



Birchwood Clipboard The Lion's Roar

JAN. 2013 Vol 19, Issue 5

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A Brief Summary Explaining the Use of Academic Competitions

The month of November began a series of mathematics competitions for fifth through eighth grade students ending late spring. In this context, I thought it might be helpful to briefly explain the role competitions play at Birchwood.

It is important to understand that Birchwood does not enter competitions for competition's sake, nor do we enter competitions simply to win awards. We select competitions that will introduce children to subject matter more deeply than what can be attained in any typical classroom. Hence, the depth of learning in each competition enables children to reach extraordinary levels of achievement. In contests like MathCounts or National History Day, I have had university professors, working as judges in these competitions, tell me that the work of the young competitors sometimes matches that of their undergraduate students – no exaggeration! Within these quality competitions, students experience what it is to be a true mathematician, historian, writer, or scientist.

We also select competitions that are actually comprehensive programs, providing teachers with a wealth of materials and direction in order to guide students to a richer appreciation and deeper understanding of subject content. Visit my math room sometime and I can show you the materials and guidelines that I have received from MathCounts, Math Olympiads, Continental Math League, and other programs that equip me to give my students a deep and broad mathematics education.

Quality academic competitions also provide affective benefits. Because the standards in competitions are well beyond the academic ceiling of nearly all students, it allows them to develop and stretch their abilities as far as they can. Children work hard to excel in these competitions. Win or lose, they are proud of their work and proud of their effort. Their self-esteem soars.

Furthermore, we believe that since competition is an integral and unavoidable part of life; consequently, it is far better to introduce children to this world within a protective environment. At Birchwood, student competitors are surrounded by caring parents and teachers encouraging their success and softening the blow of failure. This is wise. Through quality academic competitions children learn how to win – humbly and magnanimously. More often than not, they learn how to lose. But failure, in a supportive environment at Birchwood, does not devastate students. Rather it gives teachers and parents a chance to teach resilience, reflection upon performance, lessons for improvement, determination to improve, and renewed efforts toward the next round of challenge. (Mr. Debelak has co-authored two articles for *Gifted Child Today* on the benefits of academic competitions. These can be found on our website.) ~**Charles Debelak**

Award Highlights

Farah S won the Cleveland Section of the American Chemical Society's poster competition and has advanced to the national level of the contest. **Van W** was one of the winners in the 2012 Holiday Rack Card Contest sponsored by Disney on Ice. His card won "Best Message." **Jane N** (5th grade) was the winner of Birchwood Geography Bee. **Jane** will take a challenging 70 question test that will be sent to the National Geographic Society. The top 100 performers on this test will compete in the state bee in April. **Prathna K** (8th grade) and **Lilah N** (4th grade) came in second and third place respectively.

Welcome New Families

We would like to welcome the Nautiyal, Alshishehhi, Ali, Todd, De Angelis, Shakur-DuVall, and Sato families to the Birchwood Community. **Naoki** (K), **Nasreen** (1st), **Dhyani** (1st), **Neige** (3rd), **Dharma** (4th), **Ali** (5th), **Aliaa** (6th) and **Abdulla** (7th) will join their classes after the first of the year, if they have not joined already.

Birchwood Marketing Efforts

Many exciting things are happening in the Marketing Department at Birchwood. In gearing up for our January open house, a promotional video, produced by Perception Multimedia, has been completed and is available on our website. Also, an interview with **Mr. and Mrs. Debelak** and various clips of students has been filmed by a Channel 3 news crew. This promotional piece will air on *Live on Lakeside* January 2nd between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. Starting in January, if you are listening to National Public Radio 90.3, you may hear ads promoting Birchwood's Open House Week (January 13-18). Lastly, a group of parent volunteers are compiling brand standards for all Birchwood communication and have labored to develop a speakers bureau presentation on behalf of the school. Thank you all for your part in Birchwood's growth. Many families who decide on Birchwood have come from recommendations from you! If you are interested in helping with any of our marketing efforts please contact **Cindy McNaughton** at mcnaughton@birchwoodschool.org or call 216-251-2321.

