

education news

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A Blue Ribbon School!

School No. 3 receives award in Washington, D.C. from US Department of Education

“I say all the time that I am lucky to be surrounded by the most conscientious and committed group of people in the world. Everyone across the district has worked so hard, particularly over the past five years, and this award is a testament to that effort.”

Tracey Marinelli
Superintendent

LITTLE Falls School No. 3 officially received its National Blue Ribbon School award from the U.S. Department of Education on November 15. Superintendent Tracey Marinelli, Nicole Dilkes, principal and district curriculum coordinator, and School No. 3 teacher Tiffany Sellitto accepted the plaque at a Washington, D.C. ceremony. The school is one of just nine in New Jersey to be selected as an exemplary high performing school, an honor that recognizes School No. 3 for educating some of **the state's highest achieving third- and fourth-graders in English and math.**

“Accepting this award was one of the proudest moments of my life,” said Mrs. Marinelli. “I’m proud of the students, teachers, support staff, and parents at School No. 3 for their dedication and pursuit of excellence. I say all the time that I am lucky to be surrounded by the most conscientious and committed group of people in the world. Everyone across the district has worked so hard, particularly over the past five years, and this award is a testament to that effort.”

Weeks before the award was announced by the U.S. DOE in late September, Mrs. Dilkes met with the entire student body at an assembly to discuss the state DOE’s nomination of School No. 3 for the Blue Ribbon. On announcement day, all classrooms in the building simultaneously watched the internet award broadcast on their

whiteboards.

“The students were jumping and screaming when the announcement was made,” said Mrs. Dilkes. “They were bubbling with joy and some had happy tears. They felt such an ownership, that their efforts had paid off.”

That day and in the week that followed, congratulations poured in to the district and school from local, state, and federal officials. Members of the town council, the mayor, the Passaic County superintendent of schools, the New Jersey commissioner of education, and the U.S. secretary of education all sent their regards. Mrs. Marinelli also received a telephone call from Governor Phil Murphy.

Soaring student achievement

After being nominated by the state for the Blue Ribbon, School No. 3 completed a lengthy application. The foundation for the award, however, was the school’s excellent test scores in recent years.

Since 2014, student performance on state standardized exams has skyrocketed. At School No. 3, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations (considered



Anthony Trapanese and Lia Callahan show off the congratulations arrangement sent by Superintendent Tracey Marinelli’s family

passing) has **increased by 35% in math and 17% in English language arts.**

Similar increases can be seen across the district. According to Mrs. Marinelli, the soaring results can be credited to curriculum changes, different classroom practices that more effectively teach state standards, and the use of test data to help teachers provide targeted instruction based on every student’s unique needs.

Blue Ribbon celebration planned

A community celebration is in the earliest planning stages. The celebration, which may include a parade, will be held sometime this spring. More information will be provided once details are finalized.



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STEAM PROJECT

**Using science
and creativity to
problem-solve**

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ART PROJECT



Third-grader Adrian De La Mata staples a paper tree into place on a bulletin board

All-natural nature scenes

THE great outdoors recently came indoors at School No. 3. For one of their first art projects of the school year, third- and fourth-graders transformed the main floor bulletin boards into scenes of nature you'd see around Little Falls. Garret Mountain and the Passaic River shores were just some of the areas imaginatively depicted using natural and recycled materials including cardboard, construction paper, newsprint, wooden dowels, and fabric.

Art teacher Lisa Spero showed students local

photos and put the display design into their hands. The kids did the rest. Since the project happened early in the school year, teachers had plenty of cardboard boxes and mailing tubes that could be cut, painted, drawn on, bent, and twisted to fashion leaves, trees, bridges, plants, and waterfalls.

"I wanted the students to make the displays their own," said Ms. Spero. "The project made the process of decorating our school student-led and driven by their own imagination and creativity."

Enhancing motor skills

FOR years, occupational therapist Maggie Duca and physical therapist Chani Muschel marked areas in the hallways of School No. 2 and School No. 3 with masking tape, and assigned types of movement to each one. The hopping, jumping, pressing, and walking on tippy-toes helped their students build motor skills and sensory pathways.

This year, the tape has been replaced with brightly colored illustrations to form true sensory walks. You'll see flowers, letters, numbers, logs, and ladybugs, with prompts on the walls and floor describing which movements

to perform.

The intent is the same as with the tape – to help students with special needs work on balance, motor planning, and spatial awareness – but the excitement among kids couldn't be higher. With visually powerful and developmentally appropriate graphics, the sensory walks are magnets for students of all abilities. No one coming down the hall can resist jumping along the letters of the alphabet in School No. 2 or hopping from planet to planet in School No. 3.

