

## The WRITE Stuff

By resident education specialist **Perk Musacchio**

As a very astute mom once said to her daughter, “Tether yourself to real people, scenery, furry animals, books, music, and the great outdoors.” I love this because it reminds me that the best things in life aren’t things! But the world has drastically changed in the last two decades, presenting many challenges for today’s parents. While we cannot stop some of the changes our society has undergone, we can be more aware and empowered participants in our own lives and the lives of our children. It has become so easy to tether oneself to technology instead of people, and many parents also get caught up trying to juggle too many lessons, practices, games, recitals, homework, and other activities, which often necessitates grabbing fast food on the go and can interfere with adequate sleep. Crazy-busy lifestyles and the overuse of technology can certainly take a toll on a family’s physical and mental health.

It is critical for parents and educators to create a strong foundation of skills that will nurture healthy brain and body development, balance the use of screens and schedules, and stay informed about what local legislators are doing in response to the alarming increases in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues that face our kids, from preschool through college.

There are currently several pieces of legislation that have been proposed in response to these increases in mental health diagnoses that are being seen in communities across the country including Chester County. While it’s a sad commentary that these bills are even necessary, it’s reassuring to know that we do have representatives who recognize the need to mandate what has been common sense and effective for centuries. It is important for parents to understand that while these issues do often manifest in schools, and appropriate school funding and programming can certainly help to address them, our youth mental health crisis is not a school problem; it is a community problem, and it is up to all of us to work toward solutions.

**House Bill 189, Handwriting Standards for Schools**, recognizes the research showing that the benefits of handwriting extend far beyond the act of writing, such as better hand-eye coordination, greater rates of comprehension and information retention, improved academic achievements, and increased and expanded neural development in areas of language, memory, word recognition and emotion. This legislation, sponsored by Rep. Angel Cruz, would require handwriting instruction in K through 5th grade to ensure that students have the ability to legibly print by 3rd grade and to write in cursive by the end of 5th grade.

Note: The reality is that many children enter kindergarten with poor fine motor skill development, which can lead to an incorrect pencil grip and letter formations that are difficult to reverse. In the past, formal handwriting instruction was left to kindergarten and first grade when most children have the physical skills to be successful. Unfortunately that is no longer the case and preschools are often required to instruct young children in the task of handwriting...ready or not. If children are not given the proper instruction, ample guided practice, or are not developmentally ready to learn to write, they often develop bad habits in their attempt to conform. The result is an inefficient and often illegible system of writing, which as the writing demands increase, can be a trigger for frustration and behavior issues. Cursive instruction takes advantage of a “blank slate” for instruction. No bad habits to undo and usually eager students who can’t wait to use “fancy writing”. With direct instruction, guided practice, teaching to mastery, and then requiring cursive writing, students become fluent writers, which allows them to focus on the content of their writing and not the physical process.

**House Bill 1949, School Free-Play Recess and Lunch Periods**, acknowledges the essential role that recess, free-play, and mental down-time fulfill in a child’s growth and development—including social and emotional development. This bill, introduced by Representative Danielle Friel Otten, would require schools to provide students in elementary grades with at least 40 minutes of free-play recess each day and to provide students in secondary grades with at least 20 minutes each day, in addition to a minimum of 30 minutes of lunch daily for all students.

Note: This is just plain common sense. Kids need to move, and play is the work of young children.

**The Beyond Safe Schools package**, a collection of bills introduced by House Democrats, looks at school safety and security as more than locked doors, metal detectors, and security cameras. The package focuses on recognizing the mental health needs of students from preschool on up and building mental health and behavior supports for students in public schools across the state.

Note: There was a poem written many years ago by Joseph Malens, entitled “An Ambulance Down in the Valley.” It talks about a town that had once engaged in a very bitter debate about whether the best way to deal with the problem of people falling off a local cliff high above the city was to raise funds to build a fence at the top of the cliff or to continue to raise funds to park an ambulance down in the valley, which was very efficiently hauling people off to the hospital. A lot of the townspeople said, “Look, we’ve always had an ambulance there and it’s worked very well. Why should

we raise more funds to build a fence?” Finally common sense prevailed. Someone stood up and said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Let 2020 be the year of prevention and building a community around tethering...to our family, our friends and neighbors, our faith, and the abundance of beauty/nature that surrounds us.

**If you have tips about and/or photos of how your family finds ways to provide a healthy balance in today’s world, please email them to [skills2soarllc@gmail.com](mailto:skills2soarllc@gmail.com).**