



The Bluehawk Courier

HUDSON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT • WWW.HUDSONCITYSCHOOLDISTRICT.COM

Two years ago the New York Times reported troubling data from the U.S. Department of Education: Nationwide, 25 percent of students arriving in 9th grade were unable to read well enough to take high school courses, let alone college preparatory classes. Here in Hudson, the vital importance of literacy education has come to the forefront throughout the school system. (See page 3.)



- Special Issue: Literacy in the Hudson Schools
- Hudson Test Scores: Pages 4-6



Dear Parents and Friends:

In this issue, we decided to give you a newsletter that will inform you about many of the literacy initiatives and programs that are currently happening in your school system. Some of these are very new, and some have been tested over time. Together, they serve as a key piece to every child's success in school. We believe that reading skills, writing skills, listening skills and speaking skills serve as the most important fundamental aspect to a child's ability to learn. In essence, reading is the foundation to all that will follow in school. As you will see in this issue, we are seeing many successes. However, we recognize that we have much yet to accomplish throughout our elementary and secondary programs. Please know that the District Curriculum Steering Committee that was formed this past summer continues to review all of our curriculum from Pre-K through grade 12. Additionally, this committee is reviewing the age and quality of our textbooks, and they are spearheading training sessions for our staff for a new curriculum-mapping software product for proper correlation between curriculum and the standards.

On another note, I am sure that most of you have noticed changes to two of the schools due to construction. As of my writing this message to you, both projects at the High School and at JLE are on schedule so that students will be in those new classrooms next September. From time to time we may encounter some disruptions and some noise, but the final product of new learning facilities will be well worth it for your children and your grandchildren.

Also, there is a distinct possibility that you may get to see a few commercials on television next spring about some of the successful programs that are happening in your schools. If this happens, please know that it will be made possible by the generosity of a number of businesses that support the school system and this idea. If this happens, please know that it will be done with no taxpayer cost. It will be funded totally by business supporters, not any funds from the school budget. There will be more about this in a future issue if we are able to make this happen.

Speaking of the future, I believe everyone has heard about New York State's financial issues. Please know that this year the proposed school budget that will be brought to you in May will have been thoroughly planned, justified and scrutinized for an affordable and proper education for all children. There will be a series of budget development workshops with the entire Board of Education in the early spring to make this happen. We will be watching revenues and expenditures very closely. Our budget has been frozen since the end of November, with rare exceptions, so that we can save funds to roll into next year's proposed budget. The next issue of this newsletter will be focused on giving you

Continued on page 8



HUDSON

NEW YORK

● THE HUDSON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Our focus and commitment for our school community is to increase student achievement, improve communication for and with all stakeholders, and develop a professional learning community that supports lifelong learners.

● HUDSON HIGH SCHOOL

215 Harry Howard Avenue, Hudson, NY 12534
Steven Spicer, *Principal*
518 828-4132 ext. 3114
Guidance Department 828-4132 ext. 3190

● MONTGOMERY C. SMITH MIDDLE SCHOOL

102 Harry Howard Avenue, Hudson, NY 12534
Ryan Groat, *Principal*
518 828-4650 ext. 1112

● JOHN L. EDWARDS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

360 State Street, Hudson, NY 12534
Carol Gans, *Principal*
518 828-9493 ext. 4317

● GREENPORT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

158 Union Turnpike, Hudson, NY 12534
Thomas Baumgartner, *Principal*
518 828-4305 ext. 5100

● ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAM

158 Union Turnpike, Hudson, NY 12534
Tom Gavin, *Principal*
518 828-4305 ext. 5205

● ADMINISTRATION

David Paciencia, *Superintendent*
518 828-4360 ext. 2101
Dr. Amanda Bagnato
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction
518 828-4360 ext. 2134
Daniel P. Barrett, *Business Manager*
518 828-4360 ext. 2100
W. John Knight, *Interim Director of Human Resources*
518 828-4360 ext. 2108

