



MONTCLAIR KIMBERLEY ACADEMY

December 5, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

This past week, I received a strongly worded email from two fourth graders who were deeply frustrated with the ongoing tetherball situation. The tetherball has been broken and replaced several times over the past few months, and they feel that misuse is at the root of the problem. When I met with them to hear about their concerns, they spoke with clarity and conviction: they want to fix the issue because they feel empathy and care about every student who hopes to play but can't due to the broken equipment.

Their response was to take action. They decided to write a speech for Middle School students, outlining the rules of tetherball in hopes that greater understanding will lead to better care. Their commitment truly moved me. These fourth graders recognized a problem, used their voices, and chose to lead. As a result, I now plan to meet with them weekly as they build a slide deck and prepare a speech that reflects their vision for positive change.

What may look small from the outside is, in fact, a powerful example of our mission in motion. At MKA, we aim to cultivate students who are prepared to take responsibility as citizens and leaders. Leadership does not begin when students graduate; it begins now, in moments just like this. This is an opportunity for them to identify a need, collaborate with others, and courageously advocate for solutions.

As Whitney Houston once reminded us, children are our future, and it is our job to provide them with developmentally appropriate, supportive spaces where they can safely learn how to create change. These "small" issues matter because they allow students to build the empathy, communication, resilience, and agency that they will rely on when the problems they encounter are larger, more complicated, and far less insular. If we want young people who step confidently into a world that needs thoughtful leaders, we must give them opportunities to lead today, in a place where they feel a sense of belonging.

I do not know how many tetherball dilemmas these young activists will confront later in life, but I do know they will face a world full of challenges that demand informed, compassionate action. My hope is that the success they experience here, within our walls, reinforces a truth we want all students to carry with them: their voice matters, their leadership matters, and even in the smallest or largest moments, they have the power to create meaningful change.

Take care,

Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life

November 21, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

I am in awe that we have already made it to Thanksgiving break. It feels like just yesterday we were identifying our superpowers and planning for those first few days of community building at school. Now, a few months in, we have grown into a cohesive, connected, and caring community. How do I know this, you might wonder? Let me share a few pieces of evidence with you.

Eighth Grade Play - *The Amazing Lemonade Girl*

This year's production was incredibly impressive. The connections among cast and crew were visible in every line delivered, every set change, and every moment on stage. This small but mighty group brought the house down with their performance of the true story behind Alex's Lemonade Stand. Their impact extended far beyond the theater. Inspired by the show, our community helped raise \$600 for Alex's Lemonade Stand through a student-run lemonade stand at lunch.



Book Fair

Thanks to the collaboration among PAMKA, Scholastic, and the entire Middle School community, the book fair was a tremendous success. Our fourth and fifth-graders proudly introduced our visiting authors at each assembly. Student government members staffed the

evening book fair event to raise money for the Human Needs Food Pantry. Students and teachers alike were inspired to write, draw, read, and share their stories.



Advisory

This week's advisory programming is full of gratitude, recognition, and community. Here are two examples of Lower House and Upper House advisory programming:

- In fifth grade, students will highlight and thank the individuals who make our community a better and safer place. They will be interviewing members of our school community, including the security team, dining hall staff, and physical plant staff. They will share the information they learn about these individuals with the rest of the fifth-grade student body.
- In seventh grade, students will explore the power of gratitude. They will write gratitude letters to individuals they want to thank for helping them grow as humans and as community members. This experience gives students the chance to reflect on who has made a difference in their lives while also learning about the positive impact a simple "thank you" can have on both the giver and the receiver.

Taking time to reflect, recognize others, and give thanks is an essential part of being in a community. Our hope is that practicing gratitude in intentional ways will inspire students to express gratitude independently in their daily lives.

With that, I thank you for reading this letter. I hope you and your family have a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday and break.

Take care,

Shanie Israel

Dean of Community Life

November 14, 2025



"Bye, sweetie—have a day filled with social drama, drastically shifting friendships, and academic milestones, which you'll describe to me later as 'fine.'"

