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Dear Parent,

Welcome to the 2025/2026 school year! I have written many back-to-school letters to parents in my time, but none like this one. Not only is this my first as superintendent of the Princeton Public Schools, but I have also felt as if I have been living in a state of juxtaposition this summer.

On June 6th, I stood at the edge of a high school track to watch my twin sons graduate from high school. Having sat on stage at graduation ceremonies for more than 20 years now, I knew what to expect. But the exuberance and pride that typically fill me on graduation day did not match the sense of nostalgia and worry and disbelief I felt as a parent.

Eleven days later I sat on stage in the back row for the Princeton High School commencement. I watched as family cheered, student speakers provided testimonials about what PHS meant to them, and Principal Birge made real-time adjustments to dance around the threatening skies. Seeing the graduates toss their blue caps in front of the Tower made me feel as though a new volume of my life was opening, just as another was closing in my own family.

I have spent the summer meeting people from across this district and community. I have read a book gifted to me by the Princeton Parents for Black Children that makes my walk between Valley Road and Nassau richer and more meaningful. I have learned and continue to learn about our schools. It has been exciting and stimulating and even intimidating to be new and to be learning. I am a new student in a new place.

The tug I have felt between these opening and closing volumes has reminded me all summer long of an axiom I have tried to keep in mind throughout my career: the job of an educator is to become inessential. If we do our work well—whether at the classroom level or systemwide—our students will come to possess the capacity for self-direction, critical thinking, academic capability, and self-confidence that will enable them to no longer rely on us. Our goal is for students to not need us.

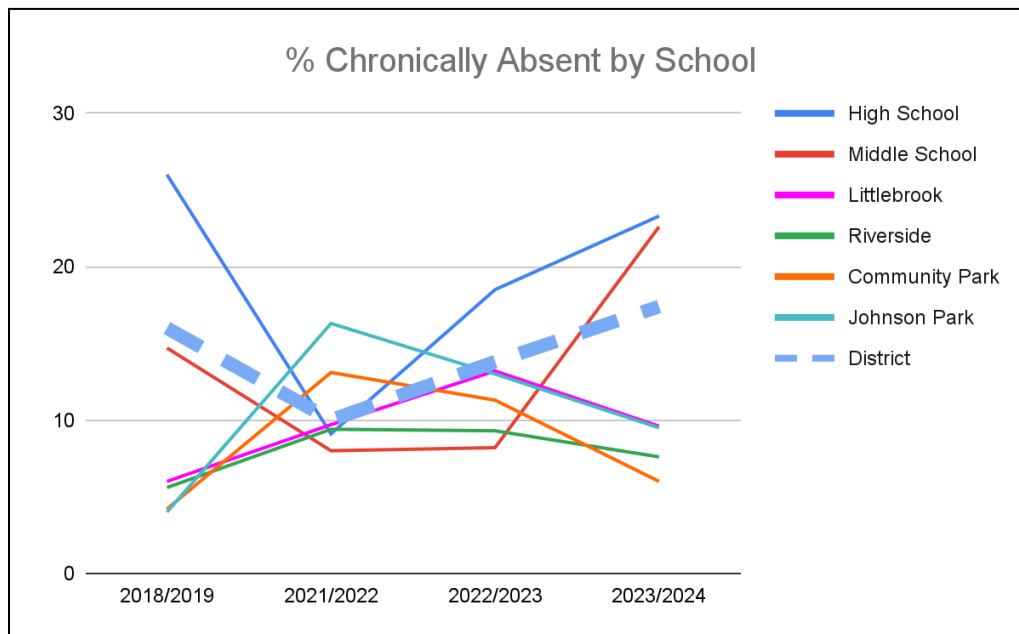
Last week my wife and I saw our boys, our only children, off to college. The realization of having become inessential was searing. I felt the axiom hit home, this time as a parent.

