



MUSCOTA NEW SCHOOL

"Turn the World Around"

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UPCOMING DATES:

December 20 Early Dismissal Wed. for staff professional development
December 25 thru Monday, January 1 Holiday Vacation no school
January 4 All School Ice Skating Trip Families encouraged to come along
January 5 Winter Pot Luck and Candlelight Night Mingle with staff and classmates
January 8 (first Monday of the month) Java with Judi – open discussion with parents on school questions, needs, concerns
January 9-11 English Language Arts (ELA) state exam for grades 3, 4 and 5
January 15 no school Martin Luther King Day
January 31 Early Dismissal Wednesday for staff professional development

EARLY DISMISSAL WEDNESDAY THIS WEEK- Dec. 20

Project Kids to take regular afterschool students for the _ day. Additional families who would like their child to stay from 11:30- 3:00, the cost is \$20 each month. See tear-off at the end of this letter.

All other families – Dismissal at 11:30 in front of the school.

December 18, 2006

Dear Families,

I often wonder – getting ready for vacation is so hectic- finishing up assorted projects, straightening up at home before going away – it is exhausting and makes vacation all the more necessary. It's the vacation coming up that is what is so hard! Of course, I still wouldn't trade in having the vacation even if it means I wouldn't be so stressed by not having to get ready for it. That kind of circular reasoning probably only makes sense inside my own head, but that also symbolizes for me what the business of schooling has been like lately. I don't mean the real work of school – which is working directly with your kids – that part is always challenging and always equally rewarding. The business of schooling has nothing to do with education; it is all about politics and increasingly, about scores and numbers. And it has me running in circles lately. Here is a brief overview of the issues coming at schools right now:

All NYC public schools will receive a Progress Report beginning Sept. 2007. Empowerment Schools were given a demo version of this document last month. It is simply a collection of percentages with the scores from the state ELA and Math tests for grades 3-5 from last school year. Categories counted up are: number of Hispanic, Asian, White or African American students tested, number of students with disabilities (having an IEP for support services of any kind), number of English Language Learners (ESL kids that work with Johanna), number of kids scoring at Level 3 and 4, number of kids whose score went up at least _ a level between grade 3 and 4 or grade 4 and 5, and so on. These percentages of our whole tested group (which is only 150 kids) are compared to all elementary schools and also to schools most like us (how that is determined is a whole other discussion). Points are given based on each category. Then there is "extra credit" (that is really what the city calls it) for kids in multiple categories, like Hispanic English Language Learners whose scores went up at least .5 and also are in the lowest third of scorers city-wide!

The number of things wrong with this kind of process to assess the success of any school is too long to list. Just a few of the main points that schools like ours are protesting:

For small schools the number of kids tested and the number who will make up any one of those categories is too small to be statistically reliable- meaning 1 or 2 kids more or less can make or break a school using this formula

What about the work done with kids in grades K-2?

What about all the ways in which schools and kids show development other than written proficiency on a standardized test?

What about the moral question of reducing humans to merely a composite number based on their ethnicity, language, and economic circumstance?

And then there is the huge problem with making sure that at least the numbers the city and state is using to make these judgments are accurate. Not surprisingly, as far as any school can check, they are not.

Along with the upcoming school Progress Reports, Muscota has also received its NCLB (No Child Left Behind legislation) report. This is the annual evaluation every school in the country receives after testing from one school year is complete and reported. Since there were so many problems with the state scoring of the 2005-06 tests and such delays in sending home the scores, that document only just came to the schools. The good news is that Muscota is “a school in good standing” in all areas. The unfortunate news is all the concerns I listed above and the enormous amount of time all principals have had to put in to over the past trying to determine how many Hispanic ELL, etc, etc, students we did have last year!

I made a presentation to interested staff a few weeks ago, and will probably do the same either in the Spring or next fall for parents on exactly how these 2 reports are determined and the implications for schools. Regardless of how absurd this system may seem to those of us who actually know the children in the schools, it is very serious business and puts progressive education at great risk. I am attaching a short article with this letter, “Testing is not Teaching” that speaks to this concern. I will try to send home other information about this growing pressure on all schools every month.

Now that I have gotten all that off my chest, let’s get to the good stuff –

SCHOLASTIC BOOK FAIR last month was a big success. Not the record breaker of last year, but certainly respectable. The school earned a credit of \$2274 to be shared between class libraries. Teachers are going through the catalogues now to make their selections. Many, many thanks to the parents who sat for hours in the 3rd floor hallway helping kids make choices and keeping the books organized.

Ellen will run her book fair in the library in April again. That one is a Buy One, Get One Free, aimed at getting more books in the hands of more children, not also used as a fundraiser. We are already reserved for the November fair for 2007!

PHOTOS came in and have been sent home. If you paid for school pictures and did not get them yet, let Denise know immediately. We also need to know if you would like the pictures retaken. Denise will then let those families know when the picture retake day is.

