

Education Update

October 2018

New superintendent brings a record of innovation to district

DR. Robert Zywicki, Mount Olive's new superintendent of schools, brings to the district visionary leadership and a proven track record of innovation.

“Mount Olive has improved dramatically in the past decade and we need to not only sustain that growth but also continue to innovate.”

Dr. Robert Zywicki
Superintendent

He previously served as superintendent of the Weehawken school system and his three-year tenure there yielded prestigious honors. In 2017 and 2018, Weehawken was named one of the most innovative districts in the nation by the International Center for Leadership in Education. Every Weehawken school was also certified as “future ready” by Future Ready Schools – New Jersey, a partnership dedicated to

preparing students for success in the digital age. This year, the national Future Ready Schools program named Dr. Zywicki as a District Thought Leader, one of just 17 educational leaders in the country to be so honored.

During a community presentation and welcome reception on October 11, his second day as Mount Olive superintendent, the veteran educator discussed his goals for the school system and his vision. Among his priorities are safety and security, the personalization of learning to better meet the unique needs of each student, and better communication through social media, web resources, and personal contact.

“Mount Olive has improved dramatically

in the past decade and we need to not only sustain that growth but also continue to innovate,” Dr. Zywicki said after the meeting. “We need to engender a growth mindset in students so they truly believe that perseverance will help them find success and meet their goals, in school and in life. Most of all, we need to prepare kids to be adaptable, critical thinkers who can thrive wherever their future takes them.”

Since his appointment in the summer, Dr. Zywicki has immersed himself in all things Mount Olive so that he could hit the ground running on his very first day at the helm. He reviewed educational achievement reports and district budgets, toured all schools, and met with principals. He also kept in daily contact with Liz Quimet, board of education president, and Susan Breton, director of curriculum and instruction. On his “first day of school” here, he visited every building to meet teachers, staff members, and students.

Known for his boundless energy, cutting-edge programs, and ability to bring about systemic change, Dr. Zywicki has conducted presentations at many state and national conferences. Topic have included



Shawn Nettles, a Mount Olive parent, greets Dr. Robert Zywicki at a welcome reception

organizational leadership and project-based learning. He has also served on several state-wide educational advisory committees. Dr. Zywicki currently teaches at Rutgers and coordinates the design and delivery of research-based professional development programs for the university's Center for Effective School Practices.

Dr. Zywicki earned his doctorate and master's from St. Peter's University, and his bachelor's degree from Rutgers. He is an avid fisherman and lives in Sparta with his wife, Melanie, and their four young children.

Follow Dr. Zywicki and the district on Twitter:



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NEW PROGRAM

Biotech course begins at high school

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Walk-a-thon raises money

SANDSHORE Elementary School students recently exercised to raise money for the school's parent-teacher organization, the Sandshore Home School Partnership.

While the annual event is called a walk-a-thon, there was a whole lot more than walking taking place. This year's event featured a Cross Fit theme. Stations were set up on the back field and students could stop as they walked and try the Cross Fit activities. Among the most popular were the mini obstacle course with agility ladders and hurdles, weight exercises using sand-filled water bottles, the jump rope station, and the "wheel barrow" arm workout.

The walk-a-thon is one of the SHSP's largest fundraisers. Money is raised from donors who contribute money after their sponsored students complete the day's activities. The exact total raised won't be known until all the donations have been received. The SHSP uses the money for



Hailey Collins has some fun at the walk-a-thon

special student programs, curriculum enhancements, assemblies, and teacher grants.

Students in grades K-5 participated in the event during their physical education, music, or art time. The event was coordinated by Jamie Penza from the SHSP, with assistance from physical education teachers Kit Thompson and Nicholas Falkman.

Students are among nation's best

Seven Mount Olive High School seniors were named as commended students in the 2019 National Merit Scholarship Program.

Jared Asprer, Shraya Chintalapudi, Gianni Hernandez, Colin McCutcheon, Aneta Oniszczuk, Maya Shah, and Anoushka Thakur earned the honor based on their scores on the Preliminary SAT, an exam that measures language and math skills and knowledge important for success in college and beyond.

The students' scores are in the top 2% in the nation.

Gianni was also recognized with Antonio Diaz and Herman Gonzalez in the National Hispanic Recognition Program for scoring in the top 2.5% among Hispanic and Latino students.

