

Dear Blake Middle School Families,

I hope you all have a wonderful summer. We have enjoyed a very busy, activity-filled, enjoyable, exciting, and educational year. The learning process does not take a break, however, and learning activities continue at Blake Middle School over summer vacation.

Summer reading is an important part of continuing the learning process into the summer season. Each grade has a book that our students are required to read, chosen by our humanities teachers, that helps to introduce each student to the themes that will be studied that class. Students entering Grade 6 are required to read *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park. Students entering Grade 7 are asked to read two books; one, *A Jar of Dreams* by Yoshiko Uchida and the second book, *A Boy of Old Prague* by Shulamith Ish-Kishorand. Optional, but strongly recommended by the teacher for those entering Grade 7 is *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor. Students entering Grade 8 should read *Indian Captive: The Story of Mary Jemison* by Lois Lenski.

All students entering Blake Middle School in 2010 are asked to choose one additional book from the list below. The common theme of the books on the list centers on the many challenges of adolescent relationships. Please look over the titles, descriptions, and links I have provided for each book and work with your child to pick out a book that you consider most appropriate with respect to reading level and content. I have read the first seven books on this list and could answer additional questions about them if you would like to know more.

Limited numbers of these books are available at the Campus Store.

Travel Team by Mike Lupica

(I consider this book to be an easy read and it would certainly be a great match for any basketball fan.)

Twelve-year-old Danny Walker is an average kid who loves basketball. Despite his small stature he hopes to someday play on the same travel team as his dad, Richie Walker, who led the team to the national championship when he was Danny's age.

Danny's hopes are dashed, however, when he is deemed "too small" to play on the travel team by his dad's childhood adversary, Mr. Ross, who seems to want a winning team based mostly on physical strength rather than wit. Danny tries not to let this unfortunate event bother him, but it's difficult for him to forget when he has seemingly waited his entire life to prove – to his dad and to himself – that he is just as good, if not better, at playing basketball than the other kids in Middletown. His mom Ali, along with friends Will and Tess, try to cheer him up, but Danny would rather be on the travel team than play basketball anywhere else.

Then his dad comes up with a great idea – Danny can have his own travel team! Danny is at first a little skeptical that his dad can coach a seventh-grade travel team, especially since he has had trouble keeping jobs due to a near-fatal car accident that left him unable to play pro basketball again. Richie, however, is determined to prove that he can help his

son fulfill his goal and fight his own inner demons. There's also the problem of finding enough talented players, but with the help of Danny's friends they are able to do just that. Most of all though is the much-needed strength to endure all the obstacles that seem to be keeping them from their ultimate goal – winning the state championship.

Travel Team is a great story about achieving your goals, regardless of the seemingly large obstacles that may be in your way. Sports fans, athletes, and readers of all ages will enjoy this realistic, inspirational novel.

Reviewed by Sarah Sawtelle (SdarksideG@aol.com)
<http://www.mikelupicabooks.com/books.html>

Freak the Mighty and

Max the Mighty both by Rodman Philbrick (*Freak the Mighty* is the first book and should be read first. If your child likes the book, the second book in the series might be considered.)

Maxwell Kane, a lumbering eighth grader who describes himself as a "butthead goon", has lived with grandparents Grim and Gram ever since his father was imprisoned for murdering his mother. Mean-spirited schoolmates and special ed (for an undetermined learning disability) haven't improved his self-image, so he is totally unprepared for a friendship with Kevin, aka Freak, a veritable genius with a serious birth defect that's left him in braces and using crutches. Max is uplifted by Freak's imagination and booming confidence, while Freak gets a literal boost – hoisted onto Max's shoulders, he shares Max's mobility. Together they become Freak the Mighty, an invincible duo. Ages 10-14. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.
<http://www.rodmanphilbrick.com/books.html>

***The Misfits* by James Howe**

(I agree with the reviewer's remarks regarding the authenticity of the characters in this book. The book does introduce different options for children to consider as responses to being picked on and bullied) I have included a link for families considering this book on how the author, James Howe, tries to teach tolerance through his writing.

What do a 12-year-old student who moonlights as a tie salesman, a tall, outspoken girl, a gay middle schooler and a kid branded as a hooligan have in common? Best friends for years, they've all been the target of cruel name-calling and now that they're in seventh grade, they're not about to take it any more. In this hilarious and poignant novel, Howe (*Bunnica*; *The Watcher*) focuses on the quietest of the bunch, overweight Bobby Goodspeed (the tie salesman), showing how he evolves from nerd to hero when he starts speaking his mind. Addie (the outspoken girl) decides that the four of them should run against more popular peers in the upcoming student council election. But her lofty ideals and rabble-rousing speeches make the wrong kind of waves, offending fellow classmates, teachers and the principal. It is not until softer-spoken Bobby says what's in his heart about nicknames and taunts that people begin to listen and take notice, granting their respect for the boy they used to call "Lardo" and "Fluff." The four "misfits" are slightly

larger than life, wiser than their years, worldlier than the smalltown setting would suggest, and remarkably well-adjusted, but there remains much authenticity in the story's message about preadolescent stereotyping and the devastating effects of degrading labels. An upbeat, reassuring novel that encourages preteens and teens to celebrate their individuality. Ages 10-14.

<http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-29-spring-2006/totally-james>

***The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton**

(This classic novel is often used within schools to help students think through the "us versus them" mentality. It has the added value of having a companion movie with Tom Cruise, Patrick Swayze, Rob Lowe, and others filmed in 1982.)

