

MONTCLAIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Superintendent of Schools

Community Message SY 23-24 No. 3

Jonathan Ponds, Ed.D.

January 3, 2024

Dear Families/Caregivers and Staff,

We hope you had an enjoyable winter break and holiday season. We are excited about collaborating with our community, families, students and staff as we begin 2024. Below you will find highlights of current projects and some on the near horizon. What is most important about these initiatives is that we are working together to shape the future of education in Montclair, keeping students first in all we do.

Communications

We have created a formal [Chain of Communications](#) webpage with charts to assist you with questions and concerns. Our aim is to get you to the proper staff member closest to your issue so that we can handle your concerns efficiently and expediently. Please visit this **new** webpage that has more details, as we wish to address your questions and look forward to assisting you. [Navigating the School System](#) webpage also contains some helpful parenting tips and resources.

Strategic Planning

We are on our way to a five-year strategic plan that will set the vision and the goals for Montclair Public Schools. The level of engagement and participation from the community at our public planning forums was outstanding, and we are fully committed to presenting our goals to the Board in February for approval. The forums outlined how we can capitalize on our strengths and face our challenges to develop goals. This work emphasized our commitment to students and families through equity and best practices. Once the goals are approved by the Board, District Administration will design the steps to accomplish these goals known as the Action Plan. Please take a moment to visit the [Strategic Planning webpage](#) for details.



PreK - Introducing Mini-Mounties

We continue to expand our PreK classrooms moving from 11 to 19 for the school year 2024-25, and the preschool program will be officially known as **Mini-Mounties**. Our vision for FREE, Universal PreK in the Montclair Public Schools in conjunction with community partners is nearing. Check out our [new webpage](#) and for those interested in enrolling or know a neighbor or

friend who would like to enroll, visit the [registration section](#). We thank our partners -- Montclair Community PreK, Montclair YMCA, Montclair Childhood Development Center (Head Start) and Neighborhood Childcare Center. We are grateful for their support in expanding our program and look forward to continued collaboration.

We are happy to announce that Dr. Gambi White-Tennant will be the Community Parent Involvement Specialist working with all community stakeholders and forming the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC). The ECAC will meet regularly to ensure that our preschool efforts are high quality and serve the needs of all children.

Community Engagement

Bullock Hosts Restorative Justice Family Nights



Charles H. Bullock Elementary School (CHB) hosted two Restorative Justice (RJ) Nights for Families on November 28 and 30, providing parents and caregivers a primer on what RJ is all about. They were given the opportunity to “sit circle” just as their children do every other week. [Read more](#).

This fall, the District hosted two [Family Engagement Nights: An Open Forum for ESL Parents of Multilingual Learners \(MLs\)](#) was held last month. Topics included an ESL program overview, an

introduction of our Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee and ESL Outreach Team, Genesis Parent Portal tutorial, support for students/guardians and more. Small break-out groups and a Q&A session also took place. The next family meeting will be on February 26 at the Fuzzy Furlong Field House.

Beginning in March, our ESL team is once again sponsoring a **free, 10-week adult ESL program** for parents/guardians of our multilingual students. This will be held at CHB.



The District also co-sponsored a workshop with the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence, [“Navigating Parent-Teacher Conferences,”](#) which provided valuable insight and strategies to engage families to ask key questions to support their children in achieving success in school. The program was facilitated by Latifah Jannah, Community, Parent and Student Engagement Coordinator, and featured presenter Ylonda Gault, author, veteran parenting journalist, education advocate and Montclair parent of three.



Montclair's newest Little Food Pantry was installed at Renaissance Middle School, a true community project providing non-perishable goods and maintained by volunteer donors year-round.

Equity, Curriculum and Instruction (ECI)

Project Alpha: You may recall we introduced a new equity initiative, [Project Alpha](#), in November geared towards mentoring and tutoring. Our pilot schools are Renaissance Middle School and the High School. Renaissance and the High School are hosting about 15 students each who report enjoying their time with peers and mentors. Programs such as this foster a camaraderie and safe environment for students to share challenges, get advice on career readiness and college preparation and have an opportunity to speak freely.

Amistad: We are committed to providing comprehensive curricula and experiences for our students by advancing the core objective of the Amistad Legislation. We are in the process of developing a curriculum that will have an ongoing professional development component to not only encompass history and social studies but also seamlessly integrate the profound narrative of African Americans' transformative role in shaping and nurturing the United States across all curricular domains. Our primary objective is to equip teachers with the necessary tools to effectively convey impactful educational awareness about critical topics such as the African slave trade, the history of slavery in America, and the extraordinary contributions of Africans that have enriched the tapestry of American society. Our comprehensive plan will demonstrate accountability for inclusive educational excellence.



Math: Math teachers are implementing a station rotation model, known as Math Workshop Model, to increase student engagement and allow for more opportunities for direct feedback. They are increasing their focus on using Rich Math Tasks to engage students in using math as a tool to build problem solving and reasoning skills. The focus is on moving math from the abstract to real world problem solving, making it meaningful for students of all ages.

IXL Assessment: The new IXL assessment tool is being actively utilized to practice skills and create flexible groupings in classrooms. To date, students across the District have practiced a total of 131,456 skills, showing proficiency in 86,088 skills and mastery in 70,352 skills. Teachers along with building and District administrators are reviewing data in Professional Learning



Communities (PLCs) to ensure that students are receiving necessary interventions or enrichment.



Our 1st through 5th grade students have completed their second snapshot, allowing us to review data from September until present. In looking at ELA across these grade levels, the average snapshot score in December across the District is solidly within the "on grade level" target. In looking at math across these grade levels, the average captured score across the District is within the "on grade level" target scores for December for grades 1-4, with 5th grade falling just eight points below the target. Having this level of detail allows us to target instruction where it is most needed.