Ensemble sings on film soundtrack

Mount Olive High School's Advanced Women's Ensemble has made it to the big screen. The group's work is part of the soundtrack of "Buttons," a new film starring legendary actors Dick Van Dyke and Angela Lansbury. Under the musical direction of teacher Matt Vanzini and produced by teacher Trevor Campbell, several selections over the past two years were recorded for the film in the school's own audio studio. This year, the ensemble of 32 performed songs for the trailer.

The film is directed by Tim Janis, a composer and filmmaker who regularly includes student voices in his work. Every year during the holiday season, MOHS singers perform Mr. Janis' compositions with other area students at Carnegie Hall.

"Buttons" is in theaters on December 8.

Newsletter receives national honors

The district's newsletter, "Education Update," recently won two awards from the National School Public Relations Association.

"Education Update" was the only publication in the state to be honored in the Print Newsletter category, which recognizes quality in writing, photography, and graphic design. It was also the only New Jersey publication to be honored for Excellence in Writing, the third consecutive year the newsletter has been feted in this category.

JROTC wins award

Mount Olive High School's Air Force Junior ROTC team recently took 3rd place in the Raider Challenge at Central York High School in York, Pennsylvania. The team competed in six different events including runs and obstacle courses.

Good listeners visit CMS

AFTER reading the book, "Therapy Dogs," Janet Polizois' second-graders at Chester M. Stephens Elementary School met some in real life. They joined Dina Carmalengo's third-graders for a visit from Smokey and Tippi from Creature Comfort Pet Therapy of Morris Plains.

While the students interacted with the lovable dogs, Lynn Livingston and Lenore MacKenzie (the dogs' respective owners) spoke with the students about therapy dog training and the ways that therapy dogs can help people. The students also learned some of the breeds that make the best helping dogs.

The visit, however, wasn't just a book coming to life. Research shows that students who read aloud to therapy dogs improve their language arts skills. Children who may feel self-conscious while reading to their classmates are comfortable reading to the dogs who provide a neutral and non-judgmental audience. It's a way for students to practice, feel safe making mistakes, and begin to gain confidence in their reading.

When students read to dogs, their attitude



Second-grader Olivia Geftic becomes fast friends with Tippi

and enthusiasm for reading has been shown to increase as well.

Smokey, a mini-schnauzer, and Tippi, a golden retriever, will visit every other week for the remainder of the school year and be the good listeners they naturally are.

NEW PROGRAM

MOHS students explore biotech

A NEW hands-on biotech course is hurtling Mount Olive High School students toward the edge of the frontier of science.

Biotechnology Lab Practices teaches juniors and seniors the ways that technology can harness a variety of biological processes to

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Jennifer Brown
Science teacher

improve our lives. The semester-long course focuses on laboratory techniques. It has students extracting DNA, detecting cancer genes, investigating foodborne outbreaks, and doing a little genetic engineering by creating glow-in-the-dark bacteria.

In a recent experiment, students made cheese the lab way by mixing bacteria into milk and then adding an enzyme that breaks up the milk proteins to create curds. The activity showed the young scientists that not only is cheesemaking a complex biochemical process, but also that mankind has been using available technology to manipulate biology for thousands of years.

The entry into the biotech world is another step into tomorrow for a school that’s become known for its high-tech offerings. Robotics, engineering, and industrial design now have an equally important sibling.

“Biotechnology is revolutionizing the world,” said teacher Jennifer Brown, who before coming to MOHS spent three years working in a medical diagnostic lab which

specialized in DNA-based molecular analysis. “It continues to advance as our tools for seeing, analyzing, and manipulating the very small get better. It’s crucial that students study biotech because it is so important to our future and so many new jobs are in this field.”

A new laboratory

To make hands-on biotechnology courses available, a new biotech lab was created. Over the summer a mailroom on the first floor was converted to instructional use and outfitted with new lab benches and storage units, centrifuges, an interactive white board, a lab microwave, and equipment to separate and copy DNA.

Before the lab was designed and the course created, teachers and administrators visited Mountain Lakes High School to talk with educators about its biotechnology program and sit in on some classes. In addition, Mount Olive’s team toured Princeton’s biotech labs and Rutgers biotech labs to research necessary equipment and room design.

