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A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

A look at
activities in the
Monticello
School District

SCENE



STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The State of Monticello Central School District

Dr. Matthew Evans, Superintendent of Schools for the Monticello Central School District, said students and staff have renewed energy and commitment this year. The district is gearing up for several significant improvements, particularly in curriculum and instruction. They are working diligently to enhance their Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) programs to provide students with the support they need for improved outcomes.

Dr. Evans also highlighted the ongoing capital project supported by the community. He mentioned completing the tennis court phase and the upcoming final phase, including site work at the elementary schools.

“We are excited to see that finished up,” said Dr. Evans.

Regarding facilities improvements, Dr. Evans said new dugouts are installed on the baseball and softball fields along with field upgrades. Additionally, the district is utilizing federal relief funds to improve heating and ventilation systems in schools starting with Chase Elementary School.

Evans said the district is using funds provided by the COVID-19 relief funds, and about \$9 million will be used to upgrade ventilation systems in older elementary schools to create a healthier learning environment.

Evans added that there is a shortage of teachers, a national trend that has affected the district. Dr. Evans outlined their strategies to address this issue, including a program called “Today’s Students, Tomorrow’s Teachers,” offering high school students a 50 percent tuition scholarship and mentoring if they continue into an education prep program through college.

“As we speak right now, as we said, we have 10 teaching vacancies in the high school that we have been unable to fill. These are mostly in hard-to-fill subject areas like Special

Education, Science, Spanish and Math,” said Dr. Evans.

Dr. Evans revealed that the district is welcoming several fresh faces into leadership roles, and what makes this transition even more remarkable is that many of these leaders have deep roots within the Monticello school community. These emerging school leaders, in most cases, are educators who have previously served in various capacities within the district, whether as dedicated teachers or in other administrative roles.

Over the course of the past year, they took leaves of absence from their teaching positions to focus entirely on their administrative pursuits.

“They can give you a more ground view of what our teachers and our staff are doing on a daily basis,” said Dr. Evans.

Additionally, the district is planning to establish a registered apprenticeship program, which provides graduate students with paid internships in partnership with the school district.

In response to rising concerns about safety, Dr. Evans shared that the district has taken significant steps. They have contracted with Atlas security services to provide armed security guards at middle and high schools, supplementing existing security staff and



Dr. Matthew Evans, Superintendent of the Monticello Central School District, expressed that both students and staff have exhibited a rejuvenated sense of enthusiasm and dedication this academic year.

school resource officers.

Furthermore, the district is implementing random metal detector screenings as a deterrent against bringing weapons to school. The metal detector is mobile and will be used at random times.

Dr. Evans stressed the importance of community engagement. He emphasized the district’s commitment to enhancing communication and expressed his dedication to engaging with the community through initiatives like “Mondays in Monticello” videos where he addresses the district via video posted on social media and their website.

Dr. Evans said that the Monticello Central School District is taking proactive measures to improve curriculum, infrastructure, and student safety while addressing the teacher shortage issue.

School Scene

‘A look inside the Monticello School District’

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Meet the new Robert J. Kaiser Middle School Principal

STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Sara Kozachuk's path to leadership is a testament to her dedication. She began as a teaching assistant and then moved on to become a teacher, specializing in English and math for students in grades three through five. Her journey in education took her from teaching fifth grade to first grade, where she honed her skills and developed a passion for inspiring young minds. After years of teaching, she transitioned to the role of Middle School Assistant Principal, where she served for seven years before assuming her current position as Principal in the Monticello Central School District.

Kozachuk never strayed from the district where she grew up, studied, and ultimately found her calling. When asked about her decision to stay in Monticello, she emphasized her love for the community, its natural beauty, and its proximity to both rural and urban experiences. Her commitment runs deep, spanning generations, as her own children are the fourth generation to attend Monticello schools.

But what inspired Sara to become an educator in the first place? Her answer was simple: she had always wanted to be a teacher since she was a child. She played school and dreamed of making a difference in the lives of young learners. Her inspiration came from her own experiences with great teachers at Monticello, who instilled in her the desire to pay it forward and inspire the next generation of students.

Sara's journey from teacher to principal has equipped her with a unique perspective. Having experienced all aspects of education, from teaching to school administration, she deeply understands what students and staff go through. This background allows her to relate to the



Sara Kozachuk, (center) is the new Robert J. Kaiser Middle School Principal and she is supported with her Assistant Principals Dr. Jason Doyle (left) and Elizabeth Bedford.

challenges and opportunities faced by her school community.

