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# SCENE

A look at activities  
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# Tri-Valley Superintendent Erin Long reflects on school progress

BY VINCENT KURZROCK

Under Tri-Valley Superintendent Erin Long, upgrades and progress have been at the forefront of her work this past year, with the district being able to make quality upgrades to spaces within the Elementary School, Secondary School and District Office.

These spaces, known as Collaboration Spaces, allow for groups of students to work on projects together, and allow collaborative learning to take place. They also serve as a convenient space to hold larger group meetings or community events.

"We have continued our focus on our students and their needs," said Long. "For example, we have made some state-of-the-art upgrades to both of our libraries and some of our counseling suites."

One of these spaces is called a "Bear Den" which is a space for students to socialize and complete their schoolwork in a more relaxed setting.

There, seniors displayed their "Senior Tiles" which was an opportunity for seniors to create a tile representative of themselves.

"We have so many Tri-Valley traditions that are honored and valued; these opportunities have simply enhanced the wonderful school that we have," stated Long.

Long acknowledges that growing can be a challenge especially when it comes to implementing new initiatives.

"Communication has been a priority for us as identified in our strategic plan," explained Long. "This year we moved to a communication platform called Parent Square."

When there is a change in the practice schedule or something exciting to share from the classroom, Parent Square can be used as an app or email to instantly notify the families.

According to Long, their families participate 98 percent of the time, and they are making this their primary communication channel.

"What is great about Parent Square is the communication can come from the district, a building, a teacher, coach or a staff member leading a club," the Superintendent noted.

## A workplace of pride

The learning that comes with being Superintendent for the Tri-Valley Central School District is something Long really enjoys.

She states that what they do is really driven by a lot of school law. Additionally, she's had the chance to take part in more advocacy for their school.

"With the many unfunded mandates and requirements of the



Superintendent Erin Long

state, it is really important that our district is represented," stressed Long. "I had the good fortune to participate in some of the Rockefeller Institute conversations that studied the Foundation Aid formula."

While participating in these studies, she was able to share a bit about Tri-Valley's story and the changing needs of their community.

"Every day, it is an honor to be at our school," Long stated.

## Cyber-challenges in education

Long acknowledged the fact that they are in the thralls of a social media crisis, noting that, as such, students' lives and daily interactions with their peers have been profoundly impacted.

Because of this, the district said that they will be looking to develop a set of protocols and expectations for devices along with the rollout for our students and families following the recent directive

continued on page 4T

## School Scene

*'A look inside the Tri-Valley Central School District'*

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3T

New York State Governor Kathy Hochul has issued the directive to ban personal internet devices.

They will be working to create a set of expectations and guidelines regarding devices to go along with the rollout for our students and families.

Following the Governor's order to also outlaw personal internet devices, they will be working to establish a set of guidelines and standards for devices in addition to implementing them for our students and families.

"I believe that after some growing pains, it is going to help us get back to our focus of educating students," assessed Long.

### Celebrating accomplishments

Long states that Tri-Valley has been dabbling in the Community Schools framework for a few years, sending a team to attend and learn the framework with a state coalition, which has given them many new ideas.

A few summers back they created the "Bear Bash" that brings

students and families together for a back-to-school event in August.

The school also had many staff volunteers as they sought to bring in vendors from around the county to share their resources and supports for their school community families.

Long also acknowledged that the community itself has been a remarkable cornerstone in partnership.

"Our local fire departments give tours of their equipment and they man the grill for all of our families to grab a burger or hot dog," recounted Long. "We showcase our own clubs, and offer school supplies for our students and free shopping at our Bear Clawset, which provides clothing, coats, shoes, and hygiene products."

The Bash has many activities including a DJ, bounce house, face painting, lawn games and arts and crafts for the students.

"It has been a huge success, said Long, "with over 500 people attending each year – it is a wonderful way to welcome our students to the new school year!"



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# A corner of comfort

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY VINCENT KURZROCK

In the corner of Elementary School Counselor Alexandra Bassani's room exists a new space for kids to unwind.

The corner has a wall with a variety of puzzles and other mazes for Elementary students to take their mind off any stresses on their mind.

The unique wall, dubbed the Dream Sensory Board, takes on a mountain art style to represent the location of Tri - Valley School being in between different mountains. This feature of the room has proven a hit with students who "love it!"

One popular feature of the corner is a weighted stuffed animal bear.

"That's our Tri-Valley Bear and it represents who we are," explained Elementary Counselor Alexandra Bassani. "The kids also love that because they can go and sit down in that corner and just put that weight on them and helps them decompress and calm down."

One of the features on the Board is the butterflies which are "a kind of a little bit like a puzzle".

