



MUSCOTA NEW SCHOOL

"Turn the World Around"

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Judith Menken, Principal

September 4, 2007

Dear Families,

With this letter I officially announce the beginning of Muscota's 15th year! That is a remarkable accomplishment, not just considering our particular history within district 6, but as a hallmark of progressive thinking within the larger emerging culture of standardization in education. There have certainly been bumps along the way, significant leadership and staff changes, but each year, each set of bruises and lessons, has also deepened the standing of the school in the community, broadened the scope of our services for children and heightened the skills and achievement of our staff to meet the needs of ever-changing students and families.

This school year is sure to offer its own list of challenges, some expected like the upcoming DOE School Report Cards to be published in the next few weeks, others continuing like the Interim Assessment reports, and still others that we cannot anticipate at this point. But whatever the situation we also know that the school community will respond from a position of strength and history, of being united around a common understanding of children and development and a shared set of values of compassion, respect and individuality.

At the top of the new information for this year, there are some staff changes to announce:

- Howard Matza, who had been serving as Muscota assistant principal since May 2005, will not be returning. I am sure I echo the thoughts of the entire Muscota community in thanking Howard for his work on behalf of our students and his friendly and open disposition to all families, and wish him only the best in the future.
- Valerie Rochon, dance teacher last year, has moved on to University Neighborhood High School in the Bronx. The position is not being replaced. A committee of staff, and hopefully with parent input, is going to be looking at how we accommodate physical education for our students considering time in the school and limited space within the building. Teachers already do a lot within the context of their existing curriculum and planning – more about this in a future letter.
- Eric Nolan has joined our staff as ESL teacher, replacing Johanna Marte who has also moved on to another school. Eric has taught at MS 322 in the 218 complex. He is eager to extend his expertise to younger students, and from the good connection we saw during his interview and demo lesson, the hiring committee felt strongly that his easy way and even demeanor would be a great fit. Eric lives in the neighborhood as well and was also looking to deepen his place in the community. He has many other interests and talents, along with ESL training, that you will hear more of as the weeks unfold.
- Alena Hatch, music teacher last year, has decided to leave education. We were only notified of this decision last week, but immediately a hiring committee was formed and interviewing of possible appropriate candidates began. We are committed to continuing to build a strong music program at Muscota and hope to have a selection to announce in the next week or so.
- As was announced last Spring, Francesca Weiss, 9-year K/1 veteran of Muscota has moved to AmPark Neighborhood School in the Bronx where she will work on building a new progressive school serving as literacy and classroom coach. Erin Ormond, who all our students and many of the parents know as former student teacher with Victoria, replacement teacher last fall for Lailany and then ever-present substitute teacher in all classes last fall will finally have a class and permanent place of her own at the school. Erin is taking over the 1st grade in room 107. She has become such a familiar face and voice in our midst; we are all delighted to make her position here permanent.

Everyone else is back in their regular assignments. In fact, most of the staff has been on site for a week already, cleaning, arranging, welcoming, meeting and preparing for your children this Tuesday morning.

Other school updates to share-

~ KINDERGARTEN PROCEDURES:

+ K students are dismissed at 11:30 Sept. 4 and 5. Beginning Sept. 6 they have the same full day schedule as all other students – dismissal at 2:50 pm.

+ For the first 2 weeks of school Lailany and Christopher 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:**

Following the Dept. of Education reorganization last spring, all public schools were required to align themselves with a network of schools under a variety of organizing agencies; this is to replace the regions that have served this purpose for the past 5 years. We are continuing as an Empowerment School. I was extremely satisfied with the team leaders we worked with last year. These were the people responsible for assisting with hiring, budget, special services, accessing curriculum information, compliance schedules, and other organizational necessities. The school is still left with the work of planning and implementing instruction, budgetary allocations, intervention plans, and, along with our network schools and under DOE guidelines, our own interim assessments for students. More about this Design Your Own (DYO) work in a future letter as well.

~ **SCHEDULES (continuing from last year):**

+ **Java with Judi** –

Last winter I started meeting with available parents informally one morning each month, just to share ideas, talk about possibilities, answer questions that may have come up in a class, grade or school-wide. There was no agenda, no notes, no presentations.. Just coffee and a home baked snack for anyone who wanted to stop by. One conversation last year about recess, safety, and supervision led to the plan this year of scheduling the gym to be available during our lunch hour to allow older kids to play basketball in an appropriate space. Because of limited meeting space, I am moving *Java with Judi* to the first Tuesday morning each month, from 8:30 to about 9:15, or until we have used up the conversation.

First Java with Judi will be next week, Tuesday, September 11 at 8:30 am in the school cafeteria.

All parents invited. Spanish translation will be provided.

