Dear Families, Caregivers and Staff:

Thank you, Principals and staff, PTAs, SATps, community partners, parents/caregivers, and the Board of Education for bringing your energy and enthusiasm to a year of high expectations and successful outcomes. Teachers and administrators rolled up their sleeves and brought their best work to the table. With this end-of-the-year letter, I am delighted to recap some accomplishments and mention a few new initiatives on the horizon.

Accomplishments School Year 2023-24

- Organized community-wide collaboration to create a Five-Year Strategic Plan. The goals and action plan for achieving those goals will be presented at the August Board Retreat. This is an exciting time for all when our actions will be intentionally targeted at raising achievement which includes staff success, enhancing community engagement and communication, creating an equitable, safe and healthy learning environment, and improving operations and systems.

- The first 20 projects of the $188 million bond referendum came in at approximately $3.7 million under budget. Sixteen projects are slated for substantial completion by the end of August which is on time with the schedule.

- Entered into a Project Labor Agreement ensuring that bond referendum projects over $5 million are awarded to union contractors and set-aside awards go to minority women and small businesses.

- Free, Universal PreK expanded. Our Mini-Mounties grew from six classes at inception to 19 and growing.
● The Board approved a fiscally sound budget that supported NO STAFF CUTS for budgetary reasons, kept the tax levy at the 2% cap allowed by law, and supported programming and additional tutoring opportunities within a vibrant magnet system.

● With the expansion of dual enrollment and certification courses at MHS, multiple pathways for success after high school were created. Partnerships grew with Essex County College, Montclair State University and Kean University all offering for-credit courses. Manufacturing certification opportunities through New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program and a carpentry apprenticeship course are among the choices for high school students.

● A Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee was created. The District is focused on providing additional support for students and families with tutoring and English classes for adults taught by certified instructors from Essex County College and District staff.

● We reinvigorated the District Leadership Team (DLT) which began in 2022 in partnership with the Rutgers Labor Management Collaborative. In 2023-24 the DLT tackled district projects, and when more voices were needed, the School Leadership Teams (SLTs) were formed. The DLT and SLTs seek innovative ways to attain common goals such as improving student attendance and revising policy. This collaboration with labor and management is ongoing.

● Principals attended a leadership symposium from Kean University with meetings throughout the year held at the District. They also participated in one-on-one trainings at their schools. This will be an ongoing initiative in 2024-25.

● We identified a curriculum-based assessment tool for K-12 to provide timely feedback on student progress, additional skills practice, and targeted supports. A comprehensive and consistent Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) was developed for use with the data-driven assessment tool. MTSS is being used for ELA and Math. Critical to the math progression were vertical alignment meetings held in May for Grades 5/6 and 8/9 where teachers shared valuable insights to help inform pacing and instructional strategies.

● Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were formed composed of Principals and key staff members who work on school-based concerns to develop best practices and share ideas among schools.
Three schools have been designated as **No Place for Hate** by the Anti-Defamation League: Buzz Aldrin and Glenfield Middle Schools and MHS. This designation attests to their building learning communities that focus on equity, inclusion and respect.

**Restorative Justice (RJ)** onboarded Hillside Elementary School as its newest pilot bringing the total to eight schools fully implementing these processes. RJ is enriching our school culture by vowing to use empathy, respect and community in fostering a compassionate and inclusive educational environment. RJ teachers on special assignment are building on last year’s experience, demonstrating a full understanding of the circle process, establishing RJ peer leader groups and continuing professional development and bringing RJ strategies to PLC meetings. In November the first family night was held for parents to experience circle sessions and focus on positive feedback and gratitude. A self-care toolkit workshop in April at MHS dealt with ways to manage worry, anxiety, and stress. Our District’s RJ initiative was recognized by the National Education Association as a model for promoting safe, just and equitable schools.

