

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Superintendent's Newsletter

September 2014

Dear Parent,

I hope that you and your families have had a restful and fulfilling summer. I am writing to welcome you to what promises to be another exciting year in the School District of the Chathams and touch on a couple of items of note.

As you may know, the Chatham schools have garnered some positive accolades recently. During our last school year, we were notified that Milton Avenue School was named a finalist in the National Blue Ribbon Award process. It is one of only nine New Jersey schools to receive such commendation. We have also learned that *New Jersey Monthly Magazine* has named Chatham High School as the Number One high school in New Jersey in its semi-annual rankings of the state's public high schools. We have likewise been informed that Chatham High School will appear as a top-performing high school in the northeastern United States in a ranking compiled and to be published in the coming weeks by *Newsweek/The Daily Beast*. These kinds of acknowledgments are affirming for our students and staff members.

At the same time, however, rankings are imperfect and fail to capture many of the most critical facets of a child's education. A ranking does not reveal whether a school has a climate of inclusion and acceptance of all students. A ranking does not indicate whether teachers at all grade levels work with students to develop qualities like persistence and self-direction that will likely lead to success after high school. A ranking does not necessarily reflect the degree to which students *want* to come to school and genuinely find a place where they can explore that which most interests them. Our goal as a district is not to climb a rankings ladder, but to try to ensure that our schools are places of learning and development, evincing the kinds of characteristics I just noted. If we were defined by rankings, we might be content in the number one slot. If we are defined by higher purposes, we will always be able to strive toward more and more meaningful and transformative experiences for students.

As we have enjoyed external commendations, we have spent this summer taking on a number of internal improvements. Construction on the high school expansion project has moved along as anticipated, and as of now most of the exterior shell of the addition is complete. Our expectation is that the renovations of computer labs at CMS and CHS will be completed by the final week of August. Bathroom upgrades, financed in part by the D.O.E., are running slightly behind schedule because of some unexpected issues, but we are optimistic that they will be completed prior to Labor Day. The large exterior windows in the stairwells at CMS have been replaced. The turf fields have been replaced at Haas and Cougar. Finally, our custodians and maintainers continue to put the finishing touches on all facilities so that they are ready when students arrive on September 4.

The fall is an exhilarating time of the year! There is nothing better than feeling the energy of students venturing into their first day of school and observing the excitement of teachers greeting those students. We look forward to another great year and wish you and your children the best as you get back into the routine of school.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael LaSusa, Superintendent of Schools

DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS

We continually evaluate our vehicles of communication in an effort for our schools and the district as a whole to communicate optimally with families. This year, we have made the decision to move away from Honeywell Instant Alert as a communication vehicle and instead implement a communication system known as School Messenger. There are numerous reasons for this change. One of them is that we believe School Messenger will provide us with greater functionality and speed when sending out alerts. Second, School Messenger is compatible with the Genesis Parent Portal. On a nightly basis, we are able to automatically update School Messenger with all parent contact information residing in Genesis. This means that parents no longer have to log in to two different places to provide or update their contact information. A parent need ONLY log in to GENESIS via the PARENT PORTAL and make sure that all information is accurate.

Please take a moment when you are able to log into the [Genesis Parent Portal](#) and update your contact information according to the directions that are included under the “Contacts” tab. Should you wish to receive text messages as well as phone and email messages, you will need to subscribe to School Messenger via your cell phone by following the directions in the Parent Portal. Please also click on the [“Newsletters and Notifications”](#) page within the “For Parents” section of the district website. The “Opening of School Notifications” document contains additional information about various school-related matters, including instructions about school closing procedures.

COMMON CORE and PARCC

The subjects of the Common Core State Standards and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers have continued to receive publicity this summer. New Jersey adopted the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics in 2010, and the New Jersey State Board of Education reauthorized these standards in July. Information about the Common Core may be found at [this website](#). Our school district’s curriculum has reflected these standards since the summer of 2010.

The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers is one of two national consortia tasked with designing tests to measure how well students are acquiring the skills outlined in the Common Core. New Jersey has been a member state of P.A.R.C.C. since its inception, and is scheduled to fully implement P.A.R.C.C. tests over the course of this year. This past year our school district conducted a field study in connection to these tests, but we have not yet administered them on a full scale.

