

SCHOOL SCENE

A Special Supplement
to the Sullivan County
Democrat

**A LOOK AT
ACTIVITIES
IN THE
MONTICELLO
CENTRAL
SCHOOL
DISTRICT**



SECTION M
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CALLICOON, NY

Sixth Graders get their own 'Academy' on St. John's Street

When Middle School Principal Michelle Knowlton got the phone call asking her if she could possibly move one of her grades a mile and a half to St. John's Street School in downtown Monticello, Knowlton's reaction was positive.

"I had taught at St. John's," said Knowlton. And her assistant principal, Sara Kozachuk, had gone to school there.

A shift of kids from Robert J. Kaiser Middle School was necessary because renovation of the Monticello High

School required moving some of the high school kids into Kaiser.

Knowlton and Kozachuk were up for the change. Then came the logistics.

"How many rooms would we need?" said Knowlton. "Where would we serve lunch? Where would a staff room be?" Transportation, technology, food service all had to be figured out. Not to mention furniture, new flooring, a working public address system, phones, new wiring, furniture... it went on and on.

St. John's oldest wing, constructed during the late 1800s, is home to a pre-kindergarten program run by the non-profit Easterseals New York. The other part of the building, now housing the sixth grade, was built in the 1930s under FDR's Works Progress Administration.

Sixth grade teacher Joel Jerume works with students on an interactive white board at the front of the class in the newly renovated St. John's Street School, near Broadway in Monticello.



In a hallway of the 1930s building that now houses Monticello's sixth grade, Middle School Principal Michelle Knowlton at right and Assistant Principal Sara Kozachuk tour classrooms.

The school closed in 2001, when Robert J. Kaiser Middle School was built.

Today, the wing with Monticello's sixth grade features interactive smart boards in classrooms, installed by the District's technology department. There's a learning technology lab for teachers. The floors glisten as though the spirit of the school is pleased along with the kids and adults.

This year is especially noteworthy because students are back together after a Covid-centered year and a half. During that time, a new initiative, called Office Hours, became popular with both kids and teachers and has been carried over.

"It's 50 minutes of a supervised study hall for students to work with teachers," said Knowlton. "Last year, it worked remotely, with the Guidance Department connecting teachers with stu-

dents in need. Teachers worked one-on-one or in small groups of kids."

Now, the last period at St. John's is dedicated to Office Hours, now entitled "Excelsior," which is the Latin word for "Higher."

Further, the sixth grade program also enjoys a new name. It's called the Sixth Grade Academy.

"We're the bridge between childhood and adolescence. We wanted to make sixth grade special," said Knowlton.

Kids and teachers are not the only ones delighted about the changes this year. Says Knowlton: "Many parents went to school here, and so did the student's grandparents. On the first day of school, one grandmother said she lives right down the street from the school and that her twin sixth grade grandchildren can walk right to her house after school."

School Scene

'A Look at Activities in the Monticello Central School'

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District welcomes federal dollars to recover lost learning

In March of 2019, the coronavirus began creating mass disruption in schools, eventually affecting some 59 million students across the U.S. Now, school districts are gladly accepting financial aid to restore that lost learning.

With New York State flush from billions of federal Covid relief, school superintendents are rejoicing over new funding.

"We got a significant bump in state aid," said Monticello Superintendent of Schools Dr. Matt Evans, noting that taxpayers are now experiencing a two percent decrease in their school tax bills.

"And we have the state legislature's commitment to fully fund Foundation Aid in the next three years," Evans continued. Foundation Aid makes up the lion's share of money channeled to school districts.

Further, over the next few years, school districts will receive federal funds through two vehicles: the American Rescue Plan, and the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund.

As elsewhere, many Monticello students are lagging scholastically in the wake of Covid. Schools first shut their doors from March through June of 2019, scrambling to offer on-line learning.

Then, the 2020/2021 school year saw most kids in school with one weekday devoted to remote learning at home. Other students never stepped into the school corridors, working on-line from home. Still others struggled with access to the technology they needed.

"We know that student growth was not the same rate as years past," said Evans. "Our K-8 NWEA

assessments in reading and math were well below normal. In high school, more students failed courses than before."

The federal funding has allowed the District to hire 20 new teachers and social workers specifically to address student learning loss on the elementary school level, in special education, and, in the upper grades, in math, social studies and English language arts.