● TRANSPORTATION DEPARTMENT

Nicole DeDominicis, *Transportation Coordinator*
518 828-4360 ext. 2103

● BOARD OF EDUCATION

Mary Daly, *President*
Patricia Abitabile, *Vice President*
John Mabb
Emil Meister
Peter Meyer
Jeff Otty
Peter Rost

www.hudsoncityschooldistrict.com

READING, WRITING, UNDERSTANDING: HOW HCS D IS TRYING TO STRENGTHEN ITS LITERACY EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS OF ALL AGES

In the old model of public education, learning to read is what you did in grades 1–3. But studies indicate that while the basics of reading taught in the early grades are crucial for further learning, further learning does not happen on its own. Public schools like Hudson face a major challenge: to continue effective, individualized reading instruction throughout all the grades. The Montgomery C. Smith Middle School is in the center of this effort.

Lisa Dolan is the school's literacy coach for grades 5 and 6. Her job is to work with both students and teachers. She does it in a multifaceted manner.

"With teachers I'll meet and talk about strategies. In ELA meetings we look at data from standardized tests and our own ongoing assessments. We'll see where our kids are doing well and where they're not. And then we make a plan to address it."

Throughout the school—and outside the school—Mrs. Dolan is on a mission to spread a passion for literacy. Before Thanksgiving she read to Middle School students from various books and offered them a copy of a book to take home over the break.

"If they're better readers they'll do better on tests," she said. "Although everything I do is based on research, at the heart of it is a love for literature." Mrs. Dolan pointed out that literacy involves not only reading and writing, but effective speaking and listening.

Mrs. Dolan is constantly looking for new literacy projects, especially ones that involve the community at large. This fall, a group of students went to the Firemen's Home across the street from the school and were paired with a resident there. They learned about that resident's life, took notes and eventually wrote a true story based on what they learned. Students Gregory Abreu (bottom left), Richard Dellavechia (bottom right) and Patricia



THE CHALLENGE, THE CHALLENGER Lisa Dolan, Middle School literacy coach, challenges Hudson students and community members to put more energy into literacy. Outside her work in classrooms, she runs five book groups, including an intergenerational book group at the Opera House and one for teachers in the school system. Gabrielle Mosley participated in a book discussion.

Van Valkenburgh (front cover) were three of the 16 students who participated in the project. Mrs. Dolan called the project "the best thing I've ever done in my life." ■

This issue of The Bluehawk Courier is focused on literacy education in HCS D today. It also includes a frank look at test scores (pages 4–6) with an emphasis on how the district, which currently has more than 100 non-native English-speaking students, is focusing on literacy as a key to test scores. The results are not uniform. The process is ongoing.



SOME FRANK TALK ABOUT TESTING...

Since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002, the performance of public schools on standardized tests has become a major topic of conversation. A detailed State report card for HCS D can be accessed by following the links on the website: www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/reportcard/home.shtml

The Greenport Elementary School is currently listed by the State as a “school in need of improvement” based on test scores. In the past the High School was also listed as “a school in need of improvement,” while the Middle School was listed as a school “in need of corrective action.” This year, based upon the data the district has received from the State, the administration expects that the Middle School and High School will both be classified as schools “in good standing.”

The Bluehawk Courier talked with principals and other educators about the issues surrounding test performance, efforts to improve test scores and the key role that literacy education plays in both.

Montgomery C. Smith Middle School: Communication is a Key

The Middle School was placed on the “corrective action” list because this classification indicates that it had taken more than two consecutive years for the school to improve scores. In the past two years, the school has met its targets.

Like all schools flagged by the State, the Middle School has been working with a Comprehensive Educational Plan over the past several years. The plan identifies areas of weaknesses and puts into place methods, tools and

measurements to ensure better test performance.

