

News from Burr

Principal's Newsletter

March 2015

Dear Burr Community,

One focus area for our staff this year has been the influence of language on learning. Academically, we have spent time looking at the role of teacher feedback – that is, the questions, the statements, the suggestions, and the praise we give students to help them learn. We have learned a lot about the importance of specificity, timeliness, and user friendly language when giving students feedback. Additionally, we want our feedback to be continuous, tangible, and something that moves students to action. So much of the work that teachers do with students in the classroom is either in small groups or 1-1. We have found that quality feedback is a critical element in helping students grow and improve.

Additionally, we continue to learn about the power of language when helping students develop socially and emotionally. Burr's teachers (as well as teachers throughout Fairfield and the nation) use *Responsive Classroom* as way to build community in the classroom. Some of our teachers recently participated in a book group for *The Power of Our Words*. There was some terrific learning that came out of this work for teachers – learning that I think you might find applicable to your role as parents. For example, language directed at children should be direct and authentic. This includes:

- Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say - By doing this, students learn that language is not used to trick, manipulate, or confuse.
- Use Appropriate Tone of Voice – Tone can override the meaning of what we are trying to say and can sour our intent in an instant. In general, a warm, matter of fact tone is the goal. “It conveys authenticity, respect, and directness.”
- Careful with Sarcasm – While sarcasm has a place in art (movies, etc.), it generally doesn’t work well with children. They often don’t understand it and (later on, when they do), it can be easily embarrassing to them.
- Follow Through - Mean what you say. By not following through, we are indirectly teaching children that our words don’t have to be taken seriously. This implies that we should choose our words carefully and not make promises that we can’t keep.
- Avoid Over-Generalizations - Examples of an over-generalization might be “This is going to be hard” or “This should be easy and a lot of fun.” Our goal when we make statements like this is to be empathetic and supportive. However, sweeping statements are not always true. When they don’t come true, that could →



BURR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

unintentionally teach children not to trust what we say. (Ex. "I thought you said it was going to be easy...") Another approach might be saying something authentic, supportive, and in the first or third person. (Ex. "I found this fun" or "Some people may find this fun. I'll be interested to hear what you think.")

- Be Aware of Body Language – Body language is our gestures, posture, and facial expressions. Much of the communication between people happens through body language. (Researchers estimate up to 90%) We should make sure that the words we are saying match our body language. When they don't ,this can be confusing to children.

Other suggestions included:

- Take Time to Notice the Positives – Praise persistence, hard work, and character – not necessarily achievement.
- Try to Keep Language Nonjudgmental – Instead of saying, "If you cared, you would study harder" say, "I noticed that you didn't study for your last test. What's your plan for your next test."?
- Keep it Brief – "Long explanations, however reasoned and well intentioned, are usually counterproductive...Children often understand more when we speak less."
- Know When to Be Silent and Provide Wait Time – Research suggests that even waiting 3-5 seconds can lead to more thoughtful and reasoned responses from children.
- Avoid Voice Overs – This is when we say things like, "So what you are saying is..." While this may be necessary to clarify a child's thinking, it has the unintended consequence of saying that a child's words are important only if repeated by an adult.

I have found all of these suggestions to be very helpful—both as an educator and a parent. I hope you do as well.

I also wanted to take a moment to recognize and thank students for some terrific service work inside and outside of Burr.

- A special congratulations to Mrs. Uliasz, Mrs. Montgomery, and the *Roots and Shoots Club* who raised \$2,442 to help *Guiding Eyes for the Blind*.
- A special thank you and job well done to the following students who earned a collective \$5, 251 for the *St. Baldrick's Foundation* for childhood cancer research: In grade 4, Michael M. , Garrett L. , Carter G. , Chase M. , Jack P. , Charlie S. , and in grade 5 Clayton J.

In the meantime - spring is here,! Enjoy.

Warmly,

Jason