be to create learners - people who continually learn how to learn - not to create tests to show others that "No Child is being Left Behind."

Assessment is important. It is a treat to be able to pinpoint where a student is succeeding and where their learning breaks down. It is a treat to be able to use that information to move each student forward in their learning. That is our purpose for working at Douglas. And so I look forward to the continued treats that working at

Douglas provides. I look forward to being read to, to helping teachers help students learn math or social studies or science. To seeing our children learn – that's why I come to school everyday – for the treats.

Sincerely,
Dr. Whitbeck