

A look
inside
the
Sullivan
West
Central
School
District

SCHOOL

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

SCENE



SECTION 5, OCTOBER 2, 2020

CALLICOON, NY



'At the same time as safety and health are imperative, we want students to feel comfortable, to laugh, have fun, see friends and learn,' says Superintendent of Schools Stephen Walker.

Upside down, right-side up:

Joy of learning in midst of COVID

STORY AND PHOTO
BY KATHY DALEY

It's a high stakes situation," says Sullivan West Superintendent of Schools Stephen Walker.

Walker is talking, of course, about schools opening for a new year during a pandemic. But he points out that the educational

mission hasn't changed. The focus is to create lifelong learners, critical thinkers and effective communicators.

"Our job is to balance health and safety," Walker said, "as we continue to provide our students with an excellent education. That's what we strive for."

Given the New York State Education Department's mandate for six feet of "social dis-

tancing" in classrooms, the school district could not accommodate its 1,100 students and 200 staff members all at the same time.

So most of the District's students are learning in a "hybrid" schedule that allows for half the student population to attend school in person on Mondays and Tuesdays and then receive remote learning in their homes

for the rest of the week. The other half attends school on Thursdays and Fridays and then receives home learning the other three days.

A smaller group of students attend school in person for four days a week. These are children in special education classes, or at-risk students, or students who don't have appropriate computer access in their neigh-

borhood.

Finally, some 18 to 20 percent of the student body is learning totally from home due to parental concerns about COVID.

NEW, FUN AND SMART

Still, this school year has opened with numerous bright lights amidst the dark.

At Sullivan West High School in Lake Huntington, a special wing is now designated for Middle School-aged students only, a move that is sure to signal success. The shift offers the seventh and eighth graders the special focus they need as they learn and grow.

At the elementary school in Jeffersonville, a newly replaced

gym floor will open for business in October along with a new tiled foyer at the school's main entryway. Funds came from a reserve "rainy day" fund, not affecting school tax bills.

Back at the high school, a new school year ushers in engrossing high school electives, including the school district's first agriculture course. The elective, entitled Natural Resources, is being taught by seasoned science teacher Padraic McCarthy, who, it happens, grew up on a farm in Cohecton.

Another new class, Cyber Security, invites students to learn about the practices in defending computers, servers, mobile devices, electronic sys-

tems, networks and data from malicious attacks. The course is offered through Project Lead the Way, a science, technology, engineering and math nonprofit that has linked with the Rochester Institute of Technology. High School teacher Katelyn Kelly is teaching the course.

English teacher Dorothy Grecco now teaches Social Justice, an elective that exposes teens to diversity and different ways of thinking. This summer, she participated in a study group entitled Developing Anti-Racist Mindsets with Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES.

"We want to help build skills in being both successful and

empathic," said Superintendent Walker. "Dorrie is teaching diversity in ideas and literature."

A College Linear Algebra class taught by math teacher Anthony Durkin rounds out the roster of new electives.

High school students also benefit this year from a new Mac lab, inviting them to work on what is considered the best platform for design and creativity. The lab is especially handy for students interested in art and digital music, the superintendent said.

"We want kids to have these high level experiences," he said. "We want them to strive to go on to great colleges and do great things."

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Pictured: 2020 Sullivan Renaissance Interns at Field Team Workday in Roscoe, NY.



Henry Marin-Leon - 2020 Intern for Jeffersonville with his sister, Arly Marin-Leon - 2020 Program Intern

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An Agriculture Education program launched this fall by Sullivan West Central School District celebrates the on-going farming history of Sullivan County. This barn and out-buildings, framed by goldenrod, lie just outside of Lake Huntington.

Sullivan County native kicks off new ag emphasis at high school

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KATHY DALEY

It's been a long trip back to his roots for biology teacher Paddy McCarthy. But always, the beauty of nature and a fascination with the wild accompa-

nied him.