While Middle and High School students have taken the beginning-of-year assessment and are receiving targeted interventions based on those scores, we are eagerly awaiting the results from the February snapshot to assess student progress. This new tool allows teachers across all grade levels to inform instruction and provide individualized intervention and enrichment.

The ECI department is preparing a how-to video and handbook for parents that will be launched at the end of this month.

Dual Enrollment Opportunities at MHS

In four years, the Montclair Academic Dual Enrollment (MADE) program held at **Montclair State University** has grown from 18 to 78 students. MHS students also participate in dual enrollment at **Essex County College (ECC)** and **Kean University**. New this year, we are hoping to form a partnership with **Bloomfield College** (satellite of Montclair State University) and additional opportunities for dual enrollment. Expanding these opportunities provides students with not only the college experience but also saves them money by earning credits while in high school.



MHS Model Congress Team Achievement

Competing at Yale University in December against students from schools across the country, the team spent four days debating and arguing for the passage of mock legislation they created. We are so proud of our students and their advisor William Wingren.

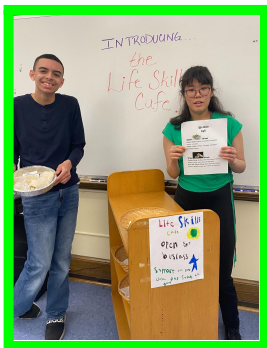
Multilingual Learners (MLs)

Both Dr. Vicky Chang and consultant Yasmin Hernandez have been working with registration to support our incoming multilingual students. We continue to make materials accessible in multiple languages and encourage families to contact the District with any questions. As mentioned above in our

Community Engagement section, we held an MLs family night in December and will be scheduling the next one in February. The District will also be partnering with Essex County vocational schools to support our MLs.

Pupil Services

The Pupil Services Office implemented a Child Study Team [referral process](#). Parents/guardians can now request evaluations with this one easy step. New executive functioning curriculum has been a focus this year which will help students learn how to plan, regulate behavior, complete tasks, use checklists, keep to a routine, and more. These skills will help them in school and out. For more news and highlights, please see the Pupil Services [newsletters](#); a new edition will be out in February.



MHS Life Skills

Student-run life skills cafe at MHS is open for business! Students are working hard to hone their entrepreneurial skills taking orders, serving salads and wraps made to order and hand-delivered to staff.

Nursing Office

We extend a warm welcome to two new school nurses, Karen DiCristina (Bradford School) and Jeanne Fredericks (Watchung School), who bring a wealth of experience and passion to our dedicated healthcare team. As they join us, we look forward to the fresh perspectives and energy they will contribute to the well-being of our students. Their commitment to fostering a healthy and safe school environment aligns seamlessly with our mission, and we are confident that their skills and compassion will make a positive impact on the health and wellness of our school community.

Simultaneously, we bid a heartfelt farewell to two beloved school nurses, Tricia Dowling (Bradford School) and Marjorie McShane (Watchung School), who have dedicated an astounding combined 40 years of service to our District. Their unwavering commitment, expertise and compassion have left an indelible mark on the countless lives they have touched throughout their tenure. Their legacy of care and dedication is deeply appreciated. We extend our sincere gratitude for their invaluable contributions to the health and welfare of our students and staff. As they embark on this new chapter, we celebrate their remarkable careers and wish them all the best in their future endeavors.



Health and Wellness

We had a successful Flu Clinic hosted by Rite Aid Pharmacy in November in which more than 80 vaccinations were provided for flu, pneumonia, RSV, and COVID-19. This is an annual service for our families and staff.

The **Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning Team** continues its dedication to fostering a trauma-informed and sensitive school community. Professional Development for staff includes training in self-care, suicide awareness, anti-bullying and more. We are committed to being mindful of how grief is processed differently and how others can be indirectly impacted by such tragedies. Most recently, the entire MHS faculty participated in an **Imagine** workshop and our school counselors/SACs completed the beginning phase of the grief and loss training. In the fall, a Parent Academy workshop was held for families to help identify and address challenging emotions. The next workshop, which will focus on grief and loss, will be on Jan. 9, 7-8 pm in the MHS LGI room. For more information and updates, please visit the [Mental Health Resources and Supports page](#) which also includes the SEL quarterly newsletters.

Next Projects of the Referendum

Building safe places for our students to learn, play and develop is one of our top priorities. We are also prioritizing our construction work, so it does not disrupt our students' learning environments. Our next projects include playgrounds at Bradford, Edgemont, Hillside, Northeast and Nishuane; new roofs at DLC/MCPK, Hillside, Glenfield, and Central Office; and the Hillside soccer field. During spring and summer breaks, we will be installing new exterior staircases at the DLC/MCPK and Edgemont. Periodically Legacy, our Project Management firm, and PSA our architectural firm, present at Board meetings with timelines and updates. Please refer to our [Bond Referendum webpage](#) for details.

Montclair Scholarship Fund

Once again the Montclair Scholarship Fund is seeking donations for need-based scholarships to help our students with college and/or trade school expenses. Your contributions really do make a difference. See the [flyer](#) with details.

I would like to share a personal reflection on my instructional walks in our schools. As you know, I believe the real work, the work that will move the needle on student achievement, begins with our teaching staff and their Principals, and it is the District's responsibility to provide the support and training needed to always improve our practices. I am seeing engaged students, learning centers, questioning techniques, teachers encouraging students to talk through their thinking, Principals that are learning about programs with their teachers and providing in-class support structure, interventions thoughtfully scheduled, and a comfort level with students, teachers and principals indicating the shared commitment to teaching and learning. These classroom visits are some of the best parts of my days. Your children are amazing!



I look forward to seeing you throughout the coming months!

Dr. Jonathan Ponds