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SCENE

A look at
activities
in the
Fallsburg
Central
School
District



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SECTION F • FEBRUARY 2021 • CALLICOON, NY

During pandemic, the 'pumping heart' of Fallsburg staff

STORY AND PHOTO
BY KATHY DALEY

Since March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has taken center stage for schools, communities and homes. One result appears to be a greater appreciation of the essential caretaking role that public education does play, whether it's ensuring that kids keep learning or that families have the essentials – like food on the table.

"Our commitment to technology and feeding our kids have been two of our biggest concerns," agrees Dr. Ivan Katz, Superintendent of Schools for the Fallsburg Central School District.

"We have served thousands and thousands of meals since the pandemic began," Katz said. "During our winter holiday break, even though school was closed, we delivered 13,000 meals to our students because we know how much families depend on us regardless of whether school is or isn't in session."

Clearly, the pandemic has challenged schools. Take, for example, the need to construct and revamp school reopening plans, planning for remote and in-person learning, staff accommodations, stu-



Junior/Senior High School librarian Livia Sabourin, left, and secretary to the Guidance Office Kristen Meyer head to Rolling V school buses that delivered bags of personal care items and activity packs to families along bus routes.

School Scene

A Look Inside the Fallsburg Central School District

Published by
Catskill-Delaware Publications, Inc.

Publishers of the

SULLIVAN COUNTY
Democrat

(845) 887-5200

Callicoon, NY 12723

February 12, 2021 • Vol. CXXX, No. 71

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One possible silver lining during Covid is that online learning may present an opportunity for the future. 'While many students benefit from in-person learning,' said school chief Dr. Ivan Katz, 'many others have shared with me that they prefer online learning because it allows them to learn more for themselves than the traditional classroom does.'

dents' loss of social connections with peers and adults.

There's been the rocky technology roll-outs, importance of internet access for all students, meal distribution, student and staff well-being, balancing the varying needs of families, loss of sports seasons and after-school programs. Not to mention the continual need to close in-person learning because of Covid infections and exposures.

OUTREACH TO FAMILIES

Parents' lives are fraught with challenges on many levels, Katz noted, from economic worries to child care concerns. Some want their children to attend school in-person to the greatest and safest extent possible. Others want their kids home learning remotely until the scourge of the pandemic has passed and a safe, healthy return to normalcy is possible.

"There are many parents out of work as a result of the pandemic," Katz said. "In many instances,

parents have become assistant teachers for their children, without the benefit of teacher preparation."

Now more than ever, communication is crucial. Katz said the District uses every means at its disposal: email, phone calls, Facebook, the District website, press releases, Google Meets, surveys, virtual Q & A sessions, newsletters, and "Monday Morning Messages."

"We also realize that whatever communication efforts we use, they are not perfect and we can always improve on them," he said. "Our school community does a good job in letting us know where we need to improve on our communication efforts and that feedback is critical."

WHEN COMPUTERS ARE KEY

"Technology is an ongoing effort that requires our constant attention," the superintendent said.

The school district has provided Chromebooks for every student who has requested one and purchased mobile hotspots for students who are without home internet access.

"Our technology staff spends the lion's share of their time troubleshooting technology issues for staff, students and parents. There are many complexities that go along with the technology we use, and our goal is to help everyone we can as quickly as we can. We have come a long way since last spring."

"I'm exceptionally proud of our tech department and their supreme efforts and devotion to serving our school community," he said.

As for staff in general, "I could not be prouder of the FCSD staff," Katz reflected. "They are the pumping heart of what we have been able to accomplish during the pandemic challenge. Everyone, at each level, is doing their part and, together this has resulted in a system that is working well. It is not a perfect system, but it is one driven by the passion, drive and love for kids and the school community that our staff showcases daily."



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What's the difference between mayor and principal?

Ask Kyle Roddey

BY KATHY DALEY

It's a first for Fallsburg and perhaps for Sullivan County in general: a new high school principal who once served as mayor.

That's how it is for the new Fallsburg Junior/Senior High School principal. He's Kyle Roddey, arriving from assistant principalship at Goshen High School and from serving as Goshen's youngest mayor, beginning at age 25, from 2011 until 2018.

"After I graduated from Binghamton University I began paying attention to local issues," said Roddey. "I ran for Goshen Village Trustee when I was 23. Two years later I ran for mayor. My family has never been political so it was a new endeavor for me and those around me, but I loved it. The

mayor was technically a part-time position (with full-time responsibilities) so I was able to continue to serve once I began teaching in Middletown."

