



Superintendent's Update - January 2008 HAPPY NEW YEAR !

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ALUMNI VISITS

During the first week of January, when college students are home on semester break, it is the tradition in both our high schools to invite our alumni back for panel discussions with our current seniors. There is no better evaluation of our district's programs than to hear from our recent graduates about how well prepared they were for their college experience.

Listening to the panel of alumni, the most critical need they identified was an ability to write well. In Freshman year they are inundated with thesis papers, so their ability to write quickly and competently is the key to getting good grades. The next vital need they identified is the ability to read large quantities of material and, in essence, to skim and scan for the information to support their theses. When I asked one of the panelists if anyone could sum up the one thing we could have taught better in the district, the answer was: "how to study."

A recurrent theme of these alumni visits is the "culture shock" that our students experience when they leave the "sameness" of Middletown. Their limited experience in encountering people from different cultures is a real obstacle for them to overcome. It is fascinating to listen to their acknowledgment of the "Middletown Bubble" in which they've grown up where everyone looks and acts pretty much the same. Their observations are a clear indication that the district needs to take some steps toward creating opportunities for our students to interact with students from other cultures. Foreign exchange programs are one way of filling this gap.

Another recurrent theme is their need to learn tolerance and how to just get along with people. I heard some great stories about the problems encountered with difficult roommates, though of course some of the students found that their roommate or other dorm mate quickly became their best friends. Clearly the issue of "fitting in" and all that goes along with it has much to do with the success and happiness of our students in the college experience. A strong message from our alumni to our current students was to get involved in as many extra curricular activities as possible. "Develop your interests and repertoire of skills while you have the opportunity in high school, because you will have a better chance of getting connected in college life," they said.

Look for the segment on "Alumni Visits" in next month's edition of "*Your Town, Your Schools.*" You can see the show either on Comcast Municipal Channel 20 or you can view the segment directly on the district website by following the links to the TV Production Studio.

February 5th — In-Service Day for Teachers

On Tuesday, February 5th, the Middletown Schools will be closed for another full day in-service training, which will continue to move our educational initiatives forward. Most of the workshops will be a continuation of the ones held on October 22nd. Feedback from the teachers was analyzed and the additional needs identified are being incorporated into the workshops planned for each grade level and subject area. Mrs. Marjorie Caruso, our Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, and the Curriculum Administrators take special care to insure that each workshop is specially designed to meet our teachers' immediate needs that translate into improved instruction in our classrooms.

In the elementary schools, all teachers will continue their training on The Writing Workshop, a comprehensive approach to teaching process writing. In the afternoon, the District is pleased to have the support of the N.J. Department of Education to train our elementary teachers in a model of curriculum delivery that will improve the learning of all children through connecting the content areas of Language Arts and Social Studies, and will allow better inclusion of students who struggle with learning into the general education classrooms.

Our Fine and Performing Arts teachers will be treated to another full day of training at the Middletown Arts Center, with workshops led by professionals who work with the Monmouth County Arts High School Program. Many other exciting workshops will be provided for our teachers on that day.

School Funding Formula

Governor Corzine's School Funding Formula begins on the right foot with an increase of \$550 million dollars in state aid to New Jersey's schools. Unfortunately for Middletown, the formula determines the amount of special education aid a district receives based on the state's average classification rate, which is 14.69%, and not by counting the number of students a district has in the special education system. Middletown's classification rate is well above the state average, over 18%, so additional costs to educate students with disabilities will have to come out of our local budget.

Suburban districts like Middletown, Brick and Toms River, that are large enough to support their own programs for students with significant disabilities, have attracted these children's families because appropriate programs and services are available within the district. When the special education aid formula was based on counting the number of students with disabilities and then looking deeper at the intensive services being provided to support their learning, districts like Middletown were able to get the appropriate state aid in order to support those intensive services. The proposed formula that mitigates the amount of aid based on the district's wealth, does not take into account the expense to educate students with significant disabilities.

Another anomaly for Middletown and other similar districts has been the reliance on special education services to provide support for mild learning problems, particularly for those students who are struggling to learn how to read. Students who could not successfully learn how to read by the time they reached the end of second grade were referred for special education services and identified as having a "specific learning disability." That practice of using special education services to remediate reading problems was, and still is, allowable under special education regulations. However, it is the most costly way for students who struggle with reading to get services, thus placing the Middletown district in its' current dilemma of providing a service that will no longer be funded under the new formula.

Since I began working in the district as Director of Pupil Services in March of 2002, I have been working to unravel the complex process of utilizing the special education system to help students who have not learned to read through the general reading curriculum offered by the district. The process will require a coordination of efforts among teachers, specialists, administrators, and especially parents. All must work together to help make significant changes in our methods of instruction in general and in our methods of providing intervention specifically.

The high cost of using the special education system to educate students who do not learn to read at the same pace and in the same way as the majority of students has to do with the identification process. The evaluation by three qualified professionals, the Child Study Team, to assess the student's intellectual ability and then compare that to the student's level of academic achievement, along with assessing the students' concomitant social and emotional issues, seems like a thorough and important diagnostic process. However, this identification process is not only too slow and too costly, but it also puts the onus of responsibility on the student for not learning how to read like everyone else. Research tells us that not all children learn how to read in the same way.

The National Reading Panel has determined that there are at least five approaches to teaching reading. These approaches should be used in general instruction before determining that there is a learning problem. The research is clear that students who are educated in separate settings, such as pull-out resource rooms, tend to fall further behind academically. Parents and educators need to know that there is another way that is far less costly and far less risky to service students who are struggling readers.

The Middletown district has embarked upon the road to change our practice so that students who are struggling readers can be educated within the general education classroom, where different approaches to teach reading are utilized. Additional trained staff co-teach in the classroom to provide supports and services within a tiered instructional model. With in-class services, students do not have to be identified and the risk of harm due to poor self concept is mitigated. Our teachers are learning to use formative assessments like the DRA to identify students' reading level at very early stages in kindergarten, first and second grades, and we are providing those students with the appropriate level of reading material using the correct methodology that meets that students needs. We are differentiating instruction, understanding that "one size fits all" approaches do not work and the costly practice of dependence on the special education system must decrease so that only those students with significant disabilities will utilize that very important, but costly, system.

Fundraiser for HSN Student

On October 6th Lindsay Capatasto, HSN student, was a victim of a horrible car accident that tragically took the life of her friend, Dana Centanni. Since the day of the accident Lindsay had been recovering at a rehabilitation center facility. Even though she is home, she still has a long road ahead of her. As you can imagine, the cost for the treatment that Lindsay is receiving is exorbitant. A fundraising dinner and auction to help the Capatasto Family is being held.

*Location: St. Mary's Gym, New Monmouth
Date: March 14th, 2008 7:30 p.m. – 11:30 p.m.
Dinner Buffet & DJ \$50/person*

For more information on how to purchase tickets, please contact Mary Cook @ 732-671-5158 or Marianne Ruane @732-671-7580