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Focusing on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The Fallsburg Central School District is making strides in its efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for its students, staff and community.

Led by Lindsay Severino, Director of Student Equity, the district is working to ensure that everyone has the tools they need to thrive while celebrating the cultural richness of its community.

“We do a lot of things to celebrate our diverse community and, on the equity side, make sure all of our students and community members have what they need to be successful,” Severino said.

Among the district’s most impactful initiatives are its food and clothing programs, designed to meet the immediate needs of students and families.

Severino oversees a large-scale clothing and donation closet, alongside partnerships with organizations like Sullivan 180 and A Single Bite.

A Single Bite provides meals to about 30 families weekly, while the district’s newly launched food backpack program supports 20 students by sending them home with weekend meals.

“A Single Bite is open to anyone to sign up—there’s no income requirement,” Severino explained. The food backpack program is more targeted, with teachers or social workers referring students based on need.



The Student Equity Group talks at a recent meeting.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Celebrating Diversity

The district’s DEI work goes beyond meeting basic needs by actively highlighting and celebrating the community’s diversity. Recent efforts include hosting performances for Hispanic Heritage Month, where students participated in Latin American dances, and organizing cultural food offerings during family engagement events.

“This year, we’re really focusing on putting our words into actions,” Severino said, emphasizing the goal of moving beyond acknowledgment to active celebration of diversity.

The Junior-Senior High School and Elementary Equity Groups also play a crucial role in shaping the school environment. These student panels meet regularly to discuss important issues like cultural representation and disciplinary



Director of Student Equity, Lindsay Severino, leads the district’s efforts to ensure everyone has the tools they need to thrive while celebrating the community’s cultural richness.

practices. Severino highlighted the impact of their input, saying, “We revamped our student policies and procedures for discipline based on feedback from the student equity group. We want them to know they are leaders in their school community, and their voices matter.”

Supporting Immigrant Families

The district is also focusing on welcoming immigrant families to Fallsburg. Severino has spearheaded the Newcomer Family Welcoming Program, which helps families adjust to the U.S. school system and access available resources. “We introduce them to the basics of the school system here, let them know who to call and when, and make sure they know we are here to support them,” she said.

Expanding Efforts

As the district’s DEI work evolves, Severino acknowledges that the need continues to grow. Plans are in the works to expand programs, including exploring after-school meal options. However, challenges like limited storage space for food items persist.

Despite these hurdles, the district is committed to continuous improvement. Each year, a DEI survey gathers feedback from students, staff, and parents, providing a roadmap for future efforts. “We want to know how we’re doing and what we can do better,” Severino explained.

The district’s approach underscores the importance of listening to the community and acting on their input. “We are always looking for new ways to support our students and families,” Severino said.

Fallsburg Central School District’s DEI program is not just about addressing needs—it’s about creating a school community where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

School Scene

‘A look inside the Fallsburg Central School District’

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BCES boosts learning with outdoor classrooms



From left: Stacy Strassburg, Consultant Teacher and Empowering a Healthier Generation Coordinator at BCES; BCES Principal Mary Kate Stinehour; and Amanda Stevens, Athletic Director and Wellness Coordinator, are instrumental in the school's wellness initiatives.

STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

The Benjamin Cosor Elementary School (BCES) within the Fallsburg Central School District is redefining the concept of education by connecting students to nature and wellness. Thanks to a dedicated wellness committee and a series of innovative grants, the school now boasts outdoor classroom spaces that are already making an impact on student engagement and overall wellness.

Outdoor classrooms: transforming learning spaces

Initially conceived through a community survey, the outdoor classroom initiative was identi-

fied as a top priority by Fallsburg residents, students, and staff. The project was made possible by a \$50,000 grant from Sullivan 180's Empowering Healthier Generations initiative.

"It was a community-driven decision," said Stacy Strassburg, who is a Consultant Teacher and Empowering a Healthier Generation Coordinator at BCES, reflecting on the collaborative effort to bring the project to life.

The newly completed outdoor classrooms feature natural seating, turf, and open spaces for various learning activities. Although introduced at the start of the academic year, the spaces are already being used for subjects ranging from math to ELA. "We've seen technology classes, math groups,

Highlights of BCES Wellness Programs

- Blender Bike:** A pedal-powered blender that encourages healthy eating.
- Calming Corners:** Dedicated spaces for mindfulness and stress relief.
- Snowshoeing:** Seasonal outdoor activity for students during school hours.
- Nature Trails:** Frequent use of on-campus trails for exploration and learning.

and even ELA groups utilizing the outdoor classrooms,” shared Strassburg.

