

Superintendent's Newsletter

Dear Parents,

It is hard to believe we are now at the mid-year point of the school year. We have spent a good part of the year working toward building practices, systems, and capacity to better serve the unique needs of our students K12. According to research, “Developing students’ academic skills alone is no longer enough. The role of public school districts in the United States is changing and districts are now also responsible for developing students’ physical, mental, and emotional skills” (Hanover, 2018).



Dr Lorrie Rodrigue
Interim Superintendent

Our district-level Safe School Climate committee has continued to work with consultants from UCONN to develop a clear purpose and vision for social-emotional practices. Working collaboratively, school leaders and staff have directed building-level committees to ensure current and future practices related to social-emotional learning (SEL) are consistently applied across all schools and grade levels.

Our social-emotional learning practices remain focused on the following priorities:

- Using common language to convey our core values and beliefs around social-emotional learning
- Defining social-emotional learning across the district and identifying associated student outcomes
- Identifying relevant data for tracking social-emotional and behavioral needs and growth

Through a grant, we have been able to secure paraprofessional support so that elementary teachers have adequate time for professional activities and collaboration – some of which will focus on the practices related to aligning social-emotional practices in the classroom.

Our Director of Counseling is currently working with counselors across the district to help define and direct student supports and plans for success. The use of a new database system, Alpine, will support our ability to identify, track, and support students to ensure their overall well-being.

Both school leaders and staff will continue to implement and monitor opportunities for students to reflect on their behaviors, manage stress and conflict, and seek support when needed. We will continue to improve our programs and practices in an effort to promote and sustain a healthy school community.

Enjoy our February newsletter as we celebrate the excellent social and academic opportunities offered to Newtown students.

Board Meetings

February 20, March 6, March 20, April 3,
April 10, May 1, May 15, June 5, June 19

Respectfully,

Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue
Interim Superintendent

Board Members

Michelle Ku, Chair
Rebekah Harriman-Stites, Vice Chair
Dan Cruson, Secretary, Debbie Leidlein,
John Vouros, Andrew Clure, Dan Delia



Teachers Learn about Concept-Based Instruction by Assistant Superintendent Jean Evans Davila



Jean Evans Davila
Assistant Superintendent

Dr. Lois Lanning, co-author of *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom*, returned to Newtown in January to lead a team of 30 teachers from all schools through next steps in our concept-based model of curriculum, teaching, and learning. In May 2017, Dr. Lanning provided introductory training to this same cohort of teachers from English language arts, mathematics, health, science, social studies, and music. Research indicates that when students are taught content and skills conceptually, they demonstrate higher level thinking, better retain learning over time, and transfer knowledge across multiple subject areas and contexts. These sessions led by Dr. Lanning support coherence and rigor within our curriculum and instruction model, a commitment that is integral to the District’s Strategic Plan and the success of our students.



Relationship Between First-Year Teacher and Veteran Paraeducator

By Mike Poeltl, Grade 4 Teacher, & Linda Biscoe, Paraeducator



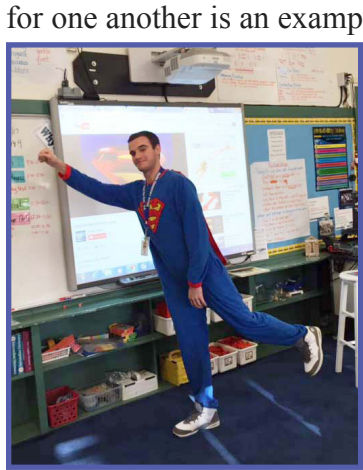
Mike Poeltl & Linda Biscoe
Hawley Elementary School

The relationship with another adult in the classroom can be a tricky one. How do we manage our students together? How often do we collaborate on lessons? What if we have philosophical differences? Not to mention the added stress of being in an elementary classroom together all day, and the fact that we have a first-year teacher with a veteran paraeducator. This could have been a recipe for disaster, but as a team, nothing could prevent our story of success.

We began our relationship with honest communication. The same way you would begin any relationship, whether it be your students, your parents, or your significant other. Right from the beginning we were communicating and planning how we were going to interact and manage our students together. Starting off the year with honest communication helped us build our foundation for the year. One of the best parts of teaching is that educators have their own flare, their own unique style. It truly is an artistic profession and can be successful in so many different ways. With all the variations in style, it is important to have clear and honest communication, especially when there is another adult/paraeducator in the classroom. Each year is different for the students, the teacher, and the paraeducator. It is important for the educators to have honest and clear communication; this way, the paraeducator can echo the same expectations to his or her students. To be honest, one of the ways we keep communications clear is by talking/texting to each other on the phone, which is one of the easiest ways of communication since both of us are so busy during the school day. Every so often there is time to chat during a specials or during a transition, but in the elementary school classroom it would be challenging to redirect one another. Once the students realize we are on different pages, they will start to exploit it. Just as everyone has done with their parents, the students would start to pull the old-fashioned “I asked Mom, and she said no. So, I’m going to ask Dad.” Having consistent and honest communication helps keep a strong relationship with each other and our students.



