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# SCHOOL

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

A look at  
activities in the  
Monticello  
School District

# SCENE







Monticello Central School District Superintendent Dr. Matthew Evans stands beside plans for the proposed football/soccer field upgrade. Though the final design is still in progress, this project promises a lasting impact for years to come.

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Monticello Central School District Superintendent Dr. Matthew Evans shared that the district has rolled out an instructional playbook, which sets clear expectations for how lessons could be taught.

“The single greatest factor... that affects student achievement is the quality of instruction in the classroom,” Dr. Evans said, stressing that the goal is to create a standard of teaching excellence throughout the district.

The playbook, developed by instructional coaches, teacher leaders and administrators, outlines

the key elements of effective lessons and is now posted in every classroom.

“This is really about creating a common language around what good instruction looks like,” Evans explained. He added that the district has ramped up professional development and coaching, with teachers receiving ongoing support from instructional coaches who help them fine-tune their teaching methods.

This coaching network, already in place at Chase, Cooke, and Rutherford Elementary Schools, has now been expanded to include Kaiser Middle School, with the plan to eventually bring it to Monticello High School.

Evans credits the team be-

# State of the District

hind this initiative, particularly Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Theresa Carlin, who has led the charge in coordinating this effort.

“We believe that the result of this work will be improved outcomes for students,” he said.

## Capital Projects

On the facilities front, voters gave the green light for a \$31.8 million capital project that will overhaul several buildings and give the high school a brand-new stadium. The centerpiece of this project is Kennedy Field football field, which will get a major upgrade, including new bleachers and track facilities. According to Evans, designs are being finalized, and the district is planning to break ground in late spring or early summer of 2025, pending approval from the New York State Education Department.

Other improvements include replacing old, energy-inefficient windows at the high school, upgrading the facade at St. John Street School, and removing outdated storefront windows at Cooke and Rutherford Elementary Schools.

Evans noted that these projects, while necessary, may cause some temporary disruptions.

“It will be a bit messy and noisy,” he said, but reassured the community that the improvements will be well worth it in the long run.

As for the sports teams, the construction may force them to play

away games for a season, depending on the timeline.

“We might have to go a season where it’s all road games,” Evans said, but the final schedule won’t be set until the plans are approved by the state.

## School Safety

While the capital project is mostly focused on modernizing facilities, Evans pointed out that school safety is always a key consideration. The district’s decision to replace the large storefront windows, for example, also aims to enhance security by making classrooms less visible from the outside.

“On the one hand, we’re reducing visibility for law enforcement, but at the same time, it reduces visibility for anyone looking to do harm,” he said.

In light of the troubling rise in school shootings nationwide, the Superintendent shared that the district is planning to implement “threat assessment teams” in all six schools. These teams, made up of administrators, teachers, counselors, security staff, and law enforcement, will focus on identifying students who might pose a risk and developing intervention plans before issues escalate.

## Cell Phone Policy

One topic that has stirred plenty of discussion is the district’s approach to student cell phone use.

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## School Scene

‘A look at activities in the Monticello School District’

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2M

While there's already a "soft ban" in place, meaning phones aren't allowed out during instructional time, the district is considering going a step further with a full ban. Evans explained that a task force has been formed to explore the idea of students storing their phones in secure bags during the school day, which would be locked until the end of the day.

"Student smartphone usage increases behavioral issues in schools, causes anxieties, and has diminished student achievement," Evans said. While the district is still in the planning stages, he was clear that the community will be involved in the decision-making process through town hall meetings. For now, he reassures parents that they can always reach their children via the main office or email.

three new inductees into the Monticello High School Hall of Distinction this year. Among the honorees are Emma Chase, one of the first female superintendents in New York; Sullivan County historian John Conway; and Blake Washington, who currently serves as New York State Budget Director. The ceremony will take place on October 18th, in conjunction with the school's homecoming festivities, and the public is encouraged to attend.

**Looking Ahead**

Despite the challenges, Evans is optimistic about the future of Monticello schools.

"We're especially proud of our staff for everything they do every day for our kids," he said, adding that the district is looking forward to "bigger and better things" as they continue to improve both instruction and facilities across the board.



Monticello Central School District Superintendent Dr. Matthew Evans anticipates an exciting start to the new school year.