November 14, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

This *New Yorker* cartoon leaped out at me as I was scrolling through social media this week. At first, it made me laugh, but then it made me pause and think. I keep coming back to the way the parent is drawn: leaning forward, waving goodbye, yet also reaching out, as if on the verge of pulling their child back home. As a parent, I have felt that tension. I've wanted to know everything. I have wanted to hear every detail of my child's day—the highs and the lows

—because those shared moments give me a sense of trust: Trust in my son’s ability to persevere, trust in the school that cares for him, and trust in the child-parent relationship we share, one that feels at times symbiotic and ever-evolving.

As an educator, I see the cartoon differently. From that lens, I hope the parent’s wave also conveys confidence and trust. Trust that the school community will help their child navigate social ups and downs, shifting friendships, and academic challenges, so that when that child later answers, “fine,” it’s not dismissal or distance. It’s often just the shorthand of middle-school life and a sign that all is well and unfolding as it should.

Middle school is hard. Yes, academically, it brings new challenges, but even more importantly, it opens up a complex world of social possibilities, emotions, and worries. From the student’s perspective, the freedom to express oneself and discover identity is layered with social expectations and an intense desire to fit in. From the parent or caregiver’s perspective, it marks a shift in the relationship between adult and child. The days of oversharing tend to give way to one- or two-word answers, and that growing silence can spark either worry or reassurance. Which one we feel often depends on the level of trust we hold in our children and in the school community that surrounds them.

I know that trust is earned. As you have had years of growing with your child to build a trusting relationship, I encourage you to put some focus on building that trust with our school. We have many opportunities for you to get proximate. If there is something you are wondering about, reach out to a Middle School faculty member for guidance. We promise to respond. If you want to get a sense of what happens in the building, come to a Monday assembly (there was a sign-up link earlier in the year in WeAreMKA). If you want to get to know the school’s leadership, come to a coffee with Dr. Bell. If you want to see the magic that happens in our building and what Middle Schoolers can create, come see the eighth-grade play this weekend.

Additionally, I hope that sharing and reading this letter builds trust. As I write this, I am working to build your trust. This weekly letter is here to give you insight into what happens in our building, help you get to know me, and open the lines of communication, one of the most essential pillars of trust.

Trust takes time, connection, and care—and it’s something we build together, one day at a time. Thank you for being our partners in this work and for entrusting us with your children each day. We hope that as the year grows, so does our relationship with you.

Take care,

Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life

November 7, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

This week, we’ve been preparing for the annual book fair, adjusting to the earlier evening darkness, and coming down from a sugar-filled Halloween weekend. The start of November

often ushers in the busy winter season. It is a time when we look for moments of joy amid the early chill. Since I've shared quite a few words in these letters since September, I thought it might be time to give voice to the students. I asked them, "What is something that brings you joy in Middle School?"

Here are some of their responses:

*What brings me joy in sixth grade is the fact that we get to go to different classes with different students.
In fifth grade, we travelled with the same students to every class.
This change allows me to make new friends.*

*Playing basketball and having recess and lunch bring me joy at school because they are fun times during the day, and they allow me to spend time with my friends.
I also like food a lot, so that helps.*

I find joy in Spanish class because I like learning new languages.

*I enjoy hanging out with my friends because it brings me joy, and they are good people.
I also enjoy meeting students from other grades during recess and FLEX.*

*I find joy in the interactions with other community members.
I also enjoy getting to know new members of the MKA community.*

*My friends bring me joy because we laugh a lot and we are cheerful together.
I also find joy in the freedom we have when we switch classes.
We no longer have to travel the hallways in a line, and I like that.*

*Having more than one recess a day brings me joy.
At my old school, I did not have as many recesses, and I like the time to play during the day.*

The MKA community brings me joy. I appreciate the supportiveness of the community, especially when a community member puts themselves out there working to achieve something.

The people at school bring me joy because they are very kind and caring, and it is a great community to be a part of.

