

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Superintendent's Newsletter

September 2015

Dear Parent,

Welcome back to another promising year in the School District of the Chathams! I write to you to update you on a number of important items as we enter the 2015/2016 school year.

For starters, our enrollment is defying trends. Every demographic report we have commissioned in the past five years has called for our enrollment to be in decline by the year 2015/2016. Demographic reports are based principally on birth rates, which in turn project kindergarten enrollment in future years. Our kindergarten enrollment is in fact lower this year than it has been in any recent year, at about 210 students. However, we have gained new registrants throughout our other grade levels and as a result our enrollment as of this writing is more than 4,150 students, which is the largest enrollment ever in the district. The impact has been greatest at Southern Boulevard School, where we have had to add an additional section in both second and third grade in order to maintain class sizes at a reasonable number.

We also continue to address facilities needs. The Board of Education is continuing to evaluate capital investments in the wake of the defeated referendum last year. There will be additional information about plans to address the capital needs of the district in the coming months. Currently, however, we are moving forward with an Energy Savings Improvement Plan, or E.S.I.P., that we initiated last school year. This is a state-approved program that enables the district to finance a range of energy-related projects. The infrastructure of all of our school buildings will benefit from this program and the energy consumption of the district will decline as a result.

Our academic program is as vibrant as ever, and I include some highlights within this newsletter. New course offerings introduced over the past two years have served to diversify and strengthen our program. Our students also continue to garner accolades on behalf of the district. This past May, *U.S. News and World Report* named Chatham High School as a Gold Award school, a distinction assigned to only 3% of the high schools in the country, and ranked it as the #3 comprehensive public high school in New Jersey. *Newsweek* similarly ranked CHS among the nation's best high schools just this month. Southern Boulevard School also has been named a finalist for a No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Award. The final status of the nomination will be announced this fall. Should SBS earn the award, it would make it the third district school to earn such commendation (MAS and CHS are the others).

More important than academics is the well-being of our students. One of our areas of continuing focus as a district is student wellness. The well-being of students includes emotional as well as physical health, and impacts student learning in significant ways. Pages three and four of this document speak to this campaign.

I hope that you enjoy the final days of summer and that your children return to school rested, ready, and raring to go.

Sincerely,
Dr. Michael LaSusa, Superintendent of Schools

SOME NEWS FROM THE SCHOOLS



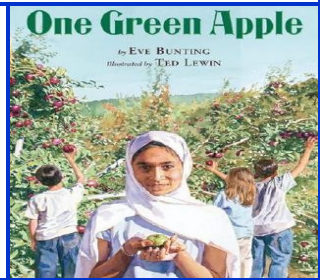
Milton Avenue School welcomes its new principal, Nick Andrezza, to the school community. Mr. Andrezza is excited to join MAS and get to know its students, parents, and teachers. MAS, along with our other primary schools, will delve deeper into the Readers Workshop model for literacy instruction this year.

Washington Avenue School this year will continue its campaign to promote kindness, otherwise known as Cougar Cubs for Kindness. With the help of the PTO, the school celebrated a number of events last year and this year will take additional efforts to show how kindness can powerfully transfer to situations outside of school.



Southern Boulevard School last year began a partnership with the New York Yankees in connection with the organization's Hope Week. This August, SBS students traveled to the Bronx to participate in a charity event for needy schoolchildren. The Yankees provided complimentary tickets to a daytime game with the Twins, and invited Rob Gardella and some of our students to throw out the first pitch.

With the support of the PTO, Lafayette Avenue School will be celebrating and teaching students about diversity and acceptance through a year-long immersion in children's literature. The school has selected a book a month to be read during the Lafayette character periods. Ms. Cindy Weiner, School Counselor, will also lead students in activities that emphasize each book's central theme.



