



MUSCOTA NEW SCHOOL

"Turn the World Around"

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Dear Families,

This letter officially begins Muscota's 14th year as a progressive school of choice serving the northern Manhattan communities of Washington Heights and Inwood. It is a designation we are extremely proud of. The staff began our new year together with a 2-day Retreat last week at the Clearpool Environmental Center in Westchester, the same place our 5th graders were at for a 2-night overnight last June. The weather cooperated with some sun breaking through from time to time. We did team building activities, took a night hike, bunked together, ate together, and spent 2 days talking about both the history of Muscota, how it came to be and why, and sharing our hopes and dreams for the year(s) ahead and then planning real ways to how we are going to make that happen. What became clear was that despite changes in school status whether under district 6, Region 10, the Board or Dept. of Education or, now, Empowerment Schools Initiative, the values that make Muscota what it is have not and will not change.

So, on to the year ahead. First, introducing our newest staff members:

- **Johanna Marte** comes to use as our new ESL teacher after several years teaching 1st grade in the Bronx. Johanna is originally from Inwood and remembers hearing about Muscota while a young student in the neighborhood. Most of her students are K/1 kids, but Johanna has already made her mark as a spirited, committed teacher for all our kids and colleague for all staff.
- **Becky Hart** was an art student teacher with Lynn in 2003. Then in 2004 Lynn had family issues that needed her attention, so she was working part time for several months. Becky filled in those other days. So Becky knows all of us very well and most of the kids know her also. Imagine my surprise when Lynn mentioned this summer that Becky is looking for a job, but not an art job. She has her degree and license in special education! It didn't take long for me to reach her and her to race in to meet the hiring committee and spend some time with Lauren. It was a perfect fit! Becky will be co-teaching with Lauren in the grade 5 CTT class. They have already spent many hours and days together planning and building their classroom as a team.
- **Heather Pelanne** was also Lynn's student teacher (last fall). Lynn has left Muscota. She is due with her first child, a boy, in December. She and her husband are also planning to relocate (destination unknown) as he works in international relations. She is doing well and we all can't wait to see her in her roundness. But her life changes left a space to bring Heather back into the fold. Again, kids and staff already know her well. She has lots of great ideas already in place for the year.

- **Jill Cecil** will be rebuilding our dance program this year. Jill is originally from Utah. She is a formally trained dancer herself, but has also interned in city schools. She has a calm voice and demeanor, a great smile that connects instantly with kids.
- **Alena Hatch**, also from Utah (!), will be establishing a music program at Muscota! It is the one area that parents and staff have felt has been lacking in our work with your kids. We all sing together, and there is a bit of guitar in some classes, but not a well thought out, comprehensive music enrichment. Now there will be. Alena plans on bringing both vocal and recorder to the students, class by class and in larger groups. There will be a Muscota Chorus again, but the format is still being considered.
- **Bree Wilchcombe**- Bree and her mom have been Muscota parents for many years. The boys have all moved on from us, but Bree has stayed in touch. She has been a school secretary elsewhere in the district. On the last day of June Esther announced to me that she was taking a job closer to her home downtown. I immediately called Bree. We are all delighted to have Bree with us again.

Other school updates to share-

~ Once again there have been some moves around the 3rd floor. This should be the last of our grand plans to arrange ourselves into a coherent, well balanced school organization. Marilyn V. is joining Victoria in room 303 as the co-teacher in the grade 2/3 CTT class. They have also been tied to each other over the past week in setting up home together. Room 311 is now (finally!) our school resource center. The intervention staff (Marian, Jackie and now Johanna) will be based in their. The room has been set up with different areas for groups of kids to work. It will also house a large library of guided reading and multiple copy books for all teachers to use as needed with their students. The staff professional library is also in this room now, with an enormous collection of teaching guides and curriculum development in all subject areas. Space is still at a premium for us, but setting up this resource center provides a somewhat more flexible, multi-use quiet space for everyone. It has also allowed Ellen to spread the library to use the full space. There is no longer any part of the library sectioned off for any other use.

~ We will now have lunch and recess 6th period, beginning at 12:25. It is late in the day, but we all had adjusted to having a very early lunch past years. Many classes will have snack mid-morning. Teachers will let you know directly about their plans. It has sometimes been hard in the older grades to get families to send in snack reliably in the past. If your teacher does want to add this to her program, please take the request seriously. Sharing a bite together has powerful community building power. It is also an appropriate break when kids eat so late in the day. They really do work hard in school. Howard and Denise still need parent volunteers to assist lunch/recess. If you have an hour to spare speak to Denise right away. They need to know which adults they can count on and when in order to establish safe supervision for your children.

~ Some scheduling changes for kindergarten kids at the beginning of school:

+ K students are dismissed at 11:30 Sept. 5 and 6. Beginning Sept. 7 they have the same full day schedule as all other students – dismissal at 2:50 pm.

+ For the first 2 weeks of school Marilyn S. and Francesca will be dismissing from their classrooms. This is so they can better touch base with parents and caregivers. Once everyone's afterschool schedule is clear, they will be dismissing with the rest of the school from the yard. On rain days, when everyone else dismisses from the gym, all K/1 classes dismiss from the classrooms.

