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SCHOOL

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

A look at
activities in the
Monticello
School District

SCENE



The State of Monticello CSD

STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The return of the school year brings hope and eagerness as students return to in-person learning as the COVID-19 pandemic worries have subsided.

But this new year brings the danger of Monkeypox and Polio, which New York State Public Health calls a public emergency.

However, Dr. Matthew Evans, Superintendent of the Monticello Central School District, said that the schools are ready to face the challenges in the upcoming school year.

"We have reminded all of our families out there to have the requirements for student immunizations," said Dr. Evans. "We're monitoring those closely and ensuring that every student has the required immunizations to attend school."

Evans urges parents and caregivers to seek information on the students' vaccinations and ensure they are up to date.

The most considerable interruption to the school year in the past two years has been the COVID-19 pandemic and entering this school year, many of the guidelines that have been in place for the past two years have changed.

Students who become infected must be isolated and not report to school for five days, which is a shorter time frame than it was two years ago.

They may return on the sixth day if their symptoms are no longer showing and are required to wear a face mask from day six to 10.

While virtual learning had proved essential in the pandemic, Dr. Evans said the Monticello Central School District's mission is to return back to in-person learning full time.

"We recognize the value of in-person learning and that students, on the whole, do much better when they're in-person in school with

their teachers and their peers learning together," Dr. Evans said.

However, some takeaways from the pandemic have stuck around, like video conferencing, which the Board of Education used to hold meetings.

Furthermore, Dr. Evans provides updates to the district via video, which gets posted to the website.

The Monticello Central School District is working with TutorMe, a private 24-hour, seven-days-a-week tutoring service that aids students from grades sixth to 12th.

"They provide synchronous and live tutoring with a teacher, not one of ours, but it's a company that we've contracted with using federal relief monies to help address student learning," added Dr. Evans.

Dr. Evans says programs like these help bridge the gap between teachers and students and help fulfill the students' needs.

Moreover, Dr. Evans said he is very optimistic and excited for this year's upcoming school year and for students to start using the newly renovated wing of Monticello High School, which will expand the learning capability of the district.

In fact, Dr. Evans said they also now have an approved pre-kindergarten program, and there are currently about 100 students participating at its St. John's Street location along with its high school program to help "revitalize and rejuvenate what we're able to offer kids in our schools."

In light of the tragic deaths at schools across the country, Dr. Evans said increased security at the schools has also been a top priority. The schools will make sure there is only one point of entry and exit and have now added an additional School Resource Officer from the Sullivan County Sheriffs' Office.

"We're also working closely with law enforce-



Dr. Matthew Evans, Superintendent of the Monticello Central School District, says he is optimistic for the new school year.

ment agencies making sure that in the event of an unfortunate incident, we know what happens and who does what and when," said Dr. Evans.

He went on to say law enforcement has been invited to the schools for walkthroughs of the hallways and classrooms, so they are prepared and know the layout of the buildings.

However, Dr. Evans said despite the increased security measures, it is an exciting time to resume school.

"[We want to] restore the promise of schools and what we're capable of doing for our kids and community," said Dr. Evans.

School Scene

'A Look at activities in the Monticello School District'

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Students preparing for class in the renovated science wing at Monticello High School.



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Keeping schools safe

STORY AND PHOTO BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

In response to the tragedies in Uvalde, Texas, the Monticello Central School District has taken steps to ensure the safety of all students and teachers in the new year.

One of those changes is the extra school resource officer that is now patrolling the St. John Street School Community Hub and the Chase Elementary School in Wurtsboro.

The Assistant Principal for Safety and Security and Assistant Principal at Chase Elementary School, Doug Murphy, said his security guards patrol the school multiple times a day and are the district's first line of defense.

They have increased the radio signals to help better communicate with each other and have been installing vape and smoke detectors that, when activated, will alert the security officers when they are being used inside the school.

Furthermore, the school will have detectors that will alert security to loud sounds.

According to Murphy, parents were concerned about school safety this year, and he said they have taken measures to help ensure the safety of the students, one of which is the visibility of the Sheriff's Office outside the school.

Furthermore, the schools have a single entry point, and visitors must be buzzed in and registered in the system.

Additionally, the security officers have been trained to handle situations verbally and to help de-escalate situations if they are to occur.

