

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Superintendent's Newsletter: September 2019

Dear Parent,

Welcome back to school as we embark upon another rewarding year in our school district. There is much to be excited about in 2019/2020!

We have now completed roughly 90% of the construction approved in the 2016 capital referendum. Our high school auditorium is now a dynamic performing arts space that hosted the performance of the first-ever New Jersey high school production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in March (pictured below). Our design and technology labs at CMS are fully functional. We have opened four new classrooms at MAS that have helped us better house pre-K and special education programs, and have led to our first-ever pilot for full-day kindergarten on a tuition basis. The final project that is currently in process is the renovation of the Chatham Middle School auditorium, which we expect to be completed in the middle of the year.

We are proud of other new programs and initiatives. We have invested heavily in the K-12 computer science and design and technology areas in recent years. Last year, our district-wide program won the NJTEEA Statewide Excellence Award. Our robotics team, with 50% female representation (pictured far right) and led by coach Julie Ryan, who was recently named NJFIRST Veteran Coach of the Year, competed at the national and international levels. Finally, CHS won the first AP Computer Science Female Diversity Award for its female participation rate.



We also recently launched a public speaking course at CHS based on the model of TED Talks. One of the teachers of this course, Christina McCabe, with the help of the CEF and other key district staff, led the way in creating a TEDxChatham event last June. The eight talks delivered that night represented a true community celebration. Ms. McCabe stands at the center of the photo at right; all of the talks may be viewed by [clicking here](#) or on the photo.



These are just some of the highlights from recent months. All of our academic and extracurricular programs, from our early grades through our high school, have their own bragging sheets and are thriving in different ways. I hope that your children find what most calls to them and enjoy a year of growth and fulfillment

Sincerely,
Dr. Michael LaSusa, Superintendent of Schools

Cultural Competence and Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying

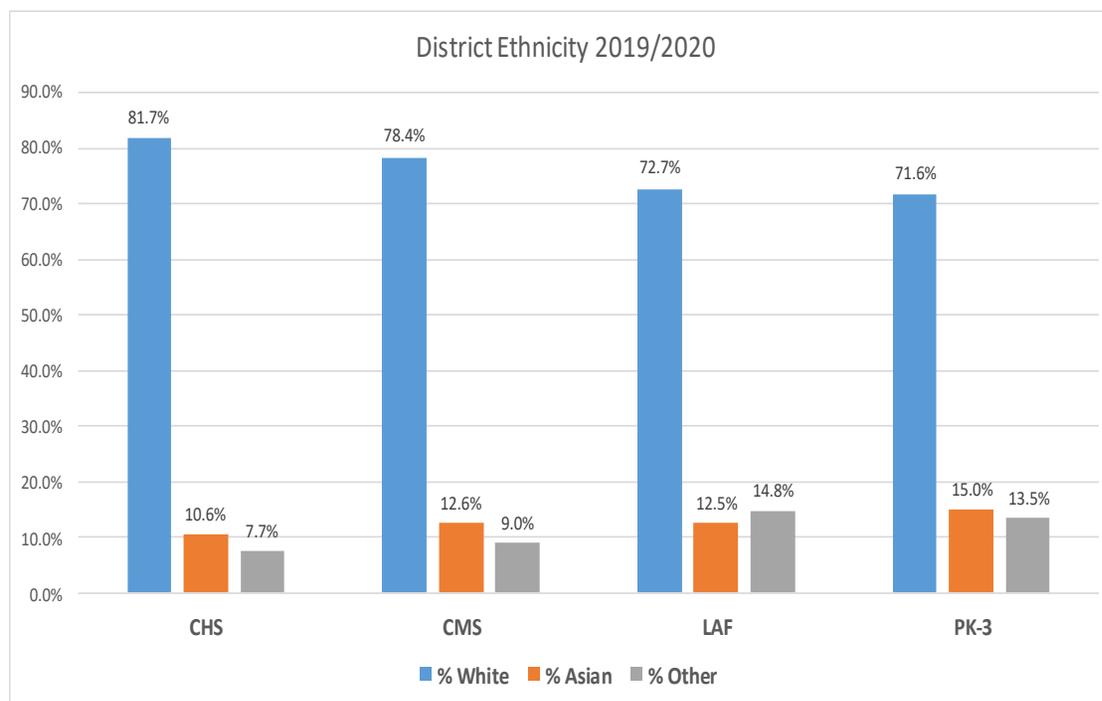
Our school district is becoming more diverse. There are currently 32 home languages other than English represented in our student population. They are: Arabic, Bengali, Bosnian, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Guarani, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Marathi, Norwegian, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, Swedish, Tamil, Tagalog, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Urdu. We count over 100 immigrant students, representing 30 different countries, in our schools. China is the most common non-US place of birth and Chinese is our largest non-English language. Of course, our student body is representative of numerous religious or faith traditions, a range of sexual orientations and identifications, a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, and a multitude of other qualities. In terms of ethnicity, “White” is our largest ethnic population, followed by “Asian.” (the ethnic categories are established by the state of New Jersey and form part of our reporting process to the state).