Now, the schools are welcoming students once again, with mask-wearing a must, along with social distancing. Students with significant personal health issues can receive remote learning. And quarantined students – due to testing positive or having had a contact with a person with Covid – will go on remote for a time, said Evans.

Meanwhile, work continues on the renovation of one of the wings at Monticello High School. "We're bringing it up to 21st century standards with a new science and technology room and with science labs," said Evans, adding that skylights, heating and ventilation are all part of the package.

Interestingly, the high school renovation has prompted a kind of reawakening of the District's oldest building. The St. John's Street school in downtown Monticello is seeing new life with the shifting of the entire sixth grade into that classic building this September.

The move came about when high school classes needed room in the middle school during renovation. St. John's is in two portions, one constructed in the 1800s and another wing that opened in the 1930s. The old school also houses a pre-kindergarten program.



'Dealing with Covid once again this year requires flexibility, response to needs as they arise, and prioritizing,' says Dr. Matt Evans, school superintendent at Monticello.

Credits:

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The **Democrat** would also like to thank the Monticello Central School District for all its cooperation in this project.



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The story and 'superpower' of new Assistant Principal

Veronica Serrano serves as new Assistant Principal at Kenneth L. Rutherford Elementary School. 'We have a great team here,' she said of the teachers and administrators at the third through fifth grade school. Rutherford borders the High School-Middle School campus.



Born into an Hispanic family that spoke Spanish in the home, Veronica Serrano felt out of place in school.

"I grew up in Williamsburg in Brooklyn," said Serrano, who is now the new Assistant Principal at Kenneth L. Rutherford Elementary School. "I didn't look like the other kids. I didn't speak as they did" even though she did speak English.

After high school, she began taking accounting courses at Orange County Community College and signed up as a substitute teacher in Middletown to help pay for her books and gas in her car.

"It was the universe aligning to direct me to my true destiny," Serrano said.

"On my second assignment, I walked into the classroom, not

feeling secure in my ability to manage a room of 20 little human beings," she said. "But I started speaking to them in their native tongue, Spanish. They quickly wanted to engage in conversations about how I learned to speak Spanish. Where is my family from? What do I like to eat?"

At that moment, "I realized I wanted to work with this particular population, one that reflects me – not just in our common mother tongue, but in my childhood experiences. I realized my identity was my superpower."

Serrano went on to earn two master's degrees: one in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and a masters in school administration.

She taught for six years at Fallsburg Central School District,

teaching kindergarten and implementing a Dual Language program that taught Spanish to English-speaking children, and English to Spanish-speaking children. She also served as summer principal for Fallsburg's Migrant Education Program.

Enthusiastic and energetic, Serrano is thrilled to work at Rutherford Elementary, which educates third, fourth and fifth graders.

"It's a great team here," she said. "Everybody jumps in. Mr. Palmer (Principal Christopher Palmer) is larger than life – there's nothing too small or too great for him to do or take on."

Typically, assistant principals have a raft of duties. One minute she's welcoming students from their school buses or parents' cars,

the next she's hauling in student lunches or carrying in iPads or reminding students of mask-wearing or the three-foot-apart rule.

"There's a lot of moving pieces," she says with a smile.

In her office, she's answering tons of emails. At dismissal, she's making sure the right kid gets into the right car – IDs for parents are mandatory.

Getting to know parents is delightful.

"At Fallsburg, I did a lot of community outreach," Serrano said, "and I flourished as a bridge from the school district to the community. I loved being that vital support."

"I want to be that voice for Monticello," Serrano said. "I'm super-excited."



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Dashing towards the goal of all kids flourishing in school

When it comes to the concept of equity in education, high school English teacher Tim Billias explains it this way: “We want to make sure that all kids have what they need to be successful.”

Former sports coach in track and field and in cross-country, Billias has taken part in an equity work group at the high school for the past two years. The goal is to boost students, particularly disadvantaged kids, with the resources and support they need to learn and achieve.

Barriers faced by kids include poverty, a lack of basic needs being met, poor parental involvement, poor access to technology – and a difficulty in prioritizing in their own lives and in their schoolwork.