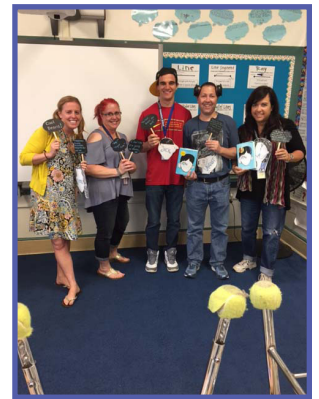
One of the most important parts of teaching is modeling. The way teachers and paraeducators model respect



for one another is an example that rubs off on the students. We often use humor in our modeling to show our students how it would feel both in a negative and a positive way, i.e. “Oh, no, I have to work with Mrs. Biscoe, she is so picky!” or “Yes, I know we will do a great job since I get to work with Mr. Poelt!” We try and create a positive environment in the classroom by example, routines, and language. The way we complement each other’s personal strengths and personalities helps us build and grow our relationship together. We don’t just complement as in show gratitude for each other’s personal strengths, but we also complement as in build off each other’s personal strengths. Linda brings the natural motherly attitude with the artistic side, while Mike brings in the rambunctious and sporty side. Each of us balances the other out. Linda gives the classroom a homey feeling with holiday books, snacks, new classroom furniture/ decorations, and creative bulletin-boards, while Mike draws in the students’ attention with his love for sports. Although we balance each other out with personality differences, we both are emotionally thick

skinned and upfront with our concerns.

Another key aspect to our prosperous relationship is the ability to respect each other professionally. Understanding each others role in the classroom is what makes us so successful. Through honest communication, Linda understands that part of Mike’s philosophy of teaching is learning through experiences. There are challenges to this philosophy when a team of professionals are collaborating, some have more experience than others. In this case, Linda has more experience, but this has not harmed their relationship in the least. Since Linda respects Mike professionally, she supports him when he tries new lessons, new management techniques, and new activities within the class. She allows him to try and fail because she knows that is the best way for him to learn and grow as a teacher. Sometimes she will even help him through the reflection process after a lesson. The freedom to perform in the classroom without judgement helps them both grow. Respecting each other professionally is a two-way road. In return, to respect Linda professionally, Mike must be aware of the needs of her students. Making Linda aware of possible changes to her student’s daily routine prior to implementation is a common courtesy that must be acknowledged. Mike has to allow flexibility with the numerous breaks required with a special education student. Also, the daily nuances are a large factor that often get overlooked. Part of respecting a paraeducator is knowing they are a paraeducator and not a teacher’s aide. Excessive monotonous work or dispersing your personal responsibilities on another can become a strain on any relationship, especially on the teacher-paraeducator relationship.



Our teacher-paraeducator relationship is a unique one. One of youthful energy and veteran knowledge coming together to form the ultimate teacher-paraeducator. It is like Babe Ruth and Michael Jordan coming together to form the ultimate athlete. Our students get the best of both worlds, a new and energetic charisma intertwined with knowledge of fourth grade expectations, background knowledge of building protocol and special events. Being new to a building can create a lot of extra stress on a first-year teacher. The little things can add up in a hurry, but when we have each other by our sides we are in a good place.



Happenings at Our Elementary Schools!

News from Head O' Meadow!

Head O' Meadow has a new school motto. Students in grades K-4 submitted entries and after a school-wide vote, the clear winner was **There's No Place Like HOM!** The new school motto will appear on Spirit Wear during the month of February as the school hopes to raise the remaining funds needed for a Ben's Bells Mural.



The Middle Gate staff has continued book study conversations on *A Mindset for Learning: Teaching the Traits of Joyful, Independent Growth*; (Mraz, Hertz). By design, the discussions take place in small groups (departmental and grade level teams) and cover two chapters at a time. Recent conversations focused on:

- defining the stances (habits of mind) of optimism, flexibility, resilience, persistence, and empathy
- discussing ways to intentionally and explicitly teach the stances
- identifying activities and resources (such as read aloud books) to support learning about the stances
- matching the ways in which this book supports or supplements the work we already do in each classroom (i.e. the Responsive Classroom approach, Second Step lessons)

In addition to this work with Mindset, Middle Gate recently hosted a Principal's Coffee. The main topic was "a reader's mindset" which was presented by Lina Silveira, Middle Gate School's Language Arts Consultant. During the presentation, Lina gave helpful information on the growth mindset, its connection to developing reading skills, and the importance of maintaining reading as a fun activity (which too often becomes work in the minds of learners).