Chatham Middle School will enter its second year of a new cycles program that includes the required courses of iSTEM, Digital Footprints and Global Awareness, and Holocaust Studies and the Power of Language. At the very end of last year, the school also launched its first-ever eighth grade trip to Washington D.C., where staff and students spent three days touring historic sites in our nation's capital.

Chatham High School will open its doors with seven additional classrooms, completed in the middle of last year, as well as new bathrooms financed in part through the state's ROD Grant program. The classrooms include new computer lab space to accommodate increasing enrollment in the computer sciences. More than 200 students are enrolled in computer science electives this year, including 30 in AP Computer Science, the most ever.



STUDENT WELLNESS

The physical and emotional wellbeing of our students remains a district focus. Over the past two years, we have taken a number of steps to address the whole person of our students and this year we will continue on that path.

First, we have made efforts to improve the physical environments in our classrooms to better address socio-emotional needs. Washington Avenue School led the way in introducing child-friendly furniture in its classrooms. Specifically, with the help of the PTO and CEF, WAS purchased standing desks and balance ball chairs. Through additional grants and via the district budget, we introduced at least one standing desk into every elementary classroom in the district last year, and this year we are scaling their use into the middle and high school as well. Numerous studies indicate that more flexible furniture—standing desks in particular—improve focus and concentration in students. This is especially important given that the most common special education classification in our district is for ADHD. Our maintenance and custodial staff has also painted over 60 classrooms throughout the district in tones selected by our architectural firm. Again, numerous studies indicate that certain colors improve mood and concentration when compared to “institutional” shades of white. Our goal is to improve the learning environments in our schools over time so that they are maximally beneficial in terms of learning and wellbeing.

Second, we have sought to raise awareness about crucial issues facing students and families. Last year, our Student Assistance Counselors, Lisa Lattarulo (CHS) and Alex Emr (CMS), arranged eight parent programs that addressed topics including stress and anxiety in teenagers, substance abuse, social media and bullying, and LGBT issues. Video recordings of some of these presentations may be found on this [page of our website](#). Lisa and Alex also coordinated a survey in June of last year of our grades 6-12 student population regarding health and emotional habits. Items on this survey addressed substance use, homework levels, stress, sleep, and other matters. Lisa, Alex, and I will discuss findings from the survey at upcoming parent programs this year, and they will form the basis of further action to address student needs.

Finally, the district as a whole has made efforts to educate students about several key wellness issues. First, we have introduced a range of initiatives pertaining to character education and New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. I encourage you once again to have candid, developmentally appropriate conversations with your child about treating others with respect and acceptance, especially as that relates to sexual orientation. Second, we have sought to explicitly instruct students about their digital footprint and appropriate digital comportment. I also ask that you speak with your children in a developmentally appropriate way about their use of technology, in particular their use of cell phones. Within the section on cell phone use in the survey I referenced earlier, 30% of our high school respondents indicated that they have received a racy or sexual image of someone, and 11% of high schoolers indicated that they had sent such an image of themselves to someone else. We must all do more to bring students to understand how their cell phone and texting habits may impact them. Lastly, we have tried to bring speakers to our district to talk with students and parents about grit, determination, and how to overcome challenges. [The videos to some of these speakers are posted here](#).

On the next page, I highlight two areas of importance in the realm of student wellness that we plan to incorporate into our school district in the coming year.

STUDENT WELLNESS—BEING MINDFUL

The practice of being “mindful” has garnered much attention in recent years. A number of high-profile companies, like Google, Apple, and McKinsey, for example, have implemented mindfulness programs and [60-Minutes](#) ran a piece on it last year.

The term “mindfulness” is defined by [Psychology Today](#) as “a state of active, open attention on the present.” Other definitions offer somewhat different descriptions, but for our purposes the practice of mindfulness has to do with the capacity to focus one’s thoughts and attention in an inward manner. This is important because by most accounts—both anecdotal and empirical—there are more stressors in our lives today than ever before. We all probably feel this in some shape or form, and certainly our children feel it. Mindfulness as a meditative practice has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, assist in overcoming addiction, improve attention in children, and achieve a host of other positive outcomes.