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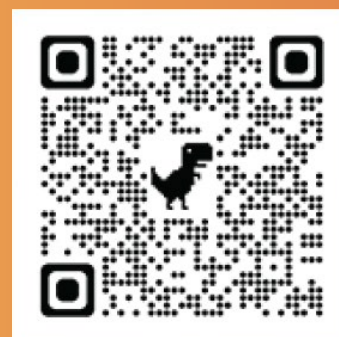
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# New Principal of Monticello High School: Jennifer Gorr sets her vision for the year

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

**M**onticello High School has welcomed a new leader to its helm—Jennifer Gorr, who brings nearly a decade of experience within the district. As the new principal, Gorr is determined to forge deeper connections with students, staff, and families while championing a culture of achievement and inclusion.

“My goal is to get to know the staff, the families, and of course, the students, to understand the strengths of this building and areas for improvement,” Gorr said. She made an effort to meet with every staff member in June, even before officially transitioning into the role. This proactive approach allowed her to grasp the climate and culture of the school, which she plans to build upon.

morale, both for students and staff.

“We have amazing staff who are dedicated professionals, and amazing students who excel in academics, the arts, and athletics,” she said, emphasizing her commitment to showcasing the school’s strengths. “Sometimes those great things get missed,” she remarked, noting her intent to shine a spotlight on the many successes already present within the school.

## A Vision

Beyond celebrating the achievements, Gorr is also passionate about helping every student realize their full potential.

“I care about what they have inside them because I know that every student has drive,” she asserted. Her focus is on finding that “spark” in every student, working closely with families and staff to foster both academic and social-emotional success. Gorr’s guiding principle is collaboration with families and not making



Jennifer Gorr, the new Principal of Monticello High School, alongside sophomore De'Anna Livingston and junior Darius Morgan.

rash decisions that could negatively affect a child’s future.

Her experience as the former principal of St. John Street Community School, which served both preschool and alternative high school students, provided Gorr with valuable insights into helping students who face challenges.

“It really is just taking each individual situation and student individually, and supporting them with what they

need,” she said, reaffirming her belief in meeting students where they are, regardless of their circumstances.

## Pathways

With Monticello High School students approaching the pivotal transition to college or other post-secondary pathways, Gorr is focused on ensuring that every student is prepared for their next steps—whether that includes college, trade schools,

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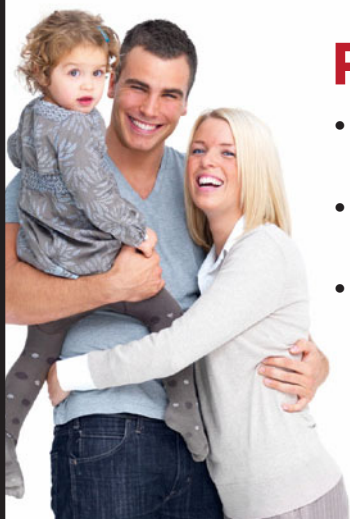
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or the workforce.

“College isn’t for everyone,” she acknowledged, stressing the importance of individualized career pathway plans. By working with her guidance team, Gorr aims to ensure that students and their families are aware of all the options available. “It’s about giving them the tools to navigate whichever path they choose,” she explained.

The school’s ninth graders, for example, will be involved in career pathway planning through interest inventories that help tailor their academic experience to their aspirations, whether in science, the arts, or athletics. “Obviously that plan can change as they grow, but it gives us a road-map,” she said.

**eHall Pass**

One of the new initiatives Gorr has implemented is the introduction of the Securely e-hall pass system, a tool aimed at improving accountability for students during school hours. This real-time system allows the administration to track when and where students are when they leave the classroom, which Gorr believes will help address concerns raised by staff about stu-

dents being in the hallways too often.

“This way, we can be proactive in preventing a snowball effect,” she explained, highlighting the importance of addressing behavioral issues early on.

In tandem with the hall pass system, Gorr has introduced stricter cell phone policies.

“Zero cell phone use in the classroom,” she said firmly, adding that students can have them during lunch or between classes, but not during academic times. Gorr recognizes the challenge that phones pose to maintaining students’ focus and is working closely with her team to enforce this rule for the benefit of students’ academic success.

**Parental and Community Involvement**

Gorr also places great importance on fostering strong relationships with parents and guardians.

“As a parent myself, I always ask how I would want a situation handled with my own child,” she said, offering a compassionate approach. Her door is always open, and she is committed to listening to families, ensuring their voices are heard as they collaborate

in supporting their children’s success.

