Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning
Executive Director Communication

August 9, 2017

Dear RMSEL Parent Community,

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Welcome and Appreciation

I want to extend a warm and exciting welcome to all of our students and families for the upcoming school year. The staff and I cannot wait for the halls and classrooms of our building to be filled with the joy of our students. Last week, over 300 families attended registration and completed the process. As a staff, we appreciate the diligence of our families in completing the registration process. The process at RMSEL is significantly more detailed than that of other school programs, but ensures our staff has required documentation to provide our unique learning program. The process of registration is truly a crew and community effort at RMSEL. I have to thank our office staff for their dedication and professional planning in making the day an overwhelming success. In addition to our staff team, I also want to thank members of our District Accountability Committee (DAC) for organizing spirit wear sales and working with parent volunteers to ensure that each station during registration was a success. Finally, a thank you to our amazing parent volunteers for taking time from your busy schedules and end of summer activities to support our crew.

EL Work Plan

RMSEL and all schools are unique organizations in that we have finite start and end times as well as specific dates of operation annually. While some may find this to be challenging, it is very inspirational to teachers and school staff. We are inspired by the opportunity to reflect, revise, and prepare to grow in service of your children. While the summer is a time to rejuvenate, it is also time for professional development, planning, and growth. Over the past week during Ground School, our staff engaged in finalizing their respective professional learning to begin another exciting year with students. Founding National Executive Director of Expeditionary Learning, Gregg Farrell, stated, “Model what you are trying to teach. Instructors have to live what they are teaching, or they lose credibility with their students. Instructors and students live so closely on course that it would become immediately apparent if an instructor had a different standard of conduct for themselves and for their students. They have to walk the talk. If they are not lit up with learning, there is little chance they will light up their students with the excitement of learning. The professional development we offer teachers gives them the experience of being students on learning expeditions in which our staff model the kind of teaching we want them to do.”

The week of Ground School is a time in which we, as a staff, build relationships as a crew and model through our actions the values we intend to instill in our school and classrooms. To
briefly recap, our staff is actively engaged in planning learning expeditions and in-depth field experiences for our students. Each year we model our EL Work Plan goals during this time. Our goal is complex, but simple, this year, that as a community we will exemplify the motto “Be Kind, Work Hard!” We want our students to build and foster relationships that allow them to exemplify their character. Character is built through providing students with challenging academic and field experiences that allow them to problem solve and communicate their learning. This week, our staff modeled this as we took on the act of service during our annual staff retreat. We camped together as a team and proceeded to model the design principle, Service and Compassion – “…one of Expeditionary Learning School’s primary functions is to prepare students with the attitudes and skills to learn from and be made of service.” As an entire staff, we worked on a restoration project with Jefferson County Open Space at Clear Creek Canyon. In one day, with many hands, we removed 14 bags of trash from climbing site 1 and scrubbed graffiti from the granite walls of the canyon, all during a cold downpour. I appreciate working with a staff that models our actions in the school setting and the field.

**Communication Revisions**

We are a school that values and seeks feedback from our stakeholders. Last year through the use of Tri Annual Quality Surveys, we collected data regarding the effective use of Google Classroom and Infinite Campus. During this survey we found that approximately 40% of RMSEL parents did not access Google Classroom, of the 60% of remaining parents that engaged in the use of the tool, only 50% found it to be effective in communicating classroom information. Through further analysis we discovered that it was not due to the content, depth, and quality of communication present in Google Classroom, but rather, how the information was delivered to the parent community. Two identifiable failures were found through the analysis. 1) Once the number of “classrooms” a student is assigned to increases beyond 1-2 it is challenging for parents to track all the information. 2) The use of a secondary “@rmsel.org” domain assigned parent email is required; it creates a barrier for use because parents cannot select the delivery point of information.

To address these two systematic failures, we are going to shift our use of Google Classroom for the 2017-2018 school year. We will continue to use Google Classroom. The same email you have registered with the school to receive Infinite Campus Messenger (any RMSEL school communication) will be assigned to your child’s Google Classroom account. This is called the “Guardian” feature in Google Classroom. You will receive an invitation from Google Classroom to accept guardianship of your child’s account. Once assigned to your child, you will receive one weekly email with all the information for any classroom your child is assigned to.

This eliminates parents sifting through multiple pages and you no longer need duplicate email accounts. You will receive one consolidated review weekly. We believe this will solve the systematic usage failures last year and consolidate the amazing information from your child’s teachers into one single message.

