

Princeton Charter School

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Dear Princeton Charter School Family,

I hope this letter finds you enjoying the final weeks of summer before the return to school. I want to share some thoughts on our theme for the year as well as some important changes. This fall marks the 29th year of operation at Princeton Charter School. This is also a New Jersey Department of Education charter renewal year for us which is an important milestone as it determines whether we remain open as a school in the future! (See below for more detailed information on the renewal process.) In this communication, I have included important Back to School information. Please take the time to review carefully (it is a lot!) so that you are aware of all changes in rules and procedures and so that you have time to prepare and submit all requirements in advance of the start of school.

“Charter Unplugged:” Changes in Smartphone/Smartwatch guidelines for the school: Many measures of student mental health indicate that there has been an alarming uptick in self-harm and mental health issues for young people over the last 10-12 years. In our own anecdotal experience, we are seeing an increase in the number of students who are struggling more severely, socially and emotionally. The current thinking supports that social media, cell phones, and screen time is having a serious negative impact on children. Last year we held discussions with parents based on the work of Jonathan Haidt - *The Anxious Generation* and Anna Lembke - *Dopamine Nation*. A recent study published in *Nature* indicates that the mere proximity of a phone causes increased distraction for students.

At the risk of overstepping, I would also argue that technology has resulted in an increased reliance on parents to help students “manage” the day-to-day routine of school. The number of parents dropping off materials, e.g. homework or lunch for students on any given day, is far too many. The concern is that reliance on parents and intervention from parents may prevent students from developing self-reliance and the ability to “manage” independently in the safe space of school, now, when the stakes are low.

While there is no real indication that cell phones improve the safety of children, this is the main reason that parents cite for having cell phones. [See CNN article](#). Overwhelmingly, the reason parents want students to have cellphones is: “So that your child can use their phone if there is an emergency at school 78%.” Ironically, the potential for mental health, self-harm, and dangerous behaviors is linked to early cell phone use. Jonathan Haidt argues, “that we have vastly overprotected our children in the real world. We have to give them more freedom. And we have vastly underprotected them in the virtual world,” from [New Yorker interview](#).

In light of all of these considerations, the administration is proposing a “Charter Unplugged” theme for next year which will include the following changes:

- We discourage student smartphones until the second half of 8th grade.*

- Any cell phone that is brought to school is to be turned off and stored in a locker or cubby for the day. (The school is not responsible for the loss or theft of a student's cellphone.) Students may use phones for communication after normal school hours.
- Use of smartwatches is prohibited at school as well. ** Smartwatches are also to be stored in a locker or cubby. (The school is not responsible for the loss or theft of a student's smartwatch.)
- In class, the default is that Chromebooks stay closed and away unless the teacher directs students to use them.
- Limits to screen time: *Students **may not** use Chromebooks during Homeroom, reading period, breaks, and lunch.*
- Notes are taken on paper.
- Teachers identify on Schoology work that requires screen time. (A conscious effort is made to differentiate between internet time and working in a Google document, e.g. researching on the internet vs. typing a paper.)
- Teachers will consider whether there is value added to using a device for assignments.

*These changes also reflect decisions and trends in Princeton by other schools, and grassroots efforts such as the “Princeton Pledge to Delay the Smartphone!” and the national movement “Wait until Eight.”

**PMS the Middle school at Princeton Public Schools is making the same change.

The new guidelines have been updated in the Student-Parent Handbook for 2025-26.

We will plan an evening meeting to discuss these changes in greater detail. If you have any concerns, please reach out to Lisa Eckstrom, Michelle Dowling, or me.

NEW Lunch Service - We are thrilled to announce Maschio’s as our new food service provider. This is actually a structural change in how we will provide school lunch - we will now have meals that are prepared on-site in our kitchen (not delivered). The goal of the kitchen renovation last year was to allow for this to happen. Meals prepared on site will be fresher. In addition, a major change will be that students will be able to purchase snacks in addition to lunch. There will be a variety of food choices available for purchase by students that all conform to the nutritional guidelines put forth by the state and federal government.

