**LETTER FROM MISSION HILL**

Can We Talk? (And Keep Talking?)

Dear Families, Students, and Staff,

Nearly a fifth of the school year is over and much has yet to be done. Three things are at the top of my agenda these days.

One: We need to keep talking about testing. The newspapers will soon be full of the state test results. The scores will be awful, but the editorial writers will say that’s fine—that we should look at the bad results as an incentive to work harder, teach tougher, and so on.

In fact, it was a very bad test. It’s like the paper-and-pencil driver’s test I described last week. Working harder is not the point. Not even Click and Clack of “Car Talk” could pass this kind of driver’s test (and they wouldn’t be better mechanics if they could). It covered everything but the kitchen sink. Our kids will do no worse than others—probably even better—but that’s no excuse.

What’s the alternative? We know there are better ways to test kids, ways that can actually help improve schooling. We believe high standards are critical and we aim to meet them. But first we have to get those standards right.

Two: That’s what the Mission Hill graduation standards are all about. Attached is a shortened version of the faculty’s first draft of these standards, which we distributed last February.

The draft is similar to the high school graduation test we used successfully in New York City for many years. It’s modeled on graduate school exams—for example, a doctoral exam with an oral defense. We’ll use a wide range of evidence to assess each “domain,” and several audiences to judge the quality of work in each. We’ve selected eight domains—areas in which students must amass evidence of proficiency.

Is it too much? Does it capture the important things? Is it missing something critical?

Three: No matter how we assess kids’ progress, we need to collaborate more with each family on how we reach our goals. We all know that one-on-one relationships, with the child at the center, are the key; and we know we are just scratching the surface. Parents and teachers tend to start out wary of each other. That’s because it matters so much and we’re so afraid of getting it wrong.

Parents and teachers tend to start out wary of each other—afraid of getting it wrong.

In fact, we will often get it wrong. We just have to keep at it. Keep this in mind at family conferences in these next two weeks. If this meeting doesn’t resolve your concerns, ask for another. And another. Do you want someone else to join you? DeeDee Costello, Brian, me, Suzanne, or another teacher? And, of course, feel free to bring grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, and other expert friends if that helps.

Perseverance—sticking with it—makes a big difference in education. It’s a habit of work (and heart) that is critical in life. We won’t give up on any child, but that doesn’t mean we’ll get it right all the time.

—Deborah Meier