December 21, 2022

Dear Families/Caregivers and Staff,

As we celebrate the holidays and new year with our families and loved ones, I am happy to report that the sense of optimism I shared at the start of school in my September message is spreading across the District this year. Whether your child is a three-year-old just starting out in one of our new, full-day Pre-K classrooms or a high school senior planning to pursue higher education or career credentials, our ability to provide them with a rich learning experience has never been greater. Teachers, administrators and support staff stand ready to support all students as they develop interests, talents and skills for their future, and we are forming many new partnerships to improve and add resources for them.

Allow me to share some upcoming highlights, a brief introduction about these new partnerships and how our existing partnerships are expanding.

Next Phase Begins -- Community Investment/Bond Referendum
The next phase of the community investment/bond referendum has begun which includes selecting a construction management firm to oversee logistics, procurement, scheduling, and proper completion of bond projects to ensure that repairs are completed in a timely and cost-effective manner and with minimal disruption to students and staff. The Board approved an advisory committee of professionals with expertise, to be supervised by me, who will follow our policy for advisory committees. We will also establish a volunteer community committee to help us keep the public informed of the administration of projects and provide feedback to us along the way.

We are immensely appreciative and grateful to our Business Office, Executive Communications Director David Cantor and tireless efforts of PTAC volunteers, under the direction of PTAC President Tessie Thomas, for their work on the District’s historic $188 million plan to repair Montclair’s beautiful but very old buildings.

Universal Pre-K Coming Into Sight
In the beginning of this school year, more than 200 parents and caregivers applied through a randomized lottery for 59 seats in six new, fully-certified and inclusive classrooms that — thanks to Special Education Supervisor Jennifer Finnerty, who stepped in to lead the effort — we were able to open in early October, less than a month after we’d been awarded new state funding.
We are already deep in planning for the 2023-24 school year, when the District will work with community providers to open six more classrooms. As part of the state grant, we are assembling a community advisory council to oversee implementation; we’re also taking steps to ensure that next year’s larger student selection process continues to yield an economically and ethnically diverse population. It is exciting to see this develop as more and more of our youngest learners get to experience high-quality Pre-K.

**New Partnerships**

**Essex County College**
At its December 12 meeting the Montclair Board of Education approved a Memorandum of Understanding with Essex County College to provide a dual enrollment program for our high school students to take courses earning college credit and in some cases graduating with Associate’s Degrees together with their high school diplomas. Thanks to the efforts of Principal Jeff Freeman and his team, beginning in school year 2023-24, we can offer our students opportunities to save money and finish college early.

**Essex County Schools of Technology**
Through a new partnership with Essex County Schools of Technology, Principal Freeman and his team are designing a program for students to participate in shared-time learning at the West Caldwell Campus in the morning and then spend afternoons completing core courses at MHS. Programming at the Essex County Technology campus will consist of automotive, construction, cosmetology, culinary, and other courses. A family night is planned for January 17 to learn more about what is available. The high school will be sending out information after the new year.

**Hackensack Meridian Mountainside Medical Center (Mountainside)**
*Medical Services Provided After School for Montclair Residents*
Thanks to a new partnership the District formed earlier this month with Mountainside, free medical services for Montclair residents at Hillside and Glenfield schools will begin later this winter.

The new collaboration will allow residents across town to receive free health screenings, referrals, and vaccines administered by medical professionals during after school and early evening hours. Mountainside will also offer a lecture series on common health problems like diabetes and hypertension. Interim Pupil Services Director David Goldblatt is leading the effort. Stay tuned for details.

**Kean University**
Kean University will be providing professional development for principals including instructional leadership. We are excited about our building leaders having this opportunity. We understand it is the District’s responsibility to provide professional development, and this new partnership will expand our resources to provide more tools to assist them. Through our joint efforts with Kean University, we support our principals in this critical journey serving our students, staff and families.

**Expanding Partnerships**

**Montclair State University (MSU)**
Our newest partnership with MSU is the **Weston Health Internship Program** (WHIP), which allows students to shadow doctors and hospital administrators at Hackensack Meridian Mountainside Medical Center during three weeks in the summer and learn first-hand about professional opportunities in health care. We are also expanding the **Montclair Academic Dual Enrollment** (MADE) program. MADE
gives high school seniors the opportunity to take a minimum of 12 college credits (two classes in the fall and two in the spring) in STEM courses. Additionally, MSU is home to the Weston Science Scholars program, whereby students spend five weeks in the summer conducting hands-on research with scientists in the fields of marine biology, biochemistry, physics, computer science and more.