The impact on students has been remarkable. “One student described it as a privilege to be outside in nature,” said Athletic Director and Wellness Coordinator, Amanda Stevens. A third grader echoed, “The fresh air helps me wake up, and it’s so calm outside—it makes learning fun!”

Principal Mary Kate Stinehour emphasized the broader benefits. “Many of our students don’t have access to parks or large outdoor spaces at home. These classrooms ensure that every child has the chance to enjoy nature while learning,” she said.

Forest School Training: a professional leap

To maximize the potential of these new spaces, 10 BCES teachers attended Forest School training in Hankins, New York. This hands-on experience emphasized creative ways to merge curriculum standards with outdoor learning. “We learned to create math tools from sticks and stones, which was both engaging and innovative,” said Strassburg.

The training also underscored the importance of social-emotional learning. “When we’re outside, we feel better. It’s the same for our students,” she added.

Principal Stinehour noted the program’s ripple effect: “This training helps us think creatively about how we use these spaces. It’s not just about being outside; it’s about using nature as a tool for engagement and growth.”

A holistic approach to wellness

Beyond outdoor classrooms, BCES continues to expand its wellness initiatives. Programs like the “Blender Bike,” calming corners, and mindfulness practices showcase the district’s commitment to fostering a healthier environment for students. “Wellness is a top priority for our district,” Principal Stinehour added.

The wellness committee collaborates with organizations like

Cornell Cooperative Extension and Sullivan 180 to address students’ physical and emotional needs. “We work to ensure every student has access to wellness opportunities, regardless of their background,” said Stevens.

Strassburg added that these efforts have brought noticeable changes to student engagement: “Sometimes, it’s like night and day. A student who struggles in the classroom can thrive when they’re learning outside.”

Principal Stinehour credited the broader support system for the success of these initiatives. “Our administrative staff and Board of Education have been instrumental in ensuring these projects come to fruition. Health and wellness aren’t just ideas here; they’re priorities,” she said.

Looking ahead

As the district evaluates the success of its outdoor spaces, plans are underway to further enhance them. From adding shading to introducing more structured activities, the team remains committed to growth. However, as Strassburg noted, “\$50,000 is a significant grant, but it takes additional district support to truly make these spaces functional.”

Meanwhile, the wellness committee continues to brainstorm new initiatives, from nutrition programs to potential partnerships for hearing and vision screenings. Principal Stinehour talked about the importance of these efforts: “Our goal is to provide every student, no matter where they come from, with the opportunity to thrive. We are the hub for wellness in our community.”

A community effort

The success of these projects hinges on the unwavering support of the administration, staff, and community members. “We’ve never been told ‘no’ when we bring new ideas to the table,” Stevens shared. “Instead, we work together to find solutions.”

Principal Stinehour added, “When parents saw the outdoor classrooms during open house, they were amazed. Some even mentioned how they wished they’d



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

One of the outdoor spaces created through a \$50,000 grant from Sullivan 180’s Empowering Healthier Generations initiative.

had these opportunities growing up. That feedback reinforces why this work is so important.”

From outdoor classrooms to district-wide wellness programs, Fallsburg Central School District

exemplifies how collaboration and innovation can transform education. The work here not only educates students but also inspires a community to value health and nature as essential parts of learning.



Together, we are empowering a healthier generation at Fallsburg CSD!

Embracing restorative practices with SCARF

STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO



Junior-Senior High School Assistant Principal James Mort, a recent addition to the district, is leading efforts to address behavior through an approach that promotes understanding, growth, and community.

In Fallsburg Central School District, restorative practices are redefining how discipline and relationships are managed within

the Junior Senior High School. Assistant Principal James Mort, who joined the district recently, is championing this approach to address behavior in a way that fos-

ters understanding, growth and community.

“Restorative practices are about creating an environment where people understand why they should treat others in certain ways, while also having their needs met,” explained Mort.

These practices are a holistic approach that begin with establishing a supportive and predictable school climate. Unlike restorative justice — which is often a reaction to misconduct — restorative practices encompass proactive measures to create a healthy environment and address underlying needs.

Addressing misbehavior with understanding

Mort said that many student behaviors stem from unmet needs or external stresses. “When students misbehave, it’s not a personal attack. They’re often communicating stress or challenges they’re facing,” he said.

Traditional disciplinary methods—where a student receives a consequence with little dialogue—may curb behavior temporarily but often fail to address the root cause. Restorative practices pair appropriate consequences with meaningful conversations, helping students understand the im-

pact of their actions and learn how to repair relationships.

“One major principle is that all behavior is communication,” Mort said. For example, a student acting out might be seeking certainty or recognition—needs that could be met through classroom routines or stronger teacher-student relationships.

Tools of Transformation: The SCARF Model

At the core of Fallsburg’s strategy is the SCARF model, which addresses five fundamental needs that drive human behavior:

1. Status - A sense of importance or value in relation to others. Students and teachers want to feel recognized and respected for their roles and contributions.

2. Certainty - The need for predictability and understanding of what comes next. This is especially crucial for students facing unstable or uncertain circumstances at home.

3. Autonomy - The feeling of control over one’s own choices and actions. When students and teachers have agency in their environments, they are more likely to engage positively.

4. Relatedness - A sense of connection and belonging with others. This fosters community and helps individuals feel they are part of a supportive group.

5. Fairness - The perception that processes and decisions are just and equitable. Children and adults alike are deeply affected by whether they feel they are being treated fairly.

The SCARF model, developed by neuroscientist David Rock, is a guiding framework in understanding student behavior. “When we identify which of these needs a student is lacking, we can address those deficits constructively,” said Mort.



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Real results and success stories

While the transition has not been without challenges, the district is already seeing results. Mort recounted a case of a student who was frequently in trouble last year but has made significant improvements through consistent communication between the school, teachers, and the student's family. "This student, who was a regular in my office, hasn't had a single disciplinary issue this year. They've really turned a corner," he shared.

These successes underscore the importance of relationship-build-

ing, a cornerstone of restorative practices. Teachers, staff, and students are engaging in open dialogues, often leading to moments of profound understanding and reconciliation.

A collaborative effort

Training and community involvement are key to the program's success. Fallsburg has partnered with experts like Alyssa Sabbatino, the Director of Teaching and Learning at the Schodack Central School District, who provides training and guidance to staff, from teachers to coaches. Monthly "SCARF team"

meetings allow educators to discuss challenges, share strategies, and ensure that their own needs are also being met. "Teachers, like students, need to feel seen and supported," said Mort.

Parents are also brought into the fold. Through meetings, surveys, and collaborative planning for the district's Comprehensive Educational Plan, families have a voice in shaping these initiatives. "When we involve parents, we not only help the students but also build a positive perception of the school community," Mort added.

Looking ahead

Fallsburg's restorative practices are an evolving journey. The district continues to monitor progress through data on referrals and surveys measuring staff and student satisfaction. Mort emphasized that while no approach is a "magic wand," these practices are making a tangible difference in school culture and student outcomes.

"By addressing human needs and fostering relationships, we're creating a space where students can thrive—academically and emotionally," Mort added.



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Fallsburg Central School District has been putting an emphasis on leading students to a brighter future after high school, filled with opportunities at SUNY Sullivan and other local colleges, such as performance and culinary arts.

Expanding college pathways for students

BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Fallsburg Junior Senior High School is paving a unique and practical path for its students through innovative partnerships with Siena College and SUNY Sullivan.

These programs allow students to earn college credits — some even their associate degrees — before their high school graduation. It's an initiative aimed not only at academic enrichment but also at offering economic relief and fostering career readiness.

Shana Bruestle, Principal of Fallsburg Junior Senior High School, explained the dual pathways offered by the school.

The SUNY Sullivan program enables students to graduate with a high school diploma and an associate degree, whereas the Siena College initiative focuses on technology and computer science.

"The Siena College pathway is around technology—computer web design, programming. Students can earn up to nine credits or three classes," Bruestle said.

For students aiming for an associate degree, the SUNY Sullivan pathway includes dual-enrollment classes that count for both high school and college credits.

Dr. Sally Sharkey, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, highlighted the inclusiveness of the program. "Instead of taking high school math, you're taking a math that counts for both. There is no cost for families; the school covers the expense because we believe in equity and opportunity."

A Success in Numbers

The program is gaining momentum. Last year, Gusyavo Avila Morales, Haris Basic, Nikolas

Bonner, Alexander Depuy-McBride, Mia Irlbacher, Cian Meyer, Isaiah Young and Lukas Zelaya earned their associate degrees, and this year, 24 students are on track to do the same.

Reflecting on the growth, Bruestle said, "Seeing the numbers increase shows not just awareness but how achievable this program is."

But the initiative goes beyond just the numbers. "It's not limited to honor students or those on advanced tracks," Bruestle said.

Students can tailor their participation, whether it's earning a full associate degree or taking select college courses in their areas of interest. For instance, a student struggling with math but excelling in English can still gain college credits in English.

