

# Llife

INSIDE  
THE WEEK  
AHEAD  
E13

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

Thank you for your dedication to education. I  
see things seem discouraging now, but demand  
creators and persons with your skills will  
rise on the economy and state budgets rebound  
In the meantime, I'm rooting for you!



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

# POWER OF THE PEN

A ROOSEVELT EDUCATOR'S LETTER TO  
PRESIDENT OBAMA AND HIS REPLY SPUR A FOCUS ON PROSE

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NEWSDAY / ALEANDRA VILLA

# The write stuff

A poignant letter to President Barack Obama in 2011 got a response and taught an educator the importance and power of writing

Roosevelt Schools Superintendent Marnie Hazelton talks to a third-grade class about the importance of writing well, citing a letter she sent to President Obama.

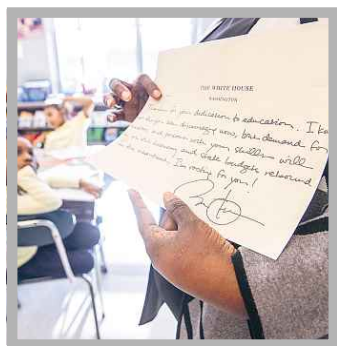
BY KAY BLOUGH  
Special to Newsday

**J**ust about everything is a teachable moment for Marnie Hazelton, superintendent of the Roosevelt Union Free School District. That's not what the educator had in mind, though, when anxiety over a looming 2011 layoff prompted her to pen a letter to the commander in chief, Barack Obama.

"Dear Mr. President," the letter began. "My parents represent the very best of America. My father was one of the first Black students to integrate Baltimore's Polytechnic High School and my mother spent a week in prison after being arrested for trying to integrate a



Marnie Hazelton and her family posed with Obama in 2014 during a White House visit. Family members include her partner Jerome Walker, her son Jordan, 8, and her mother, Marcia Hazelton.



**ON THE COVER** Roosevelt Schools Superintendent Marnie Hazelton holds a handwritten note she received in 2011 from Obama.

movie theatre across the street from her school, Morgan State University.”

Hazelton ended her letter with a question and the valediction “carpe diem” — seize the day.

“I faced some tough times a few years ago, and I was depressed,” she told students recently in Tanya Curtis’ third-grade class at Ulysses Byas Elementary School. “I sat down at my computer and typed



Hazelton, the Roosevelt Schools superintendent, has instituted writing programs throughout the district, from kindergarten through high school.

President Obama a letter where I shared my family story and poured my heart out to him. Then I mailed it off to the White House.”

And that, she thought, was that. It was April 2011, and at the end of the school year in June she would be laid off from her job as Roosevelt’s district coordinator for elementary education. Hazelton’s duties included supervising nine English language arts, math,

science and technology curriculum specialists in three elementary schools; assisting three principals with teacher observations and evaluations; and planning and coordinating professional development. She was also the district’s test coordinator and literacy team co-chair, and led parent orientation sessions on school curriculum and student assessments. On top of that, she was in the second year of a doctoral program

at Hofstra University.

“Then two months later, I got a letter from the White House. When you have the president of the United States, the most powerful and important person in the world, listening to your words, well . . . That speaks volumes to my ability to write and convey my thoughts and emotions. That’s the power of writing,” she told the students.

It’s a power Hazelton and administrators in the district of

## 9 minutes of writing each day

The district’s writing across the curriculum program focuses on writing in all classes and all grade levels, including math, science and social studies classes. The goal is to have a minimum of nine minutes of writing daily.

Students practice writing for an audience by writing poetry, writing for the school newsletter, keeping a science journal, writing for the Rough Writers Spotlight on the district’s website, taking part in the Author’s Convention, where sixth-graders publish a book of pieces they’ve authored and illustrated, and doing a story add-on, where one class begins the story and the next same-grade-level class adds onto it.

There are quarterly districtwide days of writing. In October, the topic was the impact of natural disasters. Math students analyzed the costs and wrote about the impact; science students looked at the causes; and art students used Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream” as a springboard.