**On the Horizon for Summer and Fall**

The District is happy to announce the adoption of **new ELA instructional materials programming** for the 2024-2025 school year. This month, the BOE approved **Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts Program (CKLA)** to be used in kindergarten through fifth grade. This is the first time in decades that the District will have a unified, comprehensive and coordinated program throughout all of its elementary schools. **Amplify CKLA** is an early literacy program rooted in the **Science of Reading**. It merges knowledge-building with evidence-based foundational skills empowering educators to cultivate proficient readers, writers, and critical thinkers. After providing all of our K-5 teachers of reading with professional learning in the **Science of Reading** over the past two years, teachers will now receive professional development to learn how **Amplify CKLA** instruction aligns with the **Science of Reading**, how to navigate the **Amplify CKLA** curriculum, and how to use program materials to prepare for effective implementation. This coordinated effort will boost the effectiveness of reading instruction.

The District has entered into a **five-year contract with IXL**. You may recall we have been piloting this curriculum-based assessment tool this year. Results have been promising in that we have seen student growth, and are excited about using this tool throughout K-12 in the next five years. A detailed letter from the Equity, Curriculum and Instruction Department is being sent sharing how this resource can be used during the summer to accelerate student learning.
An Advanced Placement (AP) cohort initiative is launching this summer. The District is working to attract and retain more students of color in AP courses at MHS. Interested students can attend AP Bootcamp in the summer facilitated by AP teachers who will mentor those enrolled in handling coursework and overcoming social and emotional obstacles. IMANI is also collaborating with the District in this effort to provide personalized attention and support throughout the school year.

The District has entered a partnership with New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program (NJMEP) to provide training for adults in the community who may be interested in the manufacturing and supply chain/logistics industries. NJMEP for adults in the community begins this fall and more information for how to apply will be forthcoming.

Farms in Schools - Healthy eating starts with healthy growing. The District is partnering with Inspired Growing in four schools -- Buzz, Renaissance, Edgemont, and Nishuane. Mini farms that are eco-friendly will be set up in these schools and students will learn the cultivation and planting process, harvesting, and the science behind these farms. They will get to consume healthy produce at lunch time and share it with their families. We will also offer classes for high school students connected to STEM and the science behind farming, providing them with internship opportunities in this industry.

Partnerships with Kean University:

- **Project Adelante** launches this summer. The District is partnering with Kean University to offer Latino students in grades 6-12 a pre-college program. Students will be provided the necessary tools and support to obtain a high school diploma as well as being introduced to a variety of career choices. The program offers English as a Second Language (ESL), Math, History, Research & Technology, Biology, College Preparation and FREE, Virtual ESL classes for families of students enrolled in Project Adelante. It begins July 8 and will continue throughout the school year 2024-25. For more information please contact, Yasmin E. Hernández, Supervisor of ESL & World Languages, at (973) 509-4020 Ext: 50506.

- **Scholarships for multilingual learners are available.** The District will be seeking scholarship opportunities for students to enroll in Kean University. They offer not only financial support but provide ongoing support throughout the college experience. We are encouraged by Kean’s targeted and structured support to ensure that students who enroll in college, stay in college and earn their degrees.
○ **Discounted Doctoral Program and Degree Advancement** for MPS employees will be available for administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other staff wishing to advance their degrees provided that we have enough employees interested in the program. For more information, please email Secondary Education Director Damen Cooper at dcooper@montclair.k12.nj.us.

● The District is embarking on a **pilot initiative with Yondr**, a program that offers schools a practical solution for dealing with cell phone use during class time. District leadership along with building leadership and staff have reviewed research and are working on ways to implement this pilot. Yondr has developed a product that allows students to be phone free during classes, and we will pilot it at Buzz, Glenfield, Renaissance, and MHS. Our Board policy committee will also be evaluating our cell phone policies districtwide (K-12).

# # #

*Together we have navigated challenges, celebrated successes, and continued our commitment to excellence in education. As we head into the summer, I wish everyone a safe, restful, and enjoyable break. Let's return refreshed and ready to embark on another year of growth and learning.*

Sincerely,
Jonathan Ponds
Superintendent