When a school does not meet target numbers on tests, administrators and teachers look for new and better ways of doing their job. Associate Principal Mark Brenneman said Middle School teachers have benefited from a program offered by the Center of English Learning and Achievement (CELA) from the University of Albany’s School of Education. CELA is a program that gives teachers a chance to share knowledge, get extra training, do brainstorming and learn how to implement new ideas.

The school has also benefited from the work of Lisa Dolan as literary coach (see page 3).

“Better scores show real progress,” Mr. Brenneman said. “But the bar will keep getting raised, as it should be. Even though I think there are many other ways of assessing a school, this one is important, and we have to keep meeting the challenge.”

Greenport Elementary School: “Scaffolding Upward”

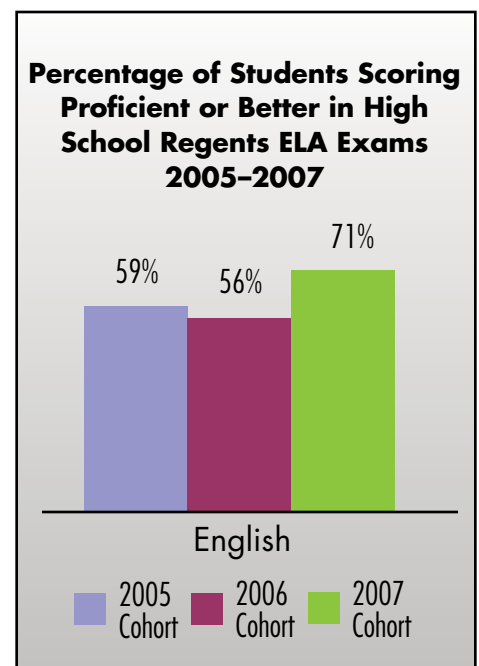
Greenport Elementary School was placed on the “in need of improvement list” last year because of inadequate test scores among students with disabilities—which can range from mild learning disorders to severe physical and emotional disabilities.

This graph shows the performance of three Hudson High School cohorts on Regents ELA exams given in the years 2005, 2006 and 2007. The cohorts are identified by the year they entered 9th grade. The graph shows that Hudson High School has made recent strides in improving ELA test scores.

Principal Tom Baumgartner described the efforts his school has undertaken to work with this group of students. “In the first month of school we sit down with every single student one-on-one and identify where they are in their reading skills. We then design a curriculum that fits their instructional level.”

An instructional level, Mr. Baumgartner said, is not the same as a reading level. “The instructional level is a half step ahead of their reading level. It gives them a goal they can reach. We call it ‘scaffolding,’ building on success and moving students up as they master each level.” In addition, following its Comprehensive Educational Plan, the school is constantly spot-checking students’ reading abilities through a series of different tests and measurements.

Mr. Baumgartner is confident that his school is making strides. He pointed with pride at the 5th grade Middle School reading scores (see chart at



right). “Those are students we had for two years.” He noted that the 3rd grade test, which is exclusively an ELA exam, is given just a few months after students enter Greenport Elementary. It is the first State test students take.

“Our teachers loop from 3rd to 4th grade. I’ve seen teachers take a whole class, including special education students, and reach proficiency on the tests. It takes time and hard work. There just aren’t any shortcuts.”

Hudson High School: “The Power of Perseverance”

Hudson High School was named a “school in need of improvement” in 2004 for testing only 94 percent of its students in math instead of the required 95 percent. In order for the State to name the High School a “school in good standing,” 95 percent of the students had to take the math Regents two years in a row.

“To ensure that all the students required to take the math Regents exam actually took the exam, our School Improvement Team enacted an action plan to deal with the situation,” Principal Steven Spicer said. “We had the guidance department make a list of all the students we had to test. We coordinated with all the teachers and the attendance office to identify any student

ABOUT THE NUMBERS...