As I reflect on their answers, I recognize that students need community and crave relationships with others. Although I may have wished to see more academically focused responses, in reality, Middle School is the time when students learn to make solid connections to their peers and their community while engaging in learning experiences. I hope you and your family are finding joy and moments of connection with one another and others as you navigate the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving.

Take care,

Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life

October 31, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

The Community Belonging Statement of Purpose on our website states:

We believe that the diversity of experiences presented through an inclusive and representative curriculum develops our global cultural competency. To cultivate a love of learning, we encourage ourselves to explore and appreciate differences and similarities, to challenge stereotypes, and to acknowledge the range of perspectives within and outside of our community.

As members of the MKA community, it is our shared responsibility to bring these words to life each day through our curriculum and programming. Guided by this statement, alongside our Mission Statement, MKA faculty and staff strive to create an environment where every student feels seen, valued, and represented.

One meaningful way we demonstrate this commitment is by acknowledging heritage and history months. These observances provide opportunities to highlight diverse voices and stories, while also reminding us of the importance of recognizing and celebrating individuals from these communities throughout the entire year—not just during designated months.

During school assemblies, we dedicate time to celebrate various communities and their contributions. For example, recent assemblies have highlighted Junot Díaz's writing during Hispanic Heritage Month and honored mathematician Autumn Kent during LGBTQ+ History Month.

Celebrating these months is more than tradition—it helps students see both themselves and others reflected in what they learn. In education, we often refer to “mirrors, windows, and doors.” Mirrors allow students to see their own experiences reflected and valued, windows provide a view into the lives of others to foster understanding and empathy, and doors invite students to step into new perspectives and possibilities.

During assemblies, we highlight key figures, moments, and contributions connected to each heritage and history month. These highlights are designed to provide representation, spark curiosity, and share stories that help all students appreciate the richness of our shared humanity. As we emphasize in our assembly programming, if a student or faculty member would like to highlight someone or something in a future assembly, the school is happy to work with them to make it happen. As an example, during Monday's assembly, we will have a student-created presentation about Días de los Muertos, as well as several student performances that will showcase the diversity of talent and interests within our own school community.

Take care,

Shanie Israel

Dean of Community Life

October 24, 2025

Dear Middle School Parents and Caregivers,

One of the most exciting parts of middle school is discovering what makes you come alive and sparks your curiosity, creativity, and sense of purpose. Finding your passion is not something that happens overnight; it grows through exploration, experience, and the courage to try something new. When I was in middle school, I fell in love with theater arts, broadcast journalism, and creative writing. My family always encouraged me to explore new things and take risks, but they weren't writers or actors themselves. The teachers who recognized my curiosity and gave me chances to act, write, and tell stories are the ones who sparked and shaped my lifelong passions.

At the Middle School, we believe that these years provide the perfect opportunity to begin that journey. Our goal is to provide students with a wide range of opportunities to explore their interests and discover what inspires them. Whether it's through athletics, student government, technology, performance, or leading a FLEX session to teach others something they love, students have many avenues to discover and share their passions.

Curriculum itself can also light that spark. Maybe it happens during a trip to Colonial Williamsburg, when students have the chance to interview people "living" in the past, and suddenly history feels real and alive. Perhaps it happens in a sixth-grade English debate, when a student realizes how much they enjoy building an argument and speaking with conviction. Possibly, the spark ignites during fifth-grade science class when students work in the garden and learn about how the food they consume is cultivated.

We encourage families to talk with their students about what excites them—what activities, topics, or experiences make them lose track of time. Sometimes a passion begins quietly, as a simple curiosity, and grows into something much more meaningful when it's nurtured and supported.

Middle school is a time of discovery, and we're proud to help our students find their voice, discover their interests, and cultivate a sense of purpose along the way. Below are some pictures of students finding their passions this fall at the Middle School and beyond.



Take care,

Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life

October 17, 2025

Dear Middle School Parents and Caregivers,

Last week, following the all-school Gathering, we held our **third (not annual) Student vs. Faculty and Staff Kickball Game** — and what an afternoon it was! The students came ready to play and walked away with an impressive **7–3 victory** over the teachers.

