

## Superintendent's Message

EARLY MAY 2011

Dear Parents and Community Members,

Public education is certainly in the eye of the storm as all levels of government steer their way through significant economic challenges. Without a doubt, educators and parents need to continue their fierce commitment to improving the academic achievement of all students to ensure their preparation for an increasingly complex and globalized future. At the same time, we recognize the importance of balancing the needs of our students and our schools with what can realistically be supported by the taxpayers of our communities. This is especially true in New York State, where the system of funding public education has never been thoughtfully resolved.

As New York State ricochets through this economic maelstrom, answers, ideas, and solutions for “fixing” public education abound. Some of these ideas are valuable and warrant serious consideration, while others are “quick-fixes” that beg for examination from a wider range of perspectives.

One “solution” for fixing public education that is regularly promulgated during difficult economic times is that small school districts like Menands should cease to exist – that small districts should be annexed by larger districts, that several small districts should be merged into one large district, or that New York should move to county-wide school districts. While there may be merit to this idea from a certain vantage point, this idea fails to consider the contributions that small school districts make in the lives of students, families, and communities.

Mrs. Susan Volo, our English teacher and *Paw Prints* editor, and I recently sat down with some of our community members to discuss their experiences with Menands School and the role of small school districts like Menands. Some of the participants in our discussion were parents of children who currently attend Menands School; some were parents of children who have graduated from the school; and some were graduates of the school themselves. Our discussion yielded much consensus on the remarkable attributes of Menands School and why small school districts are important.

Lisa Buoniconto can't think of a better place for her children to be in school than Menands. “Each of our four children is very different,” she explained, “and this is a school where the unique needs of each student are met.” One of the things that makes Menands so attractive is that each of our 254 students is known by almost everyone on our staff.

Jennifer Wilson described walking down the hall with her son, Kevis, early in his first year of kindergarten: “He was saying hello to everyone...It was amazing to me that, not just his teacher, but all of the adults knew him by name.” It may be that this kind of personalization is lost in the big schools and the big school districts.

Because we are a small school, each student receives a great deal of care and there is constant communication between families and the staff. Galen Gomes, who is now 30 and graduated from Menands 16 years ago, recalls his experiences as a Menands student: “The teachers really cared about my success in school. They all knew my parents by name and were not afraid to call them if necessary. On the flipside, they also called my parents to report good news as well...Even when I come back to visit Menands School, the teachers are very welcoming and are genuinely interested in how I am doing.”

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Another attribute of Menands School that contributes to strong relationships between families and the school staff is that, as a K-8 school, many of our students spend nine years in the same school building. This is in contrast to many other districts in which students start kindergarten in a primary school, move to another building for the intermediate grades, and then move to a middle school in sixth or seventh grade. Juliet VanKampen explained some of these advantages: “We live in Menands because of the school district. Not only are all three of our children in the same school, but because it’s K-8, we avoid some of the transitions that can be tough for kids, especially the problems that can occur during the middle school years.”

Parents, parents of our graduates, and our graduates themselves point to the strength of the academic programs as the foundation of Menands School’s success. The academic programs in all subjects continue to evolve, keeping pace with the preparation our students need for success in high school, college, and careers. Like the overwhelming majority of Menands graduates, Lakshmi Sana shared that her daughter, Meghana, was extremely well prepared and is now doing exceptionally well as a ninth grader at Shaker High School. Similarly, Elangovan Raman credited the strong educational foundation that his son, Madhavan, received all along the way at Menands for his success in high school. Madhavan, who is now a senior at Shaker, will attend Johns Hopkins in the fall as a pre-medical student. Unlike students in most school districts, Menands students also have the advantage of choosing among three different schools for high school.

In addition to the strength of core academics in English, math, social studies, and science, Menands students have the benefit of a rich, well-rounded program in the special areas. For example, Menands students start studying Spanish in kindergarten, and by the time they have finished eighth grade, they are prepared to take second or even third year high school Spanish. Similarly, our programs in art, music, band, computer literacy, library media, physical education, and health have great depth, engaging our students in active, minds-on learning on a daily basis while also contributing to their long term preparation for college, life, and careers. We also have an extensive array of after-school clubs for students in grades 1-8, and four extramural sports for middle school students. Cindy Price, whose son attends Menands and whose daughter is now at Shaker, agreed that, “All of the opportunities are here and there’s a place for everyone...the teams, the plays, the arts, the clubs, the enrichment...giving kids exposure to a world of interests, helping them feel that they belong, and developing their confidence.” Fawn Montagne, who has two young children at Menands, concurred: “The extras are building the foundation of the next generation of the community.” *(continued on page 3)*



*Ms. Meany speaks with parents*

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When Jennifer Wilson and her husband decided upon Menands as a place to buy a home and send their children to school, she felt that they had “hit the jackpot” because Menands is not only a small, close knit school but a richly diverse school. Of the K-8 students currently enrolled in Menands, 23% of the students are African or African –American, 19% are Asian, 2% are Hispanic or Latino, 41% are White, and 15% are of multiracial backgrounds. Gabe Murphy feels that experiencing this diversity prepares students for the real world. The Murphy’s youngest son, Michael, will soon be graduating from Menands as did his older siblings; Gabe herself graduated from Menands; and Gabe’s father, Grant Smith, and her grandfather graduated from Menands. Gabe explained that the increase in diversity among the families is a major change from when she attended Menands, but a change that has greatly enriched her children’s lives.

For the Gomes family, Menands was a welcoming and supportive place when they moved here from Guyana. As former student Sonya Gomes described, “Having been born in another country, Menands School introduced us to the American culture and helped us become acclimated to our new environment. We learned more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Everyone went above and beyond to teach us what we needed to know.” Annie Amaya also entered Menands School as a student born in another country. Annie, whose son Anthony attends the school, describes Menands as a place where diversity is both respected and celebrated. *(continued on page 4)*



*(Mrs. Price and Mrs. Wilson)*

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**Sonya Gomes, former Menands School student**

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As American society has become more transient and less connected to traditional institutions, feeling connected to a community has become less and less common. In spite of these shifts in our culture, however, people continue to yearn for a sense of connection. Children especially need to feel connected to peers, to important adults, and to safe, dependable places. Families are drawn to Menands because of the strong sense of community in the village and in the school district. This is true for families that have lived in Menands for a long time as well as for families that have moved here in recent years. Sheri Hayes attended Menands School along with her entire family a generation ago. She sees Menands as a “special place with a long history of traditions. When it was time to decide where my three children would go to school, I would not have them anywhere else.” Although Melissa Mitchell and her family are relative newcomers to Menands, Melissa echoed Sheri’s perspective: “I’ve got Menands in my blood and we won’t be moving. There are so many school and village events that kids, parents, grandparents, teachers, and administrators are all a part of.” Gabe Murphy added that, “Because Menands students are together for nine years, those relationships form the core that kids keep coming back to long after they have left the school.”

The Village of Menands and the Menands School District have much to be proud of, all of which points to support for the role of small school districts in the lives of students, families, and communities. As Jennifer Wilson described, “I’ll support this school district even when my own kids are grown. Every child deserves a small school like Menands.”

Sincerely,

Ms. Kathy Meany  
Superintendent

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Every child deserves a small school like Menands.”**

**Jennifer Wilson, Menands School parent**