

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Superintendent's Newsletter: February 2017

Dear Parent,

The first half of the school year is in the rearview mirror and March is at our doorstep. I hope that your children have an opportunity to rest and recharge this week. I write this newsletter to touch upon some of the prominent issues in the district right now.

The first theme warranting attention is that of *respect*. We try to instill in our students the importance of this trait. Respectfulness is a core principle in our elementary character education initiatives. The message of respecting one another is at the core of our anti-HIB (Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying) efforts at the Chatham Middle School and Chatham High School. The *Week of Respect* is observed in all of our schools, in accordance with state law. And, of course, our teachers seek to cultivate classrooms in which students respect one another, themselves, and their teacher.

The exchange of ideas—a foundational component of public education—is not possible without respect. Yet in recent months I have received direct reports from staff members and from parents about disrespectful actions on the part of some of our students. Our staff has so far investigated 44 potential acts of HIB in the district, a number on pace to exceed the total of 62 incidents last year. We have confirmed more acts of HIB involving anti-Islamic or homophobic words/actions than were confirmed in those areas all of last year. Further, we have had to address other problematic behavior outside of HIB-related investigations. For example, one concerned parent informed me recently that her child, who holds a conservative political view, was mistreated for expressing his opinions. All of this is unacceptable.

In the context of six schools, 4231 students, and more than 100 days of school completed thus far, the reality is that the above incidents represent a tiny, tiny fraction of the interactions that take place on a daily basis. In fact, our discipline data over the past number of years show that our schools are exceedingly orderly and safe, with strong cultures of learning. The truth is that our students are overwhelmingly respectful, hard working, and upstanding. Ditto our parents—a more supportive community there is not. I believe that our school district is a special place, with special people, all of whom want what is best for children.

For all of these reasons, I am asking that you remind your children that respectfulness is one of the hallmarks of our school district. If they need a visual depicting CMS students working together to celebrate this tradition, they can [click here](#). If they need some modeling from our high school students, they can [check out this page](#). Regardless of where they turn for inspiration, as we begin the spring season let's work together to ensure that our schools continue to be wonderful places of learning and interaction for kids.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael LaSusa

Teaching about Religion in Our Curriculum

The inclusion of instruction about religious and cultural issues and themes in our curriculum has been a subject of discussion recently. The New Jersey State Department of Education establishes the standards to which our schools are held. Religious topics appear throughout the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, notably in one of the Cumulative Progress Indicators within Social Studies Standard 6.2, which in part calls for students to “Compare and contrast the tenets of various world religions . . . (i.e., Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and Taoism), their patterns of expansion, and their responses to the current challenges of globalization.”

Our teachers and supervisors develop curricular units and lessons around the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, and do so over the entire K-12 curriculum. It is important to consider standards and topics over time, and not in the context of only a single lesson or unit. It is also important to recognize that no topic or instructional matter appears in a vacuum. Our teachers provide context, learning objectives, discussion, and instruction in what they teach. It would be impossible to capture in a document like this all of the instructional and curricular work our students receive about various religions of the world. However, some examples of instruction about religion include: introducing students at an early age to how Christmas is celebrated in various parts of the world, as well as to the traditions of Hanukkah and Diwali; examining the split of the Church of England and the beliefs of Separatist groups that ultimately left for America; comparing and contrasting the world’s great religions and philosophy systems, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism; exploring the history of the Holocaust in a required course for all eighth graders; learning about the Protestant Reformation, the Puritans and Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, The Great Awakening, and how religious expression shaped the founding and establishment of the American colonies; how the First Amendment features so prominently in our governing documents; and so forth.

I reiterate that the above is not an all-inclusive list and that religious topics appear in our curriculum in myriad places, as well as vary slightly between teachers or from year to year depending on classroom factors. Our art students may study pieces with religious subjects. Our music groups may perform pieces with religious topics (and even perform in places like St. Patrick’s Cathedral!). Our students read primary sources and literary classics—from authors like Abraham Lincoln to Shakespeare—with religious connotations. And our students have a great deal of choice regarding what they read via literature circles in our classrooms or our library media centers, with a range of works that include religious themes or content. I also must state that our school district is committed to continual improvement. We all—me included—can be better teachers. If there is a topic warranting more attention or a resource that we should consider utilizing in the place of another, we are receptive to evaluating what we currently do and making adjustments to improve.

Central to our mission as educators is to help students develop understandings of the themselves, others, and the world around them—something achievable only through deliberate work with material and topics previously unfamiliar to students. We build and strengthen awareness and understanding through exposure and engagement, and we do so in age-appropriate and instructionally purposeful ways that support and exceed the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Other Items of Note

Snow Day Update

To date the district has used one snow day. Unused snow days shall be converted to days without school by year's end. The Board of Education will amend this year's calendar to reflect the number of unused snow days once the threat of severe weather has passed.

Student Shadowing Project

Our administrative team will embark upon a new initiative that will entail the shadowing of a student volunteer over the course of a full day. The administrator will attend all of the classes as that student in an effort to simulate the student day. The goal of this initiative is to provide administrators with a perspective on the student learning experience that will lead to better informed decisions in the future.

Special Services Relocation

Our special services department is located at 233 Lafayette Avenue, in the little house in front of the high school. Although we have had concerns about the working conditions in the building for some time, we became aware of additional problems in the fall. Specifically, we learned that some of the structural components of the building—namely the floor joist system and the fieldstone foundation—were in a state of deterioration. As a result, we are relocating our special services department to 58 Meyersville Rd, inside of the Township Municipal building, where most of our other administrative offices are located. The school district is currently evaluating its options with respect to replacing the special services building with a larger structure that would accommodate most administrative offices in the district. The two possible locations for such a structure would be the location of the current special services building, at 233 Lafayette Ave., or a space right behind the C-Gym of the high school. The latter location would allow the district to consider building a second story dedicated to additional high school classrooms should there be an enrollment surge in the future. The Board of Education will continue to discuss this issue and make determinations in the coming weeks and months.

Referendum Projects Update

There is a [referendum page](#) on our website that will contain updates regarding the various referendum projects. There is a timeline and other information available on this page. As construction begins, we will also post photographs of the work in progress.

Summer Enrichment Opportunities

For a second straight year, the school district is offering summer enrichment opportunities to students. A link to the catalogue of offerings is available on [this page of our website](#). Please make a note of it in case you are interested in finding

Thank you for reading and I hope you have a wonderful remainder of the year!