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NOVEMBER 2, 2021  
CALLICOON, NY

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

# SCENE

A look inside  
the Liberty  
Central School  
District





# Superintendent of Schools talks learning excellence, positivity

STORY AND PHOTO  
BY KATHY DALEY

**W**hen Patrick Sullivan worked years ago at a school for special needs students, he spoke up kindly to a hassled mother about the good qualities of her son, a boy who was constantly hysterical.

The distraught mother looked at Sullivan and said, "You are the first person to say anything good about my son."

"A positive comment can help very much," said Dr. Sullivan, now Superintendent of Schools for the Liberty Central School District. "Here, moments of kindness are rampant throughout the District. In those little moments we help each other succeed."

Sullivan is new to the top spot this year but not to the District.

In 2016, he was hired as Assistant Director of Student Services. In 2018 he became assistant principal at Liberty Middle School. The next year he took over as Assistant Superintendent of Schools.

"I'm excited," said Sullivan, who earned his doctorate in educational leadership from Manhattanville College in the Bronx. "I want to make sure I continue to learn, to listen, to help everyone support our children."

As with school districts across the nation, Liberty has gladly accepted federal funding to boost the learning losses during the Covid crisis.



'You can do this – we're here for you,' is a mantra for Dr. Patrick Sullivan at the helm in Liberty. New pads of paper are headlined 'Liberty Friendly Feedback Forms' to connect with teachers after his walk-throughs in classrooms.

But Sullivan said the District has avoided a mass hiring of new teachers, cognizant of the fact that the funding is a one-time deal.

"What will be new this year is an

in-the-works afterschool program for academic needs, Regents prep and tutoring," said Sullivan.

Also, "In Tier 1 math, we're looking at consistent interventions," he

added.

New District hires include a multi-language teacher and an expert in social-emotional learning. Also on board is a TESOL teacher (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

Teacher aides and lunchtime monitors have been added to the staff list, the latter particularly pertinent because a challenge comes at lunchtime when Covid rules keep students six feet apart.

In other matters, the District is working on updating its security camera system to allow for automatic lock-down in case of an emergency. The system will be able to send instantaneous messages on the public address system and on the Smartboards in classrooms.

In case of an emergency, the program also offers instant notification to the Liberty Police Department. The system is expected to go live within the next month.

A continued increase in the student population over the past five years is prompting the beginning of a capacity study. In the school year 2016/17, the District educated 1,630 students. This year 1,810 students are being served.

"If the numbers continue to increase, we'll have to look particularly at space capacity in the cafeteria," said Sullivan.

Regardless, he says, "The great thing here is that everyone IS Liberty. Liberty pride is a living thing."

## School Scene

*'A Look at Activities in the Liberty Central School'*

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# Choice and voice:

## *Empowering students in elementary school*

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY KATHY DALEY

Every morning at Liberty Elementary, children step down from school buses or parents' cars to be greeted warmly by 30 smiling staff members as the kids stroll into the school building.

Another huge welcome at the school's entrance takes the form of a 700-pound-plus pumpkin. The tan-colored fall fruit is the work of school district maintenance worker Rich Pennell of Swan Lake, who grows and

then delivers the huge squash to the school. Each autumn, the Atlantic Giant pumpkin launches the day sweetly for pre-kindergarten through fourth grade schoolchildren.

"They love to pat the pumpkin as they walk into the school," said Assistant Principal Robert England.

The pumpkin's dad, Pennell, couldn't be happier. "It's my hobby," he says. He works all summer at his home garden, trimming the pumpkin vines, watering



Above: Academics, leadership and the culture of the school are key to student success, notes Liberty Elementary School Assistant Principal Robert England.



At left: A first grade class learns about pumpkin growing from, back left, school district maintenance worker Rich Pennell.

the soil and feeding fish emulsion to ensure the pumpkin will, indeed, be huge.

Developing an atmosphere of connectedness is what it's all about at the school on North Main Street.

"We want every single student to have a sense of belonging," said England. Positive early experiences for children makes for robust learning in middle school and high school too. "Early on, it gives them a sense that school is good and worthwhile."

Also at Liberty Elementary, a





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New to the District, Assistant Superintendent of Schools Lynnette Brunger has worked in education for more than 27 years. As point person for overseeing curriculum and educational objectives, she's delighted to work with teachers, helping to move their skills from very good to excellent.

Smith

Wes

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STORY AND PHOTO  
BY KATHY DALEY

**"I** see people here in the school community who care and love the children deeply – and are doing great work to help kids."

