



SCHOOL

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat



SCENE

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At district, pandemic ramps up technology and compassion

The reflections of Tri-Valley Central School District Superintendent Michael Williams are echoed in the hearts of education leaders everywhere.

“Things right now are going as well as we could hope for,” Williams said. “While these are definitely uncertain times, everyone in the school and community has come together to create the most ‘normal’ school year we can for our students.”

Fortunately, Tri-Valley was ahead of the game when it came to technological know-how. That is important because, while computer technology was typically viewed as a tool to support teaching, “now it [gives] us THE tool

that allows all students to receive instruction, regardless of their location,” Williams said.

“Our technology department is fabulous,” he added. “Living where we do, internet access can be an issue. For families without an internet provider but having cell service, we purchased a number of ‘MiFi’ hotspots and provided them to the families free of charge. We pay for them to be able to access the internet using the hotspot, which is high speed, so that these students can stay connected.”

The District also allows families to drive to school grounds, park, and access the District’s wifi without having to go into the school. It’s not ideal, said Williams, “but at



Tri-Valley Superintendent of Schools Michael Williams says Covid has underscored the reality that people don’t work alone. ‘We are all connected as one big educational and social community,’ he said.

the very least these students can do their work as well as have connections with their classmates.”

Tri-Valley uses Google Classroom as its primary tool for teaching and learning. Google Meets allows teachers to create of their virtual classroom space. The model allows for synchronous learning, that is, the teacher working with students in the classroom and students at home

virtually at the same time.

“Every teacher has a camera (using a Chromebook) to livestream the lesson, see the students at home and allow them to ask questions just like the students in the classroom,” explained the superintendent. “It is challenging for the teachers, as they must now focus on more than one location.”

When the day ends, teachers

School Scene

‘A look inside the Tri-Valley Central School District’

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post their lessons on their Google Classroom page for students to review. If a student is absent that day, the lesson is right there, allowing her or him to stay caught up with the rest of the class.

FAMILY STRUGGLES

Williams' heart goes out to the parents, and relatives, of children. "Uncertainty about the future and the stress of on-line learning has brought some of our families to the breaking point," he said. "I hear from parents everyday that they are struggling and in need of assistance and sometimes just a shoulder to cry on."

As for the children academically, some students have excelled in the new virtual environment while others struggle. "Some love on-line learning while others detest it. We understand the pluses and minuses of each and continue to find new ways to enhance the experience for those in need while challenging those that are doing well."

Can any good come from Covid? Williams says yes, and it already

has. "The appreciation for being together, working together, celebrating and mourning together has grown exponentially," he said. "We no longer take for granted that things will always be 'normal.' We've learned to work as a community like never before, to make sure our families are cared for. I believe our students have developed a greater appreciation for what they used to take for granted, like sports and other extracurricular activities."

"I've seen teachers adapt 'on the fly,' creating new methods for instruction, new ways to communicate with students and families, and a new collegiality with their peers. We've discovered how to do more with less."

"I think we've also found that, in some instances, how 'we've always done things' maybe wasn't the best way to do it," he stressed. "I'm not sure, once this is over, that we ever go completely back to doing things the way we did them before COVID."

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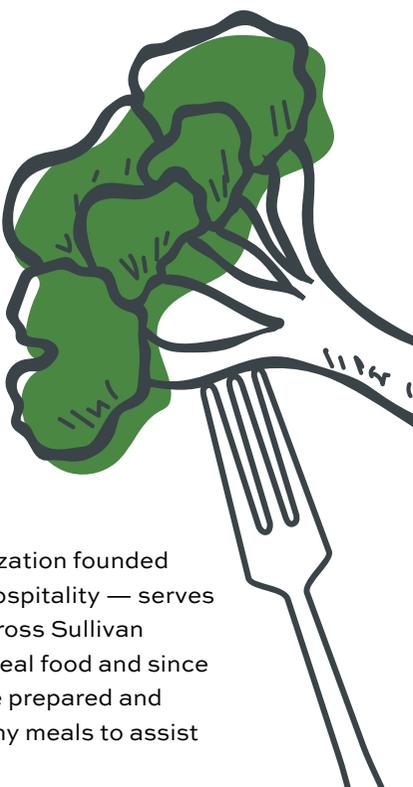
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Teachers talk locale



