Dear Campus School Families:

Before I describe my favorite SCCS Moment of the week, I have a trivia question:

What book on the spectacular bulletin board put together by our book fair committee begins:

"It was late one winter night, long past my bedtime."

Click here for the answer:

Next week’s book fair events are shaping up to be a wonderful community endeavor. I urge your family to participate in the many activities celebrating the magic of story and hope that you can join fellow parents for the Friday 11/8 wine and cheese at the CS library from 6:30-8:30. The 'happy hour' corresponds with the opening session of Kid's Night Out at the Smith gym-- or as my own kids described it-- "best time ever."

See the Facebook page put together by the parent committee:

Now a quick segue...

My favorite ‘fascinating moment’ of a week chock full of costumes, imagination, and sugar unfolded at the end of the spectacular performance of H.M.S. Pinafore (or better known for those who saw the play as the ‘joy and rapture’ moment). The finale of the play was a rousing rendition of "He is an Englishman." Afterward each actor and contributor to the play was introduced and they boldly stepped forward to acknowledge the applause with curtsy or a bow. As they stepped forward in their smashing period costumes they looked so professional and composed. After the last applause and last flower was handed out it was if a flip had been switched and our sophisticated band of thespians immediately transformed back into the fifth grade bodies and personas that they are. It was something to behold. In a moment they flipped from being swashbuckling sailors of the sea to just fifth graders thrilled to be with each other and their families.

I've been thinking about that sudden moment of transformation and the role of drama in providing a powerful form of learning and development. Intrigued, I spent some time reading about the role that theatre can play in a young person's development and then I checked back with some of the fifth graders about their experiences during the process of learning the play. I also had the opportunity to read through the reflections that they write for Ms. Cooney and Ms. Naughton. The reflections include questions such as:

• What are your earlier memories of attending fifth grade plays when you were younger?
• What were your thoughts and feelings about our play at the start of this year?
• Once rehearsals were underway, did your feelings change? If so, how?

Here are some of the things that I learned and thought about in regard to what our students experienced and learned during the play:

Drama provides a communal experience in getting something done. It involves producing something that requires work, discipline, teamwork and commitment. As one fifth grader wrote, “After the first rehearsal I thought it could never get done.” The constellation of moving parts that comprised the performance of H.M.S. Pinafore is daunting: sets, costumes, rehearsal, programs, and a myriad of other moving parts. It begins with just a script and a sense of what is possible and then over time the ensemble of contributors move towards performance. As one fifth grader said, "When we first started I didn't think we could do it, but it came together. Slowly, slowly and then fast." Another said, "I learned from myself that I'm more capable of doing more things."
My thoughts and feelings about our play at the beginning were: I don't want to do the play or I can't do this. Once we started to do rehearsals I noticed that everyone was doing great and I thought well if they can do it than I can too."

*Drama provides a distinctive opportunity to work with thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and emotions.* Playing somebody else invites children to explore why people act, think and emote in particular ways. In developing an understanding of the play and the characters, children explore what motivates people and how individuals express themselves and manage their relationships.

An understanding the interplay of social hierarchy, love triangles, and jealousy alive in a play like H.M.S. Pinafore doesn't happen just through rehearsal or text study. Ms. Naughton and Ms. Cooney spend time coaching students around the intricacies of the characters and helping them gain points of traction. When I asked Ms. Naughton-- she explained:

I spend time individually with every student going over their lines and what they mean. I will have the student read the line for me and ask if they understand it. If they can tell me what it means in their own words, we move on. Otherwise I explain. Even if they can tell me, if there is additional background information I can give them to broaden their knowledge, I do. Additional understanding comes when we block (which means learning where to move and when) because the meaning of the lines informs the blocking. Ms. Cooney also gives feedback about word emphasis and pacing to reflect the meaning of the lines.

I often try with plays like "Pinafore" or Shakespeare plays to give a modern example. Most recently I compared Buttercup to an old fashioned Ding Dong Cart. When she comes around, treats are available to buy. It has been really fun over the years to see students grasp these complex words, phrases, and situations.

*Drama provides an opportunity to 'try on' new identities, and take safe risks through playing different roles and multiple identities.* In speaking to several of the actors, I heard variations of how much they enjoyed taking on the role of the officer, sailor, or a maid. Dressing up in costume, trying on new voices, and enacting a character’s behavior is fun and empowering. As one of the fifth graders told me, "When we first read the play, I barely understood it. It almost didn't make sense, but going through it together, and going through it again helped me understand: it's about love and competition and it was fun to act it out." Much of what happens in schools involves building new knowledge and introducing students to ideas and experiences. Gavin Bolton, who writes about theater education, tells us, "Learning in drama is essentially a reframing. What knowledge a pupil already has is placed in a new perspective." Drama because it entails role playing and exploring different contexts and relationships challenges students to play with what they know, push boundaries, and experiment with new voices and roles.

*Performance provides practice in public speaking, thinking on your feet, and improvising and staying cool when a mistake is made.* In my work with college students and with Project Coach, I think a lot about the kinds of skills and experiences my students need for what comes next in their lives. The top “skill” that employers hope graduates master: the ability to verbally communicate and prepare oral presentations. The fifth graders learned about stage presence, projecting their voice, and improvising under pressure. Ms. Naughton told me that one of the most rewarding outcomes of doing the play involves how they learn to seamlessly adapt when somebody forgets a line or misses a cue. “Learning to handle mistakes in the flow is an important quality.” In every reflection, students mentioned how they learned to face their fear of presentation and the nerves that they initially thought would prevent them from being successful.

*Drama provides opportunity to memorize:* This might seem like an odd observation, but almost every student I talked with described the challenge and ultimate triumph of memorizing their lines. It reminded me of a spate of articles from a few years ago that described the enduring satisfactions yielded from memorizing literature and poetry.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, novelist Brad Leithauser contends, “The best argument for verse memorization may be that it provides us with knowledge of a qualitatively and physiologically different variety: you take
the poem inside you, into your brain chemistry if not your blood, and you know it at a deeper, bodily level than if you simply read it off a screen.” Another essay in the NY Times by Jim Holt described the process as starting as a mechanical chore before becoming musical as in feeling the rhythms of the word and ultimately becoming, “a physical feeling, and it’s a deeply pleasurable one. You can get something like it by reading the poem out loud off the page, but the sensation is far more powerful when the words come from within.

In speaking to the fifth graders, I heard so much of what these articles describe echoed in their reflections. Learning lines was daunting and they didn't believe they could do it, but they slowly learned and mastered the lines-- even the lines that were not theirs to speak. The triumph of the memorization was that they felt this cellular achievement of 'owning' the meaning and magic of the play or 'you take the [play] inside of you.'

My last observation has to do with how unusual it is for elementary schools to have full-fledged drama programs. According to a U.S. Department of Education Report in 2009–10 school year, only 4 percent of public elementary schools offered instruction that was designated specifically for drama/theatre during regular school hours. This percentage represents a dramatic decrease from 1999–2000, when 20 percent of elementary schools offered the subject during regular school hours.

We are lucky to have the fifth grade play as a memorable part of our community and our students’ elementary school experience. And in the words of the H.M.S. Pinafore it gives children a chance to be “plucky and adventury.”

Sincerely,