The game was full of great moments. From big kicks and quick catches to the laughter, cheers, and pickle tub drumming that filled the field, there was never a dull moment. Of course, few things compare to the excitement of getting your teacher out at the plate! It was wonderful to see so many smiles, high-fives, and good-natured competition all around.

We love that this event has become a cherished tradition, one that began as a COVID-19 get-together when MKA was hybrid. Since the inaugural game in 2021, the Student vs. Faculty and Staff Kickball Game has become a chance for students to showcase their skills, have fun together outside the classroom, and build connections with the adults who teach and support them every day. We look forward to keeping this tradition alive so that every Middle Schooler has the opportunity to take part in the fun. Please enjoy some pictures below.

Take care,

Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life





October 10, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

As you have seen in WeAreMKA these last two weeks, the Middle School is gearing up for our conferences on October 23. We look forward to seeing you in the building. Conferences are an important part of the community-building process. Whether you are a parent, a teacher, or a

student, conferences provide an opportunity to be a reflective human and put goals and plans in place that allow us to grow as learners and members of society.

Each grade level has a nuanced take on conferences. As you are aware, in the Lower House, students do not participate in conferences, whereas the Upper House holds student-led conferences. Below, you will find information from each grade dean explaining more about conferences for students and families in their particular grade.

Fourth: Fourth-grade parent/caregiver and teacher conferences are valuable because fourth grade serves as a crucial bridge to the Middle School campus. These meetings allow families and teachers to work together in partnership to support students' growing independence, organization, social-emotional learning, and academic responsibility. They also provide an opportunity to identify strengths and areas for growth early, helping ensure a smooth and confident transition to the Middle School building. - Dr. Shah

Fifth: The purpose of fifth-grade parent/caregiver and teacher conferences is to discuss students' social-emotional and executive functioning skill development. During the conference, advisors might share insights about a student's peer relationships, self-advocacy and communication skills, time management practices, and organizational habits. These discussion points are important building blocks of a student's experience and impact their academic performance. Specific information regarding grades will be communicated through a student's academic report, which will come home with extensive comments from each of their academic teachers in November. The advisors' goal for the conference is to foster a strong relationship between home and school, thereby providing the best support for each individual student. - Ms. Till

Sixth: The structure of the sixth-grade student-led fall conference provides our students with the opportunity to build independence and ownership of their learning process. In preparation for the conference, each student will choose artifacts that celebrate their start of the school year, as well as an artifact that indicates an area of growth related to MKA's CORE (control, on-task, responsibility, efficacy) skills. These artifacts allow students to share their experiences while also grounding the conference in tangible examples of learning. The conferences will also serve as a moment of reflection and a chance to form and refine goals for the year in collaboration with advisors and families. - Mr. Wong

Seventh: This year, seventh-grade student-led conferences will feature learning artifacts chosen by students, including at least one they are celebrating and one that demonstrates an MKA CORE (Control, On-Task, Responsibility, Efficacy) skill they want to work on this year. Students will also share a personal goal and some potential action steps to help achieve it. During the conference, there will be opportunities for parent feedback and collaboration as these artifacts are presented. This updated format provides opportunities for a more student-led conference experience, as well as the ability to see some student work from the start of the year, with the student present to provide helpful context and background. - Mr. Gardner

Eighth: To promote more student investment in their eighth-grade student-led conference presentations, eighth-grade students will not only share their strengths, challenges, and goals for each class this year, but also two wellness goals for the school year. These goals are meant to be “S.M.A.R.T” (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) and come from two different sections of the MKA Wellness Wheel (mental, emotional, social, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and environmental). Throughout the school year, students will reflect on their school experiences and goals via vlog checkpoints. These videos will serve not only as a form of reflection but also as a way to share their progress with parents and caregivers at their final student-led conference in May, allowing them to see how their child has grown and overcome any challenges and successes they may have experienced while working towards their goals. New this year, students have been informed that they must adhere to the school dress code during their student-led conferences. This way of presenting themselves maintains the professional standard that MKA promotes both inside and outside the classroom every day. - Mr. Pyke

We look forward to seeing you in the building in a few weeks. If you have not signed up for conferences, please see the information in this week’s WeAreMKA regarding sign-up.