In July, Governor Christie announced that he was making some adjustments to the implementation of New Jersey’s teacher evaluation law. The primary adjustment related to P.A.R.C.C. was that the results of these tests will count for 10% of a teacher’s evaluation, down from the 30% originally indicated in the state regulations. There has been no adjustment made to the administration of the tests themselves.

When I wrote about this subject in June, I shared with you that it was our hope that the New Jersey Department of Education would share additional information about P.A.R.C.C. administration with us this summer. Specifically, I was hopeful that the D.O.E. would inform us of the exact length of the testing sessions so that, if necessary, we could apprise parents of any scheduling adjustments prior to the year beginning. As of this writing, however, we have yet to receive any additional communication regarding P.A.R.C.C. administration, despite the fact that we customarily received similar information about N.J.A.S.K. each May. As we receive these details, we will share them with you.

CELEBRATING CHATHAM



We are proud of the strong links between the school district and wider community. During this year's annual Fishawack Festival, students and teachers participated in the celebration in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most significant contribution came from Kenji Hasegawa, who teaches art to students at Milton Avenue School and Washington Avenue School. Mr. Hasegawa was the lead artist for a project sponsored by The Public Arts Council of Chatham Borough. The project culminated in a set of murals, on display along Fairmount Avenue near the train station, depicting a number of historic and community sites in Chatham Borough. Pictured below is Mr. Hasegawa with Mayor Bruce Harris at the official ribbon-cutting ceremony.



SAFE SCHOOLS AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

Our school district has taken deliberate steps to try to ensure that our school system is a place of learning with a culture of safety, acceptance, and respect.

Over the past three years, we have installed over 200 video cameras that provide surveillance of our school buildings. Video footage from this system has helped identify acts of vandalism and other disruptive incidents. We have also invested in personnel and now have one full-time security monitor in place at each school building. These retired police officers have helped to monitor the entry of visitors to our buildings, assist with safety and security drills and evacuations, and provide supervision of the building in the absence of principals. Through climate surveys administered this past spring, roughly two-thirds of our students reported feeling safer in school as a result of these staff members.

We have also bolstered our counseling resources. We have added counseling staff at all school levels and have entered into a partnership with Project Community Pride, a community-based family counseling service that now operates out of the Madison YMCA. Upon the referral of one of our school counselors, this resource provides support to students in need at a location separate from the school.

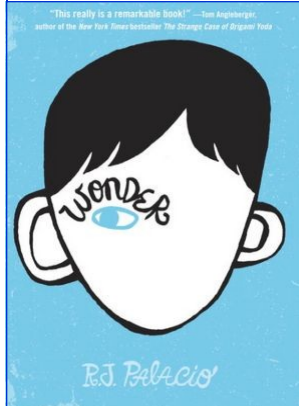
Also over the past three years, we have implemented all requirements under New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. I remind you that words and actions motivated by a distinguishing characteristic of a student may constitute bullying and harassment under this statute. I also remind you that homophobic and ethnically-biased words or actions are frequently at the heart of our cases of HIB. I encourage you to have direct conversations about these issues with your children.

This year we will broaden our attention toward issues impacting student health and well-being. One of those issues is that of substance abuse. Officials across New Jersey and in Morris County have noted a significant increase in the use of heroin. Obviously, marijuana has gained greater cultural acceptance in the United States and has become legal in some capacity in many states. I am not an expert in these areas and I do not believe that Chatham has any incidence of use or abuse greater (or less) than that of other communities. However, illicit substances carry ill health effects and those effects are uniformly worse for developing young people. I will be working with our student assistance counselors and other staff members this year to facilitate parent programs about substance use and abuse. In addition, I advise you that e-cigarettes, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs are not permitted at school or at school-sponsored events, and that students found to be in possession or under the influence of such substances will face disciplinary consequences. The school district reserves the right to take measures—such as locker inspections, use of K-9 units through the Morris County Sheriff's Office, or other steps—to prevent and discourage the use of illicit substances among students. It is always our hope that proactive education on issues like these will prevent unwanted and possibly even tragic outcomes.