That's the admiring view from the desk of new Assistant Superintendent of Schools Lynnette Brunger. She arrived in August from the post as middle school principal with the Newburgh Enlarged City School District, a district of over 12,000 students.

"I'm so excited to be here," said Brunger. "I came to Liberty and thought, this is it. A school community that's very strong. A wonderful town that supports kids."

"I wasn't looking for just any job."

With a twinkle in her eye, Brunger relates her own story of dragging her feet into education. Her mother and father were teachers. Her grandparents were teachers. Seven of 10 aunts and

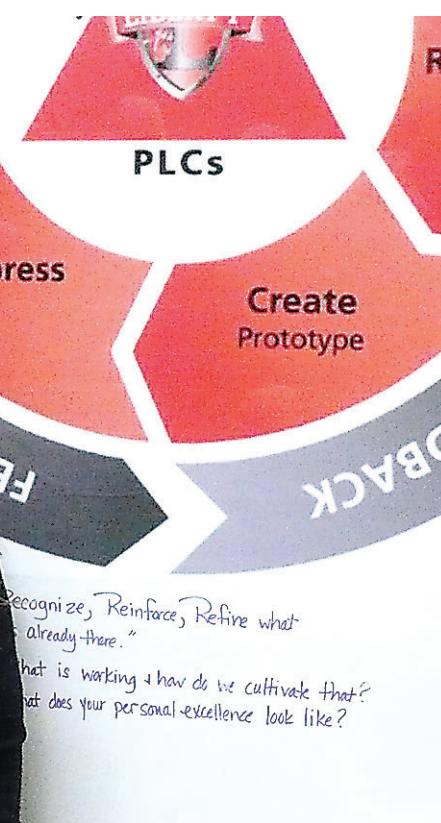
uncles were teachers. Everybody taught in New York State schools.

"I tried to fight it," she said with a grin. "I got a bachelor of fine arts degree in art history instead."

But, once she had her BFA diploma, Brunger realized the most likely job would be, well, teaching art history. And so she went full-steam ahead to earn her bachelor of science in elementary education, then a masters in literacy and finally a certificate of advanced study in administration, all at SUNY Cortland.

"I love teaching," said Brunger, who taught third grade and fourth grade and was a reading specialist for seventh and eighth graders. She worked mostly in the southern tier of New York as teacher and administrator before moving on to Newburgh.

"It's the most encouraging thing to me when kids come back and say I made a difference for them," she said. "A lot of the time it's hard for a teacher to know that in the moment – to know when the light bulb goes on for the student. That



targets posted in the classrooms. The targets, in student-friendly language, spell out what students will learn in the day's lesson. For example in English language arts, a learning target might read: "I can find details in a paragraph to summarize."

There are meetings at the schools, academic cabinet meetings, budget committee meetings, meetings with teacher department heads.

"Curriculum and instruction is my passion," said Brunger. "What I want is opportunities to work with teachers and to help them get even better at working their craft, to move from good and great to excellent."

In a world of education that continues to be affected by Covid, teachers can find themselves frantic about bringing kids up to

## A PERFECT FIT for new assistant superintendent of schools

often happens in math, when they suddenly understand a deep concept."

At Liberty these days, she's making it a point to be a presence in the elementary, middle and high schools: "I'm getting to know people, I'm paying attention, listening, visiting classrooms."

She's admiring to find learning

speed scholastically, Brunger said.

But her mantra is "love before lesson" – research suggests that caring relationships with teachers help students do better in school and act more kindly toward others.

"Yes, we need high standards," she said. "But we need to love and care about our children."





