

Fall 2010 Sixth Grade Parent Meeting September 30, 2010

**Dr. Allan Gold, District Psychologist,
Dr. Alan Vann Gardner, Del Mar Principal**

After introductions and meeting Dr. Gold's new Assistant, Kim Sullivan, Dr. Alan Van Gardner presented a synopsis of Del Mar's Vision for the Del Mar Graduate. This vision comes directly out of the District's Mission Statement, but is tailored specifically to Del Mar.

Dr. VG introduced the Vision by starting with an African proverb, **"If you want to walk fast, walk alone; if you want to walk far, walk together."**

The five support tenets of the Vision are: **motivated learner, engaged citizen, creative problem solver, effective communicator, and (adjective not yet finalized, but possibly ethical/self-confident) self.** Dr. VG, then asked parents to reflect on the bullet points of the vision and add any points or comments. Parents made the following additional points:

- Know what motivates you
- Know strengths and weaknesses
- Know what it takes to get work done
- Be a good observer and listener (hearing vs. listening)
- Avoid getting addicted to technology
- "Ideas" need to be healthy, honorable
- Not all academic focus, people goals
- Positive attitude and work ethic
- "Out of the box thinking", for our 21st century world
- Awareness of differences: disabilities, culture, etc. Social consciousness

We then discussed the various **"ROLES" of School and Home.** The following fell under "Schools": Set **Expectations and Direction, Guide, Support, and Model.** The list for the roles of parents in helping kids reach the vision was long and diverse, including:

- Listen, see what/how things are being taught and fill the gap
- Ask questions
- Provide a safe place
- Assess specific needs and guide our children
- Be good role models, e.g. NO gossiping
- Manage family stress
- Increase availability
- Be a visible presence
- Have some spiritual time

- Set boundaries and let natural consequences happen
- Consistency
- Ensure kids get enough sleep
- Work out your family's rules and expectations
- Love and confidence
- Exposure to world and global thinking
- Promote altruism
- Know other parents, ASK questions and communicate

All of this discussion segued into the thought, **“If you SEE something, SAY something”**, which has become a philosophy of Del Mar, translating into “advocate for self and others”—all with a network of adult supporters.

The discussion then moved to:

Changes in our 6th Graders since Last Year

- Physical level
- Egocentric
- Rebellion
- Individuation
- Deception
- Into appearance
- More mature decisions
- More independence
- Friendships are more important
- Frustration, Critical
- Mood swings
- More focused on academics and performance
- Increased embarrassment about self and parents

Dr. Gold organized these observations into five areas of child development: physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and moral. The general observation is that ALL of these areas during this period of a child's life are in a state of flux.

Physical Development: Obvious to all is that many children's bodies are changing rapidly as they enter puberty. Physical and hormonal changes often affect both social and emotional behaviors. Girls are generally two years ahead of boys in development and there is a very wide range of levels of development within both genders. As the kids get older, the slower developing child may have more anxiety about fitting in. Parents need to assure them that they will “get there” and their job is to be patient and keep on developing the skills that they have control over – their social and academic skills.

Cognitive Development: This is the time when children begin to be able to understand more abstract ideas and concepts. They can see the possibilities in the world and recognize how the world is not black and white. They can be outraged at injustice and

unfairness, but often focus their disappointment on parents and friends. The increased cognitive ability enables a much more rigorous and demanding curriculum. Unfortunately, not all students – 6th, 7th, or 8th graders – make this growth in cognitive development at the same time or at the same rate. Middle school teachers are quite adept at recognizing and adapting lessons and assignments to the cognitive level of their students. Nevertheless, kids this age can be easily frustrated when they don't understand something and in comparing themselves with their peers, think that they should. The positive side of this development in cognitive skills is that kids become much more interested and interesting. Conversations can start to take place at an almost adult level; most kids want to try to make sense of their world and can gradually engage in the questioning and reflection that will lead to their greater understanding.

Social Development: The social world of the young adolescent is complex and fraught with pitfalls. Sixth and seventh grade are the years of highest conformity and needing to fit in. Because of physical changes, interests can change and long-standing friendships be outgrown, through no fault of anyone. Kids are not very tactful or adept at moving from friend to friend, so feelings are often hurt, even when they know not to and try not to hurt each other. Overnight interests can go from innocent play to music, dress, sexual interest, anti-authoritarian stances, and kids who aren't there can be left behind, and quite in the dark. This is an important time for parents to shift from being “managers” to “consultants.” A good consultant listens, ask questions, helps their clients brainstorm solutions, and supports them in trying out reasonable solutions to problems. Parents should commit to being present and listening, helping children figure out what they really value in a friend, and who they feel good being with. Kids may stick with not very healthy friendships long after they should realize that at the present time, the match is not a good one. Often, all parents can do is encourage their children to reflect seriously on the friendship. If behavior seems to deteriorate after being at another kid's house, invite them over, and be clear about maintaining your rules with other children. Don't be afraid to express your observations and concerns about what looks like a bad match: (e.g. I notice when you come back from X's house, you're much less respectful, less in control, when I hear you two together, I get concerned how s/he talks to you and put's you down – how does that make you feel, etc.).

A values conflict for parents in the social realm may be popularity vs. personal standards for behavior or use of leisure time. For example, many parents are opposed to violent video games. Kids (mostly boys) find them exciting and harmless, but they may go against parental values that are anti-violent. On the other hand, will you child lose popularity if he's not conversant with or playing what other boys are playing? Be assured that kids can find a way to be liked, even if they're not doing (or allowed to do) what other kids are doing. Identify your values, express them clearly, and hold to them.

As your kids get older and have more freedom, they may need to “use” you to get out of uncomfortable situations – parties where unhealthy activities are taking place, situations where people are being mean to each other, etc. You can be the “bad guys”; make arrangements for kids to call and have you pick them, no questions asked, if they want to get out of a difficult or uncomfortable situation.

Emotional Development: Kids who have had pretty good control of their emotions for several years may revert to less control. Hormones take over, mood swings are the norm and it's difficult for everyone. You can, hopefully, with a little humor, ride out many of these episodes, use active listening to hear out your child and restrain yourself from responding out of anger and just take your own time out, when the emotional roller coaster gets too intense. They'll recover and often apologize. On the other hand (again a value issue), even though you may understand their frustrations, hormones, social and academic challenges, parents should never allow themselves to be abused or treated disrespectfully. Kids have the same frustrations at school and 99% of the time manage not to be disrespectful to adults. Of course, home has to be a safe place to let their emotions out, but not to the point that parents are giving up their authority or being seriously degraded. There can and should be consequences for inappropriate, unapologetic treatment of parents. Fortunately, most kids will recognize that they've gone over the limit and will apologize and reaffirm their affection.

Parents often wonder how to find out what their kids are thinking and feeling and doing. Some kids begin to clam up with their parents, so other children, other parents, and school become the eyes and ears. Take advantage of the relationships that you've formed over the years with your kids' friends' families to communicate with them. Look for and even offer your ear to other children, if they have something they may want to share, but not tell their own parents. Don't hesitate to talk to school personnel if you find out something from your child about another child's activities or feelings or statements and you don't want to expose your own child's confidences. We can help. Sometimes you do just have to say to them that they did the right thing by telling you and that you need to let the parent or someone know and you'll do all you can to protect their confidentiality. But you do need to discuss what was said. Don't worry that they will lose trust in you – they're telling you for a reason and they'll get over the fact that you needed to tell. Trust goes both ways, but they have the much greater task in building your trust in them at this age, than your building their trust in you.