With the change of service, there will be a new ordering process. Students in grades 3-8 will place their lunch order in the morning the “day of.” Parents of students in Grades K-2 will order online using a form.

The cost of the meal will be \$5.25 (reduced from \$5.85 K-5, and \$6.50 grades 5-8 last year). Parents ordering lunch/snacks will need to set up a Payschools account which can be done using [this link](#), which includes all information on the lunch service - menus, registering for Payschools, ordering, and allergy sheets. The link is also available on the school website (in Quick links, Lunch).

Forms and back-to-school requirement: All start of school forms, approvals, and contact information updates will be completed in PowerSchool this year. [Here is the link to detailed instructions](#) on how to access PowerSchool and how to upload and fill in all information required. Please take some time to

read through all required forms and permissions and to log onto PowerSchool. After School Program registration is also available through PowerSchool (under the “enrollment” tab).

We are asking that all forms and permissions be completed by Friday, August 29, 2025. As a plug for athletics, we are encouraging students in grades 6-8 to consider registering for soccer and field hockey this year to ensure that we have enough players to field teams. We will be offering Cross Country (which is always very popular) as well this fall. Sports meet on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Participating in sports at Charter has been a great experience for our students, a chance to be part of a team, learn, and have fun. Unlike other schools, we do not make cuts on our teams so it is a great opportunity to have a team experience.

I have included an avalanche of general updates and information below. Please take the time to review. I urge you to take the time to read the *drop-off procedures* and the *handbook* carefully. These documents contain important information that is essential for the safe and effective operation of the school.

All letters and materials sent out via email are on the website for your reference under “Announcements - Back to School 2025.”

Enjoy the rest of the summer.

Sincerely,
Larry Patton
Head of School

General School Updates

Calendar Items: The school provides calendar information in two different formats. First, the [calendar of openings and closings](#) for the academic year 2025-26 indicates all holidays, openings, closings, ½ days, parent-teacher conferences, etc. This can also be found as a PDF on the school website.

In addition, school events are marked on the school's Google calendar which is located on the website - [Click here](#). By clicking on the Google Calendar link in the lower right hand corner of the calendar, you can upload school events automatically to your own Google calendar. This will allow changes, additions and deletions from the calendar to update live.

Key events in September:

8/27	Wednesday	Grade 5 Orientation - 2:00 PM
8/28	Thursday	Optional New K-4 Parents Q&A w/ Mrs. Dowling 11:00AM - Charter Room
9/2	Tuesday	The first day of classes
9/9	Tuesday	5-8 Back to School Night - In Person
9/11	Thursday	K-4 Back to School Night - In Person

Student-Parent Handbook: [See link to a PDF](#) of the 2025-26 Student-Parent Handbook. Please take the time to review the Student-Parent Handbook carefully. You are responsible for following all rules and procedures set out in the Student-Parent Handbook. This year we have added guidelines on the use of Artificial Intelligence as well as the rules for cellphones/smartwatches. Note: You will need to acknowledge that you have read the handbook in PowerSchool.

Renewal: Charter Schools are required to apply for the renewal of their Charter through the New Jersey Department of Education every five years after an initial renewal review conducted in the 4th year of operation; hence, in our 29th year, we must apply for renewal. This is the ultimate level of accountability for performance that Charter Schools must meet. If we do not meet the standard, we will not be renewed, and cease to exist. Two schools were closed last year through this process. However, given our record of excellent performance and strong governance, I am confident in our successful renewal.

NEW Lunch Service: We are super excited that Maschio's will be providing the lunch service this year. [See welcome letter](#). The change to the new vendor will require parents to use PaySchools to make lunch and snack purchases. To sign up for PaySchools, [use this link](#) - (also in "Quicklinks" under "lunch" on the [school website](#)). Students this year will have the option to buy snacks and additional items. They will only be able to do so if there are available balances in Payschools. Note: All snacks conform to nutrition guidelines for acceptable foods in schools. Nutritional information is also listed on the Maschio-Princeton Charter page on the website.