The formal creation of the sensory walks has also opened up their use for teachers. If a student is fidgety or having difficulty concentrating, a teacher can send the student out for a quick movement break – the child equivalent of a walk to the coffee machine. Bursts of activity get the blood pumping and stimulate the whole brain, helping children sit still and focus when they return to the classroom.

The walk in School No. 2 measures about 75-feet long and School No. 3's is about 50-feet long.



No one can resist trying out the sensory walks, including Michael Shaker who shows off the solar system section of School No. 3's walk



Joshua Martinez practices on the snare drum

New advanced music course begins

Participation in band has surged by more than 50% at School No. 1 over the past four years. Nearly 130 students now take part. To enrich more-advanced young musicians, the school has begun a new course: Advanced Instrumental Music. The 22 seventh- and eighth-graders in the elective meet every other day, learning music theory and practicing performance skills.

"The class gives students the opportunity to work on more refined techniques than in band practice and their regular weekly music lessons," said music teacher Owen Davitt. "It's exciting to further shape these talented students and to take our music program to the next level."

Students enrolled in Advanced Instrumental Music will perform special musical selections in all major school concerts and will also perform at smaller venues throughout the year.

Program connects parents at No. 2

Parents with children attending School No. 2 are invited to join the Hornets At Home Group. At the informal meetings, parents share experiences, concerns, and solutions for a variety of child-rearing issues. These might include monitoring children's use of technology, for example, and tips for positive discipline. In past discussions, parents also have discussed ways to balance family and careers.

In addition, the meetings connect the school with parents, ensuring that concerns are addressed and that both are working to instill the same social emotional skills in students such as respect, empathy, and responsibility.

Hornets At Home Group meetings are scheduled for January 16 and April 23. The meetings begin at 6:30 p.m. and are held in School No. 2's cafeteria.

Peer Connection comes full circle

THE mentees have become the mentors. In 2016, School No. 1's incoming fifth-graders were taken under the wing by eighth-graders in a new program called the Peer Group Connection. Three years later, those former new kids on the block are now

eighth-graders themselves, and many have begun imparting their own wisdom to their younger counterparts as part of the program.

This first crop of previous mentees/current eighth grade mentors marks a key milestone for PGC. Intended to help fifth-graders acclimate to the academic, social, and emotional demands of middle school life, the program has woven itself into School No. 1's DNA.

“Having positive role models and peers they can lean on and go to for advice helps the fifth-graders ground themselves.”

Irina Carroll
Teacher

“As teachers we try to push the fifth-graders academically and a little socially to learn the ropes, but nothing is better than having a peer that you can go to,” said social studies teacher Irina Carroll who teaches the program with school social worker Jim Schoeneich. “Kids at this age are beginning to go through a huge personal and physical transformation, and middle school asks them to be more responsible and independent than they’ve ever been before. The transition can be difficult. Having positive role models and peers they can lean on and go to for advice helps the fifth-graders ground themselves.”

School No. 1's PGC follows the proven, 40-year-old PGC model from the Center for Supportive Schools. The 24 eighth-graders meet every other day in a PGC elective class to learn leadership skills and styles, work on team-building and bonding strategies, and



Jack Donovan, Ameer Thabata, Angelina Gencarelli, and Madison Reardon discuss an assignment in Peer Group Connection class

refine their social and emotional skills. After several weeks of training, the eighth grade peer leaders are combined into teams of four based on complementary attributes. Each eighth grade team is then assigned a group of a dozen fifth-graders to work with throughout the school year.

PGC activities

The older kids and younger kids first meet during an activity day held in late October. During this block of 75-90 minutes, the students gather in the gym and the groups simultaneously engage in a variety of different activities. These might include discussions, role-playing, skits, games, poster-making, and problem-solving scenarios. Afterward, the peer leaders and fifth-graders also spend time just hanging out informally during recess.

Then about every three weeks, the students will get together in 45-minute outreaches. Here, all the groups will work on the same activities. For example, you might

see the teams sitting in circles and playing Turning Point, a sharing game that encourages reflection and self-disclosure. In the exercise, kids take turns selecting question cards for every team member to answer such as “What was your most positive memory of fifth grade,” “What was something that made you happy this year,” “Have you ever experienced the death of a pet and how did you cope with it,” and “How do you deal with homework problems?” The experience allows students to learn about each other, discover commonalities and differences, and most importantly, connect.

While it may seem that the fifth-graders reap most of the benefits of the program, the eighth-graders gain just as much. Learning the ways to be an effective role model and the various techniques to mentor younger peers are important qualities that all good leaders must possess.