In fact, law enforcement is routinely invited to the schools to study the layout.

One of the newest school resource officers for Chase Elementary School is actually a former student who now works for the Sheriff's Office, Deputy Steven DeMestrio.

"It was great to [have] some of the teachers who taught me, and now, I feel like I am giving back to the community," he said.

Andrew Biro, a security officer



From the left, Security Officer Andrew Biro, Sullivan County Sheriff's Deputy Steven DeMestrio, Assistant Principal for Safety and Security/Assistant Principal Chase Elementary School Douglas Murphy, and Security Officer Stephon Rivera.

who has been with the district for eight years, says he has seen the leap in security over the years.

And one of those increases was the lockdown or vestibule. Once a person enters the school, they are prevented from entering the rest of the building and accessing students or teachers.

Being with the school district for a long time, he said it has helped him with relating to the students because they are seeing a familiar face year after year.

Stephon Rivera, a security officer who has also been with the school

for eight years, said things have changed since he's been with the school district.

"We went from being wide open to very much closed because of the pandemic," said Rivera.

He added they are training more on de-escalation and how to talk to the students better.

Murphy said that his guards help build relationships with the students that will strengthen the bond of community within the district, adding, "Maybe one student can relate to Stephon; another one might relate to Andy."



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New wing adds to science offerings

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The Monticello High School has added a new wing that has expanded the science classes. Science Teacher Meridith Symanski-Caruso said the new wing had been one of the highlights in her 19-year career as a teacher.

There have been no significant changes to the science room since 1965, and this much-needed update brings the students and teachers into the modern era.

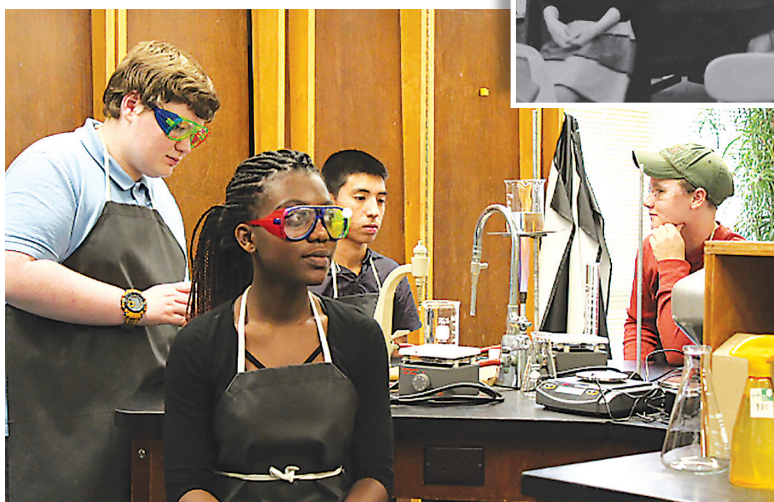
The new science wing in Monticello High School is bright and fresh, with high ceilings and LED lights.

But the LED lights are not the only light source in the new wing; skylights and large windows are able to wash the hallways and classroom with natural light that brings the students and teachers closer to nature.

Symanski-Caruso added that the



Science students in the newly renovated wing.



The photo above (from the 60s) and at left (2018) show that there were few changes in the wing for decades.

and the faculty and staff are really happy about being back in the same building. We spent two years between COVID and this building project being separated and so the sort of recreating the community that was somewhat broken as a result of COVID," said Wilder.

Also, in addition to the new wing, the Monticello Central School District will be getting new tennis courts on its campus, which are currently under construction.

The students play their matches at DeHoyos Park in Monticello, and in the near future, the student-athletes can hold their games on the school grounds.

new wing is refreshing, "I have the setup that I need to more efficiently work with my kids."

"They're excited, the kids, about everything that's new," Symanski-Caruso added.

The new upgrades include re-vamping the workstation stations for students who have easy access to outlets and other items that make each station learning and doing science dynamic.

"You can flow through the room easily. I can get everywhere I need to go. The kids have their own space too. They don't feel like they're all on top of each other," said Symanski-Caruso.

The previous science classroom had low ceilings that made the rooms feel cramped. With the renovations, the ceiling has been removed, leaving the internal infrastructure exposed, adding the sense of a real lab within the school.