State test scores are created through a complex and sliding formula and involve such terms as Performance Index, Adequate Yearly Progress, Annual Measurable Objective (AMO), Effective AMO and Safe Harbor Targets. Scores are broken down for various groups of students, including ethnic groups, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency, among others. A year after the tests are taken, schools are given the results and the in-house numbers-crunching begins so a school staff knows exactly how individual students performed on every aspect of every test. Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Amanda Bagnato and Middle School Associate Principal Mark Breneman are Hudson’s “go-to” test analysts and helped provide information for this article. They point out that since the introduction of No Child Left Behind, the way New York State administers and grades the tests, the order in which they are given, the target numbers and the tests themselves have changed repeatedly; statistical comparisons for more than three years in a row are not possible at this point.

not in the testing room before the exam started. We assigned teams to obtain the addresses and phone numbers of these students. We would then go out into the community and find them. Some of these students took their exams in their pajamas, but they took the exam. As a result of our strike teams we have tested well above the State’s required 95 percent rate. Last year we tested 100 percent of the students required to be tested. Our program has been a huge success and we are no longer a school ‘in need of improvement,’ but a ‘school in good standing,’” said Mr. Spicer.

Mr. Spicer said that his school’s concept of success now is rooted in the idea of facing every hurdle forthrightly and coming up with new and smart solutions. “We keep trying,” he said. “Our motto is ‘excellence through perseverance.’”

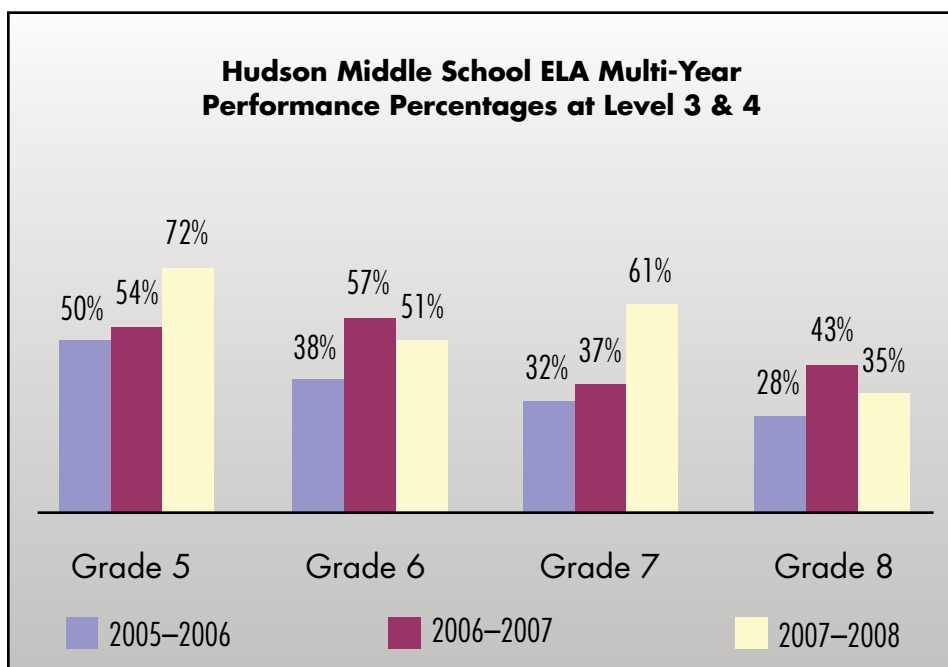
WHY DOES LITERACY MATTER TO TEST SCORES?

One thing everyone agrees on: literacy is a key to success at school and on tests.

“If a student is doing poorly on science or social studies tests, you can give him or her hours and hours of extra help,” said Middle School Principal Ryan Groat. “But if the problem is that he or she can’t read the questions well—then we haven’t been addressing the right area.”