Club and Sports participation fees

Next year, in order to defray the high costs of clubs and sports, parents will be asked to pay a participation fee for some clubs, activities, and sports. This is in response to the budgetary climate in which we are operating and to address the sharp increase in costs associated with these activities.

Clubs: For school sponsored clubs, there will be a \$75 club fee. This fee will not apply to service clubs, e.g. student council. Fees for activities run by outside organizations will vary. Further detailed information including dates, times, and fees will be sent out next week.

Sports - This applies only to Grades 6-8: There will be a \$150 participation fee for each sport.

Music: Jazz, Orchestra, and prep orchestra- There will be a \$250 fee for the year.

Chess: The fee for chess will be \$200 per trimester.

The After School Program (ASP) Registration forms and information on enrolling your child in the after school program (ASP) is available through PowerSchool. If you are having difficulty accessing the ASP forms on PowerSchool please contact Lindsey Donaldson at the Marsee Center.

Drop-off/Pick up Procedures: It is critical that we establish an efficient routine for drop off and pickup and that we maintain above all a safe parking lot area.

New This Year- No use of the back road. The intersection of cars entering the parking lot from Bunn Drive and cars coming from the gravel road is creating an unsafe situation. Cars must enter from Bunn Drive only. **IMPORTANT:** Cars should only turn in when there is enough space to clear the roadway, i.e. do not block traffic coming down Bunn Drive from the direction of Hilltop. This is extremely dangerous.

Entering the Buildings: Students and parents should follow these simple procedures when entering the buildings.

- All students and visitors will only enter through either of the two main entrances, one for the 5-8 building and one for the K-4 building.
- All parents and visitors must sign in at the office when entering the buildings.
- We have provided a drop-off table for parents to leave items for students in order to reduce the number of visitors entering inside the buildings.

Technology: We will provide all students in grades 6, 7, and 8 with a personal Chromebook. Students, however, will not receive a Chromebook (Grades 6-8) or have access to school Chromebooks in the classrooms (grades 2-8) until parents have signed the Computer Use Form on *PowerSchool*. We have a 1:1 Chromebook environment for students in grades 2-5; however, the devices remain in the classrooms.

New Staff and New Staff Assignments: Please help in welcoming new staff members to Charter for AY 2025-26:

Grade 3 Language Arts: Ceelea Graham comes to us from Maplewood Public schools where she has been teaching language arts for the past 7 years. In her time at Maplewood, she developed district-wide literacy curricula emphasizing differentiated instruction and cultural responsiveness.

She has also served as a faculty team leader facilitating cross-department curricular development and strengthening cohesion and communication throughout the school community. We are thrilled to welcome her to the 3rd grade team.

Grade 3-4 Science: Kate Semkowycz will be teaching grades 3-4 science. Kate comes to us from PACE Charter School in Hamilton. She brings a wealth of experience having taught in the elementary and middle schools at PACE over the past 15 years. Kate's focus is on providing students with the necessary tools to achieve their academic goals while instilling a love of learning and promoting cooperative teamwork. She is excited about joining the PCS community and we know she will be a valued member of the 3rd and 4th grade team.

Grade 7 Spanish In order to address the increase in the number of students selecting Spanish, Alma Deinstadt will move to full-time Spanish. We are also taking this opportunity to reset grade level teaching assignments, to spread out teachers and allow students to have different teachers each year. Alma will be teaching the two classes of grade 7 Spanish next year, and Adrianna Gaissert will be teaching in K-2. Constanza Ferro will be teaching grade 1 Spanish and also taking on some of Kalpana's duties in the business office.

Grade 3 Social Studies: Kalpana Mehta will take on the grade 3 social studies classes with Alma moving to grade 7 Spanish.

French: Sonia Dellas will be teaching full-time French to replace the classes left open due to Noum Devlaminck's retirement. Sonia will be teaching K, 1, 2, 7 French.