Teachers, as well as students, benefit from our relationship with MSU because they have the opportunity to become clinical faculty members and can use MSU resources, including on-campus libraries, professional development programming and attend academic conferences. Our teachers also work with MSU student-teachers and this ultimately gives the District a diverse pool for hiring future teachers.

Restorative Justice (RJ)
We are happy to report that RJ is in its fourth year. After initially piloting the program in four schools (Edgemont, Glenfield, Renaissance, and MHS), we expanded this year to include three more (Bradford, Bullock, and Buzz). With the expansion we now have Teachers on Special Assignment in all seven RJ schools. Nearly all administrators have been circle-trained and plans are in the making to train all. Through community engagement efforts, many have come to understand the foundational principles of RJ and are working together to communicate its spirit, strengths and opportunities for changing the school culture and climate. When we create inclusive spaces where all children are seen and heard, it has an impact on our suspension rates and students’ social-emotional well-being.

Culturally Responsive Training
In partnership with the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC) we are now working with our principals on cultural responsiveness. As our goal is to become a culturally responsive District, we want to give strategies to our building leaders to do so. Culturally responsive training will continue for Central Office, Buildings and Grounds and school personnel.

Highlights
A New Special Education Handbook for Parents
In partnership with the Special Education Parents Advisory Council, the District is in the final stages of production on a landmark parent/caregiver handbook. For the first time Montclair parents seeking services for their child will have an explanation of their rights and a detailed guide for navigating every step of the process. And for all things Special Education, don’t forget to check out the Pupil Services quarterly newsletters.

Deepening Literacy Instruction
The District has arranged for nationally renowned dyslexia expert Judy Shapiro to lead three training sessions during the spring (February 23, March 23, and April 27) for teachers who use the phonics-focused, research-backed Orton-Gillingham reading framework to build student literacy.

Social Emotional Developments
The long-term trauma arising from COVID has spotlighted the need to build healthy and healing school environments; traumatized students who aren’t thoughtfully supported have a difficult time learning. This fall the District began partnering with community service providers like IMAGINE, a center that works with grieving students and their families, and Quantum Psychotherapy, which will help us to build trauma-informed school cultures across the districts.
Thanks to the efforts of the Pupil Services office and new Mental Health Coordinator Maggie Dock, Montclair was recently selected for participation in the state’s 2023-24 *DREAMS Program*, which also helps students and educators manage trauma, anxiety, and stress.

References and resources can be found on our [Mental Health Resources & Supports](#) page to assist families when their needs extend beyond the school day.

**Every Student Continues to Get A Chromebook; Enhanced Cybersecurity**
The District’s 1:1 program continues into its second year, with a Chromebook provided to every Montclair student. The Technology Department has also provided Wi-Fi service to any family that needs it. For more recent accomplishments, including improvements in cybersecurity that have led to a 15 percent decrease in phishing attempts and compromised accounts, see this [recent presentation to the School Board](#), which was covered at length in [the Montclair Local](#).

**Family Engagement for English Language Learners (ELL)**
An [evening workshop](#) for ELL families was held December 13 and attended by more than 40 families. Spanish tutorial videos for navigating Genesis were presented and interpreter and counseling assistance were available. Supervisor of English as a Second Language (ESL) and World Language Vicky Chang shared ways for ELL families to connect with schools and introduced ways for parents to be supportive. The District will continue to provide more family engagement activities as we welcome our ELL families. On the horizon for school year 2023-24 is an *adult education program* through the partnership with Essex County College, that will include both ESL and workforce classes for our ELL families but also will be open to our entire school community.

*I am incredibly grateful and privileged to work in a community of families, caregivers, teachers, and staff whose commitment to the success of Montclair’s students — whatever their circumstances and need for support — is too great to measure.*

*My warmest wishes for the holiday season and may everyone enjoy a safe, relaxing and joyful winter break. See you in 2023!*

Sincerely,
Dr. Jonathan Ponds
Superintendent

*All Kids Can Learn ~ All Kids Are Special*