Teachers April Kackos (left), who grew up in Neversink, and Grahamsville native Bethany Hamilton find it easy to talk about their alma mater and its surrounding close-knit hamlets.

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April Kackos and Bethany Hamilton are both Tri-Valley school graduates, the former eventually becoming teacher to the latter, and now both are teaching in the school district.

Recently, they reflected on what the pull is to the school and to the wooded, winding villages of the Tri-Valley region.

“It’s about this area’s sense of community,” said Kackos, who grew up in Neversink and has now entered her 28th year of teaching math at Tri-Valley High School.

“Growing up, school played a huge role,” Kackos said. “The values of this school and the community, where people really care about one another, drew me to come back.”

Tri-Valley’s large geographic region harbors a series of hamlets that are linked by social encounters at country fairs, pumpkin parties, pancake breakfasts, church thrift shop sales, covered dish suppers and tractor shows.

Tri-Valley School’s renowned

Bernstein Theater stages everything from band and chorus concerts to poetry slams to fundraising Murder Mystery evenings for the school’s Drama Club. The annual teacher-run Tri-Valley School Car Caravan offers a parade of fun. The on-campus greenhouse opens for flower sales.

Apart from Grahamsville, Tri-Valley communities include Neversink, Claryville, parts of Woodbourne, and Sundown and Panache in Ulster County, said Hamilton, who grew up in Grahamsville. A ballpark figure on total regional population would be roughly 5,000 residents.

A teacher of English Language Arts to seventh graders, Hamilton

graduated from Tri-Valley High School, went to college “and bounced around the greater Hudson Valley and then taught at

Sullivan West (Central School District) from 2012 to 2019. I came here in September of 2019.”

“My mom and Dad are here,” she reflected. “I enjoy working in a smaller school district closer to family.”

A traumatic experience helped highlight the value of a close-knit and caring community.

“My mother was hit by a car while walking,” said Hamilton, “and every church and organization in town, every person was asking, can we make meals, can we give money, can we mow your

lawn?”

People from all walks of life wanted to help, Hamilton said. “Teachers, Department of Environmental Protection staff, corrections officers working in the prisons, people who are self-employed, people with small businesses – it reminded me of the importance of community.”

When Kackos and Hamilton were teenagers, they said, they couldn’t wait to get away from their home region. Now they appreciate the multi-generational history, the safeness of the community, and the natural beauty that welcomes hikers from elsewhere.

“A lot of people have moved into the region from New York City, and COVID has heightened that,” said Kackos. “Finding real estate now is quite a challenge.”

But families that do relocate for the mountains, streams and small-town life wind up happily educating their children at the welcoming Tri-Valley Central School.

‘Growing up, school played a huge role. The values of this school and the community, where people really care about one another, drew me to come back.’