+ Kindergarten students are not eligible for bus service until they have been registered in the DOE system which does not happen until after their first day of attendance. You will get a letter from Bree when your child comes up as eligible and what the bus stop and times area.

However, we are strongly suggesting that K students are not put on the bus for the first 2 weeks of school. We know this is probably a hardship for working parents, but it really does make a big difference in both getting the bus routes settled, and in making sure that our youngest kids have a smooth transition to their new lives in the big world. Whatever your decision please make sure that your teacher is always clear on your child's dismissal plans.

~ Empowerment Schools Initiative – Muscota is a member of this DOE opportunity. Basically it means that we no longer work with a region or district, but more on our own authority. We are in a network with 25 other like-minded schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn. There is a team, hired by this network, that will assist with business and organizational matters. As a school we are now responsible for planning and implementing our own interim assessments, budgetary allocations and intervention plans – including summer school next year. There will be much more about this work as the year unfolds.

~ One of the original plans we have been able to put into effect because of our added autonomy, is one early dismissal day each month. It will be last Wednesday of each month. This extra time will allow more in-depth professional development for the staff. There will more detailed information about how this is going to work later on.

~ Extended Day – beginning last Feb. 150 minutes each week were added after regular school hours for teachers to work with small groups of selected students. This program will not start until September 18. Teachers need to take a look at their current students. You will get a letter if your child is recommended to participate. The days for the extended time will be Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:50-3:40. This also gives a little time to make sure the bus is properly set up for that second dismissal also.

There is always a bunch of paperwork to look over at the beginning of the year. Please take time to go through the attached forms and notices. They are important.

Enclosed you will find:

To be completed and returned to your classroom teacher as soon as possible:

- **Neighborhood Trip permission slip**- this must be signed each year and returned to your teacher as every class goes into the community regularly as part of their classwork studies.
- **Permission slip to walk home alone** (only grades 4 and 5)- if you want your child to be able to leave school at 2:50 without adult pick-up, please sign and return.
- **Emergency form** – We now store this very important information on these yellow sheets (be sure to complete both sides and sign it). It is critical that we have up-to-date information for each child. You **MUST** provide at least one other phone number beside your home so that we always are able to reach a family member or friend in an emergency. Keep your teacher and the office informed whenever your phone number or address changes throughout the year.
- Federal lunch form (pink paper) – These also must be completed and filed with the government every year. Our Title I funding depends on this. It is absolutely critical that *every family* completes this form. I am committed to receiving 100% forms back; it is the only way we can be sure that we don't lose this money to our school. Our current enriched instructional program could not exist without those funds.

For your information:

- Muscota Calendar of Events – please note our whole school Open House on Sept. 14
- Heather's and Dayna's supply lists

- School bus schedule – This is the schedule for our 2 buses as it existed last year. Be aware of the posted times for the first few days until you see when your driver actually arrives at your stop.

Other important information:

- Official school hours are from 8:30 to 2:50 pm every day. Children are expected to be in the schoolyard *before* 8:30 so they can be picked up by their teacher with the rest of their class. You may drop children off beginning at 8:00 in the yard; there is Muscota supervision. Please do not leave your child before 8; there is no one available to watch them. Standing alone in the vestibule so early is not a good way for a child to start his/her day. Anyone arriving after the class has gotten to their room will be asked to get a late pass from our office and will be marked late.
- You should be able to reach someone in our office from 8am – 4pm who will most likely be able to answer any questions you may have. I used to return phone calls in the evening, but as the school has grown that has gotten harder and harder to do reliably. While email loses something in personal connection, it unfortunately has become the most efficient way to communicate. You can reach me via email (jmenken@schools.nyc.gov). I check it at least once a day.
- Phone calls will NOT be put through to teachers in the classroom. You may leave a message and the teacher will call back within 24 hours. One more request, do NOT call school with change of afterschool plans for your child. Unless there is an emergency, and that should happen very rarely, make those plans with your child at home in the morning. Not only is it a terrible distraction to have to interrupt classwork for this, but it is unsettling for children to have their plans change constantly. The more consistent and reliable their schedule each day, the more at ease and able to learn they will be.
- It is an important part of our school mission to work closely alongside families; that includes providing open access to our classrooms and support staff. As long as I am in the Muscota office any parent is welcome at any time to speak to me. That is true for Howard, Alli and Denise as well. However, you cannot assume we will be available when you drop by. If we are busy please understand our tight schedules and make an appointment to come back at a more convenient time. To make sure that teachers are able to give their undivided attention to their students, you must have a pre-arranged appointment to have an extended conversation. When coming into the building all parents must show identification and sign in at the guard's desk. This is not to limit parent presence, but to insure proper security for everyone.
- We are required to document every absence for every child. Parents are required to send a note to explain any missed day of school. These notes are kept on file. If your child is absent for more than 3 days without a call from you, Diana Morales, our school aide responsible for attendance, will call you. If you cannot be reached by phone, the region's attendance official, Ana Abreu, will make a home visit. Excessive absence and/or a pattern of lateness is detrimental to your child's success in school. It is one of our goal's this year to provide whatever social service support any family needs to ensure every child is ready and able to fully participate in school every day.
- Rainy day AM and PM procedures: In event of rain and we cannot line up in the play yard, Muscota children will meet in the gym on the main floor. Teachers will come to the gym to pick up their class. At 2:50 we will reverse this procedure. Parents will

enter the building through the main entrance and exit through the gym into the yard. K/1 parents will pick up their children in their classrooms.