We began to introduce mindfulness in the district last year. One of our speakers from the parent series I mentioned on the previous page delivered a [presentation](#) on the subject, several of our counselors received training in it, and we ran a couple of stress reduction sessions after school or during lunch at the middle and high school. This summer, all administrators in the district went through a two-day training program in mindfulness and we will be training all of our health and physical education teachers this school year. We will build exposure to the practice into our curricular program over time, with the goal of yielding all of our learners with more tools to help them manage stress in a healthy way.

STUDENT WELLNESS—DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Our school district takes seriously the use of any illicit substance on the part of students. Illicit substances include alcohol, marijuana, synthetic marijuana, and any other drug. This year, the district plans to take advantage of a resource available to Morris County school districts, which is the K-9 unit of the County Prosecutor’s Office. Darren Groh and I have met with a representative of the Prosecutor’s Office, as well as Chief Hennelly, Chief Crosson, and Lieutenant Miller of our local police departments, to coordinate potential K-9 sweeps of Chatham High School during the course of this school year.

During a K-9 sweep, an announcement is made for teachers to hold students in their classrooms. Classes continue as normal, except that about three rooms are chosen at random to evacuate to the school library or other location. The students of those rooms are told to leave their belongings behind and the teacher escorts the students to the library or other location. A County police officer and his canine partner then proceed to the empty classrooms and carry out the sweep. **The dog does not have contact with any student.** If a drug is detected, the bag or other source of detection is brought to the principal’s office, the student and his or her parents are notified, and the prosecutor’s office handles the search and investigation as a police matter. The school district will also impose its own discipline.

I am communicating the above to you openly and proactively because the use of the K-9 unit is meant to be one more preventative measure in ensuring our schools are drug-free. Roughly half of the high schools in Morris County made use of this resource last year, and we plan to join that group. Please speak with your children about substance abuse in general and the risk associated with bringing drugs to school in order to avoid problems with the law or worse.

DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS

I would like to remind you that most district communication will take place via Genesis and School Messenger. Genesis is accessible to parents via the [Parent Portal](#). The Parent Portal will furnish students with all report card and grading information. It also houses important documents such as the school directories and certain permission forms. Please log in to the Parent Portal prior to the beginning of the school year to ensure that your contact information, including emergency contacts and email addresses, are accurate.

School Messenger is the email, phone, and texting program the district uses to communicate information about school closings or important announcements. School Messenger syncs with Genesis, so you will receive critical alerts via School Messenger so long as your contact information in Genesis is up to date. 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.

Finally, please also click on the “[Newsletters and Notifications](#)” page within the “For Parents” section of the district website. The “Opening of School Notifications, 2015-2016” document contains additional information about various school-related matters, including instructions about school closing procedures.

NJCCCS/CCSS/NJASK/HSPA/PARCC/SBAC/BCT/WOE

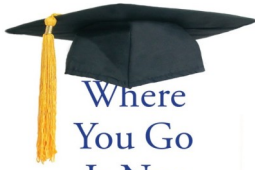
I admit that the last acronym above is one that I just made up to stand for What on Earth?

As I have written before, New Jersey officially adopted the Common Core State Standards five years ago, in 2010, thus beginning a transition away from the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. Shortly thereafter, the state announced it had joined both the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, two national groups with the mission of developing tests to measure the CCSS. A year or so later, New Jersey announced it would drop its relationship with Smarter Balanced, partner officially with PARCC, and let its contract run out with Measurement Inc., the North Carolina-based company responsible for the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge, the High School Proficiency Assessment, and the Biology Competency Test. On top of all this, New Jersey overhauled its teacher evaluation requirements to incorporate student results on these standardized tests into ratings for certain classroom teachers.