April Kackos
Math Teacher

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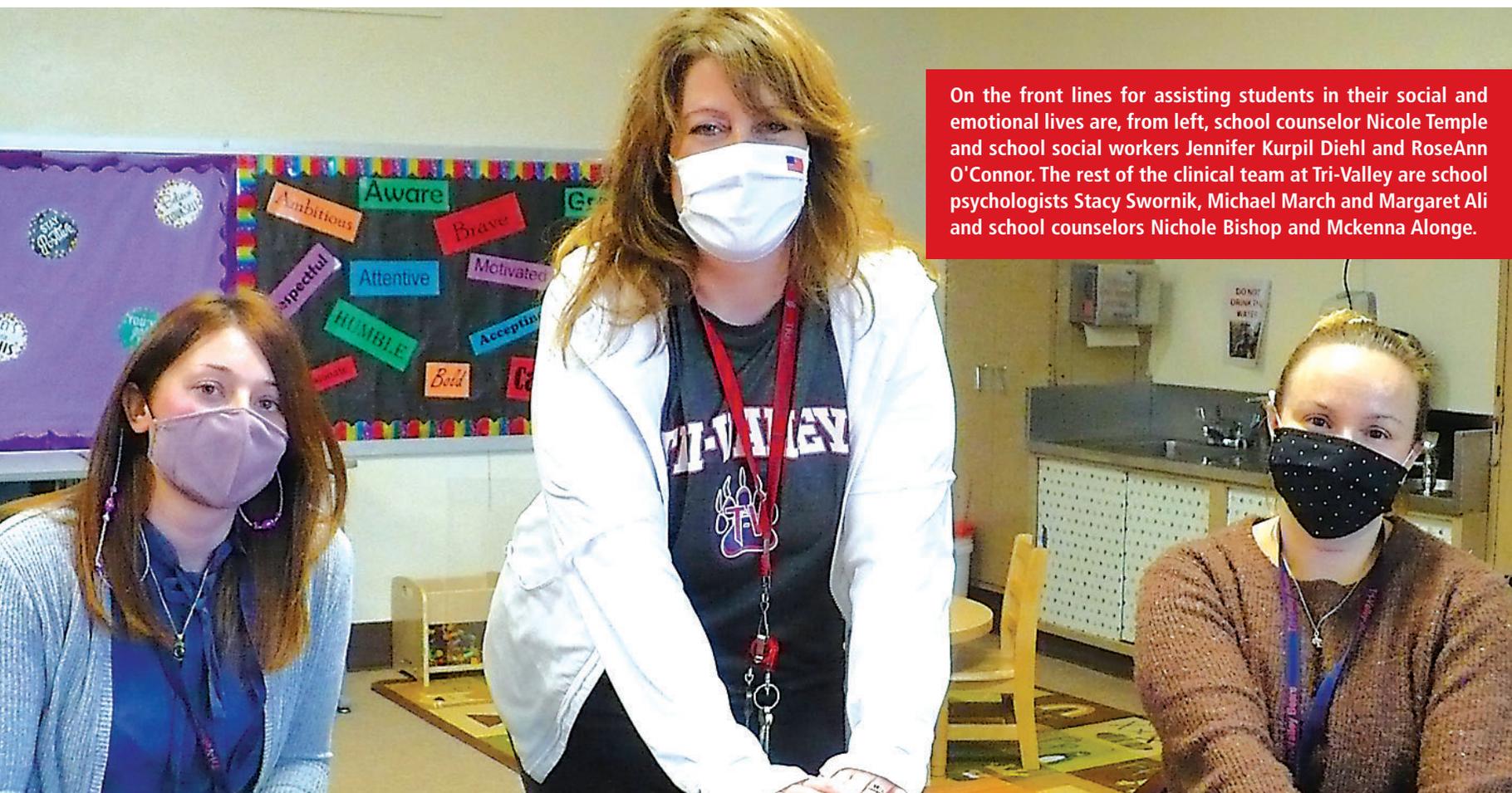
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Experts help students and families adjust to new normal



On the front lines for assisting students in their social and emotional lives are, from left, school counselor Nicole Temple and school social workers Jennifer Kurpil Diehl and RoseAnn O'Connor. The rest of the clinical team at Tri-Valley are school psychologists Stacy Swornik, Michael March and Margaret Ali and school counselors Nichole Bishop and Mckenna Alonge.

How are the children? The elephant in the room, of course, is the coronavirus. At Tri-Valley, three experts in the field of social and emotional wellness got together recently to discuss the evolving changes in daily life caused by the pandemic.