Bassani detailed that the butterflies on the board can be taken off and restarted for someone else.

"You gotta match the shape to the color," explained Bassani. "I think this is a very nice way for students to have a reset."

She detailed that regardless of what the students have going on at home, the students are allowed to come to her room and explore and get their energy out.

"I have students coming in here for a 'Lunch Bunch' which is a group of five to seven students," said Bassani. "They come in here, we chat and are able to talk."

In doing so, the students are able to get their energy out. She also exemplified that there are some students who may need a walk.

She also exemplified students who are sometimes struggling with a sensory overload where they can sit and enjoy the wall. When the students are ready, they are able to decompress and let the counsel-



The interactive board has proven to be a big hit with students.

ors know when they're ready to go back to class.

"Last year we didn't have this," stated Bassani. "It was definitely more of a struggle to try and get some of our students to calm

down."

Now, Bassani is able to walk students into her room and the students are able to go right into the corner.

There's other activities on the board such as sound beats and tying shoes.

"It keeps them very entertained," said Bassani.

It's also helpful in a situation where if a student needs to get something off their chest they're able to keep themselves busy.

In doing so, the student and Bassani can chat and she is able to pull up a chair.

"It's a good opener. Especially in the case where a student has never been in my room before. Sometimes going to see the counselor might be a little nerve-racking," stated Bassani. "Having a lot of fun kid-friendly items in my room can also really help my job and help them open up and so it's wonderful."



The unique board features a mountain design based on Tri-Valley's location.

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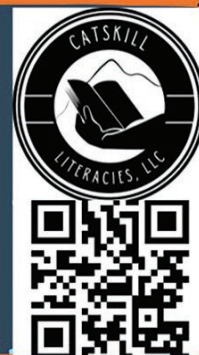
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STORY AND PHOTO  
BY VINCENT KURZROCK

# Truly a place for grade school students to grow

With the funds provided by the Esser Grant, Tri-Valley Central School District was able to transform a regular conference room into a space for group work.

A staple of the room that captures the eye and students' imagination is the Fork Farms hydroponic gardens. These are indoor, vertical hydroponic growing systems designed to allow anyone to efficiently cultivate a large amount of produce in a small space using minimal water, all within a self-contained unit.

They are ideal for home and school, where plants grow without soil utilizing nutrient-rich water solutions instead. These essentially provide a way to produce fresh

food year-round with minimal footprint and resource usage.

Two classrooms currently utilize this space, that being a second grade classroom and fifth grade classroom utilizing the setup.

The students utilize the room's tables and chairs to collaborate with other students and get to work together.

When the space was created, staff member Kimberly Patete partnered with Secondary School art teacher Chris McAssey to create an image special to them – a bear.

"He was really instrumental in helping us put this vision [the room] to life," stated Patete.

His students also came down to look at the room and add some painting to brighten up the room.

McAssey also keeps a list of the different plants that are growing.

"We think of our kids in the Elementary School; they're

sort of the seed," stated Patete. "They're starting out young and we want them to know that they have the potential to grow into not just a great student but a functioning member of our community. I think this really sets the stage for them to get that started."

## What's the curriculum?

Being guided by the leadership of the curriculum, Mrs. Gilles's second grade class is starting out with already possessing knowledge of seeds and planting.

Patete referenced a conception that typically soil is needed to create plants. The hydroponics differ in this regard because they do not need soil for the plants to thrive.

The plants grow in a rock wall with running water alongside a light. The students take what they know and compare that to learning some new aspects about the hydroponics.

Older grade schoolers also benefit, as Mr. Tenbus's three sixth grade classes come in

once a week with a focus on integrating English Language Arts (ELA) into the curriculum – receiving an article to read and then having questions to answer.

"They get to move the tables around and collaborate with each other, like focusing on vocabulary," said Patete. "They can make their connections from there to the Ag (Agriculture) class in the high school and moving forward."

The idea is also that the students experience all parts of education simultaneously in that room, including a bit of math as well, like ratios for amounts of nutrients.

## How did the idea come?

This room is the second collaboration room to come about following their space in the high school.

As with the high school, Patete felt like Elementary students also deserved a fair shake at their own collaboration room.

"We thought these kids down here also deserve a space where they feel like they can come together and work as a team and collaborate with each other," said Patete.

The hydroponic gardens which were ordered prior to the conception of the room was also accredited to playing a part in the room's creation.

"I feel they're really learning how to work as a team and how to come together as a community," explained Patete.

She also feels that the students are learning about sustainability and their future on top of the ELA, reading and math skills.

It also contributes Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Frank Snyder's hope for students to be excited about coming to school.

