

March 9, 2009 / 13 Adar, 5769

Dear Barrack Community:

When I was interviewed in the early fall of 2008 by the past presidents, Head of School Search Committee and finally the Board of Directors, I shared my hopes and visions for the school. Paramount is my commitment to maintaining the academic excellence, religious pluralism, warm intimate community and focus on *tikkun olam*-world repair. Similarly I clarified my intentions to create a program that allowed for more student choices, concentration in the arts and emerging technologies, and move from a 20th century program of lockstep instruction to a 21st century approach more common in the finest independent schools. At the same time I committed myself to increasing the depth and breath of advanced sacred text courses and to broadening opportunities for pluralistic spiritual growth amongst our students. Likewise, I envisioned a shared faculty culture where teachers were involved in problem setting and solving. With our move to our wonderful new home in Bryn Mawr, I wanted to create nothing less than the flagship day school in North America.

Over the past half year, the faculty has been working diligently with me to realize these ideas. Working committees have labored long and hard and some of their efforts have brought forth wonderful new fruit which I share with you now. The Professional Development Committee (chaired by Dr. Sigal Strauss) initiated a school wide program of peer coaching where teachers have been paired across the academic disciplines and initially trained (with continuous follow up to come) to coach one another, helping each other better understand and reflect on their work with students. All too often, faculties work in isolation behind the closed door of their classrooms. And even though they plan together, and are mentored, supervised, and evaluated by talented colleagues and department chairs, faculty rarely get to see each other at work. Peer coaching hopes to change that isolation and significantly improve the culture of critical reflection and sharing in the school.

Two other committees, one on faculty workload (chaired by me) and another on scheduling (chaired by Leslie Pugach) have been working in parallel and now have joined together. And although we have much fine tuning still to do and need to work through some thorny issues of faculty workload, the staff is excited about a new model for our school which Leslie will now describe to you. It will create new learning opportunities, allow for student choice and make better use of faculty talents. We are excited that it moves us in the direction of the vision I outlined above.

During the 2006-2007 school year an internal Scheduling Committee, with faculty representation from all academic disciplines, was formed at the behest of our Board of Directors. The charge to this committee was to examine our current schedule and roster in order to determine if they were meeting the academic needs of our students and faculty in the most educationally sound manner and in a way that best supported our school's mission. After analysis of recent research findings and extensive conversations with local independent schools, other Jewish day schools, educational experts, our College

Guidance Counselor, the Scheduling Committee developed a proposal that was presented to the academic departments of the school. However, because of the timing of other changes that were occurring simultaneously (e.g. search for a new Head of School, planning a move to a new campus), these proposed scheduling changes were tabled.

In September 2008 the Scheduling Committee resumed meeting. After reviewing our previous research and updating our findings, the committee determined that a trimester schedule would best serve our academic needs, as well as offer us the opportunity to create a more dynamic program that would be even more responsive to 21st Century educational standards. In addition, this new schedule would allow us to institute a more pluralistic approach for communal spirituality. Finally, most of the Scheduling Committee's recommendations were supported by the recent Institutional Assessment that was conducted by the nationally recognized Fieldstone Consulting Group in November 2008.

The new trimester program will:

- Offer more teaching days in a school year
- Create opportunities for elective choices in every grade
- Provide more continuity of instruction in all academic areas
- Reduce academic stress for students and faculty
- Allow eighth grade students to begin the study of a modern language
- Make it more possible for more students to attend the Semester in Israel program by lowering the cost and academic complications.
- Allow for a time for spiritual observance during the school day

While specific details about this new schedule will be sent to you soon, here are some of the important 2009-2010 calendar highlights:

- Students who are attending the Alexander Muss program will leave on Tuesday, August 25 and return to the United States on November 25, 2009. There will be no reduction in the Core program at Muss. Students attending Muss will NOT need to take Physics in the summer.
- Classes will begin on Thursday, September 10th, with orientation for new students on September 9th. The first trimester will end on Thursday, December 3rd, with a records day for faculty on December 4th (no classes for students). The second trimester begins on December 7th and ends on Thursday, March 11th with a records day for faculty on March 12th (no classes for students.) The third trimester begins on March 15th. The last day of school is Wednesday, June 16th.
- School vacations at Winter Break and Spring Break will not change, as well as the days that school is closed for national and Jewish holidays

One of the pieces of this new schedule that has our faculty most enthusiastic are the opportunities for electives in all grades. Much of the reason for this excitement is that the faculty's skills and interests can be extended as they create options for students to learn for the joy of learning. Some of the electives under consideration include:

- Electives in the arts and technology: arts (studio and performing), theatre and music (acapella and regular choruses, band, appreciation and theory), dance, as well as technology options such as animation, programming, keyboarding
- Electives in Jewish Studies, Rabbinics (Talmud, Codes, Responsa Literature), and Tanakh
- Electives in the humanities: creative writing, publications, Shakespeare, poetry, public speaking, economics, political science, psychology, SAT I preparation, AP courses
- Electives in mathematics: personal finance, Stock Market Game, Math Counts, SAT I preparation, AP courses
- Electives in the sciences: SAT II preparation, ecology, botany, AP courses
- Electives in modern languages: AP courses, the chance to study up to five years of a modern language beginning with eighth grade, linguistics; exploratory language opportunities in sixth and seventh grade where students can try a modern language (French, Spanish, Latin, or Arabic) before selecting a modern language for study in eighth grade.
- Electives in physical education, health education, and service learning

Most importantly, the new trimester system will complement and not compromise our outstanding academic programs. As with any educational change, we plan to evaluate the success of this new program and we will share our findings with you.

Students will be guided in their choices by their faculty advisors, who will understand how to help their advisees select electives that both expand their horizons, as well as speak to their talents and interests. Also, particularly in the middle and early upper school grades, some electives will be required over a period of six or nine trimesters. Students will complete their elective selections after they return from Pesah break.

In a follow up letter we will talk more about new opportunities for spirituality and prayer within our pluralistic approach to Judaism. We will keep you posted as our plans develop and mature.

Bivracha,

Dr. Steven M. Brown
Head of School