Kozachuk's leadership philosophy centers around meeting students and families where they are. She firmly believes that all students have the potential to learn and achieve their goals. Setting high expectations while providing kindness and compassion is her approach to nurturing student growth. Building strong relationships with students and families is at the core of her educational philosophy. She recognizes that without these connections, meaningful teaching and learning cannot take place.

Kozachuk's journey to becoming a principal was not without its doubts and challenges. She candidly shared that she initially hesitated but was motivated by the kind words of many, including students and staff from various roles within the school community. Feeling wanted and needed, she embraced the opportunity to serve the students of Monticello in her current role.

As a principal, Kozachuk has taken the reins with enthusiasm. She has already overseen a smooth start to the school year, with students settling in seamlessly. The Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) has been reinvigorated, allowing for greater collaboration between families and the school. Sara believes that strong relationships with families are essential, emphasizing the importance of the school and home partnership. This partnership extends beyond academics to include support for basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and counseling services, all aimed at creating a thriving community.

Kozachuk recognizes the critical role of after school programs like the Boys and Girls Club, which provides essential support for working families. Beyond academics, these programs offer homework help, meals, and a safe environment for students to thrive. Kozachuk's dedication to fostering such connections reflects her commitment to the holistic development of her

students.

In her efforts to encourage positive behavior, Kozachuk has introduced a unique initiative. Students who receive positive referrals for acts of kindness or good deeds have the chance to win Monticello and RGK (Robert J. Kaiser) swag. This rewards program reinforces the importance of positive interactions within the school community.

Kozachuk's journey from a young girl dreaming of being a teacher to becoming the principal of the school where she once studied is a testament to her unwavering dedication to Monticello. Her vision for education is grounded in kindness, compassion, and strong relationships with students and families. As she leads Robert J. Kaiser Middle School into the future, Kozachuk's commitment to fostering a thriving and supportive school community is clear, and her story serves as an inspiring example of the impact one dedicated educator can have on generations of students.



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From Pizza to Quinoa:

Monticello Central School District's Lunch Revolution

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Lisa Failla, Assistant Superintendent for Business at the Monticello Central School District, said there are exciting developments in school lunch offerings. The district has been hard at work improving the quality and diversity of its school lunches to meet the needs and preferences of its students.

One of the key changes initiated last year was a focus on gathering input from the students themselves. The district engaged with the student council and organized a roundtable discussion with students to understand their preferences and desires regarding school lunches. What became evident from these discussions was the desire for more vegetarian options and greater variety beyond the usual pizza and macaroni and cheese.

To meet these demands, the district decided to bring in a Cook Manager, Don Thurston, who is also a chef. Thurston was tasked with developing new recipes for the school cafeterias, with a specific emphasis on vegetarian options.

This year, students can expect a daily vegetarian option on the menu in addition to the regular salad bar. These options include dishes like Mediterranean quinoa, providing students a more diverse and healthier selection.

One of the standout initiatives introduced by the district is its participation in the Farm to School program. By partnering with local farmers, the district aims to source ingredients locally, offering students a taste of New York-grown produce. Thursdays have been designated as "New York Thursdays," where



Students prepared and excited for lunch.

everything on the menu will be locally or New York-sourced, showcasing the region's flavors.

Dawn Parson, the Food Service Director, emphasized the importance of gradually introducing healthier foods to students. She mentioned that changing the eating habits of students takes time and education. The district aims to shift students away from processed foods and introduce them to more nutritious options like steamed vegetables and salads.

Another noteworthy addition is the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant, benefiting elementary and middle school students. This grant allows for grab-and-go fruits and vegetables to be available throughout the school buildings.

These items are easily accessible to students, not limited to the cafeteria, promoting healthy snacking habits.

To address dietary restrictions and special needs, the district has implemented a system where students with specific dietary requirements, supported by a doctor's note, have their needs flagged in the point-of-sale system. This ensures that students with allergies or other dietary restrictions receive suitable meal options.

According to Parson, the district takes allergies seriously and ensures that students with allergies receive appropriate meals as long as they provide a note from a doctor. They work closely with nurses to meet students' dietary needs safely.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) has been a significant boon for the district and its students. The CEP allows the district to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of their income. This program ensures that students have access to nutritious meals and helps families during challenging times.

One of the most heartening aspects of these changes is the district's commitment to listening to students' voices and implementing their suggestions. For instance, students requested ranch dressing for their pizza, and the district readily accommodated this preference. It's a testament to the district's dedication to creating a positive and inclusive environment for

students where their opinions matter.