After a career that has taken him to North and South Dakota and into the National Park Service as a park ranger, McCarthy signed on at Sullivan West High School last year as biology teacher. This year, he will

teach the first course in a planned Agriculture Education program at the high school.

"As rural as we are here, agriculture is not disappearing but shifting," McCarthy said. "It's not cows and plows," he said, referring to the struggling dairy farms,

but rather other kinds of farming, he noted.

Nationwide, agriculture education is a broad umbrella for teaching students about food, farming, natural resources, agribusiness, animal and plant sciences and more.

School Scene

'A Look at Activities in the Sullivan West S.D.'

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Taught by biology teacher Paddy McCarthy, a new Natural Resources course at Sullivan West High School will introduce students to the wonders of forests, lakes and rivers, soil, wildlife and plants.

A certified agriculture teacher, McCarthy has served for the past five summers as a park ranger with the National Park Service on the Upper Delaware. Patrolling the river in a canoe – it's called river roving – he's viewed eagles, mergansers and more as he connects with boaters.

"I want to use my contacts with the National Park Service to enhance the experience for kids," he said, noting that not only park rangers but Park Service biologists can offer their knowledge and expertise to Sullivan West teens.

McCarthy's connections also reach into the realm of the New York State forest rangers at Swinging Bridge in Mongaup Valley and beyond.

Another important link between kids and ag science, noted the teacher, will be their relationship with Future Farmers of America (FFA). The nationwide student organization offers supervised agriculture experiences and prepares students for leadership, personal growth and career success through ag ed.

McCarthy has reached out to the FFA, which will link with Sullivan West once the district has offered three ag-related courses for students.

McCarthy is also connecting with an organization called Inspiring Girls Expeditions,

which empowers young women to lead and succeed through science, art, and wilderness exploration. Each summer, the organization leads tuition-free multi-day expeditions for high school girls that interweave science, art and back-country travel.

Another connection can be with the College of Wildlife Management at SUNY Cobleskill. Finally, there are hands-on learning experiences closer to home, said the teacher. Sullivan West High School's multi-acres of forest and waterways are perfect for student learning.

"We want to survey the property, identifying plants and animals," McCarthy said.

How to make management decisions, how to support precious resources, how to pay attention to what humans do with garbage and litter are all part of the learning in ag science.

And here's a really fun part, said McCarthy: an ability to quickly identify insects, birds, plants and with an app called Seek. Through image recognition of the piece of nature you photograph, the app matches the image with one of its 30,000 species in its database. Voilà! You have your "belted kingfisher" down by the brook in Jeffersonville or a "New England aster" on the roadside in Lake Huntington.

The new class at Sullivan West is entitled Natural Resources, addressing the ecology and importance of forests, lakes and rivers, soil, wildlife and plants.

McCarthy grew up in Cohecton and graduated from Narrowsburg Central School. He

went on to Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and then got a masters of arts in teaching. He taught science education and agriculture to students in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota and, closer to home, Port Jervis.

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Even the littlest students learn on devices

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KATHY DALEY

Students in their second grade classroom tap away on their laptops, each working at his or her own pace. And so it is, too, with their classmates who are learning from home.

Last year, Sullivan West Elementary School began working with a new learning platform for the youngest children called Seesaw. The technology program gives pre-kindergarten through second grade children built-in tools to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, including drawing, voice recording and videos. Teachers are able to send work back to the students in draft form for correction and improvement.

