

Morris Knolls High School—The First 50 Years

For the past 50 years, this campus setting has been a special place where thousands of graduates can claim the Knolls as their Alma Mater. Opened in 1964 and built to accommodate approximately 1,000 students, Morris Knolls immediately established itself as a highly reputable secondary school. Starting with a staff of 74, and classrooms numbering 54, Morris Knolls High School expanded rapidly.

Morris Knolls High School has its origins in its sister high school, Morris Hills High School. The Morris Hills Regional High School District (MHRHSD) was formed in 1951 after voters in Denville, Rockaway Borough, Rockaway Township, and Wharton passed a referendum in October 1949, voting 2,675 to 318 to form the district. Morris Hills opened in 1953 to 840 students from all four towns. In 1955, voters passed a \$1.8 million referendum to expand Morris Hills which would house an additional 1,000 students. That addition opened in 1957.

In 1963, Morris Hills had a student enrollment of 2,200, a faculty of 120, and four administrators. Over 1,400 students, more than three-fifths the student population, were transported by bus using 32 buses to accomplish this mass transportation. However, based only on the population of the schools in the four constituent K-8 districts, student enrollment at Hills was expected to reach 3,000 without allowing for additional families moving into the four municipalities.

The chief school administrator (CSA) in the MHRHSD, Mr. Nathan Gifford, later determined that a further expansion of Morris Hills wasn't practical and that a second school would be required for the growing needs. A 55-acre tract of land known as the Holstein tract was purchased off Franklin Ave. in Denville for the second school. As Denville was celebrating its 50th anniversary, Morris Knolls was under construction. The school would be located on the tract off of Franklin Ave. However, with no road access to the school, Knoll Drive was built to Franklin Ave.

Once Morris Knolls opened, the MHRHSD drew the district's lines, with students from Denville and Rockaway Township (except for White Meadow Lake and southern parts of the township) being transferred to Morris Knolls and those from Rockaway Borough, White Meadow Lake and southern parts of Rockaway Township, and Wharton remaining at Morris Hills. However when Knolls opened, this affected only the underclassmen, making Morris Knolls's original students the school's original underclassmen, which made the school's original seniors the school's original juniors; in '64, Mr. Gifford and Mr. Andrew Montecucollo, the principal at Morris Hills, had seniors from all four towns remain at Hills so that they could graduate with their class. Some of the Morris Knolls's original staff were also transferred from Hills, including the school's first principal, Mr. Robert Dikon, and Mr. Patrick Caruso, the school's first assistant principal, both of whom were promoted from positions at Hills.

By 1970, the functional capacity was doubled to 2,100 as a result of a major building addition, including more classrooms, a spacious auditorium, an expanded gymnasium and a second cafeteria. By the late 1970's, Morris Knolls High School reached its zenith in the size of the student body with almost 2,200 students and professional staff of 150 classroom teachers, support personnel and building administrators. Along with the rapid enrollment growth in the '70s the curriculum was significantly broadened to enrich the educational experience of students. Our work study and vocational technical programs enabled us to provide learning opportunities compatible with the world of work. During that period of time, Morris Knolls affirmed its place as a comprehensive educational institution.

As Morris Knolls High School entered the 1980s, a third major campus improvement was initiated, culminating in the dedication ceremony of Caruso Stadium in 1983. Outdoor athletic facilities were upgraded, a campus beautification program was implemented to maintain the high standards for site

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and facilities care. The 1980s saw the start of our innovative Gifted and Talented Program, a Freshman Awareness Program, Advance Placement courses, a Peer Listening Program and a host of state and nationally recognized special programs designed to meet the changing needs of our school population.

The 1990s brought dramatic changes in technology and Morris Knolls has kept pace with these changes by adding numerous computer laboratories, course offerings across the curriculum utilizing computers and a variety of computer software.

Entering the new millennium Morris Knolls again moved forward, this time by adding an addition to the building and improving campus facilities. In 2003 MK started construction on a two story science wing. Major renovations included a new gym floor and bleachers, locker and team rooms, tennis courts, new surface for the track, and chairs and carpet for the auditorium. The art and technology departments were also renovated. Construction was completed in 2007.

In 2013 the grass field at Caruso Stadium was replaced with state of the art turf field.

Thanks to Mr. Sanjay Iyer, Morris Knolls Class of 1997 and special contributor and a special ambassador for the Morris Hills Regional High School District, for helping contribute to the history of MK, especially on the information about the school's origins. He can be reached at sniyer12000@gmail.com.