As the academic year unfolds, Gorr is excited about all that lies ahead.

“I’m looking forward to all of it,” she said enthusiastically. From attending tennis and volleyball matches to supporting Monticello’s celebrated arts

and music programs, Gorr is eager to immerse herself in every aspect of school life.

“It’s just nice to see the students excel in different areas and live out their passions.”



Jennifer Gorr, the new Principal of Monticello High School, engaging with students during lunch.



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# Monticello unveils new cafeteria menus focused on fresh, whole foods

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO



Monticello Central School District is dedicated to serving higher quality food to their students throughout the district.



Inclusivity is a major point for the new menu.

**M**onticello Central School District is revamping its school lunch program, transitioning from processed, heat-and-serve meals to healthier, whole food-based options. With the hiring of a professional chef and a renewed focus on nutrition, the district is prioritizing student health and well-being through fresh, nutritious meals.

“We’ve really been working to improve the quality of the meals and get kids more interested in eating real food, whole foods as opposed to processed foods,” explained Lisa Failla, Assistant Superintendent for Business. Leading the charge is a professional chef in Kristen Huffman

The School Lunch Manager who has brought creative new recipes to the table, focusing on whole, fresh ingredients to replace the district’s former reliance on pre-packaged meals.

Over the summer, Monticello’s cafeteria staff completed an intensive two-day training program with Sullivan 180 and the Lenox Hill Teaching Kitchen. The training has equipped the staff with new skills and confidence to embrace the change. Failla said that while there was some initial hesitation, the kitchen team is now excited to showcase their talents by preparing real food.

“They’re embracing it, and they’re excited about the new offerings,” she said.

## A New Era

For years, school cafeterias nationwide, including Monticello’s, relied heavily on pre-made, processed meals due to federal regulations on calories and food portions. However, the district is now committed to a healthier approach, reflecting a shift away from convenience toward long-term health benefits.

During the pandemic, convenience became a priority, with schools opting for quick, easy-to-prepare meals. Now, with students back in the classroom, Monticello is refocusing on nutrition.

“We really want to focus on healthy eating habits because that’s a lifelong thing for kids, and our county isn’t great when it comes to health needs,” Failla said.

The district’s new menus, which are available online, represent a major shift from traditional school lunch options like chicken nuggets also mindful of diverse dietary needs, with new vegetarian options and a commitment to providing fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the day. Thanks to a fresh fruit and vegetable grant, students can take as much produce as they want at any time.

## Inclusive Meals

One of Monticello’s main goals with the new menu is to reflect the district’s diverse student population. The district is working to create meals that students recognize from their cultural backgrounds, making

the cafeteria a more inclusive space.

“We want our menu to mirror our student demographic,” said Failla, adding that the district is collaborating with student government and stakeholders to create culturally relevant meals.

To ensure students feel heard and included, Monticello will offer sample tastings of new dishes before adding them to the regular menu. This allows students to try new foods, many of which may be unfamiliar, and offer feedback on potential menu items.

Failla shared a touching story about a student who initially hesitated to share her favorite foods, believing the cafeteria staff wouldn’t recognize the Spanish dishes she loved. Once she realized the staff understood her cultural background, her attitude shifted dramatically. It’s these kinds of moments the district hopes to foster through its culturally inclusive menus.

## Student Feedback

Monticello is actively involving students in the menu creation process. The district gathers regular feedback through student government and cafeteria tastings, where students can sample new dishes and provide immediate feedback. The district is also working with students from the Sullivan BOCES CTE Culinary Program, who assist with meal prep, and students from the career readiness special education program, who help prepare fresh items like salad bar components.



For busy high school students, Monticello is introducing grab-and-go options like charcuterie-style boxes with meats, cheeses, veggies, and hummus. These will be accessible through tablet-based kiosks placed around the school, allowing students to grab a meal quickly between classes.

### Addressing Food Allergies and Special Needs

Monticello Central School District is also committed to ensuring the safety of students with food allergies. The district has implemented a point-of-sale system that alerts cafeteria staff when a student has dietary restrictions.

"It comes right up on the screen," Failla explained, ensuring staff can immediately identify any food items a student cannot have. Although the district is not peanut-free, children with severe peanut allergies are seated at separate tables to minimize exposure risks.

