



MUSCOTA NEW SCHOOL

"Turn the World Around"

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Judith Menken, Principal Howard Matza, Ass't. Principal

UPCOMING DATES:

****THIS WED – Jan. 24**

Early Dismissal for staff development 11:45 dismissal

Tuesday, Feb. 6

Whole School Ice Skating

Monday, Feb. 19- Friday, Feb. 23

NO SCHOOL Mid-Winter Break

January 22, 2007

Dear Families,

If the sudden change in weather wasn't evidence enough, the list of things in my notes to cover in this family letter lets me know that we are deep in the middle of the school year – the busy, rich deep days of winter. We began the month with Candlelight Night and Pot Luck Supper – both were extremely well attended. Many thanks to the PA for organizing dinner; having kids line up first and being served by adults made a huge difference to having a calm meal with more than enough food for everyone. Dance and Music presentations were lovely – it is amazing how much the arts afterschool kids were able to put together in just a few months.

The new year also brought Kathy back to her grade 5 class after a 2 month maternity leave. We now have Maria, who was great with the class, available to cover for teachers who need to be absent for a day or so. It makes a big difference that our substitutes are known to the students and understand our teaching system.

ELA Testing-

All went well the week of Jan. 9. 100% of children in grades 3, 4 and 5 were tested- and everyone survived, even Howard who had to organize the whole business. There is no way for us to know when the scores will finally come back to the school; we have no control over this. Last year due to NY State problems (it is the state education dept. that issues these tests) results did not come back to the schools until the following October! Toby is representing our school at the regional DOE office for the next 10 school days to score the written responses, so we know that the work gets done from the school's end. But as I have written and explained often, these tests serve the politicians and number crunchers that design and purchase them; there is virtually no educational or instructional value to them. Your child's teacher works hard every day of the year to know how your child is progressing in all areas of development, and is constantly adjusting classwork to match this information. As a grade group, the teachers look at trends in their classes and plan larger curriculum to meet those needs as well.

The state Math tests will be on March 6, 7 and 8. Practice packets should start coming home at the end of this week so kids will be very comfortable with both the format and the range of content they may encounter.

Bus Issues:

TRIPS: Unfortunately there have been a string of mishaps with reservations for school buses in the past few weeks. There were a variety of reasons for how this happens, but it is my job to take responsibility for the end result- that trips were cancelled at the last minute. I sincerely apologize to parents who had taken off the day to go ice skating with us. Everyone looks forward to that trip and I know the children were also very disappointed. The matter was further complicated that I was not able to return to work on time because of the snow and ice storms out west (my flight was delayed 4 days!). Bree and I have spoken about tighter systems to make sure that this doesn't happen again. We are all set for the rescheduled ice skating trip on Tuesday, Feb. 6- that was the first date they could give us after we cancelled. The second ice skating will be on Friday, March 23; this is different from the year calendar sent home last Sept. as we had to arrange around bus availability, family conferences and testing. Reservations at the rink and for buses has been confirmed.

DAILY BUSES: Those of whose children use the school bus to and from school each day are well aware that we have had significant changes. Removing school aides from the morning ride was necessary with very little warning. Thanks to the feedback of several concerned parents who have documented bus routines, there have been some other changes to ensure that the children are as well supervised as we can manage.

Beginning last Tuesday, Ana Veras, one of our paraprofessionals, meets each bus at 8:00 at the curb. Both drivers have been informed that they are not to let the kids off the bus until Ana is there to oversee that each child getting off the bus walks *directly* through the gate into the courtyard. Once both buses are unloaded, Ana stays in the yard moving between the four K/1 classes. She stays there until the last class is picked up by their teacher. Beginning at 8:00, Howard is also in the yard. Denise is usually downstairs as well; she moves

between the yard and cafeteria depending on where the greater need is. Two school aides are assigned to the cafeteria beginning at 8:00 also- to take meal numbers and supervise Muscota children at the tables. We feel that this is a safe plan, but we also need parents to remind their children of how to play safely. Kids are expected to:

- go immediately into the cafeteria for breakfast (if wanted) when they get to the yard
- Clean up their table spot after they eat
- no walking back and forth between yard and cafeteria
- stay at approved line-up spots (either with their K/1 class or against the green fence for grades 2-5)
- climbing apparatus is not be used in the morning
- children do *not* go upstairs to their classroom before 8:30.
- Especially at this time of year – keep on coats, hats, etc.

As soon as we thought we had a good plan in place, another condition came up. Diana, who rides one of the buses in the afternoon, and supervises in the cafeteria in the morning, had to go on emergency medical leave as of last Thursday. She is facing a high risk pregnancy and was put on immediate bed rest. I am speaking to the other school aides to work out a new schedule that covers Diana's responsibilities. This is why you may have seen that Diana has not been on the bus coming home. Angela has been putting the kids on the bus, belting them in, taking attendance. The supervision part should be worked out in the next few days.

