



## MUSCOTA NEW SCHOOL

"Turn the World Around"

4862 Broadway NYC 10034

ph (212) 544 0614 fax (212) 544-2678

Judith Menken, Principal

November 7, 2007

To Muscota Families,

For the past 2 years we have officially been part of the Empowerment Schools Initiative, a reorganization of public schools that have elected to share educational philosophy and practice, curriculum, and professional development with one another in ways that may not be in keeping with mainstream Dept. of Education policies, but carries DOE support nonetheless. This has been an excellent step for Muscota for many reasons, including the opportunity to work more closely with our "sister schools," schools that have a similar history and reputation. These schools, those who have signed the following letter, joined together 4 years ago as the PENNY group (Progressive Educators Network of New York) and continue to work together on political issues that affect us all.

The major issue facing all NYC public schools right now are the School Progress Reports. Regardless of final grade, many, many school communities are highly dissatisfied with the thinking behind this program as well as the process used to complete it. This letter is being sent to families in all PENNY schools this week to make that position clear.

Family Conferences are next week; you should have already received an appointment slip from your child's teacher. Teachers are now preparing their goals for your child which will be shared at this meeting. In addition, to help our families better understand how Muscota teachers do assess or rate how students are doing in understanding the expected work, and, even more importantly, how to plan for what to help the student accomplish next, we are holding a Family Saturday on Authentic Assessment on Saturday morning, November 17, 2007. More information will follow later in the week, but please keep that day open to join us at school for this important work.

Sincerely,

Judi

**Tuesday, November 13** \_ day school **FAMILY CONFERENCES**

**Wednesday, November 14** **EVENING FAMILY CONFERENCES**

**Saturday, November 17** 9-12 **Family Saturday on Authentic Assessment**

Thursday, November 1, 2007

Dear Families,

We have never used report cards for children in our schools because we feel that letter grades do not contain all the information about children's learning and achievement that we wish to convey to you. Nor do we use standardized test scores as the sole indicators of children's growth and learning. Our schools are attuned to the learning styles, interests and capacities of children beyond what a test might show.

We are alerting you to the fact that for many years the Department of Education has compiled statistics and information on our schools, posting the data on the DOE website as "school report cards". The format has been changed this year and for the first time, schools have been given letter grades based on statistical comparisons to other schools in the city. This has become a "high stakes" assessment for the schools. These report cards are very public representations of our schools yet give very limited information about them.

As it now stands, we are expecting the grades to be released during the week of November 5 along with a parent guide. To help you make decisions about the usefulness of the report cards and grades, we would like to share some important information with you. The letter grade we receive is based purely on comparing our schools to others. Two thirds of our grade is tabulated on comparing each of our schools to other schools with a similar "peer index". One third of our grade is made up of how we compare to all the other kindergarten through 5th grade schools in the city.

### **Peer groups**

Peer groups are formed by a range of schools that have similar populations according to these criteria: African American and Hispanic population (x 40%), free lunch eligible population (x40%), special education population (x10%) and English language learners population (x10%). These calculations determine our "peer index" that places us within a range of 40 schools within a field of peer indexes. So, for instance, the Earth School and the Neighborhood School both share some schools in their peer group but are not in each other's peer group. Each school has peer groups in Queens, Staten Island, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan.

### **Letter grade**

Our letter grade is derived from outcomes in four categories. The first is the School Environment, which counts for 15% of our score. Results of the parent and staff surveys count for 10% and attendance counts for 5% as compared to other schools. In our empowerment cohort of schools, we have seen that two schools with almost identical attendance figures received very divergent scores for attendance because of the schools to which they were compared.

The second category is School Performance, which counts for 30% of our score. This score looks at how our current 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> graders as well as graduated 6<sup>th</sup> graders perform on standardized tests.

The third category is School Progress and counts for 55% of our score. This section looks at what percentage of our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders have made what is considered a "year's worth of progress" on the standardized tests. Giving credit for the progress of a student (as measured by test scores) is a new, positive development in the field of test measurement but it makes it

difficult for children who already have high test scores to get credit for making progress. For instance, this year, children were assessed as NOT having made a year's progress if the child answered one more question wrong than last year, or even in a couple of cases got a scaled score that was only a couple of points higher. Every statistical study has a margin of error. This means that the results are true within a range. However, a "year's worth of progress" is calculated to a hundredth of a point without any range.

The last section is Extra Credit. The extra credit section rewards schools that have students in subgroups which traditionally do not test well, but who have made more progress on the standardized tests than their peers in other schools. Because of how the metric is calculated, schools with small populations often do not qualify but are still compared to schools that do.

As you can see, 85% of the report card grade is based on test scores. The grade represents the work of the school through very narrow and minute criteria. Small schools in particular can be subject to wide fluctuations from one year to the next because of a more limited data field.

Based on preliminary data, our schools have received the complete range of possible scores. However, we would like our families to understand that these report cards are based on criteria and values that we do not always embrace. We have higher expectations and deeper academic values for educating our children than performance on once a year tests.

This year we will continue to have opportunities for families to learn how we understand the complexity of children's work and how we make plans for instruction based on what we find out.

Fondly,

Judith Foster  
Neighborhood School

Judi Menken  
Muscota New School

Maria Velez-Clarke  
Children's Workshop School

Julie Zuckerman  
Central Park East I

Michelle Harring  
Earth School

Naomi Smith  
Central Part East II

Robin Williams  
East Village Community School

Anna Allanbrook  
Brooklyn New School

Alyce Barr  
Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies