

Calendar of Events:

April 2008

- April 11 End of 3rd Marking Period
- April 15 Annual School Election
- April 16 Jazz Festival
- April 18 Report Cards Being Mailed
- April 21 School Closed - Teacher In-Service
- April 22 Board of Education Meeting
- April 24 Drama Production
- April 28- May 1 NJ Ask 7 & 8



May 2008

- May 5-8 NJ Ask 5 & 6
- May 9 Father-Daughter Dance (Grs. 3 & 4)
- May 15 Spring Concert
- May 23 Early Dismissal; LDW Field Day
- May 26 School Closed - Memorial Day
- May 27 Board of Education Meeting

Any Questions/Concerns?

Contact the Following:

- Classroom:** Your child's teacher
- LDW (general):** Sandra A. Kacedon, Principal: 996-6812
- AMS (general):** David E. Pawlowski, Principal: 996-6811
- District:** Dr. Matthew J. Jennings, Superintendent: 996-6811
- Special Education:**
Jennifer Bills, Spvr, Special Ed. Srvc: 996-6811
- Counseling Services:**
Beverly Stoskus, Counselor: 996-6811 or 996-6812
- Transportation/Buildings and Grounds/Facility Use:**
Barbara E. Prowker, School Business Adm.: 996-6811



DON'T FORGET TO VOTE!

April 15, 2008 - Alexandria Middle School Old Gymnasium 7am - 9pm
Absentee ballots can be obtained on Alexandria Township's website:
www.alexandria.k12.nj.us

- BOARD OF EDUCATION**
- Susan F. Luthringer - President
 - Francis L. Guenther - Vice President
 - Thomas W. Hlasney
 - Bernice M. Keizer
 - Diane Y. Kelly
 - Douglas E. Linden, Jr.
 - Patrick D. McGuinness
 - Susan E. Metz
 - Scott A. Sacca
 - Barbara E. Prowker - School Business Administrator / Board Secretary
- SUPERVISOR OF STUDENT SERVICES - Jennifer S. Bills**
- PRINCIPAL - LDW - Sandra A. Kacedon**
- PRINCIPAL - AMS - David E. Pawlowski**
- SUPERINTENDENT - Dr. Matthew J. Jennings**

Office of the Superintendent
Alexandria Township School District
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Pittstown, NJ 08867

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A Board of Education Newsletter

Alexandria Township School District

OUR SCHOOLS

A Tradition of Excellence

Volume 17, No. 3

Spring 2008

Superintendent's Report to the School and Community

It is hard to believe that we are approximately two-thirds of the way through the school year. Significant progress continues to occur within the school district. More specifically, the staff has diligently continued to work towards completing the action plans related to our district's strategic plan.

With regards to the goal of having research-based, guaranteed, viable, curriculum documents for each New Jersey Core Content Standard, the Curriculum Committees are preparing to submit their philosophy statements. These philosophy statements are one to three page descriptions of the vision we are striving towards in the respective curriculum areas. To generate these statements, committee members have attended conferences, read research and other professional literature, visited other schools and engaged in dialogue with leaders in the respective fields. The philosophy statements will be reviewed by a district curriculum council consisting of six teachers and four administrators. This council will use a set of standards to decide whether to accept the statements or return them for additional revisions. Ultimately, this work will serve to guide the rewriting of every curriculum guide during the 2008-2009 school year.

Our second goal is to have teachers and administrators consistently and effectively use a research-based, flexible, common instructional model. Teachers are meeting to develop instructional plans that apply the Principles of Learning model. The administration has continued to provide feedback to teachers on their use of the model by engaging in brief, but frequent "walk-through" observations, as well as the traditional classroom observations and evaluations.

Using a research-based pre-referral intervention process (our third goal) is proving to be very exciting. A committee of teachers, educational specialists, and administrators has developed a plan for revising the district's programs. Training for the implementation of these changes will occur this summer.

Goal number four is to effectively utilize research-based methods for team teaching in in-class support programs. The administration and child study team have analyzed our needs in this area and have developed a plan that we will implement this fall. The necessary staff training has been identified and planned for so that in September we will begin to see significant progress in the district's in-class support programs.

To meet our goal of having a cohesive, effective district leadership team, we continue to meet on a regular basis. As a leadership team, we attended a presentation by the Mid Continent Research in Education Group. The topic of this program was Successfully Leading School Change. We are attempting to implement many of the ideas presented during this workshop session. Admittedly, in some cases, it has not been easy to implement change. It is a growing process that everyone experiences differently.

Perhaps the achievement I am most proud of relates to district goal number six. Our district committee has finalized a new district Crisis Plan. This plan has been approved by the Board of Education. We also have trained the school based team in each building so that they may effectively fulfill their responsibilities in the event of a crisis. These building based teams are currently planning to provide all staff training as a part of our next district in-service day. In addition, our district team is working with the County Prosecutor's Office to assess our safety and security vulnerabilities.

With regards to the seventh goal of having a series of self-contained special education programs for multiply disabled students within the school district, once again significant progress has been made. I, along with our Supervisor of Special Services, have visited each of the out-of-district placements. Based on these visits, we are currently engaged in dialogue with the respective parents about possibilities for educating their children.

Continued on page 2

Goal number eight, is to implement a reading intervention model (K-3) capable of preventing, identifying and remediating students' "at-risk" for reading failure. The appropriate staff has been trained in the use of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills. We are currently engaged in the process of establishing the procedures and communication tools that will be used to implement this model in the fall.

Lastly, a committee has been formed and is currently meeting to address the ninth district goal of employing new methods for instructional observation and evaluation. A special effort is being made to keep this process open and transparent. Issues related to the evaluation of performance are often difficult. However, the members of this committee have demonstrated a sincere interest in pushing past their discomfort to create a model that will serve to improve the teaching and learning process.

In addition to our work towards the nine district goals, we have accomplished several more important tasks. We have launched our new website and are trying to find ways to use it as a vehicle for increasing the quantity and quality of communication between the schools and the community. We are preparing to launch an automated substitute teacher calling service. Over time, this service will save the district money because it will reduce our need to hire personnel to complete this task. The Alexandria Township Education Association and the Board of Education have signed a memorandum of agreement on a new contract. The Board of Education and administration are currently reviewing all of our policies and job descriptions to ensure they are up to date with state and federal regulations. Lastly, I have initiated a series of meetings called "Coffee with the Superintendent" designed to provide an open forum for the sharing of thoughts.

It is amazing to see what can be done when a group of committed, dedicated staff members work towards a common set of meaningful goals. As we continue moving forward with our process of continuous improvement, many challenges continue to exist. Yet, I remain confident and optimistic that we will continue overcoming these challenges to provide the type of education the students of the Alexandria Township Public Schools deserve.

Sincerely,

Dr. Matthew J. Jennings

Matthew J. Jennings, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
Alexandria Township

The Annual School Budget

On April 15, 2008, the taxpayers will be asked to vote on the annual school budget. I am very proud of the efforts made by the staff and administration to present the community with a budget that is fiscally responsible. Often times, members of the public do not understand the steps involved in the creation of a school budget. Please allow me to explain.

This year, we started the budget from zero dollars. First, every member of the staff was asked to identify what they needed in order to run their part of the instructional program. These requests were given to their immediate supervisor in early November. Second, the supervisor reviewed the requests and made revisions. Once revised, the building or program budget was sent to the Central Office by early December. At this point, the principal or program manager met with the appropriate Central Office staff. Additional revisions to the budget were made. Last, in January, the Central Office staff presented the budget to the Board of Education Finance Committee. As a result of this presentation, once again additional revisions to the budget were made. By the time this budget reaches the public, it will have been officially reviewed and revised three times.

As a result, we are presenting the community with a budget that seeks less than the amount the state allows us to request. This budget represents a 3.7% increase on the tax levy. This tax levy increase translates to an additional \$51 per \$300,000 of assessed home value. We have done this despite the fact that mandated costs like insurance, energy, special education, and transportation have risen by double digit increases.

As a school district, we are sensitive to the current economic climate. It is for this reason, we are asking only for that which we deem necessary for providing the township's students with a quality education.

The polls at Alexandria Middle School will be open from 7 A.M. to 9 P.M. If you need an absentee ballot, they are available in the front office of each school and through a link on our district website. Please remember to vote on April 15th. If we can answer any question you have related to the budget, please do not hesitate to call the Central Office and ask for either the Superintendent or the School Business Administrator.

Spotlight on Research

We are approaching the time of year during which our students will participate in standardized testing. These high-stakes tests are frequently used to measure the level of success achieved by students and a school system. In fact, schools that do not meet expected levels of performance receive serious sanctions. What does research say about standardized testing?

Fact 1. *Our children are tested to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world.* While previous generations of American students have had to sit through tests, never have the tests been given so frequently and never have they played such a prominent role in schooling. The current situation is also unusual from an international perspective: Few countries use standardized tests for children below high school age-or multiple-choice tests for students of any age.

Fact 2. *Non instructional factors explain most of the variance among test scores when schools or districts are compared.* A study of math results on the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that the combination of four such variables (number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community, and poverty rate) accounted for a whopping 89 percent of the differences in state scores. To the best of my knowledge, all such analyses of state tests have found comparable results, with the numbers varying only slightly as a function of which socioeconomic variables were considered.

Fact 3. *Standardized-test scores often measure superficial thinking.* In a study published in the Journal of Educational Psychology, elementary school students were classified as "actively" engaged in learning if they asked questions of themselves while they read and tried to connect what they were doing to past learning; and as "superficially" engaged if they just copied down answers, guessed a lot, and skipped the hard parts. It turned out that high scores on both the CTBS and the MAT were more likely to be found among students who exhibited the superficial approach to learning. Similar findings have emerged from studies of middle school students (also using the CTBS) and high school students (using the other SAT, the college-admission exam). To be sure, there are plenty of students who think deeply and score well on tests-and plenty of students who do neither. But, as a rule, it appears that standardized-test results are positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning.

Fact 4. *Virtually all relevant experts and organizations condemn the practice of basing important decisions, such as graduation or promotion, on the results of a single test.* The National Research Council takes this position, as do most other professional groups (such as the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association), the generally pro-testing American Federation of Teachers, and even the companies that manufacture and sell the exams. Yet just such high-stakes testing is currently taking place, or scheduled to be introduced soon, in more than half the states.

Fact 5. *The time, energy, and money that are being devoted to preparing students for standardized tests have to come from somewhere.* Schools across the country are cutting back or even eliminating programs in the arts, recess for young children, electives for high schoolers, class meetings (and other activities intended to promote social and moral learning), discussions about current events (since that material will not appear on the test), the use of literature in the early grades (if the tests are focused narrowly on decoding skills), and entire subject areas such as science (if the tests cover only language arts and math). Anyone who doubts the scope and significance of what is being sacrificed in the desperate quest to raise scores has not been inside a school lately.

In Alexandria Township, we are striving to take a balanced approach to the assessment of learning. We believe that standardized testing has its place as one form of assessing student progress. We also believe that good teacher observation, documentation of student work, and performance based assessments provide us with useful information to guide our instruction and assess our progress. While standardized tests provide us with comparative information, they are no substitute for an assessment literate teacher who constructs and evaluates student effort on real learning tasks.