Early Morning Drop-off:

In watching the morning bus and yard supervision lately, another concern has come to light. Because of their work schedules, several parents have been leaving their children inside the front door of the school as early as 7:15 am! This is of great concern to me for several reasons. First, this means that children are getting up extremely early and have already had several hours of activity before the school day even begins. Next, the school does not open until 8:00 – this is hour before class starts so that kids can have breakfast and parents can go to work. We cannot provide supervision any earlier. The front door is open so that teachers can come in and that these children are not waiting on the street, but parents should not feel that the school is therefore taking on responsibility. It also cannot be assumed that your child stays inside until 8:00. We have had incidents in the past where a child went out to the street with other children, who also were unsupervised. On Friday I observed the group of kids waiting for the gate to open running on the sidewalk and into the street throwing snowballs. They were simply playing in the new snow as children will happily do, but I saw Muscota students as young as 7 year olds out there. Denise and I will be contacting parents who are leaving their children at school so early to see if we can assist in making other plans for keeping your child safe in the morning.

Brrrrr!

Yes, winter is here- DOE regulations leave the decision about how cold is too cold to go outdoors up to each school, including when it is below 32 degrees. Generally it is the strength of the wind and whether it is dry out that decides whether we can go outdoors at recess. At Muscota we believe that children need to be active throughout the day; the cold weather is not a problem for *a healthy child dressed properly*. And those are the key points. This is also the time of year for sniffles and fevers. If your child is not feeling well at home it is not going to get better during the day. Please do not send a sick child to school with the instructions, "Call me if s/he doesn't feel well." It is not fair to your child or office staff to have an unhappy child waiting to be picked up. It is also not fair to the teacher or other children in the class to be exposed to those germs.

Next, please listen to the weather each morning and dress your child accordingly. Hats are an absolute must in this weather. Hooded sweaters are not sufficient at this time of year. We expect your child to wear their coat, zipped up. Gloves and hats do get lost easily. There is a red bin on the 3rd floor where these odds and ends collect. Your child (or the parent) can check here for missing clothing, but these losses are a normal part of childhood, so stock up on inexpensive extras at the \$1.00 store or from street vendors.

Arts Afterschool:

Valerie, Alena, Ellen and I have met to review how this program is going so far. Our conclusions – the classes are great. Kids are doing very well in dance and song, but they have found that the last class, Musical Theatre, was working against the energy of the kids – it was just too late in the day. **Therefore, beginning Tuesday, Jan. 30, the program will end at 5:00 – parents and caregivers should pick up at 5 from the gym.** Tap and Drumming will continue as it is now, until 3:40. Library, Ballet and Chorus will meet for a bit longer now, from 3:45 until nearly 5.

Now that we see what works well, we also see that we can accommodate more students. Unfortunately we are still keeping it from grades 2-5. If you would like your child to attend Arts Afterschool on Tuesday and Thursday (it must be both days), please get in touch with Denise or I.

Other Good Stuff Ahead:

QUALITY REVIEW: In the never ending search for how to measure a school's accountability, the latest piece is a narrative evaluation of a school based on authentic observation and discussion, not that different from the mid-year reports your child's teacher is beginning to prepare for each student. All schools are being reviewed in this way beginning this year. The important points to this review are:

- one reviewer is assigned to our school for 1 _ days; we are tentatively scheduled for the first week of Feb.
- principal submits a self evaluation of the school before the on-site visit
- the visit includes classroom visits and meetings with groups of teachers, parents, and students, and other representative events (staff cohort meetings, Town Meeting, Parent Tour)
- the principal presents documentation on school policies, student work and performance
- a group of teachers prepare 2 “case studies” – a review of the work of 2 students that have been at the school for the same amount of time to see the ways in which our school supports learning and families. This is done confidentially; no student names are used.
- we have a QR (Quality Review) committee at school putting these pieces together.
- The written report draft comes back to the school about a week after the visit; the final report will be posted on-line along with the other school information already available through the DOE website.

The teachers are using this opportunity to take a more careful look at their classrooms, assessment processes and documentation, displays and organization of student work. I am doing the same for school-wide information. The entire process will be on the agenda of our next School Leadership Team meeting this week. I look forward to sharing the final results to all families later in the year. The Quality Review is a welcome process to help us take a critical eye to the good work already in place and can only lead to better work ahead. It is also good to see DOE responding to many schools’ deep concerns about all evaluation being based on scores and numbers; this allows the real work of schools to be seen as well.

FELD BALLETT: The 7 children selected through the audition process for grades 3-5 earlier in the fall are continuing their weekly classes. The last class will be on Feb. 16. Teachers, parents and friends are invited to observe this last class. More information to follow.

SEPT. 2007 ADMISSION: Be sure to let Denise or I know now if you have a younger sibling for kindergarten this fall (born in 2002). So far we have 9 sisters or brothers that will join the Muscota family. These spaces are taken off the number of kindergarten spaces we can offer to outside families. That lottery will be done in early March so it is important that we get those numbers now.

Before I write the next monthly letter, Lailany will have returned to her 1st grade class; her maternity leave is coming to an end as well. Erin has been a great asset to our staff and to the students and families of this class these past months. We won’t let her get too far away from us either.

Sincerely,

GETTING MORE MONEY FOR NYC SCHOOLS:

There have been lawsuits against the state to get more tax money back for NYC schools. Even though the courts have ruled in favor of NYC, the money has not been coming. The green card coming home with this letter is for each family to sign. Send it back into school and all the cards will be hand delivered to the office in Albany that makes these decisions. This is being organized by the teachers’ union, the UFT. It is a very important issue affecting all NYC students. Please send your support by filling out the card and sending it back to your class this week.