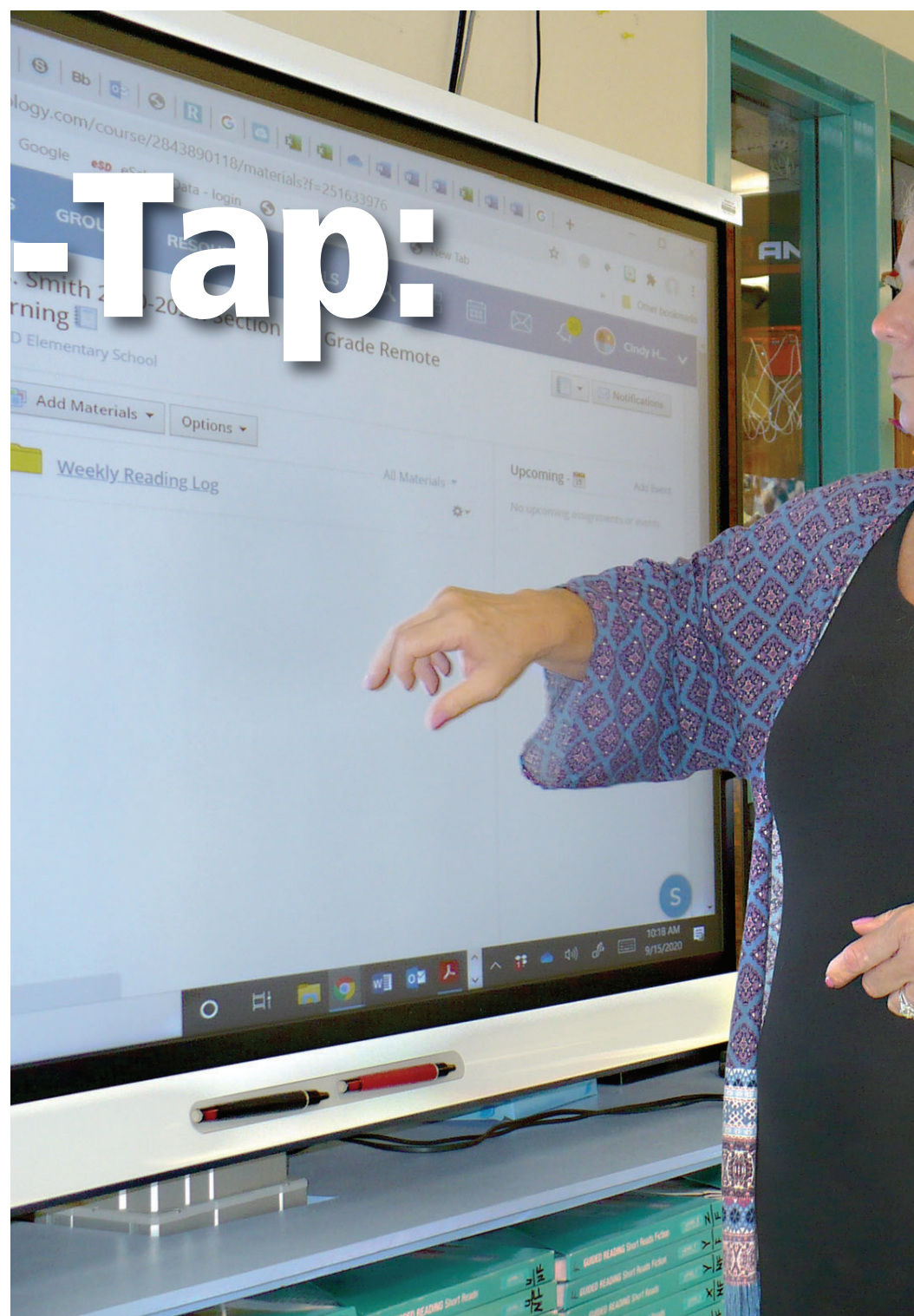
"We were introduced to Seesaw by Steve Walker (superintendent of schools) even before coronavirus happened," said teacher Melonie Cruz. "It is a great tool that we ended up needing."

Unlike the many elementary schools that scurried to find ways to offer remote learning when COVID closed schools in March, Sullivan West Elementary already had systems in place. The school was able to make a close-to-seamless shift in teaching kids in their homes.

Along with Seesaw, "teachers had been introduced to Schoology (a learning platform for older students) for third to sixth grade," said Cindy Humleker. She is the school's instructional coach, helping teachers with support and strategies.