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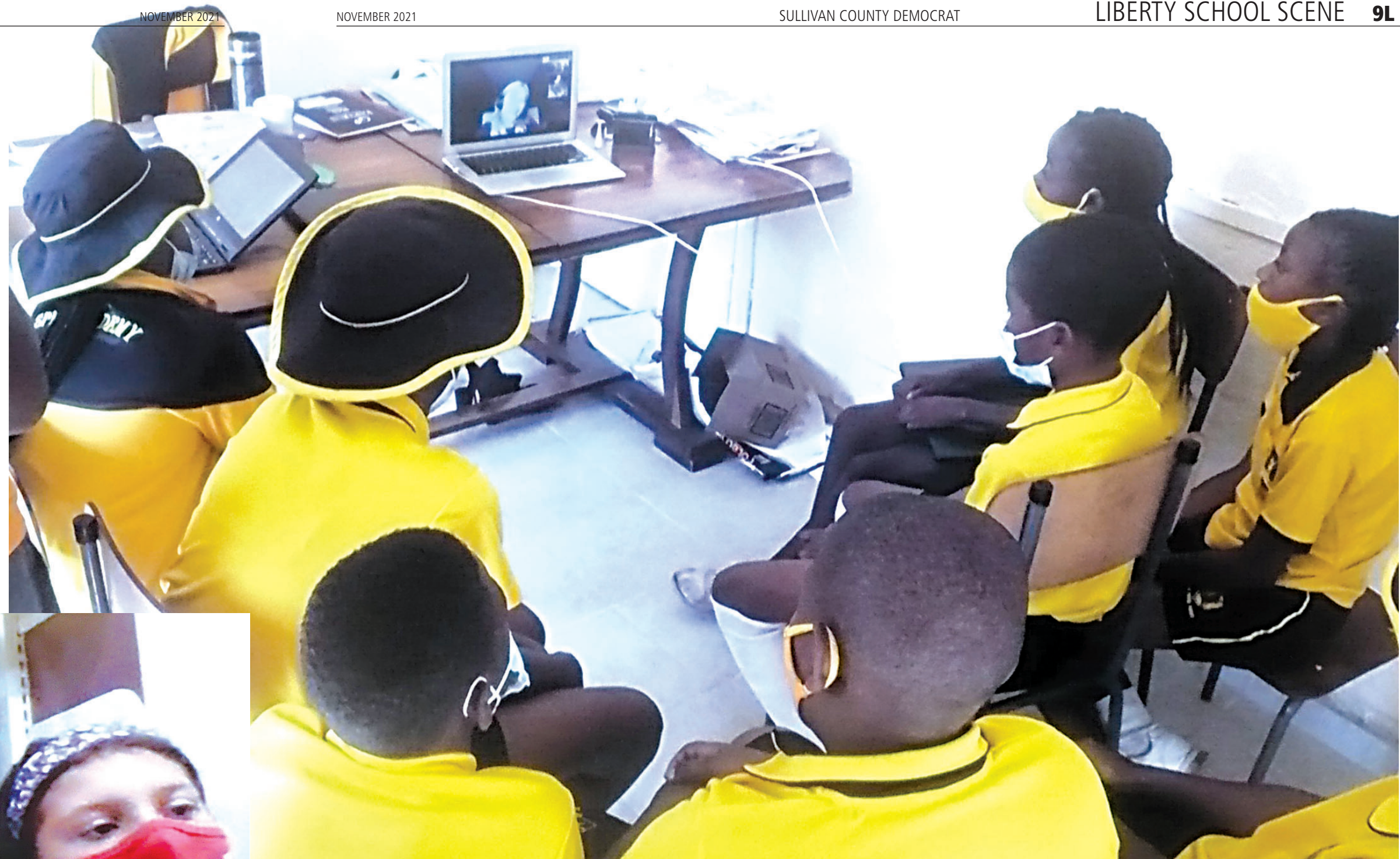
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# Students 'take to the screen' to learn with faraway friends

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHY DALEY



Above: Students at a school in Zimbabwe circle around the screen to get to know their peers at Liberty Middle School.

At left: Liberty Middle School students connect with students in Africa via video. Here, Leah Herbek, Belle Gandulla and Hope Corbet from Liberty share details about their school and town.

Sixth graders at Liberty Middle School are making new friends these days – and it's not a problem that their pals live 8,000 miles away.

"It's different to talk to someone who lives on a whole different land mass," said 11-year-old Belle Gandulla from her seat in the Liberty Middle School library.

This school year launched a joint project between Liberty students and children in the Republic of Zimbabwe in southeastern Africa. The program is run through Level Up Village, a Connecticut-based social impact company that links students from around the world to develop design thinking, that is, a way for students to define and solve tough challenges.

Together, the kids collaborate on real-world problems. In Liberty and in an urban area in Zimbabwe, students

are learning about healthy eating and how to work together for a healthy community. Locally, the course takes place in the middle school library five days a week, during first period. School librarian/teacher Jill Parks is at the helm.

A similar program through Level Up Village is ongoing as well at Liberty Elementary School.

"Three times during the course, we meet face-to-face with the students from Zimbabwe," said Parks, noting that working together in real time is difficult due to the time difference between southeastern Africa and Liberty, N.Y. When Liberty kids are at school at 8 a.m., Zimbabwe students have left school for the day.



# Liberty Indians show off their skills

PHOTOS BY ANTHONY MORGANO

The Indians fielded several varsity sports teams this fall. Here are just a few shots from the action!



Above: The Liberty boys soccer team was pumped up after defeating Red Hook in their first playoff game of the season.



At left: Yamileth Romero plants her foot and drives a direct kick in a game against Port Jervis.