Please join me in welcoming our new staff members and helping them in their transition to Charter.

Drop-off and Pick-up for 2025-26

We are committed to the safe operation of student drop-off and pick-up. By following these rules as a collective community, we can maintain an efficient process at dismissal. The Charter School parking lots are very busy, and all members of the community must follow all guidelines to ensure safety.

Read these guidelines carefully.

School Building Entrances

Entrances: Students, visitors, and parents will access the school buildings through the main entrances only for each building. These entrances will be clearly marked (on advice from the Princeton Police Department).

Check in: All visitors and parents must check in at the division office upon entering the buildings.

Delivering items to your children or the office during school hours: In order to reduce the volume and better control entry into the school buildings, parents are asked to leave any items for students at the designated drop off tables with clearly marked student names. The tables will be located at the entrances to the school buildings. (This is also on the advice of the Police Department.)

Driving on Campus Guidelines (13 MPH)

When driving on campus, all vehicles must maintain **an appropriate speed** and safety standards to ensure the well-being of all individuals on campus. (13 miles per hour) Consider that there are 474 students and staff on campus during the day, entering the buildings and walking through the parking lots in the mornings and in the afternoons.

Parents should always follow the direction of the staff who are supervising the space.

Decorum and Communication: We ask that parents communicate in a respectful and calm manner with each other or not at all. If there are any issues in the parking lot, it may be better to bring the issue to a school administrator rather than attempt to communicate with other parents.

Follow the direction of traffic as indicated:

- As mentioned earlier, parents should not use the back (gravel) road from Ewing Street for drop off and pick-up.
- All cars should enter through the upper parking lot on Bunn Drive.
- All cars should exit from the lower exit on Bunn Drive.
- **New:** During drop-off and pick-up, the exit at Bunn is right turn only, i.e. **NO** left turn onto Bunn Drive.

Drop-off and pick-up

Children should know clearly whether they are getting picked up, taking the bus, staying late for an activity, or walking home. Communicate early with the school before 2:00pm if there is a change in procedure and be clear with your child what the plan is or if there is a change in the plan. If we do not receive a written change in dismissal procedure by 2pm, your child will automatically follow his/her regular dismissal procedure.

Follow the direction of staff members who are on duty for drop-off or pick-up. Students who are not picked up by the end of the dismissal time will go directly to the After School Program.

School Bus: The most efficient way for your child to travel to and from school is on the school bus provided by Princeton Public Schools Transportation Department. We urge you to take advantage of this free service. **Any questions or problems should be directed to Princeton Public Schools Transportation at 609-806-4209.**

NOTE: Students may only ride their assigned bus. A student may not board a different bus to go home with a friend.

We recognize that the buses may arrive very early in the morning, but it is also an option to take the bus home in the afternoon only. Parents may want to consider using buses on the way home as an option.

Two Key Factors: During drop-off and pick-up, we have identified two key factors in order to maintain a safe and efficient operation.

First Key Factor - Keep the roadway clear of any blockage: cars must be able to move through the lanes at all times. To accomplish this:

- Do not park in the school bus/fire lanes.
- Do not “block the box” at the merge at the top of the parking lot.
- Do not leave cars unattended in the bus/fire lanes, no exceptions.
- **Do not double park when waiting for students at pick-up (Pull into a lined space.)**
- Do not make a left turn onto Bunn drive during pick-up and drop off.

Second Key Factor - the speed at which students load into and unload from the vehicle.

- Children should be ready to enter and exit the car quickly on the sidewalk side. Please determine in advance that the location of your child safety seats makes this possible.
- Do not keep backpacks in the trunk as this causes a delay and a traffic back-up.
- Please stop your car only long enough to drop the student off. (Do not wait for your child to walk into the building.)
 - Communicate any messages to your child before dropping off.

- If you need to get out of the car, the car must be parked in a lined parking space.
- Do not leave your car unattended if you are not parked in a lined parking space.