Mr. Spicer said that for years now Hudson High School has been stressing literacy in all areas. “It’s called literacy

Continued on page 6



This is a graph of three sequential school years in grades 5–8. Scores in level 3 are considered proficient while scores in level 4 are considered above proficient. The graph shows that test scores generally trended upwards in grades 5 and 7, were slightly lower in 6th grade, and dropped dramatically in 8th grade. However, the 8th grade results were in line with 8th grade performance across New York State, a phenomenon with which State educators are grappling.

across the content areas,” he said. “That is, we want our teachers to use more reading in all disciplines, not just English. Our math teachers, for example, know to use word walls displaying mathematical concepts for the students to read and become familiar with. In meetings with math teachers, I have said that if the first time a student sees the words ‘quadratic equation’ is on the Regents exam, it is too late. In observations over the past three years I have seen a vast increase in the required reading and vocabulary work in all our high school instruction.”

How Hudson students perform on standardized tests matters—to the school, to the community and to the students themselves. Assistant Superintendent Amanda Bagnato, along with Mr. Brenneman, keeps track of the schools’ test performance and breaks that data down across categories, subject matter and other variables. Mrs.

Bagnato said that while she and the administration are committed to improving Hudson student test scores, she regrets that the scores dominate many peoples’ perception of the school.

“The scores are real,” she said. “They show something real and we need to pay attention to them and react to them. But these test scores are only one part of what makes up a school district.” Mrs. Bagnato points out that there are 110 non-native English speaking students in Hudson schools now. That number has been rising and will likely continue to go up.

“There are many success stories that don’t get noticed. With a lot of focus on high school drop-out rates, people don’t notice when a kid goes back to school and graduates late, or if a student goes for his or her GED. I welcome scrutiny of our test scores. But I hope people realize that there’s much more to education than a sample taken on a single day.” ■

LEARNING ON YOUR FEET: ANOTHER APPROACH FOR YOUNG READERS



Reading and writing is something that you do with books, papers and pencil, right? One project underway at John L. Edwards Elementary School looks at reading as something you do with your imagination, your body, your feelings, your voice. Beyond Paper and Pencils is an ongoing project that trains teachers to allow young readers to bring movement and group problem-solving into their reading classes.

“Everyone learns in different ways,” said Julie Kabat, co-director of Concerted Effort, which created the project. “While some children take to reading naturally, others struggle. And we’ve found that sometimes the ones who have difficulty with letters and words on paper find understanding—and get positive feedback—by acting out some of the ideas in a story.”

The project is multifaceted. Teachers get training at the Hudson Opera House. In school they introduce their students to a story, either one that is read aloud or one that students can read themselves. Teachers then use their movement training to explore everything from the story’s vocabulary to a character’s emotions through movement, improvisation or song. Students work together in groups to retell a story or a moment in it with body pictures, or tableau. Teachers eventually turn back to paper and pencils, completing a unique, creative loop of learning.

“The idea is to make a difference in the educational experience by unlocking a student’s innate capacity to be curious, expressive and engaged in learning,” Ms. Kabat said. Choreographer and dancer Susan Griss is co-director of the project.

Beyond Paper and Pencils is funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and grants from Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation; Rheinstrom Hill Community Foundation; NYS Healthy Heart; Stewart’s Shops; Trustco Bank; Shallo, Galluscio, Bianchi, & Fucito CPAs; Herington’s; Metzwood Harder Insurance and the John L. Edwards PTA, among others. ■

THE LITERACY CENTER—A SPRINGBOARD TO SUCCESS

A large, multi-purpose room across the hall from the offices of the John L. Edwards Elementary School is one of the wonders of the city of Hudson. The Literacy Center, is packed with books, alphabet charts and writing and reading material. It is a place where the desire to learn and improve English literacy becomes a reality, where many pre-schoolers are first exposed to storybooks, older children get help with spelling and vocabulary, and parents—through visits to their homes—learn English and other skills they need to succeed in the community.

Demand for the Center's services is high: it is currently operating at capacity with 36 participating families. At least one parent in each family has a job; frequently, parents whose families are enrolled in the Family Literacy Program hold down more than one job.