In this school district, we care for and educate ALL students.

This includes, but is not limited to, students representing all of the languages named above, all of the ethnicities recognized by the state of New Jersey, all sexual orientations and identifications, all cognitive, academic, or other abilities, all socioeconomic strati, all immigrant and residency statuses (documented and undocumented) and any other kind of student we are proud to call a Chatham student. They and we are all Chatham.

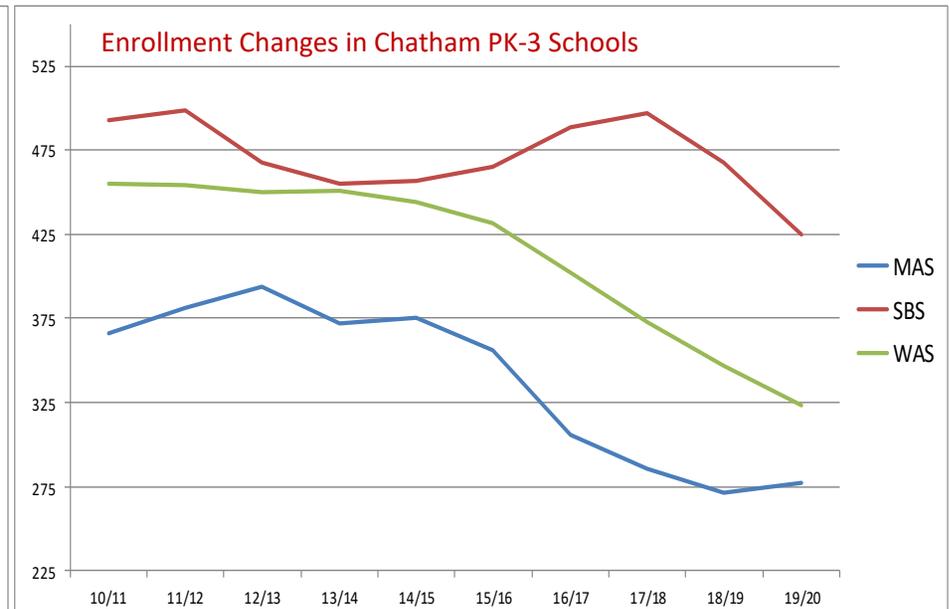
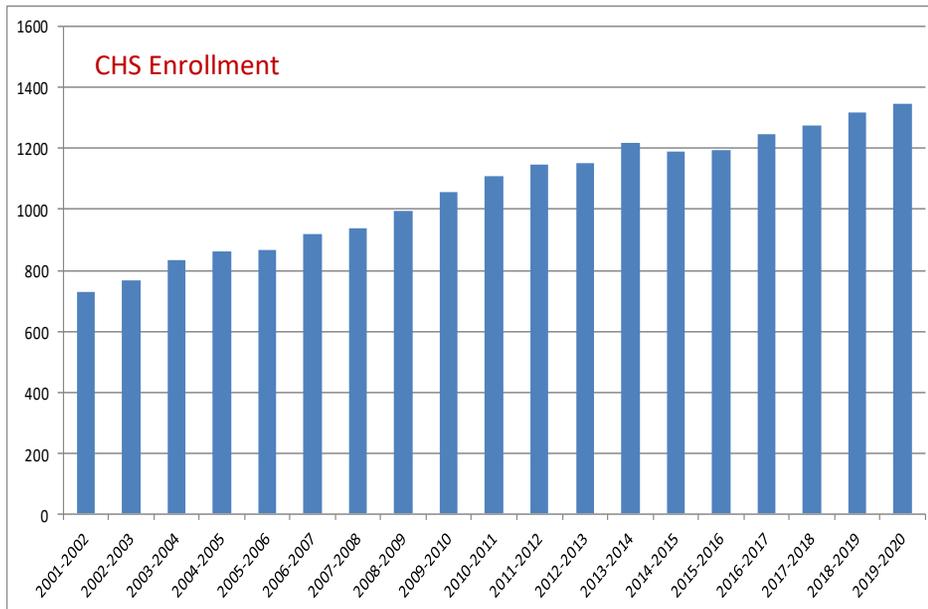
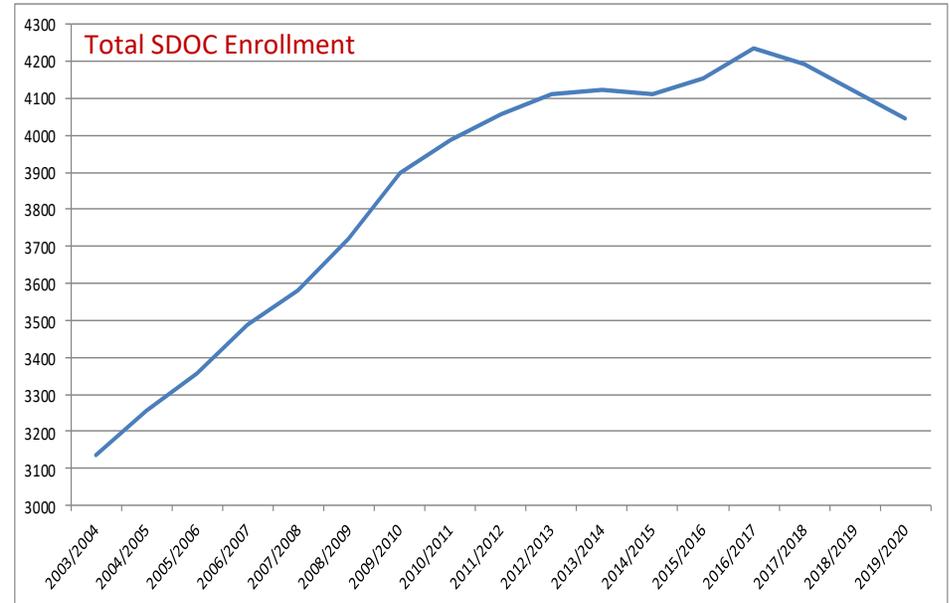
While I am happy to report that last year we saw a reduction in the number of confirmed cases of HIB, we still experienced isolated incidents of students either mistreating or disrespecting another due to a perceived difference like the ones named above. At the very end of last school year, for example, a small number of middle school students drew swastikas in the yearbooks of classmates. The school district disciplined those pupils and referred the matter to the police. Confirmed instances of HIB last year involved perceived sexual orientation, weight or physical characteristics, intelligence, and disability or medical condition. Again, the school district disciplines students found to have committed an act of HIB in these instances and in some cases refers the matter to the police.

As I do every year, I am requesting that you have deliberate, explicit, age-appropriate discussions with your children regarding how to treat other people. As our schools become more diverse, it is important for students to be aware of the various cultures, languages, and other characteristics they will encounter at school. Please also review the school district [policy on Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying](#). Students found to have engaged in harassment, intimidation, or bullying of other students may face significant disciplinary consequences, including long-term suspension and removal from the school environment. Please also note that offending conduct may take place electronically and through social media. Accordingly, please discuss with your children the importance of civility and respectfulness in online communications, and monitor your children’s social media and technology use. I thank you in advance for your commitment to making our schools safe, inclusive, and respectful places of learning and personal growth.