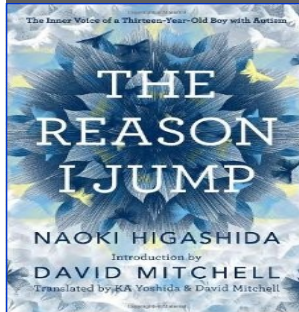
We will also try to address through parent and student programs the role of social media and personal technology devices in the lives of students. Again, many communities—including Chatham—have had to grapple with bullying and harassment through electronic means, sexting (the practice of sending explicit images of oneself or of a peer to other students), and other inappropriate uses of technology. One of our new required middle school cycle courses, Digital Footprints, will address some of these themes and we will seek other ways to educate students and parents about their prominence and intricacies.

I encourage you to have conversations with your children about these issues and to attend any of the programs about which you will receive information at a later time. The well-being of our students supersedes in importance the academic achievement of our students.

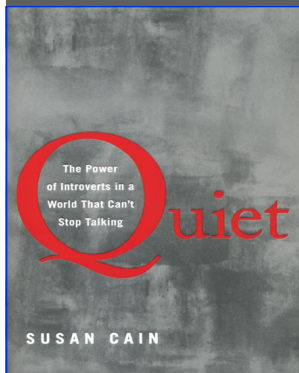
SUMMER READING



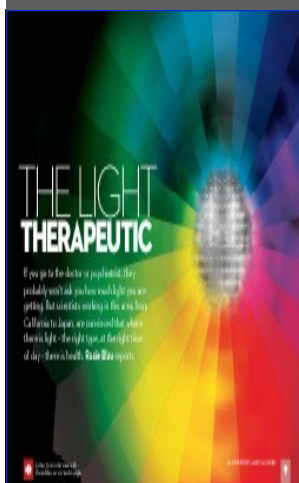
Toward the end of last year, I read *The Fault in Our Stars* and *The Giver*, two fabulous books in the “young adult” genre (did such a category of reading exist when I was a teenager?!?) They prompted me to pick up *Wonder*, a beautiful and inspiring novel about a boy named Auggie. Auggie has a facial anomaly that has prevented him from attending public school and otherwise enjoying a “typical” childhood. After making the decision to begin fifth grade at a local public school, he embarks upon a year that will make any reader feel less awkward and much more humbled about their own time in middle school. Upon reading about the heroic Auggie, I promptly bought three copies of this book for my two nieces and nephew who are in middle school now.



The author of this book, Naoki Higashida, is a thirteen-year-old boy with autism. It is a fascinating and authentic look into the thought and sensory processes of a person “on the spectrum.” Like a diary with a mini-novella at the end, the book offers a clarity and simplicity that I found accessible and also highly relevant as a parent. Reading lines like “Sometimes I actually pity you for not being able to see the beauty of the world in the same way we do” is intriguing enough, but the explanation that follows is even better.



Quiet puts forth a counter narrative of leadership, creativity, and productivity. Ms. Cain argues that some of the greatest leaders and thinkers we have known were in fact introverts, and that as a culture we have wrongly bought into the notions that leaders must be dynamic extroverts and that the best ideas arise only through collaboration and teamwork. She makes a persuasive case that disconnecting from others and spending time in solitude is a recipe for clarity, original thought, and happiness. This book has relevance for anyone, but especially for the classroom, where schools have often placed great emphasis on a child’s propensity for “participation” and outgoingness.



This one is not a book; it is an article that appeared in a recent edition of *The Economist*. It is a survey of recent discoveries regarding the health benefits of light, as well as the adverse effects associated with getting too little of the right kind of light or too much of the wrong kind. It turns out that some scientists believe that light is as important to health as sleep or exercise, and that our bodies are genetically wired to subtly respond to different kinds of light at different times of day. For example, the blue light typically emitted by cell phones and computer screens stimulates our circadian systems into alert and awake states. Thus this kind of light is especially problematic near bedtime. Similarly, studies of hospital patients indicate a faster recovery time for those exposed to more light than other patients. I shared this piece with my full administrative team because of its practical considerations.

HAVE A WONDERFUL SCHOOL YEAR!

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