The students and teachers also have a newly renovated outdoor

space where classes can be held or outdoor experiments can happen.

The classrooms are set up with tall windows with views of the outdoor courtyard, trees in the distance, and the natural light flooding into the room.

The Monticello High School Principal Stephen Wilder said the new teacher room in the newly updated wing is meant to be a more collaborative space where teachers can exchange ideas.

Furthermore, with the classroom redesign came the redesign of the teachers' office spaces. Some of the offices run the length of the hallways with windows that look into the classroom.

"There's been a big focus on creating collaborative spaces," said Wilder.

He went on to say he really likes the new lighting and open space the new wing has, and he is excited about the opportunities it creates.

"The kids have been super happy about being back in here,



The outdoor space in the new science wing at Monticello High School will allow the students to bring their education outside.



Open, bright spaces are now the norm at the new science wing at Monticello High School.



Principal Stephen Wilder under one of the new large skylights in the science wing at the Monticello High School.



Science Teacher Meridith Symanski-Caruso in one of the upgraded science classrooms in the new wing at the school.

Services expanded at Community Hub



St. John Street School Community Hub Preschool program Principal Jennifer Gorr with student Timothy Villas.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The Monticello Central School District now offers a preschool program at their St. John Street School Community Hub (SJSSCH).

The new program comes with a new principal, Jennifer Gorr, who has been with the district for six years as a special education supervisor.

The Preschool program takes three-to-four-year-olds who are chosen by a lottery system. The program includes five hours of instruction centered around movement and play, social skills, and academics so they can prepare for the transition to kindergarten.

"We're trying to increase their literacy skills, as well as our social-emotional wellness for all students," said Gorr.

While being a principal is new to her, she has the educational experience to face the unique challenges and states that she has a great support staff that works well together.

Gorr said she has a couple of goals for the new Preschool program: to have monthly parent engagement nights with the students, where parents can come

and learn about the different things they have within the community.

"It bridges that gap between our community, our families, and our district," said Gorr.

Currently, the Preschool program has 11 classrooms, and they are hiring two different teachers to add to the nine they have now.

Furthermore, the preschool program will have a school psychologist who will observe classes and have conversations with families.

"We do this as a team approach so that we are supporting not only the parents, but the students and the academics that occur in the classroom," said Gorr.

As a new principal, Gorr wants families and students to feel welcome and for their voices to be heard.

Moreover, Gorr says that education is in her blood; her father was a superintendent in the county many years ago, and her mother was a teacher for 32 years.

And as a mother herself, she cares deeply about the voice of the parent and the voice of the child.

"I will have an open door policy," said Gorr. "If you have any questions or concerns, I'm here to answer them."

Project-based learning

Also, new this year, high school students who might not be performing in a traditional school setting can be referred to the SJSSCH, which uses project-based learning.

"So they are really focusing on problem-solving and working as a team to get to the desired result," said Gorr.

Students in smaller classrooms learn science, math, social studies, and English.

"We're also working on allowing the students to go [to] an internship one day a week within our community," said Gorr.

When a student is considered for the SJSSCH, they have a discussion with the guidance department and high school administration.

Once a student is in the program, the student can return to a more traditional setting if they have shown they have developed more skills for better social interactions.

Gorr says that her hope is that they want to stay there and graduate from the same SJSSCH.

She wants to make it her goal to forge a partnership with SUNY Sullivan to offer opportunities that can bridge that gap between high school and college.

"I want to make them prepared to be productive, successful adults," said Gorr.

Gorr added she's also working with the students to find a good brand name for the new SJSSCH. She wants the students to take ownership of their studies and help build an identity for future generations of learning the SJSSCH.

She wants the students to know that they can take ownership of their studies and that the school is for them and their future.

And one of the students is Ariana Foote, who's in the 10th grade; she says that she likes the small classroom setting, and she's been



From the top left, Security Guard Kayla Marcia, student Kyoorn McCalla, student Ariana Foote, and Principal Jennifer Gorr.

able to thrive because they have been flexible on her start time and package a learning experience that, for her, has been working.

Gorr says she understands some of the unique circumstances of life at home, either working or all the obligations that can prevent them from coming to school early.

“I feel like I’m learning, but I don’t know that I’m learning,” said Foote and credited the teachers who spent time with her for helping her understand a subject.