ENROLLMENT AND DEMOGRAPHICS

After more than a decade of growth, our overall enrollment (right) peaked in 2016/2017 and has gradually declined since then. The decline in enrollment has been most felt in our pK-3 schools (below right). At the same time, our high school has continued to grow. The reasons for this are that the large enrollment bubble is still working its way through the school system and we register students at all grade levels each year as a result of families who move into the district. The Board of Education is continuing to monitor our enrollment patterns, especially as new housing development is planned in both Chatham Borough and Chatham Township, and last year enlisted the assistance of a demographer to help forecast future trends. Video of the demographer's presentation to the Board last fall may be [viewed here](#). While the Board has continued to discuss the potential of redistricting the three pK-3 school zones, there have been no definitive plans to do so at this time, in part because the decline in enrollment is gradually resulting in more flexibility at each school.



School Safety and Security

We have taken many steps in recent years to ensure that our schools are safe and secure. Last year, we partnered with Chatham Township to introduce a Class III Officer into our high school. A Class III Officer is a recently-retired police officer who has received special training to serve in a school setting. This summer, we have partnered with Chatham Borough and the result of that collaboration will be the introduction of a Class III Officer at Chatham Middle School. These officers are part of the municipal police departments and will provide our schools with an additional level of security.

In addition to personnel, we have made other changes to our facilities and our procedures in an effort to be safer and more secure. Most of these changes will not be readily visible, but some may affect traditional routines. For example, our principals are in the process of more closely examining the number of visitors we admit to our schools. The vast majority of visitors are parents, of course, and that is great! However, there are some cases in which this can be disruptive. For example, at Chatham Middle School last year, it was not uncommon for there to be 50 times per day that parents dropped off lunches, Chromebooks, or other items that children had forgotten to bring to school in the morning. While this seems innocuous, this number of visits to the school can be disruptive to the office staff and requires the front door to be opened more frequently than necessary. I have asked the principals to consider ways to reduce this level of traffic.

On a final note, we are also partnering with the Morris County Sheriff's Office on an anonymous tip application program to enable students or parents to report potential acts of violence. The program is called "RSVP-3 Morris County, NJ" and may be downloaded in either the Google Play store or the Apple Store. The app allows the reporter to report a potential act of violence anonymously. Said report will be received immediately by local law enforcement and forwarded on to designated school personnel if the act concerns a student or school. In concert with this program, one of our staff members, Dr. Evan Jaffe, along with local police personnel, has been trained in the Behavioral Threat Assessment Model, which is a method of assessing potential threats developed by the Department of Homeland Security and the United States Secret Service. Our goal in utilizing this program is to prevent any potential violent or criminal act. If you are so inclined, please download the "RSVP-3 Morris County, NJ" app at your convenience. The reporting features of the app will go live on September 1. Thank you!

Final Thoughts

In discussions over the past year, we have also identified a couple of areas where we can improve as a school community. First, we would like to reduce the amount of plastic waste we generate. We are going to continue to make an effort to use fewer plastic water bottles and also plastic utensils, where feasible. Connected to this is the generation of garbage during our lunch hours. Lafayette Avenue School last year piloted "boomerang" and "waste-free" lunches. The idea was to either not use plastics or other single-use products at lunch, or/and for students to take home whatever they brought in with respect to lunch items. This experiment was enlightening and demonstrated how much food and other products turn into garbage after a 20-minute lunch period. I have also asked the principals to work with their student bodies and PTO groups to reduce our waste output.

Above all else, the district will continue its commitment to the social and emotional well-being of students. This commitment could lead to recommendations about the structure of our school day, the coursework our students take, policies related to substance use, expectations for homework or grading, and so forth. We want to strike a balance in our school system between engaging students in genuinely stimulating academic work and taking care of their social and emotional needs. If the scale must tip slightly, it should be toward the latter and not the former. Thank you for joining us in these efforts; I look forward to a great year!

Welcome Back!