As mayor, "we were able to secure many grants and bring new businesses into the community," said Roddey. "I oversaw an infrastructure improvement plan and a beautification initiative aimed at bringing more vibrancy to our downtown. We started a non-profit called Illuminate Goshen, that launched a summer concert series, art walks, painted pianos downtown, and a New Year's Eve Ball Drop. All the arts, culture, and beautification helped build a sense of community. Because of this experience, I'm a staunch advocate for arts, music, theater and athletics."

"I also learned the importance of



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

"My biggest passion is helping students build resilience, and a growth mindset" said Junior/Senior High School Principal Kyle Roddey, who came to Fallsburg from assistant principalship in Goshen. "Seeing students succeed who previously were on the wrong path is the best part of working in education."

acknowledging the hard work and successes of team members," he said. "Nothing I accomplished was done on my own; everything was done as a team."

He's now four days into his new job as Fallsburg principal.

"The pandemic has increased my drive to be a principal," said Roddey, who is working on a doctorate through Seton Hall University. "Now, more than ever,

our students need schools to help them deal with this trauma and overcome it. As a mayor I served during times of emergencies and natural disasters – flooding, tropical storms, fires, budget crisis – and I feel uniquely suited to lead during challenging times."

Like incoming new principals, Roddey's earliest days are filled with talking, walking through the school and listening. He plans to hold meetings with key constituencies to hear their thoughts on the school, its strengths and challenges. He's visiting classrooms in-person (socially distanced and wearing a mask) and virtually "so that everyone can see who I am and feel comfortable coming to me with concerns and ideas."

His assistant principal is Shana Bruestle. "She's amazing," Roddey said. "Shana is working side by side with me to oversee the building and serve as co-instructional leaders. She brings incredible skills and experience to the role and she's critical to the success of the building."

One of his areas of focus will be to support Fallsburg seniors to ensure that they still have a great year despite the pandemic's restrictions. He's also thrilled with the strong robotics program at Fallsburg Junior/Senior High and the famed robotics team.

"I've been working with building and district leadership on my transition since I accepted the position," he said. "Because of the challenging times we're in, there is no time to waste."

"Working in a school is refreshing," Roddey reflected. "You are surrounded all day by people who share your passion for making the world a better place. I love being in classrooms and getting to witness the magic of teaching and learning. Our teachers, staff, and students do amazing things every day and seeing the 'lightbulbs' go on is nothing short of incredible."

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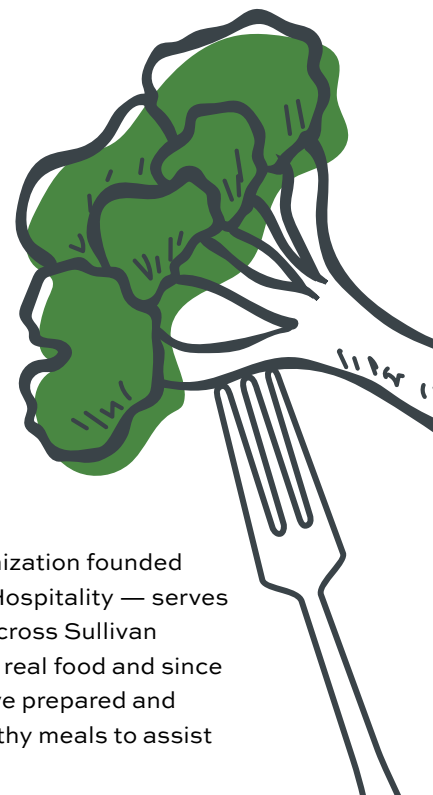
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Enter new assistant superintendent

...as Covid inspires new ideas

BY KATHY DALEY

Why is she working in education? Dr. Sally Sharkey puts it bluntly: “Our schools are the best chance our youth has.”

“I believe in building a strong foundation in knowledge, academic skills, social skills and tolerance for our youth,” said Sharkey, new Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in Fallsburg. “I find it rewarding to teach students and learn from them as well.”

Sharkey started her Fallsburg career last July. But her beginnings took place in Menands, N.Y., near Albany. There she taught school and also served as president of the local Board of Education.

Quickly climbing the ladder, she was appointed Superintendent of Schools for the Cairo Durham School District, a position she served for seven years. During the aftermath of Hurricane Irene in August 2011, Dr. Sharkey and her team received a New York State commendation for delivering food and supplies to isolated areas.

Sharkey has also worked as a human resource director and was an adjunct professor for St. Leo University in Florida, teaching on-line graduate educational leadership courses in school law and in school and community partnerships.