Moreover, by diversifying the menu and introducing students to different cuisines, the district addresses their nutritional needs and fosters empathy for diverse cultures. Food becomes a gateway to understanding and appreciating the richness of various traditions and backgrounds.

Regarding the preparation of meals, the district aims to make as much food from scratch as possible. While some items like chicken nuggets are purchased pre-made due to time and equipment constraints, many other dishes are prepared in-house, including salads and pasta dishes. The district prioritizes following strict nutritional guidelines to ensure the meals meet the necessary criteria for

school lunches.

The district's efforts to provide healthier, more diverse, and accommodating school lunches are commendable. With a continued focus on menu improvement and listening to student feedback, Monticello Central School District sets a great example of how schools can enhance the overall educational

Regarding the preparation of meals, the district aims to make as much food from scratch as possible.

experience by caring for students' basic needs and fostering a sense of belonging.

Monticello Central School District's commitment to improving school lunches is a step in the right direction towards a healthier, more inclusive, and empathetic school environment. Students' voices are being heard, and their nutritional needs are being met, making for happier, healthier learners.



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On September 21, Monticello received the following awards:

- Judge's Choice (\$5,000) - George L. Cooke Elementary School
- Physical Activity Turtle Award, sponsored by the Sullivan County Democrat (\$500) - Robert J. Kaiser Middle School
- Physical Activity Turtle Award, sponsored by Jeff Bank (\$500) - George L. Cooke Elementary School
- Project of the Year, sponsored by Thompson Sanitation (\$500) - Spartan Club, Robert J. Kaiser Middle School
- Healthier Generation Advisor of the Year, sponsored by the Gerry Foundation (\$500) - Elisa Mendels, George L. Cooke Elementary School

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STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Meet the new Principal of Kenneth L. Rutherford Elementary School

Veronica Serrano's journey to becoming a school principal was anything but typical. She initially served as the assistant principal at Rutherford Elementary for two years. However, her path to this role was not initially clear. She candidly shared that she didn't initially feel prepared for the position and didn't aspire to it. The encouragement and support from the MTA (Monticello Teacher Association) convinced her to give it a shot. This support propelled her to interview for the position leading to her current role as principal.

Before stepping into an administrative role, Serrano was a bilingual teacher in Fallsburg, teaching kindergarten for three years. Her teaching journey began with kindergarten in English-only classrooms, but due to the increased English as a New Language (ENL) population, a bilingual program was introduced. Serrano eagerly took the opportunity to participate, even though she lacked bilingual certification initially.

Her dedication paid off when she was selected for the role, and she simultaneously pursued her bilingual certification while working full-time. Her story demonstrates resilience and dedication.

Serrano's philosophy as a school leader is rooted in listening and building a strong sense of

teamwork. She recognized the need to improve staff morale and school culture based on a survey she conducted at the end of the previous school year. The feedback indicated that teachers felt unheard. To address this, she started the new school year with team-building activities and personalized T-shirts for staff members to foster a sense of belonging and teamwork. Serrano believes that a strong, unified staff will lead to a more positive student experience.

"I feel that when the staff has that feeling that they belong here, that they're validated, they're appreciated, that trickles down to our students," said Serrano.

One of Serrano's goals is to engage the school's diverse community. She is enthusiastic about the PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) involvement and plans various activities, including trunk-or-treat events and a fifth-grade dance, to bring families together. Additionally, she hosts "Tea with the Principal" events every other month to create an open dialogue with parents, addressing topics like attendance and behavior.

"I'm trying to do those every other month to have families come in and have an open dialogue," said Serrano.



Veronica Serrano is the new Principal of Kenneth L. Rutherford Elementary School.

Serrano recognizes the importance of bilingualism and is proud of her ability to connect with Spanish-speaking families. She emphasizes the significance of preserving native languages and cultures while helping students become proficient in English. Her passion for diversity and inclusion shines through in her approach to education.

"Being bilingual and being able to connect with my families is giving them the ability to see themselves in me," said Serrano.

Serrano's leadership at Kenneth L. Rutherford Elementary School

is marked by her commitment to building a strong and united team, fostering a sense of belonging in the school community, and celebrating diversity and bilingualism. Her journey from a bilingual teacher to a principal demonstrates the power of dedication and the impact of a passionate leader in education.

Serrano said, "Never in a million years, but I thought that I'd be sitting in this office; it's just been a blessing, and I don't take it for granted. I'm humbled by it every day."

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Scenes from a day at Monticello Central

Monticello Central School students are enthusiastic and prepared to embark on their academic journey, spanning from pre-K to high school, for the upcoming year.



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