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CREATIVITY

The Creative Problem Solving Process – “Mess Finding”

In this essay we will begin plotting out a practical course for teaching creativity and innovation. Remember that our approach is based on three important pillars. First, we are taking the principles and practices of creativity that are found among the world’s great creators, and applying them to “everyman’s” creativity, creativity that we all can develop. As Abraham Maslow famously noted, “A truly good soup could be as creative as a great painting or symphony.” Second, we are acknowledging that the creative process consists of skills and attitudes that can be learned, practiced, and improved. Although some people are innately more creative than others, everyone can become more creative. Finally, we recognize that creativity involves a choice between basic human impulses. Part of us longs for newness and creativity. Another part of us drifts toward self-preservation instincts and the path of least resistance. Creativity requires a choice.

To these pillars I would add that the creative process helps us think about and address opportunities we would like to grasp, aspirations we imagine, and problems or challenges we face in the every day. This gives us the ownership we will need to succeed. It helps us tackle situations on our own in a practical and effective manner. No one else will do these things for us.

Hence, the Let’s get started. To begin, dedicate time for thought and reflection. Maybe you can take your son or daughter out for a cup of hot chocolate. Make it special. Make it a time to work together as a team. Make it a time that explains to your child that you are interested as a partner as well as a parent to give him/her a rich and exciting life. (From this point forward, I will use the pronoun “you” to include both the parent and the child).

The first stage is “mess finding”, a term coined by Scott Isaksen and Donald Treffinger in *Creative Problem Solving: The Basic Course (1984)*. During this phase, we are probing interests, experiences, and personal concerns – and that will give us a starting point. It has two aspects: divergent thinking and convergent thinking. During divergent thinking we want to think as broadly as possible, envisioning opportunities or problems beyond the immediate thoughts that pop into our head. Thinking this way requires that you defer judgment. Don’t say this is possible and that is not possible. Otherwise you will restrict your thinking. Accept all possibilities. Just get the ideas out there. Break through the obvious and the ordinary. Stretch.

Here is one strategy among many that you might find helpful.

Examine your life. Take out a piece of paper and pencil. We are going to make lists built around a framework of questions so that you and your child can reflect upon experiences, the current situation, or the future. Think about the “what” – worries, problems, fears, circumstances, events, encouragements, frustrations, threats, or desires. Think about the “who” – relatives, friends, colleagues, enemies, pests, peers, or yourself. Think about the “where” – home, school, job, vacation, retreat, accident, or trouble spot. Think about the “when” – schedules, work time, leisure time, rushed times, overdue times, meal times. Think about the “why” – boredom, excitement, enjoyment, making things better, expand chances, get things over with. Think about “how” – eagerly, happily, reluctantly, sadly, my way.

Using these questions as a tool, make long lists. At first you may only come up with one or two ideas that fit into each category. Don’t stop there. Force yourselves to think divergently. Maybe even set a goal of coming up with five to ten topics that fit each category. Take your time. Add to your lists over the course of a week or a month. You will want to have an abundance of possibilities to eventually define meaningful and workable problem statements. Keep the “mess” statements broad and general so that you don’t prematurely attempt to define or solve the problem. “I wonder if I could build more lasting friendships.” “If I had my way I would become a writer.”

Try to state each “mess” in a positive or affirmative manner. At Birchwood, my students have come up with statements like, “I’d really like to get an ‘A’ in mathematics. . .” “It would sure be helpful if I could make more friends. . .” “I would love to learn how to swim.” Be brief. We are not yet defining problems or opportunities. We are just identifying possibilities.

Now let these ideas incubate. Let them simmer for a period of time. Don’t jump into resolving issues. Maybe add a few more during the next month. If you take your time, and work with multiple possibilities, gradually those items that are most important to you will emerge.

Next we will talk about convergent thinking: clarifying and defining the actual problem or opportunity you want to attack.

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