

GRMS/HS HSA

GLEN ROCK MIDDLE SCHOOL & HIGH SCHOOL HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

Superintendent Watson
Dr. Wirt, GR Middle School Principal
Mr. Arlotta, GR High School Principal
Glen Rock School District
620 Harristown Road • Glen Rock, NJ 07452

September 20, 2018

Dear Superintendent Watson, Dr. Wirt and Mr. Arlotta,

Thank you for attending the September 14 HSA Meeting and being so willing to answer parents' questions and talk about the latest news in the schools. We appreciate your generosity with your time and information. I know I speak for all parents when I say it matters tremendously to us to have open dialogue with the administration and feel that our concerns are taken seriously. It is part of our mission to promote such communication.

The recently changed school opening hours issue has many parents concerned about its impact on their children. In response to a unanimous request from parents at the HSA meeting, this letter formally conveys parents' concerns about the new hours and respectfully requests that you revisit this policy.

To briefly recap, on September 7, parents received an email from Dr. Wirt and Mr. Arlotta stating that "due to some changes in supervision in the school in the morning" school doors would open at 7:40 am (with earlier access to the cafeteria starting at 7:17 am). At the HSA meeting, parents were told that students needed to be out of the building by 3:20 pm regardless of whether they were seeking extra help. When parents pressed for clarification, it was stated that this policy was unrelated to the current staffing challenges precipitated by the teacher contract negotiations and that the policy would remain in force for the duration of the school year.

Parents view this change as problematic for many reasons, as discussed below:

Safety Concerns:

- Discharging kids on side streets or in the MS or Sports Lobby parking lots to be closer to the door nearest their locker (as was suggested by Dr. Wirt to circumvent the time pressure for MS kids entering at the Hamilton Lobby) and making them queue up in large numbers on the sidewalks poses a safety hazard. Our campus is small and does not adequately provide for the orderly flow of traffic or the safe discharge of kids from cars along Hamilton Avenue or Harristown Road. Traffic signs specifically prohibit discharging kids on Hamilton Avenue and Harristown Road for this reason. More cars are converging on the campus at the same time now that more students are arriving at 7:40, adding to the congestion and increasing the safety concerns. Many parents also noted that they are concerned about how the impact of both the NJ Transit Harristown Road construction and winter weather might further complicate drop-off.

- Dr. Wirt indicated that students' poor behavior when they were unsupervised in the hallways was a driver of this change.
 - How does a policy that encourages large groups of mostly unsupervised students congregating on the school lawn, sidewalks and in the cafeteria mitigate this risk?
- As noted by parents, this policy seemed hastily rolled out one week after the school year began. They asked:
 - Are the other schools Dr. Wirt cited as having similar policies also located in small towns with no bussing and small, congested campuses in densely populated residential areas?
 - Were other policies considered (such as notifying parents of misbehaving kids or issuing detentions) before changing the school hours?
 - What were the specific safety concerns that necessitated a wholesale revision of school hours and why was there no prior mention of those issues?

Security Concerns: Many parents are concerned about adequate supervised entry at all open doors (for example, it was reported that the Sports Lobby is normally unsupervised), and measures to ensure that no one is slipping in unnoticed in the large throngs of students entering *en masse* at 7:40 am.

- How will these security concerns be addressed?
- How does this new policy make the school any safer compared with the previous one?

Academic Concerns: There was great confusion over students' ability to remain in the building after school to seek extra help. The stated policy is that students must exit the building not later than 3:20 pm. Specifically, a student who has pre-arranged to meet with a teacher has only 13 minutes in MS and only 26 minutes in HS to return to their locker, pack their backpack with items for that night's homework, make it to the teacher's room, obtain help and exit the building by 3:20 pm. This tight schedule does not allow for any socializing at the end of a long day or waiting while a teacher finishes with another student. Nor does it provide a meaningful amount of time to actually receive help. Many parents reported that their children had either been told to leave or were afraid of seeking help for fear of getting caught in the halls. Many parents also noted that this restriction on being in the building after 3:20 pm is a source of stress for their child.

- How can students confidently seek the help they need without fear of being punished for being in the hall?
- How can students obtain adequate help in such a short window of time?

Sports Equipment Drop-Off Concerns: If a student plays a sport, which necessitates dropping bags or equipment off to the locker rooms before school, 10 minutes is not adequate to make it back to their lockers and then to class on time.

- What concessions will be made for athletes who have to drop off equipment on their way to their first class?

Health & Well-Being Concerns: Parents are *deeply* concerned that this policy:

- Creates unnecessary stress and anxiety for students starting out their day,
- Impedes meaningful socialization,

- Limits opportunities for autonomy, and
- Creates an atmosphere that is unwelcoming.

There is an obvious disconnect between the District's goals of Safety, Health & Well-Being and a policy that strips students of the opportunity to start and finish their day in a mindful way, preparing for the tasks ahead (without undue stress and pressure) in an environment where their personal needs for autonomy, social interaction and self-expression are respected and valued. It was noted that students, like adults, need time to gear up for their day, organize their materials and their thoughts and connect with peers to share their joys and frustrations.

- How can we prioritize health and well-being in a day that has minimal opportunities for down time and social interaction?
- How can we limit students' stress related to being prepared and on time when we don't allow ample time to set up for the day?
- How can we encourage making good choices when students aren't permitted many chances to exercise their own judgment?

We respect the need for our schools to be safe, secure and run in an orderly manner and appreciate all the District does to ensure those needs are met. Our request for the reexamination of this school hours policy reflects our desire for our schools to feel like a "safe, welcoming environment with a strong sense of community," as one parent articulated. In the MS especially, opportunities to develop strong interpersonal and social skills, to learn time management, and to acclimate to more independence and autonomy are limited. Parents feel the schools should encourage these skills, not adopt policies that thwart them. In HS, students are taking more advanced courses and need more time to interact with teachers and other students facing similar challenges. Many students have full schedules beyond school and limited time to interact with their peers face-to-face. By limiting the school hours and thus limiting the time students have to linger with their peers, we are doing them a disservice.

As you reflect and re-examine this policy, please consider this: "Research has demonstrated that the mismatch between students' need for autonomy at this age and schools' greater wielding of control causes students to lose motivation and interest in school. Allowing students to craft social conventions for school helps them understand the need for these conventions and keeps them engaged in the learning process."¹

Thank you in advance for helping us meet our stated mission of promoting open and transparent dialogue and providing a forum to share concerns about District matters as one collective voice. We look forward to hearing back from you at your earliest convenience so that we may report back to our members.

Sincerely,

The Glen Rock Middle School/High School Home and School Association (HSA)

¹ Zakrzewski, V. (2012, October 18). The Misunderstood Middle Schooler. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_misunderstood_middle_schooler