According to Ponyboy, there are two kinds of people in the world: greasers and socs. A soc (short for "social") has money, can get away with just about anything, and has an attitude longer than a limousine. A greaser, on the other hand, always lives on the outside and needs to watch his back. Ponyboy is a greaser, and he's always been proud of it, even willing to rumble against a gang of socs for the sake of his fellow greasers – until one terrible night when his friend Johnny kills a soc. The murder gets under Ponyboy's skin, causing his bifurcated world to crumble and teaching him that pain feels the same whether a soc or a greaser. This classic, written by S. E. Hinton when she was 16 years old, is as profound today as it was when it was first published in 1967.

<http://www.theoutsidersbookandmovie.com/AboutTheBook.html>

***Alt Ed* by Catherine Atkins**

(This is a relatively recent publication and the themes, language, and content, although geared to young readers, might be geared more to Grade 8 than Grade 6)

"The fat girl, gay guy, cheerleader, jock – all in a class that is the alternative to expulsion from high school...think of this book as a modern day Breakfast Club, because it's all about people who think they have nothing in common discovering that (some of them, at least) can actually be friends, and really talk to each other. Susan Callaway, the self-described fat girl, is an engaging and interesting narrator who is struggling with her mother's death and her alienation from school and trying to mend her relationships with her father and brother. If you liked *The Misfits* by James Howe, and pretty much anything by Chris Crutcher, then check this book out."

<http://sites.google.com/site/catherineatkinsbooks/aboutalted>

***Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson**

(This book deals with how to move beyond anger and toward healing. Much of the book takes place on an island in southern Alaska so it had a nature/outdoors component to it.)

Cole Matthews is angry. Angry, defiant, smug – in short, a bully. His anger has taken him too far this time, though. After beating up a ninth-grade classmate to the point of brain

damage, Cole is facing a prison sentence. But then a Tlingit Indian parole officer named Garvey enters his life, offering an alternative called Circle Justice, based on Native American traditions, in which victim, offender, and community all work together to find a healing solution. Privately, Cole sneers at the concept, but he's no fool – if it gets him out of prison, he'll do anything. Ultimately, Cole ends up banished for one year to a remote Alaskan island, where his arrogance sets him directly in the path of a mysterious, legendary white bear. Mauled almost to death, Cole awaits his fate and begins the transition from anger to humility.

Ben Mikaelson's depiction of a juvenile delinquent's metamorphosis into a caring, thinking individual is exciting and fascinating, if at times heavy-handed. Cole's nastiness and the vivid depictions of the lengths he must go to survive after the (equally vivid) attack by the bear are excruciating at times, but the concept of finding a way to heal a whole community when one individual wrongs another is compelling. The jacket cover photo of the author in a bear hug with the 700-pound black bear that he and his wife adopted and raised is definitely worth seeing! (Ages 12 and older) --Emilie Coulter

<http://www.amazon.com/Touching-Spirit-Bear-Ben-Mikaelson/dp/038080560X>

The last two books listed below were recommended, but I did not have enough time to read them before sending out this list. I include them here if you are looking for additional books to read this summer.

***The Friends* by Rosa Guy**

The Friends is an amazing novel by Rosa Guy. The story touches you deep down inside because it's so realistic. You just want to reach in to help the main characters. The setting takes place in Harlem, New York, in the 1960s.

The story ends happily and surprisingly. The story teaches how important a good friendship is. The author, Rosa Guy, wrote the novel based on her own experiences. She grew up in Harlem and wants everyone who reads the book to know how hard life can be at certain times. *The Friends* is the first book of a trilogy. The trilogy includes *Ruby* and *Edith Jackson*. *The Friends* is a great novel for young adults everywhere.

<http://www.amazon.com/Friends-Rosa-Guy/dp/0440226678>

***Indigo's Star* by Hilary McKay**

Grade 5-8—The endearing and eccentric Casson family, introduced in *Saffy's Angel* (McElderry, 2002), is back. Recovered from mononucleosis, 12-year-old Indigo dreads his return to school where his sensitive, peace-loving nature makes him a target for bullies. Enter Tom, a classmate from America who is living with his English grandmother to avoid dealing with his divorced parents. His arrogance stymies the gang and deflects some of the mistreatment away from Indigo, who sees through Tom's mask and reaches out in friendship. Meanwhile, eight-year-old Rose cannot adjust to her new

glasses or accept her father's apparently permanent move to London. She expresses her distress in her poignant, yet funny, letters to him and by painting family members and friends in and out of a mural on the kitchen wall. Rose, too, forms a bond with Tom, particularly appreciating his guitar playing and his desire to acquire a special instrument. In an incident in which he mistakenly believes the bullies are hurting Rose, Indigo finally fights back, giving the gang leader his comeuppance and setting the "rabble" on the road to good behavior. As the book ends, Rose and Tom each begin to come to terms with the changes in their families, and Tom starts his journey home, with the coveted new guitar. While the story may be somewhat short on plot and a bit facile in its treatment of the issue of bullying, McKay's sly humor, deft characterization, and brisk pacing more than compensate. Readers will love revisiting the chaotic but loving Casson household.—Marie Orlando, Suffolk Cooperative Library System, Bellport, NY

<http://www.amazon.com/Indigos-Star-Hilary-McKay/dp/0689865635>