This month, students will write about second chances and turning them into opportunities to make better choices.

— KAY BLOUGH



Marnie Hazelton’s mother, with her sorority sisters at Morgan State University in Baltimore, after they were arrested during a 1961 boycott.



Marnie Hazelton also got a chance to meet former first lady Michelle Obama during a New York City fundraising event.

MARNIE HAZELTON

MARNIE HAZELTON

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# Learning the write stuff

## COVER STORY from E6

A Roosevelt Renaissance are part of concerted efforts to keep the district moving forward.

“There’s been a shift in culture and a shift in mindset where we talk about content, and we’re seeing it in the classrooms,” said Hazelton, 48, of Freeport. “You get better through repetition. You have to engage every day.”

It seems to be working at every grade level.

## WRITING AND GEOMETRY

Victor Gbajumo, an 11th-grader at Roosevelt Senior High School, was surprised that writing helped him better understand geometry. “Since we got our journals, I’ve got a lot better understanding of what we’re doing,” said Gbajumo, 16. “It’s been helping me a lot.”

In the beginning, he didn’t think the journals would help in math. He uses the teacher’s words and explanation as he writes, and writing them helps him process and understand them. “Repetition does help,” Gbajumo said.

In English he likes text analysis as well as practicing argumentative writing. “I can express myself and see both sides,” he said.

Jevon Robinson, a senior at the high school, said he likes the writing process he uses in his English, physics and AP Biology classes.

The practice helps them learn physics concepts pretty thoroughly because “we write about it as though we’re explaining it to a fifth-grader,” said Robinson, 18, who hopes to become a doctor or work in the public health field. “We learned we have to go greater into our details to give greater understanding. It helps me to digest the information better. Before, I would get the answer, not the why. Now I know how to get the answer and also why it’s important to me.”

When Hazelton mailed off her letter to President Obama, she recalled that she was upset and angry. She needed to vent and wrote it in one sitting, wondering and asking how she would provide for her family and educate her son “when the education job market is flooded with thousands of teachers



Superintendent Marnie Hazelton talks with students at Roosevelt Middle School.

NEWSDAY / ALEANDRA VILLA

**Writing is a powerful tool, more powerful than I can say.**

— Roosevelt Superintendent Marnie Hazelton

dismissed due to budget cuts?”

The president’s handwritten response two months later offered Hazelton solace and hope during the 13 months she was interviewing and searching for a new job:

“Thanks for your dedication to education . . . I’m rooting for you!” the letter read in part.

In a follow-up thanking him for his encouragement in 2014, Hazelton wrote: “Your letter to me is such a testament in the power of words and providing others with hope! . . . Mr. President, you truly made me feel that I could ride out the storm of unemployment and come through it better and stronger!”

## RIDING OUT A STORM

Between job interviews and riding out the storm, Hazelton

traveled to Paris, Australia and Ireland, among other places, and was a contestant on “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” when Meredith Veira was host, taking home \$25,000.

Her letter made the daily cut when it was one of 10 chosen for President Obama to review at the end of the day from the thousands received daily at the White House. It will be included in an upcoming book about the letters sent to Obama during his two terms in office.

“Writing is a powerful tool, more powerful than I can say, and these story-writing skills are ones you’re going to need years later, to complete an essay or apply for a job,” Hazelton told the class as students shared their story entries for a creative writing contest with

her. “Getting into the habit of writing and writing well is an extremely valuable skill set.”

The writing across the curriculum program at Roosevelt is part of the district’s focus on improving academics and preparing students to compete after they graduate. Students have written about how to solve math problems, explain physics, and personal experiences.

“If we don’t set the bar high, what’s the point?” Hazelton said. “Everybody else has to believe. I think that’s the biggest struggle.”