A 2003 graduate of Monticello High, Billias notes that the “one size fits all” method of past teaching just doesn’t work anymore. “For me, what works is providing students with choice

and flexibility and offering ways that kids can express their own voice,” he said.

Toward that end, he uses an approach that engages students in critical inquiry projects or “passion projects,” inviting them to explore their own interests.

As an example, Billias talks about U.S. track and field athlete Allyson Felix, who is bold about championing women’s rights in sports and about fair treatment for women athletes once they become pregnant. Famously, her op-ed piece The New York Times accused sponsor Nike of refusing to guarantee salary protections for female athletes in the months following a pregnancy.

“Allyson Felix’s voice is heard beyond the track,” he tells his students, encouraging them to find their own voice.

In Billias’ class, students choose a topic to research and then construct their own project to present to the class. It isn’t easy: “It’s difficult at first for stu-



English high school teacher Tim Billias is tenacious when it comes to finding ways to help kids excel. In his own life, he is husband to kindergarten teacher Allison Billias, who works at the K-2 George L. Cook School in Monticello.

dents to speak about themselves,” said Billias.

But before long, they blossom as they share thoughts and dreams. One student chooses to illustrate a love of sports. Another writes about her heritage.

At first some are reluctant to take on the task of writing, but they excel when given more options, such as videomaking.

Billias also introduces teenagers to six-word memoir writing. Now a widely practiced writing assignment in school districts, kids learn to encapsulate something about their

life in just a few words. (Famous six-word memoir by well-published novel writer Amy Tan: “Former Boss: Writing’s Your Worst Skill.”)

Opening wide student creativity gives kids an opportunity to explore their own passions through their own lens, the teacher noted. Plus, they produce something they are proud of.

“The whole class learns from each other,” Billias said. “Their thinking is elevated. There’s more interest and engagement. They are in the driver’s seat in thinking about things around them.”

The compelling world of technology, upclose and personal

Kim Gordon's job is a big job one with a lot of moving parts. Literally. Gordon, who has served various roles during her 13-year tenure at Monticello, is now the new Director of Information and Technology.

"I absolutely love this," said Gordon.

She supervises a staff of 11 people: a network administrator who takes care of the invisible "web," a systems operator, a wireless component expert, technicians who fix

equipment and staff developers who help teachers and students struggling with technology. An administrative assistant rounds out the roster.

"They get stellar things done, and they do it with a smile," said Gordon.

In the school district, each student has his or her own computer for use throughout the school year. Kindergartners through 8th graders get iPads. Ninth through

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twelfth graders have laptops.

The youngest kids, for example, are involved in coding through Bee Bots, a friendly little robot that teachers use for instructing children in sequencing, estimation and problem-solving in math.