### Facing Challenges

While the district's shift to fresh, whole food-based meals is a positive change, it also presents challenges. Balancing the cost of whole foods with budget constraints is an ongoing concern, but Monticello is managing to maintain quality while staying financially stable. "We don't make a ton of money, but we tend to break even," Failla said.

The federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) has been instrumental in making these improvements possible, allowing the district to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students. This program has brought additional federal funds, which have been used to provide nutritious meals at no cost to families.

The district is also working to source more ingredients locally, participating in initiatives like New York Thursdays, which feature produce from local farmers. Although local sourcing can be difficult for larger districts like Monticello, which need a higher volume of ingredients, the district remains committed to using fresh, locally sourced products wherever possible.



Grab-and-go style boxes will be available with meats and other foods for students.



Various meals will be implemented, including those tailored for students with allergies and other dietary needs.



Fresh fruit is only one of the items on the menu.

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# RULER Program: emotional intelligence in Monticello



Elisa Mendels, a social worker at St. John Street Community School Pre-K and part of the Monticello Central School District, has played a key role in introducing the RULER program to the classroom.

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The Monticello Central School District is taking a proactive approach to emotional development with the implementation of the RULER program, starting as early as pre-kindergarten at St. John Street Community School.

This social-emotional learning framework, developed by Yale University, is designed to help students Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate their emotions—a vital skill set that aids in building empathy and better communication from a young age.

Elisa Mendels, a social worker at St. John Community School Street Pre-K and part of the Monticello Central School District, has been instrumental in bringing RULER to the classroom. Mendels, who has worked in the district for over 20 years, believes in the

importance of emotional learning as a foundation for academic and social success.

“RULER helps kids become better citizens, better friends, and teaches them empathy,” she explained. “It’s about starting young, so they grow up knowing how to handle their emotions and those of others.”

At the pre-K level, Mendels breaks down complex emotions into simple, engaging lessons tailored for young learners.

“You have to add a lot of movement, song, dance—stories standing on your head if needed—to really engage them,” she said.

For the youngest students, the focus is on concepts like kindness and friendship, rather than more complex issues such as bullying.

In classrooms across St. John Street Pre-K, a positive incentive system called “bucket fillers” encourages students to act kindly towards one another.

“Every classroom has individual buckets,” Mendels noted. “The kids are rewarded for acts of kindness, which reinforces positive behaviors.”

One of the central tools of RULER is the “Mood Meter,” a visual system that helps students label their emotions based on their level of energy and pleasantness. The Mood Meter is divided into four color-coded quadrants—blue, green, yellow, and red—each representing different emotional states. “The kids use it to tell us how they’re feeling each day,” Mendels said. “Some will come in and say, ‘I’m feeling green today,’ which means they’re calm and happy, and we use that as a way to open up conversations about emotions.”

Mendels explained that the Mood Meter is just one part of a broader effort to help children articulate their feelings.

“If they can verbally express what they’re feeling, we can validate those emotions and help them work through uncomfortable feelings in a healthy way,” she said. This early emotional education has a lasting impact, with teachers noting fewer tantrums and better communication among students as they learn to express themselves.

Parental involvement is another crucial element of the program. Mendels works to ensure that the emotional intelligence lessons extend beyond the classroom.

“We send letters to parents explaining the program and how they can use it at home,” Mendels said. She also conducts workshops, teaching parents about the Mood Meter and helping families create “family charters” that align with the emotional language used in school.

“It’s important that parents understand when their child comes home saying, ‘I’m feeling red,’ so they can help their child work through those emotions.”

Consistency across classrooms can be a challenge, but Mendels is proud of the commitment

Monticello Central School District has made to fully embrace the RULER framework.

“Every classroom at St. John Street uses a Mood Meter, and teachers incorporate emotional intelligence lessons regularly,” she said. This consistency helps students apply their emotional learning throughout the school day and at home.

Mendels believes that starting social-emotional learning at such a young age will have long-term benefits for students as they continue through school and life. “When you get them at this age, you’re setting them up to use their words and express their feelings more appropriately as they grow,” she noted.

With emotional education at the forefront of the curriculum at Monticello Central School District and St. John Street Pre-K, students are learning the tools they need to navigate their emotions, foster empathy, and build better relationships—skills that will serve them well into the future.



Each classroom has individual buckets where students are rewarded for acts of kindness encouraging positive behavior.



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