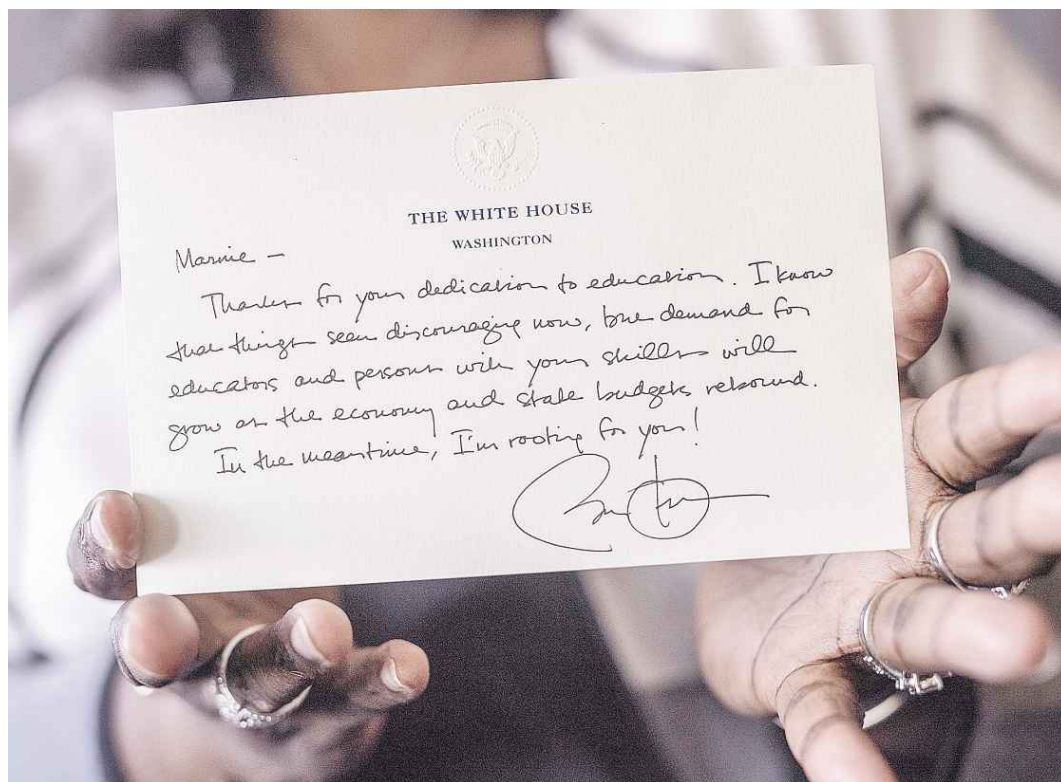
The approach is slowly changing the district’s culture, Hazelton said. “On the elementary level, I definitely see it. There’s a slow build in the high school and middle school, a

slow buy-in and a slow shift.”

The district also is focusing on professional staff development and is following project-based learning, which studies have shown can increase students’ energy, efficiency and motivation and improve student outcomes, she said.

Introducing the program has involved getting teachers on board. The emphasis is that writing is part of instruction, not something new or different, said Veronique Bailey, assistant superintendent for secondary education, although teachers are asked to check entries in Rough Writer journals that each student received in the fall and offer feedback. The journals are a play on Roosevelt’s Rough Rider school mascot.

“We’re asking teachers to



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**Carmen Severino, 8, a third-grader at Ulysses Byas Elementary School in Roosevelt, illustrates a short story she wrote.**

make comments, and if a student is writing a lot, to ask questions and give some quality feedback," said Bailey, 40, of Wheatley Heights.

Staff also is finding the program helps support students' social and emotional journeys. "Students are sharing things in writing they may not want to talk about, and it lets us address the situation earlier than we would have otherwise," she said.

The Rough Writer composition books are kept in the kindergarten through sixth-grade classrooms and in math classrooms in grades 7 to 12. Writing exercises occur in math, science and social studies classes as well as in English class. Student writing samples are featured on bulletin boards in the schools and at the central

office.

"That's a great motivator, seeing your work displayed," Hazelton said. "Writing with illustrations is a powerful piece."

Ryann Hudson, 12, a seventh-grader at Roosevelt Middle School, said she likes the free-writing assignments, especially in English class. "It's made me a better writer," she said. "I'm starting to like it and getting used to doing it."