Some teachers were adept at the new technologies, and the rest quickly caught up, Humleker said. For example, some teachers knew Schoology but didn't know how to do lessons on it.

After school closed in March, "We held many profes-



sional development Zooms," Humleker said.

But meanwhile, students had to be taught. And their teachers had to continue following curriculum and New York State learning standards.

"From mid-March to the end of June, I gave my students a morning message, a read aloud, asking them questions that we could share with each other," said Cruz. "We did interactive lessons, video lessons followed up by

activities, exercise activities, connecting back and forth with them."

"As teachers, we all had to learn quickly, be flexible, there was no choice," said Cruz.

It continues today. "On Seesaw, I can record myself teaching a math lesson," Cruz said. "Students click on the link, view the lesson and then follow up with an activity."

Cindy Humleker pointed out that teachers are also using "flipped learn-



Elementary School instructional coach Cindy Humleker gives support to teachers on educational strategies and technology



Teacher Melonie Cruz holds a masters degree in education technology. Here she works with a second grader using the learning platform Seesaw.

ing,” that is, having students watch a video that teaches them the lesson, followed by an activity or project that they create in conjunction with the teacher.

For students who don’t have technology at home, the District is providing help, said Humleker. Families who need the devices are loaned Dell or Lenovo laptops, she said.

“Our kids live in the world of

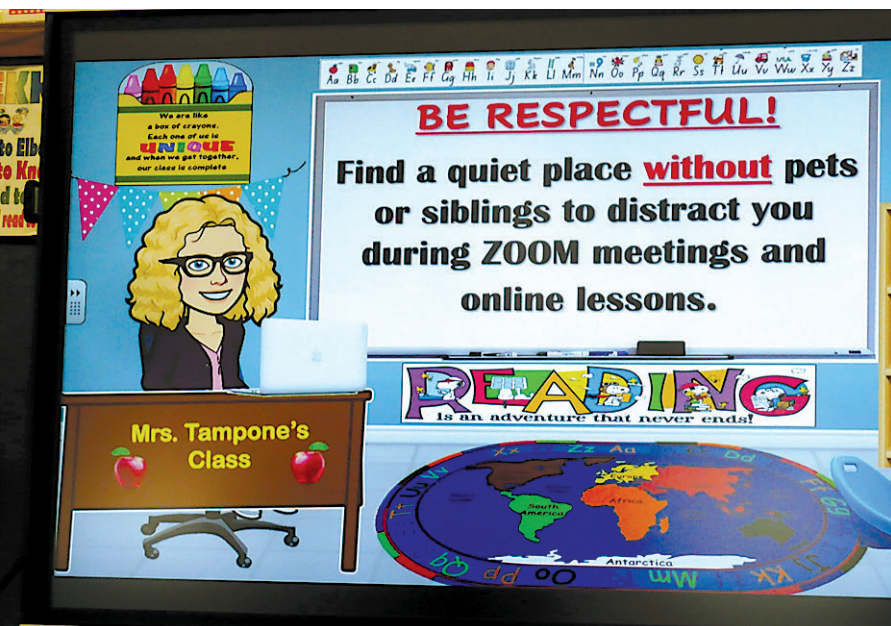
technology,” said Cruz. “We can do virtual class trips to the Bronx Zoo. We can be pen-pals with other kids around the world.”

But there is still a need for time honored “pens and pencils,” she said.

“You need to be able to write, to use math, to interact and engage,” she said. “If we can combine in-person instruction with technology, it makes everybody happy.”

Those bitmojis and more in the world of virtual learning

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHY DALEY



A cartoon character that represents teacher Kathy Tampone, with light hair and eyeglasses, features in video lessons, virtual bulletin boards and assignments for students.