Have a great weekend.

Take care,

Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life

October 3, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

I hope this message finds you well. At our most recent assembly, we kicked things off with Green Day’s “Wake Me Up When September Ends,” so here’s hoping you and your family are wide awake and ready for everything October has in store!

Each week, we highlight a song during assembly. Sometimes the song connects to a heritage month celebration, sometimes to the season, and other times it's a student request. We keep a running Spotify playlist of all the songs and will share it with the community at the end of the year. The goal is simple: give Middle School students a chance to dance a little before we begin, appreciate different genres of music, and see how music strengthens our school culture.

Assembly is an important part of our week. It brings our whole community together to learn, share, and celebrate. Student participation is always encouraged. This past week, we reminded students of the many ways in which they can get involved:

- If a student would like to **sing**, they should connect with Mr. Anderson.
- If they'd like to **play an instrument**, they should see Mr. Murphy.
- If they have a **presentation** to share, they can come to me.

Last year, about 75% of our students stepped up to the microphone during an assembly. This year, I hope to see that number grow. I know not everyone feels comfortable on stage, but part of our work is creating a community that is welcoming and supportive in ways that help students take that leap of courage.

One of the fun ways we do this is through our “**Can’t See Karaoke**” segments, which started last year and were an instant hit. Here’s how it works: a student takes the stage with a microphone, but the lyrics of the song, displayed on the screen behind them, are hidden from their view. The music begins, and they do their best to sing along. Beforehand, I meet with each participant to learn about the artists and genres they enjoy, but most don’t know every word, so the motto is: *fake it till you make it*. Inevitably, the audience joins in, cheering and singing along. This year, sixteen students have already signed up to take the stage, and I’m eager to see the joy and bravery this activity inspires. “Can’t See Karaoke” reminds us that perfection isn’t required—what matters is knowing your community is behind you.

On a side note, this is also a great family activity. If things ever get a little tense at Thanksgiving or over the holidays, try breaking out your own version of “Can’t See Karaoke.” It’s guaranteed fun and a great icebreaker.

Wishing you a wonderful weekend!

Take care,

Shanie Israel

Dean of Community Life

September 26, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

Happy Fall! I love this season—the crisp air, the apples, and especially the tall boots. Autumn feels like a giant hug, and I always enjoy a good embrace.

This week, I'd like to shine a spotlight on our eighth graders. Below, you'll find a graphic that highlights how we at MKA define "Ethical Leadership." As the graphic illustrates, our eighth graders are on their own personal leadership journeys as role models in this building. Some leadership roles come with a title, such as Student Government leaders and Student Ed Tech Leaders, but many opportunities to lead go beyond a formal job description.



Every eighth grader serves as a buddy to a fourth grader. On the first day of school, Grade Dean Spencer Pyke, School Counselor Carolyn Metz, and I led a buddy orientation workshop. During this session, we asked students to reflect on their own fourth-grade experiences and to imagine what it feels like to look up to an older student. Together, we discussed some "dos and don'ts" for mentoring younger peers, then engaged in fun activities that older buddies could share with their younger counterparts. The following week, we launched the program with a scavenger hunt for fourth graders and their eighth-grade buddies. This activity not only built connections between buddies but also helped our fourth graders find their way around our sometimes confusing building (you may have felt this yourself at BTSN, when some of our eighth-grade leaders helped guide families to classrooms).

Another leadership opportunity is *8th Grade-Led FLEX*. In this program, eighth graders design a FLEX class, collaborate with a faculty mentor, and lead programming for fourth-

fifth-, and sixth-grade students. This semester, we are excited to offer a variety of creative and engaging eighth-grade-led FLEX options. I've highlighted a few below so you can see how our students are building community and shaping experiences for younger peers.

