



NJDOE News

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DOE Recognizes Schools to Watch® In Morris and Somerset Counties

Education Commissioner Bret Schundler today announced that two middle grades schools have been selected as the 2009-10 New Jersey Schools to Watch® in recognition of their high quality academic programs and active support of student development.

This year's Schools to Watch are Black River Middle School in Chester Township (Morris County) and Montgomery Lower Middle School in Montgomery Township (Somerset County).

The program identifies schools with grades 6, 7, and 8 that do an exemplary job of addressing student achievement and the unique needs of early adolescents. The schools are showcased statewide and nationally to promote their instructional practices, programs to enhance personalization and leadership structures.

"The developmental stage of early adolescence is an important time for students as they experience significant mental, physical, social and emotional growth," said Commissioner Schundler. "It is during this period, when values and attitudes are developed and goals for the future are set. It is important that we recognize schools that are academically excellent and developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents, so they can serve as role models and mentors for others."

The schools will be recognized at an awards ceremony at Kean University on May 17, at the June 16 State Board of Education meeting, and at the national Schools to Watch conference June 24 to 26 in Washington, D.C.

"Challenging all students to use their minds well during these formative years is critical to continued success in high school, college and beyond," Commissioner Schundler said. "The schools announced today will become part of a state and national network of high-quality, innovative schools to assist others in their improvement efforts."

New Jersey is one of 18 states that participate in Schools to Watch, which is sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform. The state joined the program in 2007.

New Jersey Schools to Watch is a partnership between the Department of Education (DOE); the Garden State Partnership for Teacher Quality, which includes Kean, Rowan and William Paterson Universities; the New Jersey Middle School Association; the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association/Foundation for Education Administration; and the New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Schools must apply for the New Jersey Schools to Watch program. Participating schools use national criteria to engage in self-assessment and reflection with an emphasis on high quality instruction, adult advocacy, equal access to programs and services, and sustained support for school improvement. Schools undergo a rigorous review and full-day site visit by a team of educators representing the program partners.

Schools to Watch are designated for three years and must continue to show improvement and a commitment to the needs of middle level students. Each school must agree to host visitations and share best practices at state conferences and workshops.

The DOE and its partners will provide additional technical assistance to the schools not selected as Schools to Watch.

All schools that applied for the designation will become part of a professional development program which will provide technical assistance, and other professional learning opportunities to assist schools to address areas that do not yet meet the Schools to Watch criteria. Schools are encouraged to remain in the network and continue their improvement efforts using the Schools to Watch framework.

With the designation of the two schools today, New Jersey has a total of nine Schools To Watch. The schools originally selected in 2007-08 must reapply for designation in 2010-11 to continue their designation and

participation in the program.

Applications for the 2010-11 Schools to Watch program will be available on DOE's Web site beginning in May and will be due in October. For more information on the Schools to Watch program, please go to:

<http://www.nj.gov/education/archive/dsis/stw/>.

**Background Information on 2009-10 New Jersey Schools to Watch®
Black River Middle School, Chester Township, Morris County**

Configuration: Grades 6, 7 and 8

Enrollment: 499

Principal: Robert Mullen

Telephone: 908-879-6363

Black River Middle School is a community of learners. The staff are part of professional learning communities where teachers engage in dialogue about strategies to improve student achievement and support the needs of young adolescents. Peer coaching and mentoring allows for staff to share current best practices and continue their self improvement process. Connections are made with students through the implementation of a house system, where a core team of teachers teach only one hundred students. Core team planning time allows for interdisciplinary units and coordination of student supports.

Personalization is enhanced through their advisory program, where each teacher in the school has a group of twelve students (four students from each grade level) that stay together for the students' entire career at Black River. Team building activities and structured time during advisory help to enhance a sense of community and ensure that each student is well known and supported by an adult in the school.

A morning Drop Everything and Read period allows for band and chorus rehearsals, one-on-one teacher support, school wide activities and dedicated reading time. Numerous opportunities exist for students to receive additional academic support, including the use of Study Island and Learning Express online teaching tools. Peer tutoring is also available and is coordinated by the guidance counselor.

The school uses a block schedule with class periods of fifty minutes for core subjects and thirty-seven minutes for related arts. Black River has introduced a new related arts writing class in order to increase integrated language arts educational time. Recent changes to increase math and science class time and the opportunities for one-on-one help for all students have resulted in improved student achievement.

Teachers challenge students with higher-order questioning and integrate technology into instruction. The school uses the VBrick video streaming system for virtual field trips and incorporated it into their zoo project presentation. Math and science students participate in their school's annual science fair, the largest K-8 fair in New Jersey, where they conduct science experiments, analyze data and present their findings to experts in the field.

Students have an opportunity to participate in over thirty clubs and extracurricular activities throughout the school year, many of which are academic and service oriented. Peer Leaders is a program developed by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, designed to help students develop their leadership skills. Eighth grade students are trained to help their peers understand the dangers of substance abuse and make healthy decisions. Peer leaders also conduct workshops throughout the school year which focus on the difficult issues facing young people, including peer pressure and emotional stress.

Montgomery Lower Middle School, Montgomery Township, Somerset County

Configuration: Grades 5 and 6

Enrollment: 848

Principal: Michael Richards

Telephone: 609-466-7604

The Montgomery Lower Middle School was created only six years ago as a result of increased enrollment in the district; however, the school has fully embraced high quality middle level programs and practices. The foundation for success has been built on shared leadership and the active involvement of all stakeholders in the development of programs and practices. The school facilitates teacher independence and risk taking to achieve academic excellence and creates a student centered environment for growth and support.

To ensure that all students succeed, teachers have common planning time and participate in daily team meetings to share insights and concerns about students and plan engaging lessons. In order to meet the developmental needs of all students, the school has adopted the Responsive Classroom approach, a way of teaching that emphasizes academic, emotional and social growth in a strong and safe school community. The school day begins with a "morning meeting," which serves as the foundation for students and sets a positive tone

in the school. This time allows for students to share experiences, build relationships and establish a sense of trust and belonging. The school has a strong character education program and embraces the six pillars of character.

The Lower Middle School uses a block schedule which consists of six blocks of sixty minutes each. All students begin and end their day in academic classes and additional language arts instruction is facilitated in a course which focuses on communication skills. Social studies and science have embraced interactive notebooks as a tool to help categorize new information and reflect on learning. Students are provided with examples of high quality work and use rubrics across disciplines to ensure attainment of high standards. Students are able to critique each other's work as part of writing workshops.

The school uses the *Classroom Assessment Practices and Strategies* framework to determine student progress and inform instruction. The Lower Middle School is part of Connect Ed, a consortium of school districts, local universities and organizations dedicated to supporting professional development for math and science teachers through Rider University. The program assists teachers to become leaders and promotes professional learning communities.

Music is an integral part of the school's program of studies with all instruction occurring during the school day. Students are able to choose from four different options: chorus, orchestra, band and music workshop.

Students conduct assemblies as part of Rising Above Peer Pressure, a student group that focuses on how to deal with negative peer pressure. The school offers workshops to the community to maintain dialogue on topics pertinent to middle school, including common assessments, puberty and cyber bullying.