At right: Chase Racette dribbles around a Chester defender.



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Tanner Bury rolls out of the pocket and launches a pass deep down the left sideline.

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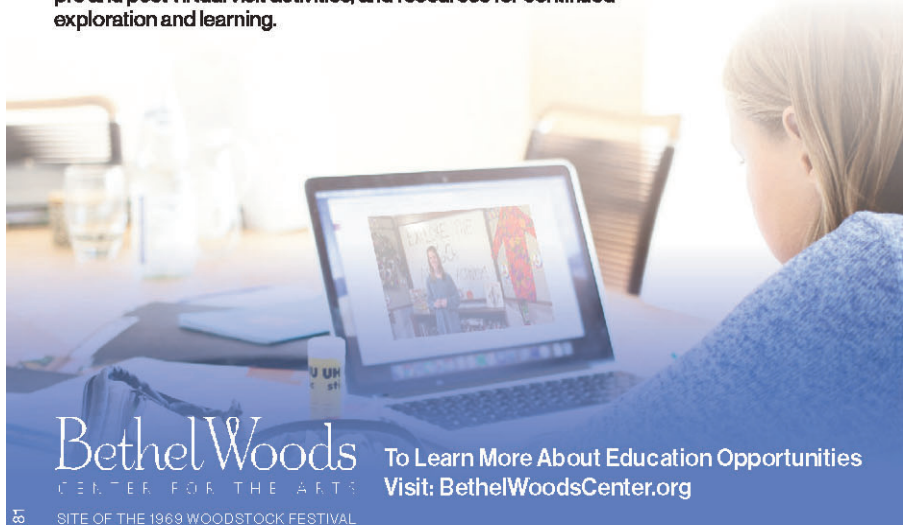
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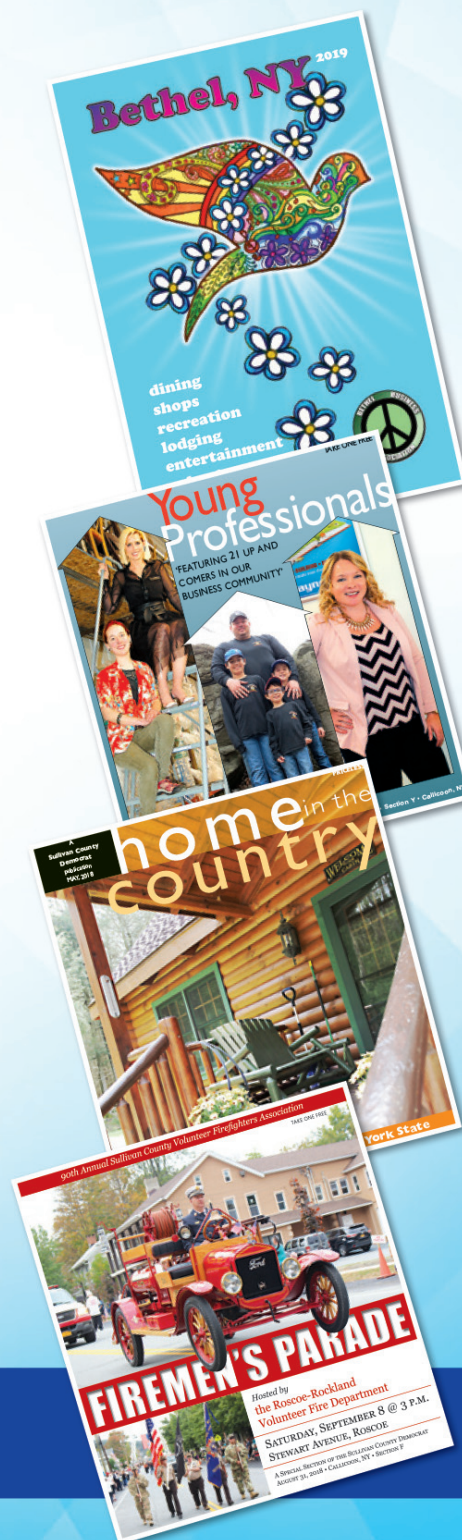
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# EMPOWERING: Students early

FROM PAGE 4L

staff Building Leadership Team (BLT) is focusing on the outward culture of the school: what parents and students see, hear and feel in the school building. One of the purviews of BLT are awards assemblies, now taking place virtually due to Covid concerns. The school sends a link to parents so, at a particular time, they can view the honors and awards given out to their children.

"On my screen, I can see a dad in his UPS uniform or a mom in her scrubs as they use their phone or ipads to watch their kids during the awards assembly," said England.