Drop-off

Congestion occurs when too many cars arrive in the parking lot at the last minute, i.e. 7:59 AM. Parents end up rushing, driving too quickly, and students start their day in a stressful mode. It is important to drop students off early enough to allow time to get to their homeroom, visit their lockers, etc. Drop-off is very calm and smooth from 7:40-7:50 which is a nice time to target. After 7:55 AM it can become backed up and busy.

K-4 stay left: At drop-off (or pick-up) for a K-4 student, enter the opening at the north most point of the school and stay to the left. Use the left lane to pass cars dropping off for grades 5-8. Look to carefully cross over to the right at or just before the middle portion of the walk that runs along the front of the school, i.e., the portion just before the main K-4 front doors. All K-4 students will be dropped off in this middle section.

Do not block the left lane when pulling over to the right. If needed, pull forward and wait to pull in rather than block the left lane for exiting 5-8 cars.

5-8 stay right: At drop-off (or pick-up) for a 5-8 student, enter the opening at the northernmost point of the parking lot and stay in the right two lanes, i.e. keep the left lane clear for K-4 parents. Proceed to the drop-area at the path to the main entrance of the 5-8 building. (Parents can drive down in the middle lane to keep the entrance clear.) Students must exit the car on the sidewalk side.

LOCATIONS

Students are to be dropped at the curb at any point reasonably close either before or beyond the 5-8 entrance path. We will set out cones indicating the point at which cars can unload students.

Students should be ready to disembark immediately and as quickly as possible. This is not the time to put on coats, stow books and toys, or finish eating. Backpacks should be in the car cabin (not in the trunk) as getting them from the trunk in the back of the car is time consuming and dangerous.

Students should not exit or enter their vehicles on Bunn Drive, or at the upper end of the parking-lot. It is tempting to disembark while waiting at the top of the parking lot, but invariably, the cars in front move forward while students are disembarking and it causes a back up onto Bunn Drive; wait until the car is in the drop-off area.

Students should not get out of the driver side of the vehicle as cars may be passing at close proximity.

Drop-off timing

Grades K-2:	7:35-7:45AM
Grade 3-4	7:45-7:55AM
Grade 5-8	7:45-7:55AM

Late Arrival: Parents must escort students to the office after 8:00 AM in order to sign in as late. Parents must park in a space when escorting children into the building.

Pick-up

In order to facilitate a speedy and efficient process during pick-up, please follow these guidelines:

NO STANDING: Cars may not double park and wait for students to arrive for pick up. (You will be asked to move/circle around and re-enter the carline if your child is not available at time of pick up.) Cars that arrive early create the backup problem for the entire school.

This is singularly the biggest cause of delays in the parking lot - cars that arrive before students are out.

Pick up older child first. If you have a K-4 student and a 5-8 student, arrive at the 5-8 time. Your younger child will be supervised until you arrive. This avoids waiting in the K-4 pick-up area, blocking a lane, until the 5-8 student is dismissed. It is also helpful for the 5-8 students to walk down to the K-4 area - one stop.

Park if early: If cars arrive early for pick-up, which is defined as “any time before the students are available or dismissed for pick-up,” parents must park in a lined space, or pull around and return once students have been dismissed, i.e. no waiting for students to come out of the building.

Do not block the left lane: The left lane must always be open, i.e. you may never wait in the left lane for students or to merge.

Do not block the upper intersection: The entrance intersection at the top of the parking lots must always be kept clear for cars to pull in. All cars blocking this area must move down in the middle lane or left lane to keep the intersection clear. There is no standing in this area.

Pull all the way down: Students should not load into cars at the upper end of the parking lot. This leads to back up and congestion.

Load quickly: As mentioned above, students should enter cars quickly, do not load backpacks into the trunk, etc.

Pick-up Timing:

Grades K-2	3:05-3:15
Grades 3-4	3:10-3:15

Grades 5-8 3:15-3:30

Buses usually begin arriving for pick-up at Charter at 3:30PM according to the end of their previous route.

Late Pick-up: Students who are not picked up by the end of the dismissal time will be sent to the After School Program.