The Bitmoji craze has hit Sullivan West Elementary School. Creating virtual cartoon classrooms came into play particularly during the shutdown of schools in March, and local teachers Dawn Hauschild and Kathy Tampone

are right in step. Their students love Bitmoji, which offers a colorful virtual environment that serves as a cozy classroom complete with an avatar, or cartoon character, of their teacher.

"You create a person who looks like you," said Hauschild, who also features her own pet dog Java in most of the scenes she has created.

Since school opened on Sept. 10, Hauschild's class of 19 third graders spend two days in her real-life classroom and three days at home each week learning on the family computer or other device.

"I give them assignments for home, doing a lot of project-based learning like 'You're on a camping trip' – projects that involve math, science, social studies, sometimes a scavenger hunt," Hauschild said.

On their devices, students can

move through the Bitmoji classroom virtually, clicking on a bookshelf image to get a reading assignment, for example. Or "going" to a set of doors labeled Reading, English Language Arts, Spelling, Math, Science or Social Studies, and clicking on one to open up a colorful world of learning.

There's a "Fun Room," a kind of maker-space lab where a student can build cars, play chess, make a robot. There's even a recess room, where students play checkers or other games.

"Basically, it's like a power-point activity slide show," said Hauschild, who has taught students for 25 years.

Fellow third grade teacher Kathy Tampone works strictly with children who are learning only from home. She uses Zoom to meet with them each day but also employs her own Bitmoji character.

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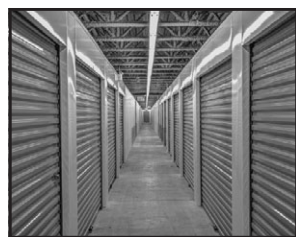
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ter to give students a sense of her presence throughout their day-time learning.

"I sent home a flat Bitmoji 'teacher' for kids to keep at their computers to remind them that I'm here to help," Tampone said. "I also create subject area video lessons with Bitmoji in them to make them more kid-friendly."

Tampone, who has taught for almost three decades, begins the day by reading a story on Zoom. She and her students discuss the tale, the children raising hands to answer questions or make a point. Then, after breaks and some exercise, Tampone starts in on math lessons and the rest of their academic subjects.

"At 11 a.m., I have them go outside, take a break, run, leave their screen," she said.

She offers good advice to her students: "It is important that you do not spend the entire day on the computer. You need to give your eyes and brain frequent breaks."

She recommends that every time a student completes an assignment, "you get up and run



Third grade teacher Kathy Tampone, a veteran educator for 29 years, works from school but connects virtually with her students, who have chosen to study from home.

around, go outside for a walk or work on a project."

"If looking at the computer is giving you headaches, I know that you can find screen time glasses that cut down on the glare and help your eyes."

Good advice.



Bitmoji Classroom makes learning fun for students, says teacher Dawn Hauschild. She spent the summer creating a virtual Bitmoji world where students can click on items that take them to various subjects and activities.



