Dear Campus School Families:

I trust that you and your family enjoyed the long weekend. It has been one long stretch of Indian Summer.

Upon returning on Wednesday, the faculty convened to launch a new peer observation initiative that we will be undertaking this year. We began our time together by reading a poem by John Moffitt titled "To look at anything." The poem reads:

To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say,
"I have seen spring in these
Woods," will not do – you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace
They issue from.

~ John Moffitt ~

After reading the poem together, we broke up into small groups and responded to a prompt inspired by the poem: What in your teaching do you want to look at in more depth? What, in the words of the poem, do you want to "look at...long" in your work? The depth of insight and thoughtfulness of Campus School teachers was on full display:

• I want to get inside content more deeply. I want to understand concepts that might appear simple—like subtraction—but when you get underneath the basic idea it has layers of complexity particularly when you think about how children think about a 'subtraction situation.' How do students understand something like subtraction? What challenges can we anticipate when a child begins to learn something complex like subtraction?
• I would like to study the discourse patterns in classroom discussions. How do students engage ideas in whole group and small group discussion? What questions and approaches help facilitate interactions between children around narrative, science, and other content?
• I would love to study how my students deploy their attention. I am fascinated by how students have this quality of inner attention. I want to know what I can do within my practice to understand that quality and how I can gather that genuine inner attention so that we can have more of those moments when everybody is with you.
• It has always fascinated me to consider the role and importance of connections between the subject matter we have decided is important for children to learn and children’s minds and psyches. That is, how can we most effectively connect the way they think and feel, and what they already know, with what we want them to know?

This discussion segued into a review of the guiding protocol for our peer observation process. Engaging in "peer observation" is a best practice in the field of education. A strange ironic reality of schools is that teachers spend their days amidst children in busy, crowded classrooms, but they rarely get the opportunity to see their colleagues teach or be observed by their fellow teachers. One of the hallmarks of great schools, at every level, is a commitment to opening up the classroom doors and providing teachers with the opportunity to see each other in action as they make those moment-to-moment decisions around
learning and student thinking. The peer observation process that we will be undertaking this year continues a long tradition of deep collegial learning at the Campus School. Our focus will be on teachers having focused conversations with each other, observing each other, and then deliberately reflecting on what transpired in the classroom. Our approach will be informed by a significant corpus of research that finds, as one researcher noted, that "The single greatest influence on the professional practice of teachers is the direct observation of other teachers."

In keeping with this formidable set of research findings, the influential Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has invested tremendous resources in trying to restructure schools to provide more dynamic and routine interaction for teachers to observe and study their colleagues work. One of my friends from graduate school-- Tom Hatch -- has been at the center of this work and wrote a book with Carnegie titled *Into the Classroom: Developing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,* . His thesis is that, "Learning happens behind closed doors, inside fences, and on campuses cut off from the rest of the community creating few sustained opportunities to go into the classrooms of their peers or to discuss their work together."

In my experience "closed classroom doors" and norms of privatism pervade most school cultures and processes; this has not been my experience here at the Campus School. We have a distinct collective approach to exploring ideas and building our knowledge of teaching and content. In fact, here is a short and incomplete review of the many collective learning endeavors that have been undertaken by Campus School teachers over the years as part of what I would describe as a joint mission to grow personally, professionally and collectively:

- Seven or so years ago, Professor Rudnitsky from the Education and Child Study Department helped coordinate a series of intensive projects that utilized the Japanese approach to professional development called lesson study, which is a multi-layered process that focuses on teachers convening to identify a lesson that they want to teach, doing extensive research on the concepts and ideas anchoring the lesson, co-designing and writing a detailed lesson plan, and then having one of the teachers teach the lesson in front of their colleagues. After the lesson is taught, the design group re-convenes and dissects and revises the lesson. Several of the lessons developed included: composing introductory paragraphs, working with common denominators, the art of camouflage, teaching with primary sources, counting with arrays, what does it mean to understand a book, and using maps to study history.

- As part of her dissertation research, Lara Ramsey started the Teacher Round Table. It is now in its tenth year. Smith College Campus School teachers and area public school educators meet once a month to practice a collaborative assessment protocol that guides our observation and evaluation of student work samples. At the Campus School, this same tool has been used for staff development around supervision of student teachers. The round table group moves through a process of carefully delineated steps (observation, description, questions, and consideration of possible teacher moves). It's an inquiry-based approach that engages participants in a focused discussion that has both specific and broad implications for teaching and learning.

- A few years back two faculty study groups formed to look deeply at two core processes of learning. The first, examined metacognition, which is thinking about one’s thinking. The group explored how to facilitate opportunities for students to monitor their learning and to flexibly adapt their approach and strategies to learning. The second explored how children use examples in coming to understand something. They examined how students select appropriate examples to support a position and how to help students develop examples that illustrate or explain a principle.

- Lastly, an ongoing blessing to our learning at the Campus School involves our work with student teachers. This intense and complicated works is inextricably collaborative. Every Campus School teacher works with at least one Smith student teacher every semester. It will probably be worth a full piece at some other time, but for now let me say that this is intense intellectual and emotional work. Campus school teachers must meet for long hours prepping the student teacher, helping them write lesson plans, and then debriefing with them about the challenges
and successes that occurred in the classroom. The process of mentoring and teaching novices is a source of creativity and richness for our teachers and your children.

So in the words of the poem that opened this letter, “To look at any thing/If you would know that thing” requires careful, loving and, in the case of teaching, collegial observation.…

Sincerely,

Sam