



# THE Head's LETTER

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FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES

## Happier Students, Better Outcomes

As we reflect on student success based on test scores and college acceptances, one topic that is seldom considered is student happiness. At times, we can confuse academic rigor with the notion that students should be worried, stressed, and overworked. Students should be pushed and challenged academically, but academic rigor and student happiness can coexist. I was fortunate to have the time to research this topic during my time at the Klingenstein Head's Program, and I found the research very clear and compelling.

Evidence exists to make the case for happiness as a part of academic rigor and challenge. Students can learn more and be more willing to take chances, ask for help, put forth ideas, and succeed when they are happy—and they take these characteristics with them after graduation.

When looking at the research, it is clear that happiness is more than just an end in itself, but something that can be at the heart of satisfaction, mastery, and success. In fact, when focusing on what we want for our students, having happy students creates the kind of internal motivation that is at the core of true and lifelong learning.

The ways in which happiness can be a catalyst for moving students towards a desirable academic and social outcome is something that we should be encouraging in all of our students. Happier students are more apt to model and develop the attributes that we hold in esteem among our citizenry.

In terms of application, it is exciting to know that there are some concrete practices that we can instill in our schools to help students become more happy. In fact, these practices can make an entire community better.

In his book *The Happiness Advantage*, Harvard psychologist Shawn Achor outlines several easy ways in which “we can improve our moods and raise our level of happiness throughout the day.” These practices can be used everywhere, and need not take up much time—as little as five minutes. They include: meditation, looking forward to something, committing acts of kindness, infusing positivity, exercise, and being grateful.

The only resource needed is someone to introduce the ideas and guide the program. It is not bound by the socio-economic attributes of a school or community, and is therefore a very

democratic approach to encouraging students to be happier and more engaged.

Luckily, we have a member of our staff who had begun his unique journey by enrolling in The Living School for Action and Contemplation, which offers a unique opportunity for its students to deepen their engagement with their truest selves and with the world. Last year we asked him to pilot a “Happiness Project” with his homeroom students. He created journals and each day asked his students to write about one of his prompts which all involved gratitude, positive experiences, and strength recognition.

As you can imagine, at first these seemed silly to junior high students, but over the course of the year the students began to look forward to writing and discussing their thoughts. He also brought mindfulness practices into his program.

Anecdotally the change was evident, students were more calm and relaxed, and the homeroom time changed dramatically in that students looked forward to it. This was a 10-minute investment in time that made a big difference.

Over the summer we paid for professional development so that he could lead the effort to roll this out throughout our middle school. We will conduct pre- and post-surveys so that we can measure the effects on our school and in the lives of our students. We will model these practices as a staff and make it a priority in small ways throughout the day but particularly during our homeroom time.

To get faculty and trustee buy-in, we will continually stress the science behind these efforts—this makes it an easy sell. Our staff has a strong affection for our students and they have always done what is best for them; we see this as another opportunity for our school to make education more personal and fulfilling. Our goal is to roll it out school-wide next year.

After all, what we really want are students who find joy in what they are doing. We want to give them knowledge and a spark of life so that they can engage with their peers and with their teachers in meaningful and purposeful ways. We want to give them all the tools available to ensure they can lead inspired lives.

Riverstone International School, Coed, Day, enrolls 320 students in grades PS-12. Mr. Carignan was appointed in 2011.



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