



School District of South Orange and Maplewood
COLUMBIA HIGH SCHOOL
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Principal Aaron's Remarks: Back to School Night, September 22, 2016

Good evening. It is as always my pride and pleasure to welcome you into this beautiful space, and to Columbia High School.

I am often asked if I miss being a teacher. Indeed, I do. I miss it especially on Back to School night. This is the night where the excitement, enthusiasm and shiny gloss of the new school year is so evident in our halls, and our teachers are ready to welcome you into what I truly believe is one of the most sacred spaces in American democracy – the hallways and classrooms of our public schools.

I am proud to say that this year – for what rankings are worth – the New Jersey Monthly magazine rankings have put us at about #64, up from #96 last year. I would love to take credit, but cannot. But you can, and your students can, and our teachers can. Those rankings' metrics have more to do with the actual lives our students lead – how many challenging courses they take and do work in – not just how they score, and how many arts classes they have access to – not how 'talented' they are, –and what their readiness is

for life after high school measured by a variety of indicators, not just admission to certain universities.

So, thank you, teachers, for making that kind of recognition possible. It is just a small reminder of how good we all can be at what we do, and how we must seek to be that good, every day, for all of our students and for your, their parents and guardians.

Our goal tonight is to make sure you put a name with a face, to sit in the rooms your children sit in, to see and hear from those of us you trust with your children every day. We thank you for that trust, and we hold it close and it is the basis of the work we do together with you this year.

Many people asked me to tell you things in my remarks this evening.

Please take time to visit the hallway tables during your child's study hall or lunch to make sure you support the Boosters, the H S A, CHSMPA, CHSSF and more. They are important partners and we thank you for your support of them. Please do this during your child's study hall or lunch period this evening. Please also visit our library, where you can pay down fines, get a Maplewood or SO library card, and check out our many great resources.

Please don't drop your students in the parking lot – please drop them on Parker Avenue, Kensington, North Terrace, or Academy. Teachers and staff, including some with handicap access needs, park and walk in that lot from earlier than 7 am onward. Also, please do not use the lot at Gleason's Dry cleaners – that is not ours.

Please remind your children, just as you did when they were five years old, to cross safely. The older they get, the less observant they are about personal safety, and there is a lot of traffic around Columbia.

Please make sure your student has a valid CHS ID. Students who need an ID can get their picture taken at at 7:45 in the main office and come back and pick it up after school. ID cards are needed to take out library materials, will be needed by the 10th and 11th graders to take the PSAT on 10/19, and more.

If for some reason your student still does not have a locker please let us know. Valuable items should not be brought to school. PE locks are to be taken on and off lockers in the locker room each period and students should always lock their belongings. Backpacks are not to be brought into our gyms during classes. Items that are locked are safe.

If your student is going to be absent, please use the absence reporting form in Powerschool or dial Ms. Alvarado at x1125 to report the absence. Please call early for early dismissals. Please send in written absent notes with your students when they return to school, and have them hand it to our security desk staff. Our handbook needs some minor updates, but it is online and fully in place for this year. Please refer to it especially regarding our absence policy.

Please have your student follow our dress code: hats, bandanas, and phones and earbuds should be OFF and AWAY. We allow student use of

phones at lunch for data. Students cannot make calls in or from school.

PLEASE do not text or call your student during the day and expect a response. They may use their phones for data at lunch inside. No calls are to be made from inside school. In an emergency, do not call or text your child, call school. Please remind your child of the same. If a student is in crisis in school and calls or texts you, that endangers your child and puts us at risk for a delay in helping them.

Please update your email address in Powerschool, and please check Powerschool with your student once a week. Have your student address any absences or cuts that are unverified. Please have your student arrive on time to school – latenesses add up to absences, which add up to loss of credit. Again, please refer to our handbook on our CHS webpage.

Please read our weekly emails, and please pay attention to emails from guidance about our college visits for seniors and juniors. The guidance weekly newsletter is also on our webpage.

Please schedule family time that does not involve electronics. Please have frank talks with your students about drug and alcohol use and abuse. Remember when our children were small and we shared every minute, insignificant detail about their lives with each other – like their nap times, their diaper contents, how their teeth growing in? We need you to share even more now that they are teens.

As teens, they are biologically and neurologically at a place where it is actually more likely that they will make a bad decision than a good one – so discuss decision-making with them. Discuss the importance of good choices, and the importance of resisting pressure to do dumb things. Risk being the bad guy, and please, power through the silent treatment your rules and expectations may get you. That grumpy car ride and silent treatment is so much better than the possible outcome of bad teen decision-making. Listen to your children when they tell – or try to tell you- in that particularly complicated, adolescent, non-specific sort of way - what they need. And, as a very wise friend once told me, only answer the questions they ask. Usually, that is all you need to get started on the road toward a good conversation. They need to keep large parts of their lives separate and private from you – but they need to know how to let you in, too. Trust them to find their way, and then lean in when it looks they may be veering off course. Allow them to make some mistakes, and feel the safety net here and at home when they do. Then let them learn that owning mistakes is much better than trying to explain them away.

Please rely on the experience of our teachers, counselors, our Assistant Principals, and Student Assistance counselors and me when needed. 9th grade parents – we have divided our 9th graders among our three Assistant Principals, and we will send that information to you.

Our academic labs and tutorials schedule is finalized as of today and will be widely communicated in the next day or so. As you know, CHS lost staffing this year, and we have been working carefully to make sure we are deploying every room and personnel asset we have wisely.

Our full commitment to our Board of Education's recently passed Access and Equity policy means that we want every student in the courses for which they are ready and in which they will be successful, and that we are committed to supporting them. Most of our students have study halls, and that is a change for CHS this year. While some of your seniors may not need – or feel they don't need them – we wanted a dedicated time in the school day where we have access to all students to receive support, do homework, receive counseling or intervention services as well as be able to make up missed work, work on college essays, applications and career planning, and make sure they have time to work on PSAT, ACT, or SAT practice. We think that this will and should help relieve some of the stress and anxiety that many of our students face, and will better resource us to assist students.

The new Access and Equity Policy was intended to allow students to select courses at the level of academic rigor of their choice. Now that school is underway it is important that we utilize all of the available resources to support students in their selected level. We are in the process of establishing guidelines that would allow a student to discuss the advantages and/or disadvantages of moving down a level after the first marking period. Please

realize that just as budgeting, staffing, teacher certification, classroom size and facilities all impacted scheduling, the same holds true when we explore possible options of moving down a level. Resources are limited. If a student is unable to move down a level, additional supports will be provided within the classroom setting. These guidelines will be reviewed, modified and updated on a regular basis as we continue to move forward with the implementation of the new Access and Equity Policy.

Do we have all of this in place right now? We do not. But it is the work underway this year. Our shift to a unified bell schedule was the first and key step into being able to put some of those things in place for all students this year and going forward.

The first few weeks of the school year can be a very difficult time as students transition from the summer back to the demands of a school year. The next few weeks are important ones for them to settle in to their classes and their relationships with new teachers and, in some cases, new counselors. Help us know what you need to manage their – and your – stress and anxiety. High school is and should always be a place for students where they feel safe, sheltered, nurtured, protected, and confident. We want them to want to be here and feel that every day they spend here does and should matter.

Thank you for taking the time to be here tonight, and have a wonderful evening.

