Happy New Year! I hope that everyone enjoyed a wonderful holiday season. We are excited to be back in school and look forward to continuing to support the progress of our students over the final six months of the school year! I am particularly excited by the members of the Class of 2019. They have displayed a tremendous commitment to academic excellence, community service, and extracurricular involvement. I am confident that they are making excellent progress that will lead to success in college, service to our country and the world of work. I wish them and all of our students, faculty and staff success; I hope that 2019 brings the entire Mount Markham school community good health and lasting accomplishments.

I want to share an important update and then I would like to share a request. First, the update; if you have been following the local news, you might recall that this fall, the Herkimer County Legislature approved the addition of several Herkimer County Sheriffs to serve as School Resource Officers. Mount Markham is one of four school districts in Herkimer County that does not have the benefit of a municipal police force. By contracting with the county, Mount Markham can have a daily law enforcement presence on our campus to supplement the daily measures that the district takes to protect our students and staff. We look forward to working with Sheriff Farber and his department to provide this important additional protection for our campus.

Now a request; this is difficult for me because my request reveals a contrasting opinion from that held by many respected colleagues and parents about an important educational topic-assessment. My request is simply stated-please encourage your children to prepare for and complete all academic assessments including the grades 3-8 ELA and Math assessments administered this April and early May. Here are the reasons for my request:

1. As a parent and as an educator, I want each parent to know the progress their child is making toward achieving the New York State Learning Standards in English Language Arts and math. In grades 3-8, this opportunity is provided annually. In high school, each child will be required to pass a New York State Regents exam in both content areas to graduate. Taking the ELA and math assessments provides parents with annual information about their students’ progress;

2. Most of the issues which led to the “Opt Out” movement have been resolved or deferred. Our state education department has been responsive to criticism about its roll out of new standards, the Common Core, the length of the assessments, and timing. The current tests are written with the help of New York State teachers; the assessments are now shorter and untimed; students can even take the assessments on the computer. Importantly, results from the state assessments cannot be used to evaluate our teachers and principals; instead, the results have the potential to provide valuable instructional insight, particularly if all children take the assessments. More progress is needed with the assessments, but significant progress has been made;

3. Annual assessment in ELA and math is part of a federal requirement and frankly, it’s a reasonable one. The federal government distributes billions of dollars back to the states to support public education. In return, through laws like ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act), the federal government outlines requirements to promote student progress. One of these requirements is that 95% of the eligible children take the annual assessments. This makes sense, how can we promote equity and understand where improvement is needed, if we cannot measure student progress annually; finally;

4. Assessment is an important part of public education and in life. From the one room classroom to the Ivy League, assessment is used to measure student progress and to inform future instruction. Every New York State student attending a public school is required to pass Regents exams in multiple content areas in order to graduate. Most of our students attend college; many of these students will take the SAT or ACT as part of the admission process. Many of our students attend excellent career tech programs; they take industry assessments to measure their skill competency. There are many more examples of how tests perform a valuable role in our lives.

I have great respect for our students, parents, teachers, and principals. I am confident in our students and parents. I encourage each parent to have their children prepare for and take the annual New York State English Language Arts and math assessments. For more information about these assessments visit nysed.gov or speak with your student’s building principal.