On the positive side, children don't seem to fixate on the annoyance of mask wearing as do adults. Children can be resilient, said school counselor Nicole Temple and school social workers Roseann O'Connor and Jennifer Kurpil Diehl.

Routines have changed radically at most school districts. In Tri-Valley, some 600 students are on a schedule of two days at in-school learning and three days at home doing virtual learning. Another 350 students are learning from home all the time.

"With more responsibility at home, students are maturing," said O'Connor, who works at the

elementary school. "And they are getting to spend more time with their families. One student said he had been missing that (before COVID). Another said his family is having more conversational time during meals and are planning games to do together."

Even at school, there are moments of gladness. "When high school kids do spend time in school, they are very happy to see each other," said Diehl, of the Secondary School. "When they're laughing and joking, I'm happy to hear them during this whole COVID thing."

But depression and anxiety can go hand-in-hand with the coronavirus.

"I talk with kids and parents, and they're experiencing a lot of stress secondary to COVID," said Diehl. "I'm seeing depression among students who are not here among their peers."

Temple, who counsels children on the elementary level, said

some students have anxiety around their varied daily routines. On Mondays and Tuesdays, for example, they are required to get up at 6 a.m. for in-school instruction. But on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday they stay at home for virtual learning, where the schedule is different.

"Some are finding it hard to stick in a classroom," said O'Connor. "They are fidgety. Teachers do brain breaks, martial arts, 'work out the wiggles.'"

Adults are under duress too, laid off from work or still working but depending on family members to help out with the kids at home.

"If parents work, the kids are being cared for by older siblings or by a grandparent," said Diehl. "Adjusting is not always easy."

One ray of light has been a new day-long program of virtual learning and outdoor experiences at the Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, about 15 miles from Grahamsville. For a fee, 45 fami-

lies are sending their students to the program. Children up to and including eighth grade are eligible. If a child is on the Monday-Tuesday schedule at school, then on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday the child attends Frost Valley. Transportation is free, courtesy of the Tri-Valley School District, which buses the students back and forth from their homes.

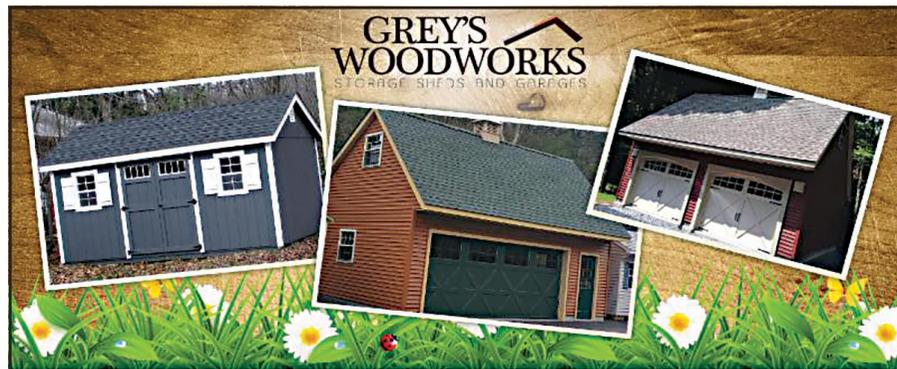
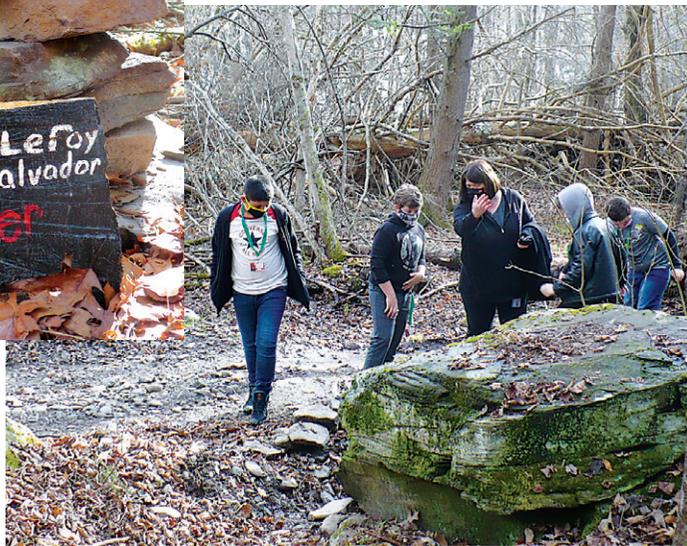
Then there's the wise and helpful new school district newsletter on how to survive COVID. The Quarterly Connection, compiled by the psychologists, social workers and counselors, suggests going on a hike or a walk as a family, building a campfire, slipping outside at night to identify the stars, building a terrarium or organizing a board game night.

