



## SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

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February 26, 2015

Dear Parent,

In each parent newsletter I have written since December of 2013, I have shared information about New Jersey's transition from NJASK/HSPA to PARCC testing. We are now on the eve of official PARCC testing and there is understandably more interest in this subject at the present time.

Earlier today, I was at Lafayette Avenue School, where all of the students in the building this morning took a practice test to familiarize themselves with the PARCC platform and questions. All went according to plan. Our technology devices ran smoothly, our teachers managed the testing sessions without issue, and, more important than anything else, our students proceeded through the tests in a calm and competent fashion.

It was heartening to see the way in which the tests played out. It validated the hundreds (no exaggeration here!) of hours our administrative team has spent preparing for this transition, the wise investment that the district (with the help of our PTOs and CEF) has made in Chromebooks, the encouraging and professional attitude of our teaching staff, and the absolutely fabulous nature of our students.

Some of our parents have emailed or called me, Karen Chase, or other staff members to inform us that they are refusing to have their children take these tests. I have found these conversations to be heartening as well. Almost every parent with whom Ms. Chase or I have interacted directly has expressed gratitude to the district and a true concern for their children's educational well-being.

For many reasons, the initiation of PARCC testing has reinforced the great privilege I feel for working in the School District of the Chathams.

While we have thus far had a small percentage of parents or students indicate that they will refuse to participate in PARCC, and I respect each and every one of those decisions, I want to make clear some of the issues surrounding test refusal from my vantage point as superintendent.

The first issue arises from required participation rates. The No Child Left Behind Act required schools to test a minimum of 95% of students included in an aggregate test group or "sub-group." This required participation level remains in effect today, even though New Jersey has obtained a waiver from NCLB.

Districts and schools that do not meet the participation rate are deemed as not having met their "progress targets" and may be subject to penalties. In our case, the most likely penalties would probably be indications of such on our DOE School Performance Reports and a lower or failing score for QSAC, which is the state monitoring system for school districts. This would potentially result in a corrective action plan and/or other penalties for our school district.

Although unrelated to formal disciplinary action from the state, many "ranking" methodologies of news publications use data from statewide assessments for their calculations. For example, this year's *New Jersey Monthly's* ranking included data from three tests, one of them being HSPA. The effect of a low participation

rate in the state's testing system is unclear, but has the potential to adversely impact the standing of the district in this regard.

I would never make an educational decision based on a superficial ranking. I also cannot tell you definitively that PARCC will be an improvement over NJASK or HSPA. I hope that is the case, but it is too soon to tell. Lastly, I cannot claim to be an avowed proponent of standardized tests in the first place. I do not believe they measure the wide range of aptitudes and skills that we hope to develop in students; I believe they take away more instructional time than they should; and I think they can lead to two-dimensional comparisons between students and schools, like those referenced above.

At the same time, however, the transition to PARCC should be considered in context. This is not the first time we have had to deal with more testing. When George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act about a dozen years ago, the amount of state testing increased from three grade levels over a child's time in our district to seven grade levels. In other words, our standardized testing menu more than doubled with the stroke of a pen. PARCC also is aligned to our current standards, adopted in 2010, which in theory should give us better data about what we are doing well and what we can do better in terms of helping students acquire the proficiencies in the standards. Finally, we have not spent the school year engaged in exhaustive "test prep." Rather, we have conducted school as normal and attempted to ensure dynamic and nurturing learning environments. A week of PARCC testing will not undermine that.

In sum, I would like to thank you for your thoughtfulness concerning PARCC and your child's education. I have shared the information in this letter with you not to be an alarmist or a cheerleader about PARCC, but rather to be reassuring and transparent about some of the issues associated with participating or not participating in the state-mandated assessment system. I am confident that we have taken all of the necessary steps to ensure a smooth administration of these assessments, and I believe that students will not be overwhelmed by them. As with all facets of our educational system, I am optimistic that the collective efforts of teaching staff, parents, and students will result in a positive overall experience. The only request that I would make of your right now is to speak with your children about the tests so that you and they are on the same page as to their administration. The one thing that I would not want is for some kids to refuse to participate in testing without having discussed the matter with their parents beforehand. Thank you in advance for your cooperation as our students begin to navigate these tests next week!

Sincerely,

Mike LaSusa