In math class, they write what was hard or what they liked about a recent lesson. "I like anything with fractions or ratios," Ryann said.

Her schoolmate, Jeremiah Maynard, 13, said the extra writing has improved his reading skills. "I can read faster now and more fluently," Maynard

**Hazelton shows the handwritten response she got from President Obama after she wrote him a letter expressing frustration over losing a teaching job.**

said. He also likes writing and illustrating his own comic books, about typical, everyday problems or supernatural events. He said he keeps the sheets and takes them along on trips to read.

The daily writing tasks are paying off for the students in Curtis' third-grade class. Hands shot up among the 23 students when Hazelton asked how many of them were enjoying writing each day. And about 10 stayed up when she asked how many didn't enjoy writing at the start of the year but liked it now.

#### A WRITING CONTEST

Students entered their 100-word stories in a creative writing contest in October and Curtis, 42, of South Ozone Park, Queens, sent off the submissions after they finished them at home. At first she thought the contest might be too challenging for her mostly 8-year-olds since it was so early in the school year, but she noted they responded well.

"We started off by doing a drawing so they'd have an illustration in mind, then we worked on adjectives for their characters," she said. "We started slow, and then got into the process of writing, how they needed a beginning, mid-

## A history of service

**M**arnie Hazelton's 2011 letter to President Barack Obama included a history of her family's background. She told him that her father was one of the first students to integrate Polytechnic High School in Baltimore, and later served in the Army, stationed in Alaska. Her mother was arrested for trying to integrate a movie theater near Morgan State University in Baltimore. When she graduated she joined the Peace Corps, spending two years teaching in Venezuela, and she continued teaching when she returned to America.

"The most important thing I forgot to mention is how my parents met. My parents' maternal grandfathers fought together in World War I and were sta-

tioned in France together. While serving, their wives lived together in Baltimore. The two families have been friends ever since, and that is how I came to be. It is also worth mentioning that my maternal grandfather and great-uncle both fought in World War II. My grandfather was injured while storming the beaches of the Philippines.

"My father worked for AT&T for 36 years, and my mother was a teacher, assistant principal and principal for 42 years."



**Marnie Hazelton's great-grandfathers Johnsie Cockey, left, and Earl Yates, who were World War I veterans.**

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April 5, 2011

Dear Mr. President,

My parents represent the very best of America. My father was one of the first Black students to integrate Baltimore's Polytechnic High School and my mother spent a week in prison after being arrested for trying to integrate a movie theatre across the street from her school, Morgan State University.

My father went on to serve two years in the United States Army, being stationed in Alaska. And my mother answered John F. Kennedy's call to serve. She joined the Peace Corp. in 1964 and spent two years teaching in Venezuela.

My parents married in 1966 and my father went to work for AT&T and my mother became a teacher. The most important thing I forgot to mention is how my parents' grandfathers fought together in World War I and were stationed together in Baltimore.

dle and end, and it had to be 100 words. They took it from there, and took it home and worked on it."

She estimated it took about three weeks from introducing the process to completing the stories, which helped her pupils model the writing exercises they'd be doing all year. "Maybe it was the Halloween holiday," Curtis said. "The reception was positive, and they were into it. They're at that stage where if you can catch them now, you'll have them forever."

Several students talked about writing their stories. "It was hard because I did it over and over again," said Carmen Severino, 8, of Roosevelt. "And first I had to build it up in my imagination."

Jaiden Urbina, 9, also of Roosevelt, said he got excited about the competition as soon as he heard about it. "I thought about how I could win, and I started paying more attention in writing it," he said.

Winning entries, including the stories from Jaiden and Carmen, will be published in a book from Young Writers due out in March, "Crazy Creatures — Adventures From New York." Ten Ulysses Byas Elementary students were selected — from among 6,000 submissions — to have their minisagas included in the book.

"That's a math lesson for later," Hazelton said to the class when Curtis explained how many student stories were chosen. "And a wonderful accomplishment."