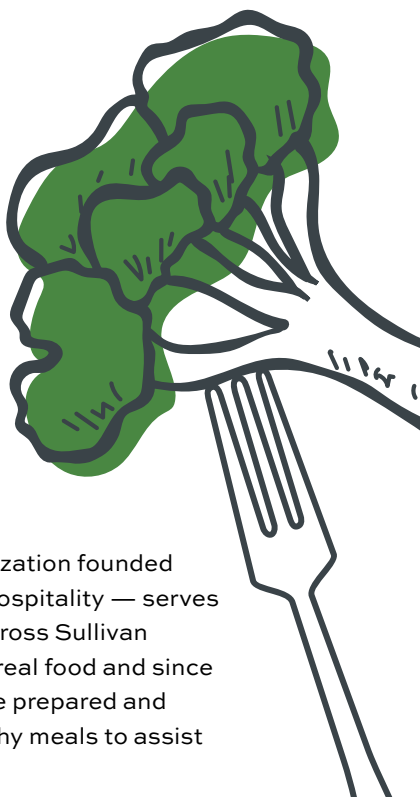
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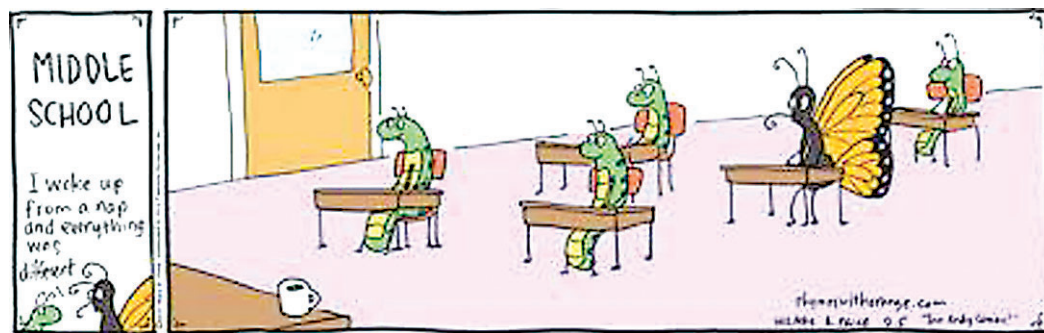
STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KATHY DALEY

At right: Thirteen- and 14-year-olds are dealing with the physical and emotional changes of puberty, setting them apart from their elementary and high school cohorts. Sullivan West has now set aside a portion of the high school just for its middle school population.

Kids in seventh and eighth grades have a foot in both worlds: the world of the child and that of the adult. The 13- and 14-year-olds can be charming and funny one minute and hormonal and moody the next.

Fortunately, as high school begins, their bodies start adjusting to the physical changes taking place and they begin to move towards a more adult identity.

Up until this year at Sullivan West High School, however, middle school students were bunched in with ninth through 12th graders. The younger kids shared the same teachers as the older ones.



For example, said Superintendent of Schools Stephen Walker, a teacher might be instructing seventh graders in English during one period, and then head to an Advanced Placement class right afterwards.

“In terms of philosophy, we were treating seventh graders like they are in high school,” said Walker.

“Seventh and eighth graders learn differently,” stressed High School Principal Mark Plescia.

The national data is clear, Plescia said. Students doing well in elementary school often stumble and fall behind in middle school. “You can see academic slides during those middle school years. If we work on fixing academics, we’ll produce stronger high school students,” he said.

Things have changed this new school year. The 75 seventh graders and 86 eighth graders now have their own wing of the high school, and their own teachers.

The seventh grade team consists of Carissa Coppolla, social studies; Joshua Martel, English; J.P. Lang, science; and Kayla Hornicek, math. In eighth grade the teachers are Ron Bauer, social studies; Sharon McKay, English; Bill Kirk, science; and Chrissy O’Sullivan, math. A guidance counselor and social worker are also part of the teams.

Even during COVID times, the District met with the parents of the incoming 75 seventh and 8th graders to explain the changes.

Then, said Plescia, “we juggled rooms around so that all seventh and eighth graders are now in one wing. Now they are more familiar with each other and with their teachers.”

“I see this as resolving into a Sullivan West Middle School,” Walker said. “The teachers are excited. The energy around this is great.”

High School Principal Mark Plescia notes that the plan to give seventh and eighth graders their own space is reaping rewards.



KATHY DALEY | DEMOCRAT

Learning outdoors

At the elementary school, teacher Sue Mullally squires students outside for a math lesson, a practice that is encouraged particularly during the pandemic. It's been a long day to wear a mask, said the teacher as the group enjoyed the school property's Forest Classroom. Fresh air, hands-on learning and health benefits make the 'outdoor classroom' a must for kids, weather permitting.



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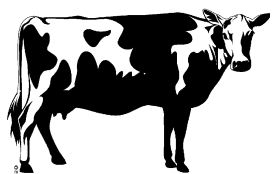


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