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"It's really to inspire kids to want to be in our building and come to school every day," acknowledged Snyder.

### Student response

A number of students have had a positive response to the implementation of the room, some who have come to recognize that the room is different than their regular classroom and getting out of the typical four walls of a classroom.

"They've embraced it. They love coming in here," stated Patete. "You'll see small groups working on the floor, the kids say [will ask] if they can push the tables together so they can talk to each other."

"Every time they come in here it's something new so it's just a great visual for them to all see."

A staple of the collaboration room, both sixth and second grade students utilize the hydroponic gardens differently.



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Seniors unwind in their den.

# Welcome to the Bear Den

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY VINCENT KURZROCK

**S**ituated in the computer room of the former lower library of the Tri-Valley High School lies the Bear Den – a space that saw a recent transformation into a Grade 12 get-away.

“They wanted a lounge space,” stated Secondary School Principal Amanda Eberly. “What happens is all seniors have access to this space. Students can earn Bear Den passes throughout their day.”

These passes can be earned by teachers catching the students doing something good. The student can then come to the Den and hang out and socialize and play games.

It is in a room off of the Secondary School’s Collaboration Space, also designed over the summer. The maintenance and grounds team worked in close collaboration with administration.

Through a grant, they were able to purchase new carpeting and furniture and revamp the space.

## A secondary space for collaboration



With the help of student feedback, the Bear Den is a Grade 12 getaway that earns use through vouchers of good deeds.

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"It's used a lot for big groups," explained Eberly. "We do our Board Meetings in here. Students are constantly down here and there's multiple seating options."

The space is also used for career spotlights and students can present in here as well.

Of importance, however, is a student's ability to work and be comfortable in the Den.

Teachers are also able to rent out the space for classes and activities. Everything is able to move and be easily shifted for different accommodations as well.

"We use it for training. We had a specialist come in here and train our admin team and admin from around the county," explained Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Frank Snyder. "It's really just a flexible space."

The space also sees Sullivan 180 from time to time for their trainings.

"It's been a great space to showcase," stated Eberly, "and our students are pretty proud of it as well."



The lower Secondary School Library has seen many uses over its life but has recently turned into a mixed-use flexible space that invites all kinds of collaborations and community-minded efforts.

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# A United Nation of students

STORY AND PHOTO  
BY VINCENT KURZROCK

Lisa Djonbalic's 9th and 10th grade students from the United Nations Club Model United Nations are getting ready to take a trip on March 13 to New York City where they will compete against thousands of high school students.

Djonbalic believes it is the only pre-collegian academic team for Sullivan County.

This competition will span the United States and abroad. This means European kids from other high schools will also be brought in to compete as well. The students are assigned different committees such as Peacekeeping or the Council to Human Rights.

"They are assigned a different topic per committee and they do research based on that," said Djonbalic. "For example, the issues that are going on in South Sudan, the Congo or trafficking in

Eastern Europe."

The students take a team approach and they come up with a consolidated background topic based on the history of the country and all the conflicts. They then research foreign policy and represent the country assigned to them.

This year the students were assigned Montenegro, a country in the Balkans. The students get a chance to get to know a new country and will represent their perspectives on Montenegrans on the global issues happening.

The students create a 10 to 20 page position paper per topic with a Topic A and a Topic B. They go in as a team of two but are in a room with a bunch of other high school kids that also represent the topic but from a different country perspective.

"When the students come up with their resolutions and their



After finding that this program wasn't offered to students through her research, Lisa Djonbalic set out to give students that 21st Century world experience.

foreign policy, they will do it through the view of Montenegro.

"They're coming in as delegates advocating for urgency for that topic to be resolved," explained Djonbalic. "They go into a debate format and after the debate they go into a final resolution phase where they are going to solve the country's problem. Each of the committees have a different task and that's what they've been building up to."

The lead up to this is a lot of work and rigorous but that hasn't deterred the students' enjoyment from what they do.

The students are also finding out that they are only as weak as the weakest link which leads to

them pulling each other up as a team. This club also helps the students build up their confidence and leadership skills.

This program came about after Djonbalic found that this type of club wasn't offered to students through her research.

"This is one of the things that they need to experience so they can build their 21st Century skills. It was a need and we fulfilled it by giving them that experience," stated Djonbalic.

"It's a phenomenal experience for them and I can't wait to see what they can do," said Djonbalic. "If they do very well, hopefully they can make it to the Puerto Rico Competition next year."

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# Adapting to a new environment

STORY AND PHOTO BY VINCENT KURZROCK

**A**dapting to a new and unfamiliar environment can be a tough challenge for many people, especially students who transfer schools.