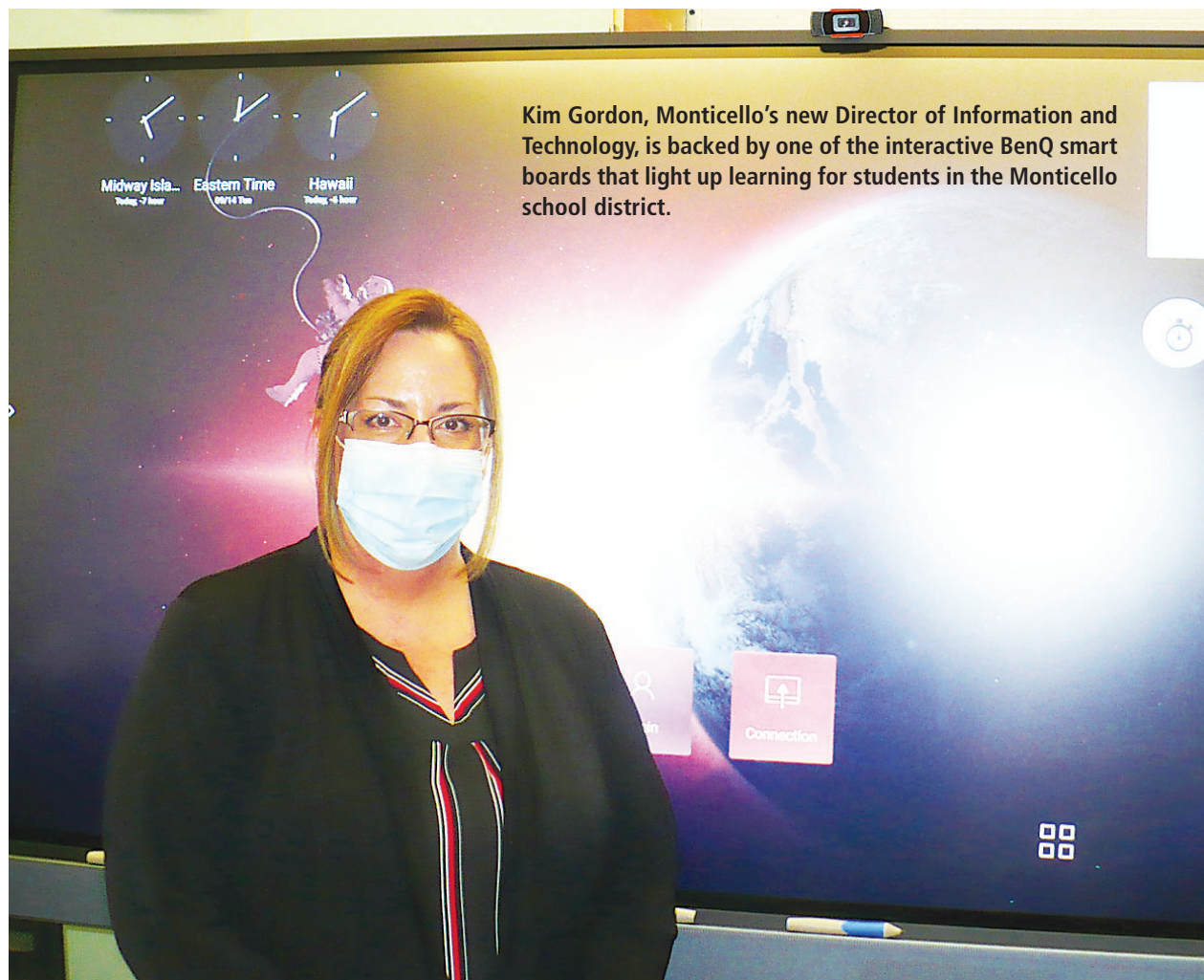
Older students can experience the ocean, or a tour of Rome through the use of virtual reality technology. "It puts students right in the environment and gets them excited about learning," said Gordon.

With Covid still an issue, Gordon notes that before the pandemic, "technology was an option. Covid made it a necessity. This department gave teachers the confidence they needed to support students. Everyone worked extremely hard every day."

As for Gordon, she's done just about everything at the school district. She's taught high school math; served as a technology integration specialist; was promoted to director of math, social studies and technology; and then served as curriculum director.

In May she took on the job of interim director of information and technology and then was appointed this summer.

"It's extremely busy here," she said with a big grin, "and it's amazing."



Kim Gordon, Monticello's new Director of Information and Technology, is backed by one of the interactive BenQ smart boards that light up learning for students in the Monticello school district.

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Teachers, Mentors start getting kids back on track

As a first grade teacher this year, what did you do when most of the students sitting before you knew how to read while others could only recognize the letters of the alphabet?

That's the reality as learning disruptions caused by Covid have rocked school districts. Fortunately, the federal government stepped in with money for repairs – teachers new to the district who can concentrate on small classrooms of kids and get them back in the saddle scholastically.

"We are also looking to hire mentors to give personalized support to 20 kids per grade," added Dr. Linda Oehler-Marx, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction.

Expanding out-of-school-time programs will be taking place as well, piggybacking on existing programs.

During the pandemic, Oehler-Marx said, the school district set up opportunities for on-line evening learning sessions by Monticello teachers, and parents were grateful. For example, the Kenneth L. Rutherford Elementary School saw 40 young participants learning from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m., on line at home.

She noted that the high school students in My Brother's Keeper (MBK) made home visits to help and support students during the pandemic. MBK is national initiative that aims to increase opportuni-



Dr. Linda Oehler-Marx, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and Covid Response Coordinator, points out the District is focused on supporting not only students' academic challenges but also their emotional and mental health.

ties for boys and young men of color.

This school year, district teachers themselves will also benefit from coaching and support particularly in the area of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

"Kids are excited to be back," said Oehler-Marx. "They're enthusiastic."

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