



**May 27, 2022**

## **Morton District 709 Weekly Update**

And so we close the curtain on another school year. From start to finish, it was a grand show.

Before we get into all that, we want to express our sympathies to the students and families of Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. We all know what happened there this past week, it has become an all-too-common tragedy in America, and it is only natural for many of our Morton families to be concerned about how prepared District 709 is against such a circumstance. We heard from some of you this past week.

We would like our parents, students, staff and other community members to know that:

- All of our schools have secure entrances that are electronically controlled, which allows us to directly manage access for visitors.
- The district completed a security audit in 2019 that alerted us to how we could maximize the safety of our students and staff. We have implemented the recommendations of that audit over the last three years. The School Board will be updated on the progress of that in June.
- District 709 has an on-site school resource officer, employed by the Morton Police Department.

- Our crisis plan is reviewed annually with all local first responders – most recently on May 16 – and we drill to better our readiness for any potential safety breach.
- We practice “see something, say something” protocols, with an active tip line in place at each school for those who witness suspicious behavior. As always, we are in this together, and we encourage our community members to help us keep our schools safe.
- Social/emotional learning is a top priority in District 709, and we are constantly monitoring the mental health of our students and training our staff members in that regard.

Because of the sensitivity of this topic, we are careful about sharing all of our security measures. However, we do want to reassure our students, staff, parents and other community members that safety is always at the top of our list, that it has long been the case for our administration and School Board, and that we are aware of and take very seriously the many challenges that confront us, as well as always being open to constructive public input.

Our students officially concluded the 2021-22 school year today with a half day of classes, and we send them off with wishes for a happy, healthy summer vacation.

It has been a year of triumph for Morton District 709, and so some reminiscence is required.



Turtles galore at Grundy



Clearing hurdles in District 709, all year long

That starts with our full year of uninterrupted in-person instruction that saw our achievement scores – already at a high level -- continue to improve pretty much across the board. It continues with our outside-the-classroom accomplishments – including a 16<sup>th</sup> consecutive state title for our Morton High marching band, third place state trophies for our boys’ cross country and girls’ basketball programs,

and an unprecedented Final 4 finish for our MHS football squad.

That success hasn't stopped. In just the last week, we had three Morton High girls track athletes compete in their state finals. Four of our boys' track athletes qualified for state competition this weekend in Charleston. Three MHS tennis players have moved on to pursue their state hardware dreams, as well. Our boys' baseball team, following another outstanding campaign with 27 wins, plays for a regional title on Saturday. And our Lady Potters' soccer team won a regional title before ending their season in a valiant effort against Notre Dame.



Off to state tennis finals



Keenan Smith, state champ, 400-meter dash

At Morton Junior High, our boys' and girls' track teams came away with state medals in the high hurdles, discus, 100-meter dash, 4x200 and 4x400 relays. Most notably, 7<sup>th</sup> grader Keenan Smith won a state title in the 400-meter dash, setting a new class record in the process. Well done, all.

It has been a stellar year for our staff, as well. This past week we honored three truly outstanding employees with the three most prestigious awards given by District 709. The Potter's Hand Award for excellence in a non-certified position went to Morton High School special education job developer/coach Kristi Ruxlow. Walking away with the Dana Ashby Memorial Service Award for exemplary work with special needs



Lincoln field trip to Lincoln's New Salem





Award winners Rhonda Howard, Laura Zehr, Kristi Ruxlow

students was Morton Academy's Rhonda Howard. And the Master Potter Excellence in Education Award, the top honor given a teacher in District 709, went to Lettie Brown 4<sup>th</sup> grade instructor Laura Zehr.

"I never wanted to do anything else but teach school," Ms. Zehr said after receiving her award. Many of us in Morton feel that same way. Congratulations.

This is my final communication to all of you as District 709 superintendent.

First, let me say, as I did at our staff awards ceremony, that I have every confidence in Dr. Craig Smock to lead District 709 into the future. We began transitioning over the course of this past school year, he is exceedingly well prepared, he knows the district and community as well as anybody, and he has great ideas. Please welcome him.

Second, School Board members don't get the credit they deserve for what can be a thankless job, but it has been a pleasure to work with a board here in Morton that knows and understands its community and did not hesitate to take decisive action in the best interests of our children when such was very much needed.

Finally, as I also told our staff, I could not have found myself in a better place than Morton – as a school district and as a community -- to cap an immensely satisfying career. My wife and I have a home here, and we will be rooting on our Morton Potters. It has been a privilege, and I thank you.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey W. Hill, Ed.D

Superintendent

Morton Community Unit District 709