INNISBRUCK GIFT WRAP has also been delivered. If you have any questions about your order contact the PA directly. I understand the PA took in several thousand dollars and are now considering priority needs for the school. Many thanks to Bryan and his group for this productive project.

MUSCOTA EXTRAS:

Girl Scouts: We are now hosting 2 new troops, one Daisy level for the K/1 girls and one Brownie group for the 2/3’s. The 2 groups meet at the school on Fridays (Daisies every other week). The program is run completely by parent and teacher volunteers and hopefully will grow as the girls get older.

Feld Ballet: 7 Muscota students were chosen by audition 2 months ago at the school to receive 8 weeks of professional ballet class. The kids began this past Friday and loved the work. This is an amazing opportunity for our kids and I hope will only be the beginning of our relationship with this dance company. Between this and watching 22 boys and girls on stage taking ballet class in our Arts Afterschool program, traditional dance seems to have finally taken root at Muscota.

Clearpool Environmental Center: Our 5th graders spent 3 days and 2 nights away last week working in nature and spending quality time together as the senior group. They will go again in June. We are able to offer the kids 2 trips this year thanks to being accepted as a partnership school with Clearpool. The teachers and kids came back at 3:00 last Friday completely pooped but delighted at the experience. In Becky’s words, “It was awesome!”

NY Road Runners: Marilyn S. has set up this relationship at our school. Several classes have added time for running in their teaching day and are formally logging their time and distances. There will be Wellness Jamboree at the Armory at 168 St. on Sunday, Jan. 14 where any interested family can spend the time in track activities, all for free. More information will come home after the vacation, but it is worth marking the date on your calendar now.

Also in planning right now, we are looking into an architecture in the classroom program out of CCNY (Salvadori Center) that may start next month in a few classes, beginning in kindergarten. I also met with a man who runs a chess program in schools. We had a very successful experience with a similar city-wide program several years ago. He is doing several demo classes for us early in January and many teachers are anxious to have their children involved. The higher level thinking both these activities encourage are exactly the stimulation we are always looking to provide for our students. I will report further next month.

BUS BUSINESS:

There has been a lot of concern over the change in schedule for the school aides who have been serving as bus matrons in the morning. As I explained in the letter that should have come home with your child if s/he rides the bus, bus duty is not one of the approved assignments for school aides in their union contract. However, as we feel it is very helpful to children’s safety and feelings of well being to have consistent familiar supervision for their entire school day, we have always hired our aides enough hours to include bus coverage. Up until now they were willing to do this work. Due to personal commitments this was no longer possible. Therefore I had to make a change to their work hours and assignments. It seemed to me that the afternoon ride was the more challenging one so that is where the aides are on the bus. There is nothing else that can be done about this. I understand that there are concerns about how the bus driver can supervise kids while driving and about younger kids putting on seat belts. I will be speaking further with the drivers about our expectations as well as clarifying with the bus company. The buses will only let off directly in front of the gate in the morning. And parents need to talk to their children about safe behavior on the bus at all times.

Bus families have also received letters directly from the Office of Pupil Transportation asking you to register your child for continued bus service. I did not get any advance information that the city may be reorganizing the bus routes or that families would be contacted. But not to worry- all our current kids on buses are registered properly. It took the past 9 years of insisting to get our routes the way they are now. I do not anticipate any changes. If you have the form you can fill it out and return it for our files, but if not, it’s okay.

TO grades 3, 4 and 5 families:

Despite our philosophical objections to the testing culture enveloping schools now, teachers in grades 3, 4 and 5 have been working with their classes on test taking skills. Several formal test practices will be coming home to all children in those grades to do over vacation. There are several hours of work involved. Most families will be busy with holiday events, but it is still important to set aside some time to go over this work with your child. Directions for how to do the practice tests are included. Read them carefully. Even families that are going far away can complete this work. It is just a matter of taking a pencil and the envelope along with you and then planning some quiet time. Your interest tells your child that you understand that this is important work. If your child feels prepared s/he will not need to worry, and that is the biggest help you can offer. The vacation pack is due back when we return on Jan. 2 There will be several more practices coming home that week as well.

REMINDER: School Tours for new families begin in January. Please spread the word to families who might be interested. Also, if you have a younger sibling you expect to send to kindergarten with us next year, let Denise or I know *in writing* so we can set aside a space for you.

Enjoy your upcoming time with your kids. Remember that it isn’t always necessary to plan big events for the time together to be worthwhile. Take a walk with your child through the park. Wander through the halls of the Museum of Natural History. Talk to him/her about what is going on in his/her life. Your kids are full of wonderful ideas; their idea of a good time is being able to share their life and time with you! Much health and joy in the New Year.

Sincerely,

RETURN THIS TEAR-OFF TO THE MUSCOTA OFFICE IF YOU WOULD LIKE YOUR CHILD TO BE ADDED TO THE REGULAR PROJECT KIDS GROUP DURING THE _ DAY ON DEC. 20

BE SURE TO INCLUDE \$20 FOR THIS SERVICE.

Child’s name

class

Parent signature _____