Last year, the above milieu, and the introduction of PARCC in particular, led to controversy in New Jersey and elsewhere. Here in Chatham, a subset of our parents and students refused to participate in the tests. Whereas 98% of our grade 3 and grade 4 students took the tests, only 44% of our sophomores and 25% of our juniors completed the exams. Toward the very end of the school year, after all the tests had been administered, Governor Christie announced that the state of New Jersey would review and likely move away from the Common Core Standards, but would retain PARCC.

We do not know what the result of the [standards review](#) will be and to date we have not received any official guidance on how to manage PARCC refusals, other than a directive from the Commissioner of Education that we must administer PARCC. Other superintendents and I have communicated to members of the Department of Education that the results from last year’s PARCC administration will be dubious because of the rate of refusal and that districts should not be penalized for parental and student choices. I will of course apprise you of additional information on PARCC and/or new standards as it becomes available over the course of this year.

SUMMER READING



Where
You Go
Is Not
Who
You'll Be

An Antidote to the College
Admissions Mania

FRANK BRUNI
New York Times Bestselling Author

If there were a single book I might recommend to parents, it might well be this one. *New York Times* journalist Frank Bruni tackles what he calls the college admissions “mania” and shows how colleges benefit from stimulating their number of applicants, how parents and students buy into the admissions race, how draining the process is for kids (from an early age), and how heavily the role of legacy weighs in the evaluation of applicants. Above all else, Bruni forcefully argues that the institution from which a person earns an undergraduate degree does not matter much in the long run. On this last point, he surveys a number of industries to demonstrate the diversity in type of alma mater found among business and government leaders. The book is thought-provoking.

Chade-Meng Tan began at Google as a software engineer, but his official job title has become “Jolly Good Fellow.” Meng is the company point-person for its employee mindfulness program, called Search Inside Yourself. As you can tell by this newsletter, I have now read a bunch of literature on mindfulness. It is something I have a very difficult time doing myself, however. It requires sitting quietly for periods of time, focusing on breathing, and not being carried away by thoughts and preoccupations. It is nearly impossible for me! I enjoyed this book because it is accessible to a lay-person and Meng employs a humorous and realistic style in his writing.

FOREWORDS BY JON KABAT-ZINN AND DANIEL GOLEMAN

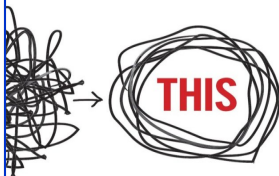
Search
Inside
Yourself

THE UNEXPECTED PATH TO ACHIEVING
SUCCESS, HAPPINESS (AND WORLD PEACE)



CHADE-MENG TAN

“This book and the course it’s based on represent one of the greatest aspects of Google’s culture—what one individual with a great idea can really change the world.”
—ERIC SCHMIDT, executive chairman of Google



essentialism
The Disciplined Pursuit of Less
GREG MCKEOWN

This is a book ostensibly about organizational leadership, but in reality it holds lessons that apply to all aspects of life. Its central argument is that we must focus on what is essential and not waste time on what is inessential. That sounds simple enough, but it turns out that our professional and personal lives are often filled with perceived obligations, appointments, and routines that might not be as necessary to our goals or ideals as we reflexively believe. The author proposes a series of habits, exercises, and approaches to zero in on that which is essential. Arriving at the essential, the author argues, leads to happiness, calm, and heightened productivity.

Peter Senge is an expert on systems thinking and Daniel Goleman is an expert on emotional intelligence. In this brief treatise, they make the case that school systems must focus on developing in students an understanding of their relationship with themselves, with others, and with the greater systems of which they are a part. The first of these understandings has to do again with mindfulness and being able to center one’s attention inwardly. The second involves extending that emotional IQ toward others in a compassionate way. The final understanding requires schools to engage students in authentic and meaningful learning. Together, these understandings develop the whole child.

Daniel Goleman
Peter Senge

The Triple Focus



A New Approach
to Education

WELCOME BACK!