Principal's Coffee



Sandy Hook School continually focuses on giving back to the world around us. We believe that being a part of a learning community that values community service is vital to the social and emotional growth of students and staff alike. In December each grade level sponsored a "CARES" project. The projects included showing support for Save the Children, the Newtown Senior Center as well as developing inspirational and caring messages to give to people in our lives that may need them.

We have just begun one of our most meaningful projects, Valentines for Troops. This program collects essentials for the men and women who are serving our country and gives students an opportunity to write letters to be sent. This program is so meaningful for both the troops and our community. This year we are supporting a United States Air Force Unit. We are also in the midst of our 100 day food drive. All food will be donated to the Faith Food Pantry in Newtown. Our final current active community service event is being sponsored by our entire third grade.



They have established a campaign to educate us and collect money to "Save Sea Turtles". We are proud of all the things we do to support the world around us!



Hawley School held their first Celebration of Learning where we gather as a school community 2-3 times per year.

Our assembly is hosted and run by students and celebrates the work of our students. We honor Art Work, Writing (Book Reviews), and Acts of



Kindness. At our recent celebration, Kindergarten students performed by singing a song and playing a guessing game of our teachers' baby pictures. It was a wonderful experience and we look forward to more.

Reed Happenings!

Reed Intermediate School students participated in a Day of Service in December. Students and staff teamed up on a variety of projects geared at improving the world for others. Students knitted caps for hospitalized babies, painted Ben's Bells, wrote letters to former teachers, collected and delivered over 1,000 donated items to Operation Hope of Fairfield, and painted kindness rocks and placed them in the Victory Garden at Fairfield Hills, among other amazing acts of kindness.



Connecticut resident and children's author Lauren Tarshis also visited Reed in December. Ms. Tarshis is the author of the extremely popular "I Survived" series. Students had the opportunity to have their books signed by Ms. Tarshis and then were treated to an hour-long presentation.

Greetings from Newtown Middle School!

We certainly had a busy late fall and early winter season at the Middle School. We continue to host a number of student events and activities that keep our students busy and engaged. These include, but certainly are not limited to: Holiday Music Concerts, Student Talent Shows, Girl's and Boys Basketball, Math Team, Ski Club, National Geographic Bee (held January 24th), Gaming Club, Literary Magazine (Award winner, I may add!), Robotix Club, Pinata Club, Tech Ed Club, and Labels are for Jars.



Contestans of the National Geographic Bee: Mitchell Schrader (Winner!) Jamie Adams, Paige Armstrong, Filippo Formica, James Hillfeld, Kirtana Kunzweiler, Zach Lehecka, Cameron Whorf

Some of our community events included: International Week, Red Ribbon week, Socktober, Red Cross Blood Drive, Interact Club collections to support Hurricane Relief, Jr. Advisory, and Student Council Community Days in the Cafeteria. Please also join us for our school production of *Alice in Wonderland* on April 6, 7 & 8, details and ticket information available on our school's website.

High School Announcements!

The second semester officially started as Newtown High School brings us closer to graduation and next year's course selection. On Wednesday, February 7th, Newtown High School will be hosting its annual "Incoming 9th Grade Informational Night" in the auditorium. It will be an evening for incoming parents and students to gather information about the programs and pathways NHS has to offer. The evening will begin at 6:30p.m. and run until 8p.m.

As you may know, the NHS students have been working incredibly hard over the past few months to put on a wonderful musical "Les Miserables." We hope that you will consider coming out to support the hard work of the many students involved. The show runs from March 22 through 25. The first three shows will be evening performances and the show will conclude on Sunday with an afternoon performance.

NHS in conjunction with the NICE program, a district initiative focused on global awareness and cultural understandings for the 21st Century, will be hosting the Spanish and French delegations in March. NICE currently works with sister schools in China, Japan, India, Spain, Italy, and France. The program promotes awareness and broadens understanding of language and builds international relevance to the lives of our students.



We are looking for host families willing to take part in this cultural experience. To host, you do not need to speak French or Spanish or be a student of that language. Most questions can be answered on the NICE website (<http://nicenewtown.wixsite.com/nice/host>) or by contacting Ms. Ward (WardE@newtown.k12.ct.us) or Ms. Chow (ChowS@newtown.k12.ct.us).