★ Story Explorers Book Club ★

By Morgan Wentz

We Will:

- Collectively or independently read.
- Write our own ending of the book and predictions after every chapter.
- Play games like Blooket, Gimkit, Kahoot and many others.
- Eat snacks. (Please let me know if you have allergies before I bring in snacks)
- On the last day we will make new bookmarks based on the themes of your favorite book that we read
- And most importantly, HAVE FUN!



Future Feminists Flex

JOIN OUR FLEX

Why should you join?

- ❖ If you believe that women should have equal rights
- ❖ If you want to have fun while doing activities about feminism!
- ❖ If you want to learn about important women in history

What will we do?

- ❖ Each week we will learn about a new famous woman
- ❖ We will have snacks & play kahoots and blookets!
- ❖ We will have fun activities such as poster making, donating to organizations & doing crafts
- ❖ We will make a newsletter to share with the school!



Spin it to Win it

Are you ready to spin and win your way to fun? Join the Ping Pong Flex where we play fast, laugh loud, and learn cool tricks that'll wow your friends! And don't worry if you have no experience just bring your energy and we will teach you everything you will need to know.



Karaoke and Snacks with Xia, Nina, Anika, and Ms. Israel

If you join our flex, you will:

- sing fun songs with us (you can sing with others or by yourself)
- eat great snacks (cookies, chips, and more)
- meet new people!

If you:

- love singing
- love eating snacks
- want to have a lot of fun

then you should join our flex!

(If you're afraid of singing in front of large crowds our flex may not be for you, but we will help you with your confidence and make you all feel welcome)



Of course, being a leader isn't always easy. Holding a title, whether as president, captain, or head of an institution, does not automatically mean someone possesses the skills or qualities necessary to be an *ethical* leader. That is why MKA emphasizes Ethical Leadership. We are committed to giving students both structured and informal opportunities to practice leadership, discover their voices, and make meaningful contributions to our community.

Enjoy the fall weather.

Take care,
Shanie Israel
Dean of Community Life

September 19, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

For those who don't know me, I grew up in Ohio during the 1980s and 1990s. To be specific, I grew up in suburban Cleveland and attended middle school from 1991 to 1993. As a suburban kid, I never really had a relationship with the city or with the country. I lived in an in-between space, where driving, malls, and playing Nintendo defined my daily experiences. However, that shifted during my sixth-grade year. At the start of that year, my school took five all-day field trips to The Nature Center at Shaker Lakes. I suppose our school wasn't prepared for us to attend a sleepover; however, we did participate in a week of all-day programming, so the school valued this opportunity.

During our trip, each day, we were given what was called a "Magic Spot." There, we were placed alone with a notebook and told to sit. I remember it fondly. For me, it was a pivotal moment when I realized that I needed to take time outside of my suburban existence to be one with nature. Besides the Magic Spots, I remember team-building activities, learning about recycling (it felt revolutionary at the time), and having the opportunity to hike with my homeroom. This trip changed me. It made my school year better, as I felt connected to my teachers and my classmates in ways that were different than usual, fostered by our team-building opportunities, and it began my long-lasting love of nature and the outdoors. I won't waste this space with my camping travels this summer, but I'm happy to share if we see one another in person.

I have been asked by several parents and faculty members why we take students to Fairview Lake and Camp Mason at the beginning of the year. The answer is complex; in its simplest form, we travel to these camps to bring students to a new environment where they can connect with themselves, each other, and nature without the confines of school life. This year, I attended the sixth-grade trip, and I was blown away by the smiles, the laughter, the connections made between the new students and the returning ones, and the excitement that everyone felt when a lean-to withstood the elements or a Fairview Lake Counselor's factoid blew a student's mind. It was an honor to attend.

Below you will find pictures from the trip and a final quote by Ralph Smart that will highlight one more reason we head to the woods to begin our year.



