

IRVINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Office of the Superintendent

Dr. Neely Hackett
Superintendent of Schools

One University Place Irvington, New Jersey 07111
(973) 399-6800 x 2110 (973) 371-6542 fax

September 2, 2014

Dear University Middle School Parents/Guardians:

Through New Jersey's waiver from provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Department of Education (NJDOE) has developed a new school accountability system to replace certain provisions of No Child Left Behind. Schools will no longer be subject to the mandated interventions associated with Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Instead, NJDOE has identified three categories of schools based on a combination of both growth and proficiency – *Priority Schools*, *Focus Schools*, and *Reward Schools*. Federal approval of New Jersey's waiver application means that school performance will be categorized more fairly and the NJDOE can provide flexibility and more targeted supports and interventions where needed.

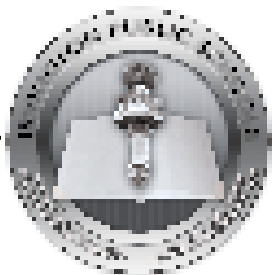
In recent years, we have taken many steps to improve our schools and help all of our students achieve at high levels. Although we have pursued a wide array of strategies designed to improve the academic outcomes of our students, University Middle School was categorized a "Priority School" on April 11, 2012.

This memo contains important information about that designation and what to expect next year.

A Priority school is a school that has been identified as among the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in the state over the past three years, or any non-Title I school that would otherwise have met the same criteria. There are a total of 75 Priority Schools in New Jersey. As part of the state's process to support Priority Schools, we will receive targeted and tailored support beginning in September 2012.

Ensuring all of our students are ready for college and career is possible if we are committed to working together and candid about the challenges and work involved. Therefore, we should use this moment as an opportunity to reflect on our experiences over the past several years and to look ahead to find ways to improve outcomes for our students.

With this in mind, the NJDOE has created a new system of customized support for Priority Schools. The NJDOE's role will shift from primarily compliance driven interactions to the increase of direct support and services. Through new Regional Achievement Centers, or "RACs", NJDOE is making a three year sustained commitment targeted to the school level. Experts employed at the RACs will collaborate with us to assess needs, use data to drive decision-making, set customized goals for improvement, and implement eight proven turnaround strategies. It must be noted that significant research exists on each of these turnaround principles and corresponding strategies and that they have been shown to narrow the achievement gap, resulting in dramatic gains in student achievement.



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The RAC teams will work directly with us to put the following research-based turnaround principles into action:

- **School Climate and Culture:** Establishing school environments with a climate conducive to learning and a culture of high expectations;
- **School Leadership:** Ensuring that the principal has the ability to lead the turnaround effort;
- **Standards Aligned Curriculum, Assessment and Intervention System:** Ensuring teachers have the foundational documents and instructional materials needed to teach to the rigorous college and career ready standards that have been adopted;
- **Instruction:** Ensuring teachers utilize research-based effective instruction to meet the needs of all students;
- **Use of Time:** Redesigning time to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning;
- **Use of Data:** Ensuring school-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning, as well as climate and culture;
- **Staffing Practices:** Developing the skills to better recruit, retain and develop effective teachers and instructional leaders; and
- **Family and Community Engagement:** Increasing academically focused family and community engagement.

As a Priority School, we will undergo a Quality School Review (QSR) to evaluate current levels of performance and determine the school's needs in connection with each turnaround principle. The results will help us refine our School Improvement Plan. Shortly after school starts, all staff will meet the RAC team members and will become engaged in a variety of exciting school turnaround activities. We will combine our deep understanding of the children and communities that we serve, the current challenges that we face and the essential lessons of our past efforts, with the expertise that will become part of our new partnership with the RAC staff.

You can learn more about the RACs and the support that they will offer University Middle School by visiting the Department of Education Website at: <http://www.nj.gov/education/rac>.

I look forward to working with you on this exciting new venture to improve our school and help our students achieve success.

Sincerely,

Dr. Neely Hackett
Superintendent
NH/np