Preparing for the Future

Both Bruestle and Sharkey

stressed the long-term benefits of the program. Sharkey pointed out, "This is about building confidence and providing financial relief. Students gain time management skills and graduate with less college debt." Families, especially in a district with a high poverty rate, are reaping the economic advantages of free college courses.

Moreover, the program is helping to change mindsets about higher education. "Some families say, 'We don't do college,' but we show them the possibilities—what college can mean for their children's futures," Sharkey shared. She cited research that highlights how education directly impacts lifetime earnings, adding, "This program is a way to break cycles of poverty and create upward mobility."

Challenges and Vision

Building these pathways re-



quired significant effort, including coordinating with college partners and ensuring the program met academic standards. "There was a lot of front-loading—meetings, planning, and professional development for our teachers," Bruestle recalled.

Looking ahead, both educators hope to expand the program's offerings. "We want to diversify the subjects available and provide students with more choices based on their interests," Sharkey said. This could include arts, creative writing, or specialized electives, making the program even more appealing and accessible.

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Leighanne Russell, Director of Pupil Personnel and Regina Giordano, Assistant Director of Pupil Personnel, have led the Fallsburg Central School District's partnership with Astor Services to establish an on-site mental health clinic.

STORY AND PHOTO
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

In a proactive step to address the growing mental health needs of students, the Fallsburg Central School District has partnered with Astor Services to establish an on-site mental health clinic. The program, slated to launch this winter, aims to provide accessible mental health support for students ranging from pre-K to 12th grade.

"This is a game-changer for our district," said Director of Pupil Personnel, Leighanne Russell. "Having Astor Services here allows us to meet the students where they are—both literally and figuratively."

How it started

The collaboration began more than a year ago when Fallsburg and Astor Services simultaneously applied for grant funding. While the district's application was unsuccessful, Astor's grant was approved, paving the way for a fully operational clinic within the school.

Astor's on-site clinic will operate Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and will be staffed by a licensed mental health counselor.

The clinic is expected to serve between 30 and 40 students, providing both individual and family therapy sessions.

Breaking barriers

"This is more than just convenience," explained Regina Giordano, the Assistant Director of Pupil Personnel. "We know that many of our families face significant barriers to accessing mental health care, from lack of insurance to transportation challenges. By bringing these services directly into the school, we're removing many of those obstacles."

Astor's clinic is designed to address a wide range of needs, including diagnosing and treating mental health conditions, medication management, and even psychiatric evaluations. The clinic also offers telehealth options for families who may struggle to attend in-person sessions. Importantly, services are provided on a sliding scale for families who lack sufficient insurance coverage, and a family advocate can assist with navigating Medicaid enrollment when necessary.

A comprehensive approach

Astor Services emphasizes confidentiality, a critical aspect of their partnership. While school staff can make referrals, they do not have access to clinical details, preserving the privacy of students and their families. Referrals can also come directly from parents or guardians.

"The clinician will be based near the main office, in a private, designated space that ensures confidentiality and comfort," said Ms. Russell. "We've made arrangements to accommodate students from the elementary school as well, with time slots set aside specifically for them."

Astor's services extend beyond the students themselves, providing support for families as well. "Sometimes, the challenges we see in school stem from difficulties at home," Giordano noted. "Astor's ability to work with families is a critical part of the solution."

Looking ahead

The district has high hopes for the program and is already ex-

ploring possibilities for expansion. Administrators are working toward securing additional space for a second clinic at the elementary school, which is currently constrained by a lack of room.

"We'd love to see this program grow to include more staff and even additional locations," said Russell. "Right now, we're focused on getting this first phase right—building relationships and ensuring the services meet the needs of our students."

The district is also planning professional development sessions with Astor for teachers and staff to help them identify students who might benefit from the program.

A nationwide trend

The initiative reflects a broader trend in education. Post-pandemic, schools across the country are increasingly recognizing the importance of mental health support.

"It's no secret that the pandemic exacerbated mental health challenges for young people," said Regina. "Programs like this are crucial as we move forward and continue to address the lasting impacts of those years."

For Fallsburg students, the clinic represents more than just access to care; it's a step toward fostering resilience and success in the classroom and beyond. As the district eagerly awaits the official opening, the excitement among staff is palpable.

"This is something our students need, and we're so proud to be able to offer it," Leighanne added.

The district will be announcing the clinic's official start date soon, along with additional information for parents on how to make referrals. Families can expect updates on social media and the school website. In the meantime, questions can be directed to the district's Pupil Personnel Services office, where bilingual staff are available to assist.

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