"The Hudson Family Literacy Program represents a unique partnership between Columbia Opportunities, Inc. and the Hudson City School District," said Sophia Becker, the Program's director. "It is built on the premise that learning the language will unlock doors. The parents understand that. Even if they are unable to take classes themselves, they value their children's learning and support it."

The Center serves 64 children ages two to 10, offering pre-k and after-school activities with age-appropriate English instruction. The preschool program, which runs three mornings a week, helps young children learn fundamental language and social skills. In the afternoon, older children come to the Center,

Continued on page 8

Interested in helping the Literacy Center? Community members can contact HCSO Superintendent David Paciencia at 828-4360 x 2101 or Tina Sharpe, Columbia Opportunities Executive Director at 828-4611.

ROMP The pre-school program is one part of the Literacy Center's programming. In pre-school, students up to the age of five learn colors, shapes, letters and English phonics. Students visit the John L. Edwards library and pick out their favorite books. And every once in a while, they take time out for some good old-fashioned romping. HosneAra Kader (at right) and Aliaa Saleh are two of the Center's key staff people.



Continued from page 7

where staff members help them with their school work. Twice a month, a Center staff member visits each home with programming that helps children and adults alike. During the week, staff members shuttle students to and from their homes in a fleet of aging multi-passenger vans; transportation is provided for everyone who needs it.

The Center's youth advocate, Kathy Williams, serves young people in another way. She deals with at-risk teens, including young mothers and pregnant teens, offering support services, coaching, even arranging child care. Teenagers, male and female, come to her via word-of-mouth and referrals from school and social workers. The Center is a place that helps them restart lives that may have gone off track.

"A lot of these kids have been told that they're not going to make it," Ms. Williams said. "We'd like to keep them in school, and in some cases we help them get back into regular school or a Questar program. But for a lot of teens, that's not realistic. We arrange tutoring, find employment. We can help them get into a GED program or just find the support that is out there." One young woman working with Ms. Williams plans to enter college in the fall.

Sophia Becker knows that what happens at the Center makes a difference. In ten years she has seen non-native English-speaking families send their children to college and become homeowners. Mrs. Becker has also seen many women, some from cultures where they are allowed few responsibilities, use the Center as a resource not only for learning English, but also mastering banking, driving and home ownership.

We've been through a lot of funding cuts," she said. "But we're still here. And we've found that this program is a key to breaking cycles of poverty." ■

Continued from page 2

specific information about that proposed budget so that you will be totally informed about its expenditures and of the anticipated revenues.

I wish to thank you for the support you have shown to our students and for the school system's programs. From all of us to all of you, we wish you a Happy New Year! ■

Sincerely,

David Paciencia



WINTER WALK VOL-

UNTEERS Staff and students from the Middle School Afterschool Program helped ring Salvation Army bells at the annual Hudson Winter Walk in December. Lester Zaborski III, Edwin Miller, program director Kathy Clark, Destiny Van Alstyne, Tomas Gonzalez and Bryan Fuller were among the more than 20 volunteers who came out for the afternoon and evening of Winter Walk.

ON THE COVER: READING AROUND THE

WORLD Alina Parvin, a native of Bangladesh, pointed out her home country on a globe to fellow Middle School student Janah McKinnon. Christopher Alata (bottom left) and Patricia Van Valkenburgh (bottom right) were part of a writing project that brought students and Firemen's Home residents together in the fall (see page 3).



THE BLUEHAWK COURIER

is published by the
Hudson City Schools Board of Education
Editor: John Slote
Photographer: David Lee
Design: Toelke Associates

Please address correspondence to:

Hudson City School District
215 Harry Howard Avenue
Hudson, NY 12534-1606

HUDSON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

215 Harry Howard Avenue
Hudson, NY 12534-1606

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
HUDSON, NY 12534
PERMIT #313
ECR-WSS

BOXHOLDER OR RESIDENT