Academically, the school is particularly focusing this year on encouraging students to take control of their learning even though young.

Students have access to their own standardized testing scores and other data, and with adult guidance are setting goals academically and personally. For instance, a child who has trouble turning in homework on time might set the goal "I am getting my homework done before I play."

Giving students skills to make good decisions empowers kids and builds their self-reliance.

Says England: "We want to encourage a sense of agency," that

is, the capacity to act independently and to make one's own free choices.

Another initiative involves a 10-member group of teachers and counselors who work on and encourage coping and resilience strategies for students, teachers and families.

"Stamina and resilience have been hurt by Covid," said England, pointing out that some students spent 18 months at home working remotely and have to get used to in-school learning again.

Research-based strategies like "brain breaks" encourages teachers and students to get up from their desks and do stretching exercises. Or to enjoy a silent minute or two by doing deep breathing and sitting in silence.

The school is also consciously celebrating when specific classrooms and students meet their goals academically or behavior-wise. A child might take home an award that goes on the home refrigerator. Or a classroom-wide celebration is held for an individual child or for a class having done a great job together.

It's all in keeping with the school's longtime mission: "to educate, inspire and empower all students in a nurturing environment supported by staff, parents and community partnerships."

## Interact Club keeping busy

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A few members of the Liberty NY Rotary Club recently assisted the Liberty High School Interact Club with the sorting of plastic. The Interact Club has been collecting donations of plastic which will eventually be turned into park benches. This is their latest endeavor, having also successfully opened a Comfort Closet last spring that provides free personal care items to students in need of them. The club is advised by LHS Business Teacher Dan Hart.



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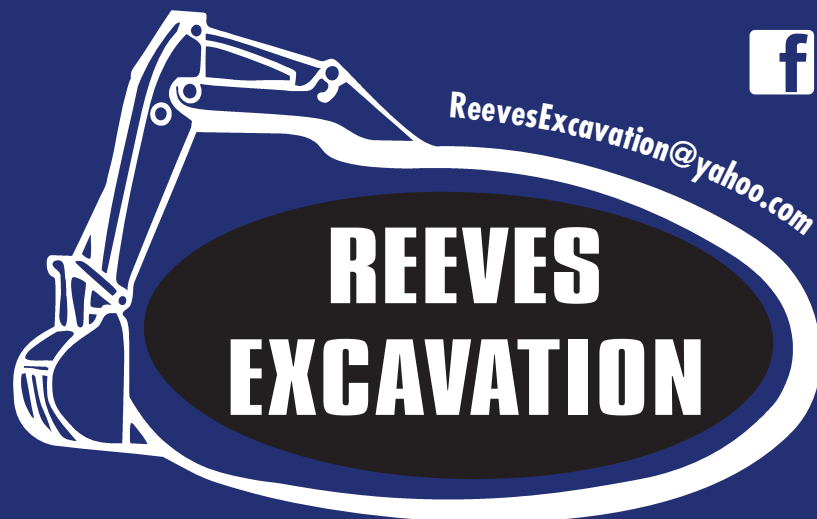
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# STUDENTS: 'Take to the screen'

But both classrooms of kids send videos back and forth, featuring students speaking into the camera about what life is like in their school and about the health issues people face.

Another part of the program features a teacher from Zimbabwe offering Liberty kids lessons on coding, that is, the process of feeding commands to the computer in a language the computer understands. The sixth graders will create a video game on a healthy topic.

Closer to home, nutritionist

Bee Moser of Cornell Cooperative Extension Sullivan County came to the class to speak to the students about "Thinking Your Drink." She discussed the health issues around sugary drinks and gave the students a way to understand how much sugar goes into soft drinks.

For example, the label on a 20 ounce bottle of Coke says the drink contains 65 grams of sugar. But convert that to teaspoons of sugar and the damage is a whopping 17 teaspoons.

Moser went on to suggest healthy alternatives: water infused with fresh fruit, or cucumber slices, or frozen blueberries.

Teacher Jill Parks notes that coding skills and preparing students for 21st century jobs are important. As for now, she's delighted that her students can occasionally interact upclose with students far away. "Our kids were mesmerized," she said.

Sixth grader Vraj Chaudhari seconded that thought. "It's cool and fun," he said, "to learn about a different culture."

'It's cool and fun to learn about different cultures,' says Vraj Chaudhari, sixth grader at Liberty Middle School.



Middle School librarian Jill Parks teaches students in a new program that links students from various countries in projects that focus on healthy individuals and communities.

Cover photos by  
Liberty CSD Public Information Specialist Lisa Ramirez

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