Foote said she feels like she has a big personality and not all that everyone could sort of handle her.

Gorr says that the SJSSCH embrace that, and they use it for learning.

“We recognize those differences in each one of our students. And are developing our lessons to bring out the best in each one of them,”

said Gorr.

Kyoorn McCalla is a senior and says he also feels that this new school has benefited him so much more.

McCalla feels that the smaller classroom settings help him build a bond with the teacher and help him understand his subjects better.

Moreover, McCalla says he’s interested in learning more about the internship program and being part of the community, and he expresses that he’s given a chance at the SJSSCH to explore things that he likes to do and make it a learning experience.

Gorr added, “At some point, I’d like to create a parent advisory committee, where their parents are helping us to open even more doors and have that collaboration with this program.”

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Making after-school programming more dynamic

STORY AND PHOTO BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Monticello was among the 84 school districts that were chosen by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to receive a School Violence Prevention Grant (SVP).

Over \$300,000 will be distributed over a five-year period, and it will help reduce interpersonal conflict between students and improve conflict resolution between students, improving school safety.

Furthermore, the new grant will aim to help improve student attendance and a sense of belonging in the district.

In order to meet those goals, the grant will offer conflict resolution and peer mediation workshops in partnership with Dispute Resolution Center, Inc. (DRC) while offering “a range of learning and development experiences to help nurture self-expression in students, including visual art, music, dance, and writing.”

And to implement all these new goals, the Monticello Central School District hired Lyle Mincheff as Grant Program Director.

Furthermore, the grant is looking to create a service-learning program that combines community service with academic learning to help students learn the value of caring for one another and their communities.

It will also help increase academic support and intervention while offering support and outreach to families of the students who are absent chronically or at risk of being absent chronically.

“There is a mentorship component to the school violence prevention program. And we have mentors who are going to be on staff working as conduits between young people,” said Mincheff, who added that this is a multi-component system that will have enrichment programming during the day and after school.

In October, Mincheff said the middle schoolers would have an opportunity to participate in the community music program, where they will be able to learn and produce their own music with a live performance using industry-standard equipment.

“It gives the kids an opportunity to take some of the art that they can create and put it into the world, making it come to fruition,” said Mincheff.

Another program to help stem school violence is basketball for life which the Monticello CSD has partnered with a dispute resolution center that offers communi-

‘That’s the biggest thing, building the right relationships to have an impact with the kids who we most want to help....’

Lyle Mincheff
Grant Program Director

cation, impacts of emotion, and the emotional impacts of daily life, said Mincheff.

He added that this allows a student to be at the school in an after-school program and involved in sports and clubs, which can mean keeping them away from trouble, as they participate in something that will be beneficial to them.

Furthermore, Mincheff realizes that students might be having a hard time coming back to school after spending so much time during the pandemic in virtual learning and away from other students.

“We’re making it a priority to



Lyle Mincheff, Grant Program Director, is leading the School Violence Prevention Grant effort at the Monticello CSD.

sort of get them reactivated to school and make up for the time they lost with their peers and teachers,” said Mincheff.

These programs also speak about bullying and the students’ interactions with the community and further explore how relationships with other students impact not only themselves but the community at large.

“The idea is to reshape the understanding of how we communicate with each other in order to minimize some of those really ravenous effects of bullying,” said Mincheff.

He also says that they are training the kids to do peer mediation on their own.

“We have them understanding the really critical components, and the philosophy, without the injurious words, putting the correct language around, getting to

the bottom of disputes between kids,” said Mincheff.

Is the program having an impact on the students so far?

Mincheff says it has and used an example of a motivational speaker who came in and talked about personal brand and uses examples of well-known commercial brand names and how companies protect their brand.

He encouraged the students to look at themselves like a brand, and what they do that can potentially harm their personal brand in life.

Mincheff said, “That’s the biggest thing, building the right relationships to have an impact with the kids who we most want to help and who also need our help the most. We’ve taken regular after-school programming and started creating something far more dynamic.”



PATRICIO ROBAYO | DEMOCRAT

Construction remains ongoing for the new tennis courts. For years, Monticello tennis athletes have played at De Hoyos Memorial Park, not far off from the high school. We look forward to detailing more additions in the district in the 2023 Monticello School Scene.

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