



## MUSCOTA NEW SCHOOL

"Turn the World Around"

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Judith Menken, Principal

November 13, 2007

Dear Families,

I have been contemplating this letter for the past month, originally dreading it. Not because of anything wrong at the school, or with your children, or with the quality or effectiveness of our glorious staff, or with the commitment each of our families shows to the health of the school every day. But rather because the state of educational values in our city and in our country at present is not directed towards supporting those children, families or teachers in their work together. As has already been well publicized last week, the Dept. of Education has finally released their latest plan for evaluating all public schools. For over a month now, we at Muscota have known that this system would not well represent our work. There were several parent meetings explaining the questionable formula the Dept. of Education used. Since the release of these "grades" there have been many articles and editorials on television and newspapers outlining the serious problems with the thinking behind the city's use of test scores and the way in which these formulas misrepresented the successes of many of the city's most effective schools; unfortunately, Muscota is one of those schools who has been publicly hurt by those grades.

This letter is not to rail against this system; there are many other public voices taking on that battle already. Muscota parents are organizing responses to the people at the Dept. of Education supporting the work of our school and all other small progressive schools that have been affected by this policy. My work and attention must be directed, as always, to the well-being of your children and the on-going work from each staff member on their behalf.

Teachers have been working very hard for the past week writing Goals for each student, specific learning outcomes individualized for your child. They will be staying many extra hours for the next week or so meeting with each of you and sharing all they know about how your child is achieving in reading, math and social development. You will see samples of work, formal and informal assessments of reading and math skills, and share plans for next steps. You will hear your child's own voice as s/he also shares on-going work and hopes and dreams for the rest of this school year. You will be taken with how well your teacher knows your child, and how confident your child is in his/her own learning. And this will all be done without a test or a grade; real learning is too complex and too precious for so simple a tool.

I look forward to meeting many of you this week. While the progress reports is not a uplifting subject to discuss, I will be available to go over any part of this development, along with any

other part of our shared work with families. Representatives of the Parents Association and School Leadership Team will also be on hand to talk about their plans for supporting the teachers and our continuing work together. Information from the Dept. of Education concerning these reports will be available as well.

Along with several Muscota teachers, I spent the past weekend at the annual Prospect Fall Conference, where several dozen progressive educators from a wide range of schools in the Northeast come together to share our students' work in light of our shared beliefs on learner centered, values based education. Those 2 days reminded me of the long-view on the work done at Muscota with and for your children. For 15 years Muscota has been building a very strong reputation for excellence in Washington Heights and Inwood; that good standing has been well documented by NCLB and Dept. of Education evaluations in the past as well. The school has earned the professional respect of other schools and educators in District 6, throughout our Empowerment Network and the larger professional communities that Muscota is active in. I

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remain proud of our good name and recommit myself and the staff to continuing to bring a well-rounded, intellectually challenging and emotionally safe education to every one of our children.

As always, we thank you for your continued support in this work together.

Sincerely,

**Judi**

Article on back from NY Times Friday, 11/9/07. Bard HS is like Muscota in many ways- curriculum and instructional plan alternative to the traditional teacher-centered model. As president of Bard College, Leon Botstein has a public audience small schools like Muscota don't. His statements are very important in supporting our current situation as well and is likely to be heard by DOE officials responsible for this new grading policy.