The most essential social and educational institution in Princeton is the Princeton Public Schools. We welcome all children of this community. We welcome three-year-olds who still need diapering assistance from our staff. We welcome eighteen-year-olds who are not sure that college is for them. We welcome artists, athletes, and academicians. We welcome students of every kind and affiliation and orientation and self-identification and place of origin. We welcome and we serve and we seek to do right by every kid in Princeton. Our aim is to be essential to all of them for as long as we have them so that we reach inessentiality by the time they leave us.

I am new and I do not know the community as well as most of those reading this note. But what has immediately impressed me the most so far about PPS is the degree of inclusivity and acceptance that I see within the schools. This is not to say that we are perfect or that there is not room for improvement. However, our educators and our students are overwhelmingly committed to supporting one another and creating spaces in which self-expression, reach, curiosity, and dialogue are foundational to the learning environment. There is no place I would rather be than PPS.

I am not a resident expert just yet. However, as we begin this school year, I would like to draw your attention to just a few points of emphasis. The first is a collaborative goal having to do with attendance. Most students are understandably absent from school for some number of days each year. The physical and mental health of our learners is paramount, and we do not want students to attend school if they are sick or not feeling well. If they are able, however, we want them to be here. If the pandemic taught us nothing else, it was that students need to interact with other students and need to spend time with adult role models in order to develop critical social and interpersonal skills. It is important to show up and spend time with others, not just in school, but also in the workplace, in relationships, and so forth.

Excessive absenteeism can make it harder for students to keep up and limits students' ability to take full advantage of the programs and opportunities we offer. The state of New Jersey defines chronic absenteeism as missing 18 or more school days over the course of the year. As a district, our rate of chronic absenteeism has crept upward recently and last year was above the state average. There may be a variety of reasons for this. Some could have to do with school or even district level practices or policies that have the unintended effect of de-emphasizing attendance. Some could have to do with the stress and pressure of being a student today. I plan to work with other staff in the district to examine potential causes of absenteeism and I will share additional data and information about attendance at the September 30 Board of Education meeting. In the meantime, please consider reinforcing with your child the importance of coming to school if able. Thank you in advance!



Beyond attendance, I would also like to note that New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights is the strongest such law in the country. Our [district policy](#) conforms to this law and as a district we are committed to ensuring that our schools are safe and inclusive spaces for all learners. Please have direct, age-appropriate conversations with your children about treating others with respect and the importance of understanding that words and actions have consequences. Students who violate our anti-bullying policy may face significant disciplinary consequences, including suspension from school. At the same time, the law and our policy are meant to protect students from facing mistreatment due to a perceived or actual distinguishing characteristic. The investigations we conduct are time-consuming and heavily prescribed by the law. Please recognize that initiating a report that triggers an investigation is a serious matter. Thank you in advance for partnering with us to uphold a climate of inclusivity for all.

Finally, I will note that the district has advanced numerous construction projects over the summer and that construction will continue over the course of the school year. Various HVAC projects are complete, the turf field is ready for play, the track resurfacing is in process, and the old bleachers in the PHS gym have been replaced with new ones. Several of the projects approved via the January 2025 referendum are in the design and approval phase right now. I would like to thank both the municipal professionals and elected officials of the Princeton Council for their responsiveness and communicativeness this summer as the district's architects and other professionals have submitted plans and sought approvals and input for various projects. We expect that the specifications for the renovations at Princeton Middle School, Community Park School, and Littlebrook School will be finalized and out to bid by the end of the calendar year (November), with the goal of beginning to break ground in the spring. We will provide updates regarding construction progress and timelines at every Board of Education meeting this year and also via our website and electronic communications.

I thank you in advance for all that you do to support your children and our school community. 180 days often do not feel like enough. I look forward to making every one of them count and helping our staff to help our children become more independent. As educators and parents, we share the same end.

I hope that you and your family have a wonderful school year!

Sincerely,

Mike LaSusa