In addition to Google Classroom, we will transition to electronic Progress Reports and Academic Updates for the year through Infinite Campus. Teachers will report academic and character progress weekly through Infinite Campus. Parents will receive a notification for updates every third Monday through the school year to access Infinite Campus. You can access Infinite Campus any time, but all teachers will ensure their grade books are updated every three weeks. In grades K-8, final progress reports will be printed every trimester. In grades 9-12, final progress
reports and grades will be posted to transcripts every semester. We have worked with Infinite Campus extensively over the summer to build a custom template for RMSEL that keeps the fidelity of our grading scale, character values, and teacher comments. The transition to this tool will provide more timely academic and character feedback to students and families. During registration we verified 314 parent portal accounts, so we are excited to begin the year with all parents logged into the system.

We understand that this transition will be dynamic and will work with staff and families to ensure we communicate in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

**Cell Phone Free**

We have elected to partner with a new innovative company called Yondr to eliminate the use of cell phones on campus during the school day. Cell phones have created a disruptive environment at school and, potentially more disruptive, outside of school. In the Common Sense Media 2015 study of 2,600 young people, “American teenagers (13 to 18 year olds) average about nine hours (8.56) of entertainment media use excluding time spent at school or for homework. Given that most that most of them sleep slightly less than ten hours per night this means kids over 13 are spending nearly two-thirds of their waking hours with their eyes tied down and bodies stationary.” This type of excessive and prevalent media consumption through devices is divergent of our values and purpose as a founding Expeditionary Learning school.

Yondr provides each student with a lockable cell phone pouch. The students will place their phone in the pouch each morning. The pouch with the phone will be with the student at all times, just not accessible for use during school hours. At the conclusion of the school day, students will return to their crew room and teachers will provide an unlock station to students. Students will swipe their pouch, remove their phone, return their pouch to the hamper, and exit school each day. This simple tool will assist our teachers in minimizing classroom disruptions and increase engagement with content and other students. Other school programs have piloted this program with tremendous success.

**Relationships, Rigor, and Relevance**

As with any summer, it affords staff the opportunity to, as we oftentimes say, “ramp up our reading.” This summer, a few staff members elected to read The Vanishing American Adult – Our Coming of Age Crisis and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance, by Ben Sasse. Sasse currently serves as a United States Senator for Nebraska. This is not a text of political rhetoric, however, a text written after he served as the President of Midland University working in conjunction with college students. Sasse provides a very deep perspective in that he received a Ph.D. from Yale in American History.

Sasse shares many perspectives throughout the depth of this text with a focus on the youth development as connected to authentic learning experiences. In the chapter titled Travel to See, he shares “Daniel Boorstin, formerly the Librarian of Congress eloquently describes this as, “the key distinction here is between active seeking and venturing and learning on one hand, and passively taking on the other hand. The traveler is fundamentally active; he is strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The old English noun “travel” is the same as “travail” – which means “trouble,” “work,” “torment.” To journey – to “travail,” or (later) to travel – then was to
do something laborious or troublesome, but meaningful. It is hard – and that is to be cherished. The traveler is an active man at work. By contrast, the tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes sight seeing.”

At RMSEL, as we develop across a K-12 continuum, we strive to be active seeking in lieu of passively taking. This process builds lifelong bonds amongst our students, families, and staff; it is fostered through rigorous learning and experiential lessons in the classroom and field. Each experience is designed to be relevant to each student’s present and future development as a scholar and citizen.

First Day – Nuts and Bolts

1. School Start Time – Monday, August 14, 2017 - 7:40 am High School / 7:50 am Middle School and Lower School

Wednesday, August 16, 2017 – Kindergarten First Day of School – Weekly delayed start of 8:50 am for Staff Professional Development

Playground Supervision for Morning Drop Off begins at 7:30 am

One traffic lane is used to drop off students in the morning; student may exit curbside and enter school or meet on the playground (Lower School). In the event a parents need to exit the vehicle, please do not exit in the traffic lane; instead proceed to park and then exit. Our parking lot is small and oftentimes when full, parents park across Holly adjacent to Ashgrove Park and use the provided crosswalk. Please demonstrate patience with morning traffic, when all families drop off their child at RMSEL.

2. Student will need a packed lunch or an active My School Bucks Account to purchase a lunch.

3. School Dismissal – 3:15 pm High School / 3:20 pm Middle School and Lower School

Parents who are exiting a vehicle must park in the afternoon in the parking lot or adjacent streets to campus. Do not block driveways or other access points in the neighborhood. In the event that you elect to wait in the Fire Lane for your child, do not exit your vehicle. In the event of emergency we must clear the lane.

4. You will receive specific details from your child’s teacher regarding classroom expectations. As a reminder, please mark your calendar for Back to School Night:

Middle School – August 22, 2017 – 5:30-7:00 pm

Lower School / High School – August 23, 2017 – 5:30-7:00 pm

We hope to see you at the Back to School Social on Sunday, August 13th at 2:00 pm!

Sincerely,

Chad