"Talk about the aspirations you had at their age and the goals you have today," the newsletter tells parents. "Engage in conversations about future dreams and plans."

Scenes from the Tri-Valley School District



The new fitness trail at school offers a half-mile path for walking or jogging and for calisthenics at various stations. The students were able to play a role in the trail's charm, painting signs and creating landmarks like a carefully planned tower of flat rocks as seen in the photo to the left. Check out page 8 for the complete story.



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New fitness trail at school offers exercise, peace of mind

For Robert, the new fitness trail at school makes him feel calm. For Leroy, it's the sounds in the woods that attract him.

Anthony loves taking in breaths of fresh air, and Salvador wraps it all up with enthusiasm: "It's cool!" he says.

The sixth graders have gotten to know well the winding path hewn out of the woods behind the elementary and high school. The students even played a role in its charm, painting signs and creating landmarks like a carefully planned tower of flat rocks.

The trail's purpose, at least in part, is to offer a half-mile path for walking or jogging and for calisthenics at various stations. Signs here and there encourage students to try out knee lifts, for example, or toe raises, which work the muscles in the lower leg.

But the meandering path, of blacktop here and wood chips there, has many purposes.

"Classes come out to read or to have lunch," said Jason Closs, physical education teacher and School District Athletic Director.

Teachers give lessons outdoors and also take students out for "Bear Breaks," so named after the black bear mascot of Tri-Valley.

"It's not just a fitness trail but a place for the mind," added Maintenance Supervisor Jesse Bell.

Bell and his crew were responsi-

Sixth grade students, from left, Anthony Ingrassia, Leroy Struber, Salvador Rivera and Robert Hadden enjoyed putting 'touch and feel' items like strategically piled rocks for younger students along the trail. Here, they show off the trail's gnome home. Sixth grader Thomas Fidecaro, not pictured, also participated.



ble for the trail's work, along with a number of high school students.

"It was a lot of work by Jesse and his crew in late spring and summer to make it a reality," said Closs.

Bell pointed out that the pandemic actually made things easier. When schools had to close last March, "it allowed us to come out and really achieve it."