School counselor Mary Budd coordinates the program.

Setting their academic goals

THIRD- and fourth-graders in School No. 3 track their individual academic growth in English and math – a practice begun several years ago. This year, fourth-graders have started helping set their classroom goals, too.

Bulletin boards in every room show bar graphs of student progress on three separate measures. Each class regularly reviews new data as it comes in. Students and teachers then discuss realistic class goals for the future.

The practice helps build comradery and encourages kids to support one another.

“The students really look forward to seeing growth every month,” said Shirley Cutruzzula, fourth grade teacher. “They work extra hard to see the bars grow on their bulletin boards.”

Goal-setting and data tracking are major factors in School No. 3's success. Three times per year, students take benchmark assessments. These assessments aren't just scores, they're indicators of the precise state standards that students have mastered and which they need

help with. For example, the assessments might show a student needs help with drawing and identifying lines and angles but is strong in solving problems involving measurement.

Teachers individually meet with each student to review his or her benchmark data, discussing both strengths and weaknesses. These academic snapshots provide students with a keen awareness of where they stand and where they're supposed to be. Then together, teacher and student set realistic goals. The teachers will tailor instruction to meet the personal needs of students, and the students themselves will define how they will proactively work to improve.

“Sharing the assessment information with students takes the mystery out of where they should focus,” said fourth grade teacher Kelly Gonzalez. “It helps them be more engaged and gives them a feeling that they're in control of their own learning.”

The fourth-graders also track and set goals for their monthly math fact test.



Chloe Culver graphs her progress in math

STEAM PROJECT

Building shelters on a deserted isle

In castaway scenario, fifth-graders use new STEAM lab to construct small-scale structures

WHAT would you do if you were stuck on a deserted island? If you brought along a Little Falls fifth-grader, you wouldn't have to worry.

In School No. 1's new STEAM lab, students are tackling that very scenario by applying their knowledge of science, technology, engineering, art, and math. Science teacher Monica Heaney has stranded her fifth-graders in the middle of nowhere and challenged them to survive, first by designing and making shelters that can withstand the elements.

Over the course of two and 1/2 weeks, the castaways planned and constructed huts using cardboard, popsicle sticks, paper, string, straws, a small piece of tape, paperclips, and a hot glue gun. The teams of two or three were free to design their structures any way they considered practical with any of the raw materials made available. It was all in their hands. The ultimate test of success or failure came when the gale force winds (from a hair dryer) hit the shelters.

"Our STEAM projects provide opportunities for students to develop 21st century skills such as collaborating to solve problems, critical thinking, creativity, and

communication," said Ms. Heaney. "And it's all being accomplished while the students are having fun."

The students also used their science, technology, engineering, art, and math skills to construct seaworthy boats capable of getting them back to civilization.

The new STEAM lab recently held its official grand opening with a ribbon cutting. Guests included Little Falls Councilwoman Maria Cordonnier; Mayor James Damiano; Susan St. Ledger, president of a Silicon Valley software firm who helped fund the lab's



Samuel Orozco and Jason Vandroth work diligently in School No. 1's STEAM lab

creation; and Michael P. Schiff, president of the Little Falls Education Foundation. Ms. St. Ledger contributed \$60,000 to make the STEAM lab a reality. She has a niece and a nephew currently attending the school.

Learning to be good leaders

SECOND-GRADERS in School No. 2 are learning what it means to be a leader and a role model.

Through a new program, the Grade 2 Leadership Group, the students are using their free school time to work with kindergartners and also help keep the building looking great. It's an opportunity for the second-graders to contribute to the school community in a meaningful way and to learn the value of

helping others.

The second-graders are divided into four teams, three of which work with kindergarten students. The Café Crew helps kindergartners during lunch, Recess Rock Stars organize games and play with the kindergartners, and the Classroom Club engages kindergartners during play center activities in class. The experience helps the younger students develop their social skills, build language skills, and see role models close to their own age.

A fourth team of second-graders, Maintenance Masters conduct twice weekly walkthroughs of the building to check the facilities and ensure the bulletin boards look great.

Because of the enthusiasm for the leadership program, different second-graders participate every three months. This gives more students a chance to take part. To join the program, second-graders must apply for a particular team and explain in writing the reasons they would like to be a school leader.

The program was piloted last school year.



Payton Culver plays with Alina Cino



Almost harvest season...

Teacher Paula Agens waters lettuce with Michael Sica in School No. 2's garden. The garden was provided by the Little Falls School #2/3 PTA several years ago to provide a hands-on learning experience to early elementary students.

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