Some quick requests:

- Children may not bring any electronic games or music devices to school. Expensive toys are not only distractions from work, but are easily lost or broken, making for hard feelings. Children may bring soft balls for recess, but keep in mind this play time is only 20 minutes and the play space is very small. We want the children to be active and involved with each other in group games as much as possible. Removed toys will only be returned to the parent. We are not responsible for toys or games that are lost or broken if brought into school anyway.
- There is no candy or gum allowed at any time, whether on the bus or for lunch. Not only is the sugar unnecessary, but the wrappers become a littering problem. The younger children have a snack time each day. Your teacher will let you know how s/he would like snack donations to be handled, but we make every effort to keep all snacks healthy. Be sure to let your teacher know if your child has any food allergies.
- Another NO- children are not to have any money in school. Again, it too easily gets lost; this is an unnecessary distraction. If money is needed for a trip, you will receive a note letting you know. Send that money in a sealed envelope with your child's name on it, or staple the bills to the permission slip. Muscota children do not use the juice and water machines in the lunchroom. The lunch period is short enough already, so again there is no need for any money in school. If you want your child to have a drink with lunch please pack a water bottle or box juice.
- It is Dept. of Ed. policy that *cell phones are not allowed in schools*. If your child has a cell phone out during the school day it will be taken away and only returned to the parent. If you have an arrangement with your child that requires him/her to call you to confirm getting to school or getting home safely, work out specific arrangements with your teacher. Otherwise, we will not be responsible for the safety of the cell phone.
- You are urged to mark your child's belongings (sweatshirt, jacket, bookbag, lunchbag) with his/her initials or name with a permanent marker. The Lost and Found collection grows much too quickly. There is a large painted wooden bin that holds all misplaced items from the classes on the third floor; the K/1 classes keep their own lost and found.
- We make every effort to get all the children outdoors at least once a day, even in the winter, so be sure to dress your child appropriately for the weather. Unless it is actually raining or snowing during our lunch hour (12:25-1:15 pm), the classes go into the yard for a short recess. Cold weather does not bother them as they are running and climbing, so be sure to include hats and gloves when the colder months come. We can always use donations of soft balls and jump ropes. On the days when it is impossible to go out, the children spend those 20 minutes either in the gym or auditorium. If you have any appropriate videos (Disney, National Geographic, Discovery Channel) that you have outgrown at home, we would love to enlarge our school collection. We have a Rainy Day cart of indoor games for when the children are in the gym. We could use donations of simple board games, decks of cards, dominoes, checkers, Chinese Checkers, etc, things that the children can play in small groups while sitting down.

- We collect Boxtops for Education. You can find these on the tops of General Foods items. There is an envelope in the main office to drop them off in. We redeem them with the company. We have gotten about \$200 each year from this fundraiser, so please tell your friends and family to collect for us, and send them into the main office.

This is what the boxtops look like-→

- **TARGET FUNDRAISER:** As many of you in the northern Manhattan community probably know we have a Target store at 225 St. and Broadway. Muscota is registered in their Take Charge of Education program. This means that if you use either a Target guest card (in-store charge card) or Target Visa and declare Muscota as your assigned school, we will receive a percentage back from all your purchases. Muscota's account # is **117781**.

It is very easy to sign up for this program and we received a few checks last year.

There will certainly be more information to share with you as the weeks and months go by. I send home a Family Letter every 3-4 weeks to update families on school-wide events and usually speak to an educational issue of interest across the ages; often there will be an article attached from the newspaper or an educational journal. You will also receive regular communication from your child's teacher about what is happening within your class.

You will be receiving a very complete Parent Handbook within the next few weeks. Thanks to parent Mandy Ehrlich this much needed project has been completed.

We are in for another hallmark year as Muscota goes into its next stage of its evolution. Just getting ready all summer and setting up these past few weeks has been very exciting. We have an outstanding staff, full of expertise, energy and enthusiasm. Another focus for this year will be to build a highly participatory Parents Association. This will be in close consultation with the School Leadership Team. Parents will be needed to serve in both these groups. Please support the school in every way you can. For some families that means being able to volunteer in class or at lunch. Some parents can chaperone class trips. Others are able to donate supplies. There is no one way to be an involved parent. But the one thing that we expect of *every* family is to make sure your child is read to daily, has healthy, well balanced meals, including breakfast, gets a good night sleep (bedtimes should begin no later than 8 pm for kindergarten children), and is able to share his/her events of the day with an adult at some point after school each day. With both school and home making sure that every child is cared for physically, emotionally and academically we can insure happy, healthy, successful children.

Sincerely,