Dear RMSEL Parent Community,

Welcome back to school and to a New Year! As we transition to a new calendar year, oftentimes various media outlets report on the previous year’s challenges, creating anxiety and uncertainty. I am certainly thankful to work in an environment in which professionals care deeply about our children and return to the rigors and challenges of classroom instruction with a positive outlook and uncanny ability to motivate and engage learners! January is an exciting month at RMSEL in which we begin the process as an administrative team and office staff in welcoming new prospective parents to our community through the annual lottery, which will be conducted on Monday January 30, 2017. All applications for the lottery are required to be complete by midnight on January 27, 2017 to be included in the lottery on the morning of the 30th. If you have a friend and/or family that are considering enrolling at RMSEL, please be sure to personally remind them of the upcoming lottery. The electronic system also sends reminders to families that have started an application to complete the process for inclusion in the lottery.

As for returning RMSEL families, this is also an important time of the year to verify your enrollment for the 2017 -2018, school year. All current families were required to complete the Re-Enrollment Acceptance/Relinquishment Form by Friday, January 13, 2017. All forms had to be completed by 3:00 pm on Friday. This is an important part of the larger process, in that enrollment spots being made available to new families are determined by relinquishment at any respective grade level. We appreciate each family’s attention to completing the required documents in a timely manner.

Winter Break at RMSEL is traditionally referred to as “Winter Reflection.” This is a direct correlation to our design principle of Solitude and Reflection which states, “Students need time alone to explore their own thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas. They also need time to exchange their reflections with other students and adults.” During the time away from campus, our teachers and staff members are encouraged to model this practice. By modeling our values we also immerse ourselves in reading and research to formulate new ideas.

During our Winter Reflection, consultant and author of Why Leaders Eat Last and Start with the Why, Simon Sinek, participated in an interview in which he was asked, “The Millennial Question.” This approximately 14 minute video went “viral,” receiving over 4 million views in less than two days. During his analysis of concerns regarding adolescents and young adults entering the workforce, he addressed four factors: parenting, technology, impatience, and environment. While no singular analysis of any topic can be adequately summarized in a 14-minute video, he does begin to prompt additional reflection and research to the impact of technology of our children and the development of young adults. Sinek does begin with an indictment of parenting strategies, which I do not condone or believe is applicable in a global sense, however, his arguments regarding technology, impatience, and relationships are profound and supported by other research.

During this clip he makes the comparison of cell phone addiction in young adults to that of smoking, alcohol use, and gambling. The comparison is made that the instantaneous response
received from a “like” or “comment” to a social media interaction releases the chemical response of dopamine to the human brain. Dopamine is also released through the sensation of smoking, alcohol consumption, and gambling; all of which are legal to use, but the difference is that these three actions have restrictions based on the age of the user. We have not created any type of formal restriction to the use of technology, which can have similar harmful effects to adolescent development. Author Nicholas Carr confirms similar studies in his 2015 release The Glass Cage – Where Automation is Taking Us. Carr does not reject the use of technology in modern society but stresses heavily the importance of rethinking the use of technology to enhance our society rather than to diminish “the extraordinary abilities that make us human.”

Dr. Leonard Sax, MD, PhD, released a new research text in June 2016, titled Boys Adrift, in which he explores similar topics, specifically the relationship to gaming and the direct correlation to Attention Deficit, Risk Taking, Obesity, and Dehumanization/Changes in Personality. When adolescents replace reality with a virtual reality and the instantaneous response of a video game, it can further lead to Sinek’s assertion that impatience created by technology use and gaming are inhibiting the ability of students to have deep meaningful relationships.

A world that will continue to be driven by instantaneous call and response prompts the importance of our staff and community to investigate best practice to ensure that we truly fulfill the mission and vision of our school. Dr. Thomas Frey of The Devinci Institute in Broomfield, Colorado, has a job title of Senior Futurist. What is a Senior Futurist? Is Dr. Frey really just George Jetson?

Dr. Frey’s work at the institute is forward thinking as to the importance and impact of technology in a global society that is increasing at an exponential rate. To put this in context, the iPhone did not exist at the turn of the century, it was released in 2007. Our development in terms of technology is exponential to advancements in the previous century. Frey builds a strong case that in the next fifty years we will no longer personally operate a private vehicle and that our system of travel will be one hundred percent autonomous. The impact of such a conjecture is profound to our economy and way of life. While many may see this as “far fetched,” the current modern automobile is just over one hundred years old; to believe that the entire system can change at the modern rate of progression is not in any way unrealistic. In the event this transition happens, car ownership is eliminated as the grid is dynamic and in constant motion, insurance costs are eliminated or changed, automobile finance is eliminated or changed, parking structures are removed, health care costs are reduced when accidents are eliminated, and this list of conjectures goes on and on.

I unpack my reflections and research to share with you the relationship to teaching and learning and the importance of school. So why is it important to learn content and skills, in a world with instantaneous responses and access to information immediately that exceeds the capacity of the human brain? If “Alexa” can answer every question, then why is it important to study content and skills? (The device consists of a 9.25-inch [23.5 cm] tall cylinder speaker with a seven-piece microphone array. The device connects to the voice-controlled intelligent personal assistant service Alexa, which responds to the name "Alexa.")

The importance of teaching and learning and the relationship to school could not be more important today than ever before. Professionals state all the time that we want students who can “problem solve” and “think critically.” These two over-utilized and vague terms actually require additional detail in our modern society. If “Alexa” can answer any question, once again, why are content and skills of such importance?
It is true that we are progressing to a society in which an instantaneous response to questions is present, however once the answer is received students must be able to access their knowledge of content and skills to understand the response. In understanding the response it will be required of students to think critically to then ask the next question. The continuous process of question and answer will result in students solving complex problems. If content and skills are absent in our classrooms and homes, we are removing the capacity of our students to solve complex problems. At RMSEL, we strive to engage students in complex topics to build content knowledge and skills, while providing students independence to build conjectures and solve problems.

The world ahead of us is at times a bit frightening as it is unknown, however the impact which our children will have in a society and workforce in which new opportunities are created weekly, even daily, brings great joy to think about: they will cure deadly disease, solve humanitarian crises around the world, and construct systems that make a difference and have a positive impact on the world.

In closure, I want to share that technology is here and part of an ever-changing world. It also comes with dangerous side effects that were not present even ten years ago. I encourage you to think about technology use with our kids, the demanding and potentially harmful effects as well as the profound impact it may have. I hope these reflections also demonstrate that as a school leader, I am always learning and making connections to our students and how we can ensure they fulfill our mission and vision. Nothing can replace the sense of joy found when students build authentic relationships with one another, and feel success in conquering a challenge. While we are progressing at an astounding rate, the principles of design that make up our foundation are more important today than ever. Design Principle #10 Service and Compassion, as Kurt Hahn states, “compassion above all…” A phone, Internet, and/or Alexa will never replace the connection of a deep relationship fostered at our school!

Sincerely,

Chad