



THE WHEELER SCHOOL

August 2019

Dear Middle School Families:

When I began teaching at Wheeler I was a different person. I had a short last name, no children, few wrinkles, a lazy cat, and only the slightest understanding of Rhode Island. Now I have a name with an apostrophe and enough letters to trip up robocallers, two hilarious lower-school aged children, a healthy dose of wrinkles, a bonkers dog, a different lazy cat, and a sneaky recipe for how to wind through Providence on side streets. Wheeler has been both backdrop to and catalyst for my personal and professional evolution during some of the most dramatic transformations of my life. Though much has changed, my love and respect for middle school kids has remained a constant. This summer, after fifteen years of teaching English and six years as Dean of Students, I officially stepped into my new role as Middle School Director. I am thrilled to embark on a new adventure with middle schoolers, in a place that I love and has been a second home for my family.

This summer I spent a lot of time watching another home: a robin's nest that was rather puzzlingly built directly on top of our outdoor speaker. My children fretted that the music would derail things for the birdies, but they needn't have worried. In fact, one particularly sunny day, as we sat on the patio eating lunch and listening to music, we could swear we saw their tiny feeble beaks bouncing to The Beatles. Four baby robins hatched, wobbled, and eventually took their sputtering but successful flights out of the nest. As the birds clamored for the dirty worms that were delivered to them by their parents (something I am embarrassed to say that I had only ever seen in cartoons) I watched with glee and made jokes about Grubhub. And when they each flew off, I felt breathless at how fast it all went. Is there anything more clichéd than comparing the ways our children hurtle toward maturity to baby birds? But even though I coach my students to "avoid cliché like the plague," how can I help it? As I watched my guests go from ragged bits of fluff to self-respecting birds I thought about our middle schoolers: who arrive so tiny and wobbly in sixth grade, and soar off on sputtering but successful routes at the end of eighth. The grownups in their lives provide the nest, the worms, the modeling of how to fly best, and, sometimes, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" emanating from beneath their feet. But ultimately, we don't fly for them. They're the ones who ask themselves what's beyond. They're the ones who make that leap.

At Wheeler's Middle School, we have always valued curiosity. Adolescents want to know the whys and hows of everything, and we want them to follow inquiry to its fullest. We guide our students to dream up the questions that keep their interest aflame. "Why would a robin choose that spot, so close to the house and the dog and The Beatles, as its nest location?" If I start with

that question, I can reach out in so many directions: animal behavior, evolution, structural design, music, psychology, empathy. The observation, research, and presentation skills our students hone while seeking and sharing answers to their complex, multifaceted questions prepare them for the complex, multifaceted world. From daily classwork to our hallmark experiences like the sixth grade Farm quarter and our new eighth grade Cityside program, our students take a path of discovery that begins with questions. I imagine the baby birds: "How did music come to exist beneath my home? Where did my mother get that worm? What will it feel like if I jump up and spread my wings?"

As I take my first bracing flight as Middle School Director, I hope I will hear from you often. Please feel free to check in with your observations, your ideas, and your complex, multifaceted questions. I am available by email, phone, or in-person meeting. It is a privilege to watch your children take off through these remarkable and transformative years.

Warmly,

Vanessa M. O'Driscoll
Director of Middle School

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Tuesday, September 3

8:30-9:30 Orientation for NEW Wheeler seventh and eighth graders
(not new sixth graders!)

9:30-12:45 Orientation for Cityside for ALL Wheeler and Hamilton eighth graders
(pickup and dropoff at the Wheeler School)

Wednesday, September 4

8:00-3:00 First day of classes for all students

3:30-5:30 First day of athletic practices for all teams
(busses leave Wheeler at 3pm and return by 6pm)

Friday, September 13

8:00-5:00 Wheeler and Hamilton Sixth Grade Parent Orientation
(by appointment to be scheduled online; no school for sixth graders)

Thursday, September 26

5:00-7:00 Wheeler and Hamilton Seventh and Eighth Grade Parent Orientation
and Family BBQ

Summer Reading and Math Assignments

There's still a little time! Find the assignments on the parent portal of the Wheeler website.

Textbooks

Textbooks available via our online bookstore. Find it on the parent portal of the Wheeler website.

Supply Lists

Find each grade's list on the parent portal of the Wheeler website.