"There is no Wi-Fi in the forest, but I promise you will find a better connection."
 – Ralph Smart

Take care,
 Shanie Israel
 Dean of Community Life

September 12, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

The start of a school year is both exciting and challenging. Students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families all step into the unknown, hopeful for a strong beginning. This is why Community Days are so valuable—they give us the chance to share, reflect, and connect around the essential question: *What is your Cougar Superpower?* Through games, conversations, and shared experiences, our first two weeks have laid the foundation for a community where every Cougar feels a true sense of belonging.

Highlights since the start of the school year:

- **Communication Assembly:** Dean of Students, Cali Burks, and I acted out common miscommunication scenarios and asked students to suggest better choices. We highlighted key Cougar Superpowers for success and reinforced our shared commitment to a respectful community by reviewing MKA's Hate Speech and Bias Incident policy.



- **Cougar Masks:** Students began designing masks to showcase their individual Cougar Superpowers. They will be displayed around the building so each superpower can shine.



- **Field Day:** After a school-wide barbecue, students bounced, ran, danced, and raced through the afternoon. The warm weather, wide smiles, and Cougar spirit made it a joyful celebration.



- **8th Grade FLEX Leadership Summit:** Our eighth graders are stepping into new leadership roles this year, guiding FLEX sessions for fourth through sixth graders and serving as role models for the Middle School.
- **6th & 7th Grade Trips to Fairview Lake:** Our sixth graders returned Wednesday evening from their bonding trip, and our seventh graders are currently at Fairview Lake enjoying their own off-campus experience. I look forward to sharing more about these adventures in next week's letter.

We are off to a strong start. The energy in the building is positive, full of excitement, and ready for a year of learning and growth.

Take care,

Shanie Israel

Dean of Community Life

September 5, 2025

Dear Middle School Families,

Welcome to the 2025–2026 school year! It is so nice to be back and to see so many wonderful, smiling faces. I love the start of a school year. It provides a fresh beginning and a chance to reflect, reset, and dream about all that is possible in the year ahead.

This summer, I spent time reflecting on my own hopes and dreams for our Middle School. I'd like to share just a few with you:

- I hope that every Middle School student feels a true sense of belonging and a strong connection to our school, their teachers, and one another.
- I hope that students and families know how deeply the MKA faculty cares about each child's well-being, and that all we do at school is with the hope that they thrive.
- I hope that each student has the opportunity to discover, nurture, and celebrate their unique superpower this year.

As I mentioned in a letter sent earlier this summer, our guiding essential question for the year is “*What is Your Cougar Superpower?*” To share the heart behind this theme, I want to include the words of our Eighth Grade Class President, Noa Streater, from her welcome speech:

Now, this year, we are all being asked one thing: what's your cougar superpower? Now, honestly, when I first heard that, I had no idea what that meant at all. Was it about grades, sports leadership? I had no idea. But maybe that's the point. Maybe? That was the beauty of the question. Maybe the question not having one distinct answer is what made it good? Maybe your cougar superpower is whatever spoke to you most deeply, or maybe it was whatever goal you had for yourself was or maybe it was that person in your imagination who you strived to be, but I don't know. Because honestly, if you asked me in 4th grade, I would have said my cougar super power was my swimming skills! But not today. Today, my cougar superpower is my willingness to put myself out there when I'm not 100% sure it's gonna work out. It's raising my hand when I'm not sure if I got the answer right, it's running for president when I didn't know how it was going to end, it's speaking to all of you right now. And again, if younger me had heard me say that, they would question if it was really me. Your cougar superpower is whatever you want it to be. But it shines brighter when you share it.

You are probably going to see signs around the school that say “our school is strongest when all superpowers are visible.” What I think that means is what makes me special, and what makes you special is not supposed to compete with each other, but highlight each other. My willingness to put myself out there is my power, but it shines with someone's creativity, kindness, or ambition. When we are all our best selves, we are all stronger.

Hearing Noa's words brought tears to my eyes. Her message captures the very essence of what I hope for our school community this year: that our students recognize and share their gifts, that they feel proud of who they are becoming, and that together we create a place where every individual's superpower makes us all stronger.

Here's to a year filled with connection, growth, and the courage to let our superpowers shine.

Take care,

Shanie Israel

Dean of Community Life