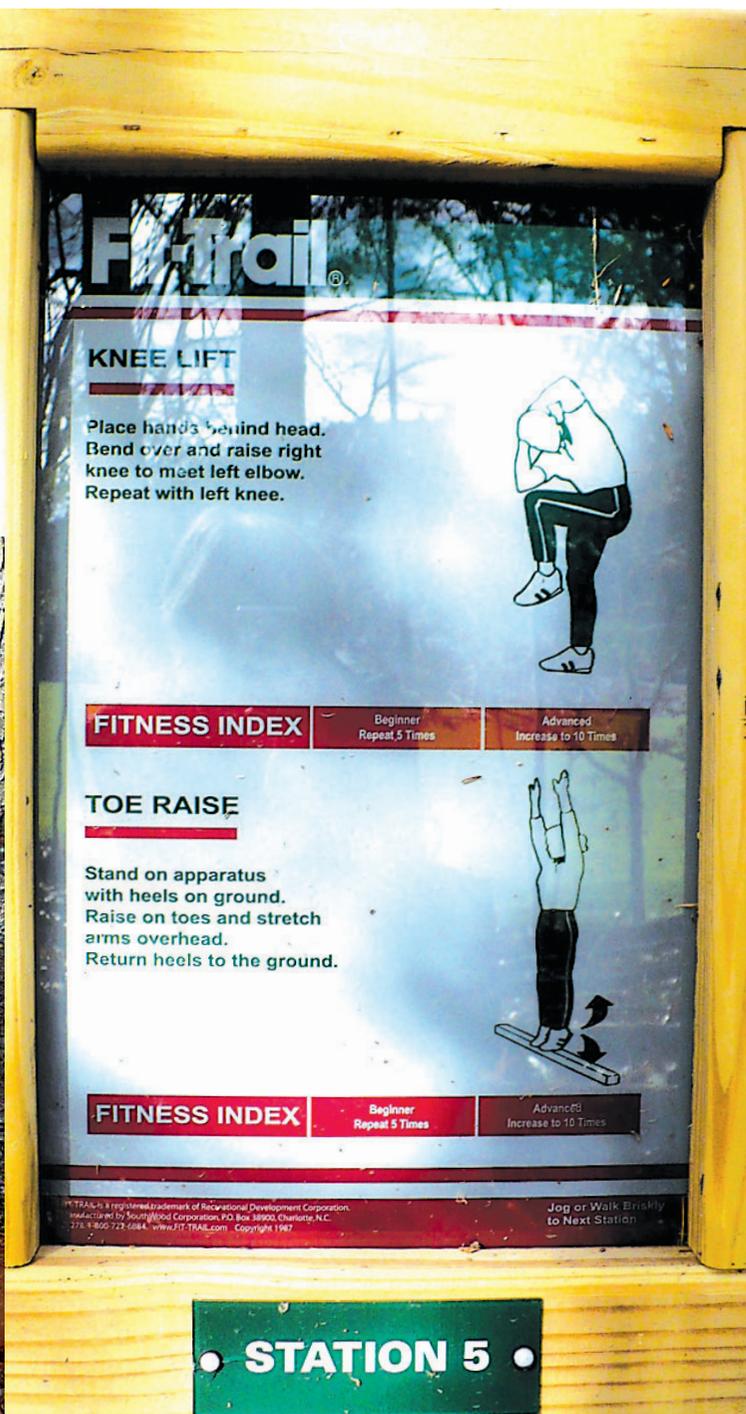
The workers not only had to

'We go out for lunch and talk about the importance of taking care of the trail and our environment. We've also gone out to just relax and play. The trail allows them to be creative and to just be kids.'

Kathy Moran
Teacher Aide |



From left, maintenance supervisor Jesse Bell and Athletic Director Jason Closs take a break at 'outdoor furniture' created by staff and students.



Knee lifts and toe raises are just a few of the fitness workouts encouraged at stations along the fitness trail behind Tri-Valley School.

clear the land for the trail, but got engaged in creating learning spaces for students, using huge boulders for tables and making benches from fallen trees.

When COVID is under control, the trail will offer time for the community to enjoy the trail, too, said Closs.

In the meantime, it's the kids who benefit.

"The trail has been very

beneficial to our class especially with the COVID restrictions," said Kathy Moran, a teacher aide who escorted the sixth graders outdoors. "We go out for lunch and talk about the importance of taking care of the trail and our environment. We've also gone out to just relax and play. The trail allows them to be creative and to just be kids."

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Teaching with chinchillas



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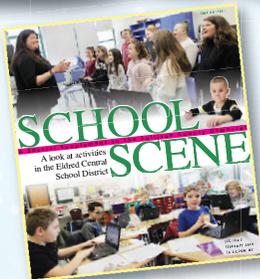
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