+ **Early dismissal Wednesdays** for professional development will continue. This was a major positive addition to the building of our staff professionally and collegially. Staff members ran workshops around their specialty or school interest or need, outside consultants and speakers were invited, in depth review of student work was possible. The dates are listed in the enclosed School Calendar. Reminders go home a few days in advance, and child care will again be made available through Project Kids. The staff and I are deeply grateful to parents managing their own schedules to allow for this professional development time together.

+ **Extended Day** – Again, staff has decided to fulfill the mandated 150 minutes extra remedial time each week by keeping small groups of students until 3:40 on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Teachers need to take a look at their current students and consider how to best use this time. We will begin all afterschool programs the first week in October. You will get a letter if your child is recommended to participate in Extended Day.

+ **Book Club** with Toby also to begin first week in October.

+ I hope to be able to offer some specialty classes afterschool 2 days a week, what we called **Arts Afterschool** last year. Funding and staff availability needs to be considered, so more info on this in the coming weeks. If we are able to put together a program it would also begin that week.

There is a lot of information and forms coming home with this letter. It is very important that each family takes a few minutes to go over it all. Your timely responses really help us back at school.

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.
- **Video/Photo Permission form** - We get many visitors to the school looking to see progressive, child-centered education in practice. Our teachers also present at conferences and network groups. Classes are photographed from time to time for brochures, graduate student studies, displays, even as illustrations for teacher guides. Pictures of kids at work are used to highlight the Muscota web site. Therefore, we now ask each family to sign this form acknowledging that their child may be photographed. *At no time is any child's name or personal information made public.*
- **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** – These also must be completed and filed with the government every year. Our Title I funding depends on this; federal funding is based on family responses. We did not receive this important money for the coming school year.. It is absolutely critical that *every family* completes this form. That is the only way we can assess if we will be eligible to be reinstated for next year. Families do not have to complete any information they are uncomfortable with, but please fill out identifying information and sign the forms. If you have several children at the school it is not necessary to send in more than one form, just be sure to include every child's name. Children who bring home lunch still need to complete a lunch form. *This is not used only for determining lunch fees; it is what the federal government uses to allocate this very important Title I funding.*

For your information:

- Muscota Calendar of Events – please note that school is closed Sept. 13 and 14 and our whole school Curriculum Open House on Sept. 20
- 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. Diana and Angela will be bus matrons this year for the afternoon bus only.

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. 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 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, a Dept. of Education attendance official 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.
- Parent or caregiver needing to pick up a child before regular dismissal time is required to sign him/her out in the Muscota office. ***Teachers are not allowed to release a child with a pass noting the time the child was signed out.*** Again, we are not trying to limit access to your child, but must document where every child is at all times. Please also remember that frequent breaks in a child's day and school work affect your child's learning and feelings of belonging to the larger group. While it isn't always possible, make every effort to schedule personal appointments on non-school times.

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 other than the milk provided, 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 red 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 a Target Visa and declare Muscota as your assigned school, we will receive a percentage back from all your purchases. This is good at all Target stores. Muscota's account # is **117781**.
It is very easy to sign up for this program and we received a few checks last year.
- **Washington Mutual Bank** also has a give-back program with schools. If you have an account at that bank please ask. I do not know the particulars, but the school did receive some small checks last year as well.
- **T-Shirt Sales:** We also have tee shirts, sweatshirts and tote bags for sale. Order form for these is included in this packet as well. Send it back to the Muscota office with a check to Muscota New School or cash. Profits go towards the senior trip to Clearpool in June.

There will certainly be more information to share with you as the weeks and months go by. I send home a Family Letter roughly once each month 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.

Every family should already have a copy of the Muscota Parent Handbook. It came out last September and has everything you ever, ever could want or should know about the school's history, philosophy, instructional practices, parent expectations and schedules and events. If you do not have one already, please let the office know and we will send a copy home.

In addition, the school website, **Muscota.org** is a wonderful resource to learn more about the school and upcoming information.

While I try to vary the words I use from letter to letter, from year to year, the message, and often the priorities, stay the same – creating stronger connections between home and school is always high on the list. The better the communication, the better for each of your children. We still need to have a more active Parents Association. While there is a core of a few parents that come through whatever the need, we still have a very long way to go in helping each family to feel accepted and comfortable. We need to put real effort behind finding ways to reach out to a wider range of families this year; that goal continues to elude us. Once again, we have an outstanding staff, full of expertise, energy and enthusiasm. The other part of the equation, however, are the school organizations that give formal voice to families, the Parents Association and 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.

Welcome back, and here's to another banner year at Muscota!

Sincerely,

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The upcoming school report cards to be put out by the Dept. of Education will rate all schools from A to F, depending on a wide range of statistics gotten from student ethnicity, income level, language and test scores. This is a source of great concern to many principals as low scores could end up closing schools. Even schools with passing scores will not be adequately recognized for good work done in areas that do not lend themselves to scores and rankings. Article in this Saturday's NY Times speaks to this with specific reference to Muscota. Article attached.