A graduate of St. Rose's College in

Albany, the new Assistant Superintendent was stirred by good teachers: “I saw that positive, inspiring and caring teachers can make a difference, and I wanted to be like those teachers.”

Music and performing have been a very big part of her life. “I still play,” she said. “There are many instruments around the house: guitars, accordions, tin whistles and a church organ in my living room. I am in the Cossackie Athens Community Band and play at home as well.”

But daily, she's at her office at the Fallsburg Central School District.

“The staff is very welcoming and very helpful,” she reflected. “Everyone rallies around each other especially when there is a need. Fallsburg treats everyone like part of a close family.”

Covid, of course, takes up much of the time.

“Reports come to me and the central office, and we review to make sure we are following all of the protocols, making sure we get copies of any quarantine orders, and making sure we are in contact with the Department of Health. Safety is a priority.”

“We have made many revisions to our reopening plans,” she noted, “to our sanitizing and cleaning protocols and to our classrooms in order to make staff feel safer. Staff has been very good about letting us know when there are issues and in helping us find the best solutions.”



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

As with school districts everywhere, student attendance is problematic during Covid, particularly when learning takes place at home on computers. ‘We are brainstorming ways to get students to attend – with parent involvement as a focus,’ said Assistant Superintendent Dr. Sally Sharkey, above.

Some of the biggest challenges are technology, overcoming isolation and attendance. The school district's technology department handles issues around accessing schoolwork from home, and it happens almost immediately “so students can connect to the Google Classroom,” Sharkey said. Through Google Meet (like Zoom), she is in touch with teachers daily, addressing concerns as best she can.

Because Fallsburg has only had in-person learning off and on since Nov. 30, there hasn't been much opportunity for Sharkey to actually interact with students. “I have been in the hallways during arrival and

dismissal times and have met with the student government.”

Still, “Technology skills are increasing and we are getting better at providing education via technology,” she said. “We can now ‘flip the switch’ and go between in person and remote learning fairly easily.”

In the future, “students will be able to access classes in either platform (in person or remote), giving much flexibility to which courses are taken and when. Students will have more access to more courses, increasing the variety of courses offered and increasing the amount of college credits a high school student could graduate with.”

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Staying sanitized when cleaning is a life-and-death business

BY KATHY DALEY

Twenty-two hand-washing stations, socially distanced desks in classrooms, one-way-only stairways, jugs of hand sanitizer everywhere. It's a new world.

"Everything looks different now," agrees Fallsburg's Director of Facilities Nick Tranchina.

Tranchina is in charge of maintaining school buildings and grounds, parking lots and playing fields. But a major part of his time is supervising custodians, cleaners, maintenance workers and building and grounds people, particularly now with the need for safety and sanitizing.

Because of Covid, "there are protocols for coming into buildings, temperature checks, stop and go directional signs," he said.

Cleaning and disinfecting goes on all day long and then at night with special spray machines. On Wednesdays, when school is closed, there's an even more thorough cleanup.

During the school day, "Teachers work with us, wiping down desks and 'high-touch' points like telephones, computers, light switches, door handles," said Tranchina. "The assistance of teachers is making this possible."

In particular, the work of school custodians is critically important. These unsung heroes create a safe, clean, and healthy environment for students every day by swabbing down floors, classrooms, lunchrooms and lavatories. But now, they are even more pivotal to students and staff.

One stand-out is custodian Angelo Pacheco, who will cele-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS



New Fallsburg Facilities Director Nick Tranchina began work in mid-November, after serving in the same capacity at the Sullivan West School District. Next October, veteran Fallsburg custodian Angelo Pacheco (left) celebrates 25 years as a school district staff member.

brate his 25th year at Fallsburg Central. The father of three children who are all Fallsburg High School graduates, Pacheco has also served as president of the Custodial Unit of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA).

"Angelo is without a doubt a pillar of the Facilities Department and a great mentor to the new recruits," said Tranchina.

For his part, Tranchina is delighted with his own new post as chief.

"Administrators, teachers, teacher aides, support staff – everyone works together to keep the schools open," he said. "The entire district has come together, seamlessly. Working together on this, I've never felt more supported anywhere."



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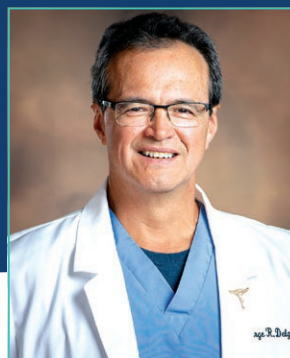
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