Principal Amanda Eberly had a vision almost a year ago and brought it to the talent of Tri-Valley Central School District, who jumped right aboard.

"I didn't really know what to do when I got here," recounted Eberly. "For me not knowing what to do in a county was 'whoa what do I do here? Who are these people?' [The program] was just something I felt was needed."

Educators John Theo and Jessica Dymond pilot an ENL (Entry into a New Language) Class at Tri-Valley. Theo has a bachelors in teaching English as a second language.

"Working with Miss Dymond has been the biggest blessing of my professional career," attributed Theo. "What she and I can do in the same room is exponentially greater than what I can do alone."

In their classroom, the teachers have students that are near fluency and on the same token have students who just came to America "less than a month ago" in the same room at the same time.

Theo alludes it to teaching a PhD-level history class and a first grade level history class. The two are able to split the group and for example Theo will work with the more advanced students in one cohort and Dymond will take the other cohort and work with them.

"Each student is getting exactly what they need at the same time in the same classroom," stated Theo.

Dymond is able to see how the language acquisition process happens, and she's seeing the results and trusting the process.

"All the students who know me since last year and are now getting to know Miss Dymond, it's so cool. In order for them to trust us, because they're in that pool of ambiguity, watching the students grow to trust Miss Dymond in front of my eyes is the coolest thing ever," stated Theo.

The pair focus on language acquisition.

When the course came to fruition, it was a "blank slate" as Dymond called it.

"Because we could make it what we wanted but it has grown to what the students need," stated Dymond. "We've had the freedom to meet them where they are and introduce other things" explained Dymond.

Her part is to organize the community piece of the class. For example, the pair go out every Friday with school-provided transportation to community buildings to introduce the students to resources that they're going to need in life outside of Tri-Valley.

"It's important for them to understand it's not scary. You need to be able to have that conversation and be able to ask for things and communicate with people outside of school," stated Dymond. "We're practicing and showing them [the students] those interactions."

The two also started a pen pal program where they go to the post office frequently and mail letters. They also sometimes speak to the attendants at the post office.

Going to the Daniel Pierce Public Library in town allows the students to grab a library card. The students are able to make the most of their time with chess boards and a teen room.

"We look at the books," said Dymond. "Some of our higher level, english-speaking students are creating a scavenger hunt at the library for our lower-level english speaking students."

Their trips also include the bank and during their next visit they will be shown the vault. The concept of an atm and opening an account have also been discussed as well.

They have also traveled to the local fire department and have seen trucks and firemen so the students "know in case of emergency



The team that made it happen. From left: Secondary School Principal Amanda Eberly, ENL Teachers Jessica Dymond and John Theo.

they're friendly and they're gonna come."

The students have given the firefighters "good questions" like where the water comes from around Gramsville given the lack of fire hydrants unlike most places.

Another trip they take is to the deli so they can order food and have a meal together.

One of the main goals is for the students to have authentic American experiences in addition to learning about life skills and exposure to community resources.

Before Thanksgiving, the students had a festive feast in the library.

"We decorated and said something we were thankful for. We had the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on in the background," stated Dymond. "We have a trip to a baseball game coming up in the spring. The Hudson Valley Renegades has an education day so we're going to that."

## Student reception

When having the Thanksgiving meal, the students stated that it was actually the first Thanksgiving meal they've ever had. They didn't even know what it was due to it not being a holiday celebrated around the world.

The students have responded warmly saying the dinner was "re-

ally special to them" and that "they've never had this."

"One of the benefits to this program is when they come here we get to have conversations [about English in their classes] about what was hard, what do they need help with and who do we need to talk to," stated Dymond. "We can meet them where they need to be and I think some of these experiences are that moment for them and they're still learning. However, they're still in an environment where others are learning the same language as them."

Dymond exemplified a student interested in mechanics and auto-body and being able to bridge the gap with them.

The program was built upon Secondary School Principal Amanda Eberly's own experiences of coming to Sullivan County from Ulster County and how that can be "scary" in a way.

"I didn't know this area at all, so I could only imagine what they [students] feel when they are coming from a totally different country," explained Eberly. "Now they're in the middle of the woods basically. I wanted them to get the experience of going out in the community and feeling safe."

Another idea by Eberly was that now that the students felt safe, they could go to bigger places and encourage family members.

She wants the students to feel like they have a place there and they have a spot they can go to.

"They've [Dymond and Theo] been able to bridge the gap and it's been huge. They love coming in here and the kids are smiling," stated Eberly. "This is their safe place. The kids are opening up more and building relationships that would've never happened without these two. This program has been phenomenal and I'm so proud of what it has come to be."





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