On the path to a new pathway

The addition of biotech into the curriculum sets the stage for the expansion of the high school’s Distinguished Pathways Diploma Program. A Pathways diploma recognizes students who concentrate in a particular field and complete advanced-level courses. MOHS began its Pathways program in 2015 by expanding its offerings to create a sequence of courses needed to earn a Pathways Diploma in engineering/industrial design.

Now school administrators and teachers are



MOHS senior Courtney Nelson extracts DNA from an onion

working on establishing the courses needed to earn a Pathways Diploma in biotechnology. Biotechnology Laboratory Practices will be a requisite as will another course added this school year: Scientific Issues & Ethics.

Taught by science teacher Christian Jensen, Scientific Issues & Ethics is a semester-long course that explores the human side of biotechnology. Here students research and debate the hot button issues that weigh societal values against scientific advances and possibilities (e.g., cloning, designer babies). The course is also designed to develop students into critical consumers of media and information.

Focusing students on what went well

PHYSICAL education teacher Mike Schwartz wants to change the way Mountain View Elementary School students think about themselves and their lives.

He supervises a study period for Rebecca Day’s fifth-graders once per week and begins each session with a group discussion on optimism called “What Went Well.”

“I think all of us tend to look at things negatively instead of accentuating the positives,” said Mr. Schwartz. “When you take a test, you focus on what you didn’t do well. I want to change that mindset for kids and get them to look at life in a positive way.”

Mr. Schwartz usually begins the chats by focusing the kids on a specific topic (e.g., working to complain less) or engaging students

in an activity. Students also can choose to discuss something positive that happened to them recently, or highlight actions that make them happy and optimistic.

In addition to the self-reflection and affirmation, the group discussions are chances to bond. The classmates recognize each other’s achievements and often talk about their lives outside of school.

To kick off the initial discussion group, Mr. Schwartz asked the fifth-graders to choose a single positive word that would define them for the year. Adjectives included bold, confident, leader, brave, and creative. A poster with a web of all the students’ words will be hung to remind students to always be working on the qualities they want to define them.



Teacher Mike Schwartz speaks with Grace Puello about what went well

Designed for 21st century learning

New seating at Tinc Road help facilitate teamwork, communication, and problem-solving

Tinc Road Elementary School is sporting new lighting, new ceilings, and new floors throughout the building, thanks to an intensive summer renovation. The look is bright and modern, and underscores just how crucial a

school environment is to learning.

“*I didn't like them being at their desks all day. I feel like they get more done now because they're comfortable, focused, and having fun.*”

Laura Offerding
Tinc Road teacher

school environment is new as well – and here in the classroom is where you'll see the most significant change. Non-traditional seating has replaced some of the desks and chairs in every room. It might be standing desks, rocker chairs, wobble stools, or some other type of non sit-still-at-your-desk accommodation. In the education world, this is known as flexible or alternate seating. It's a system designed for the active instructional methods of the 21st century and helps facilitate teamwork, communication, active problem-solving, project-based learning, and hands-on STEAM activities.

The pilot program

Fourth-grade teacher Laura Offerding is piloting the school's first all-flexible-seating classroom. Students can choose to sit on plastic crates, pillows, carpet tiles, and bouncy exercise balls in addition to the wobble stools, standing desks, and rocker chairs. Yes, there are a few regular chairs too, because sometimes you just want to sit up and do.

“I love all the space in my room,” said Mrs. Offerding. “It really gives me the ability to utilize my classroom better, especially for group work and partner work. I didn't like them being at their desks all day. I feel like they get more done now because they're comfortable, focused, and having fun.”

Research consistently shows that attention and learning are improved when students are comfortable and have opportunities to move around. In the grown-up world, this couldn't be more obvious; we all have unique preferences



Za'Miyah Achoe and Esther Subeesh sit in new rocker chairs as they work

in our professional and personal lives that help us to focus, whether it's working at Starbucks or sorting through mail at the kitchen table. Kids aren't any different.

Making it work

Mrs. Offerding is working out any classroom management issues that may arise so that she can advise other Tinc Road teachers who are considering making the head-first plunge into all flexible seating. First, since students are relying mostly on lap desks instead with drawers, there is a lack of storage space. She purchased large plastic bins for the front of her classroom for books and instructional materials. Still, students needed a way to contain their school supplies in an organized way. Now everyone has a basket for his or her own personal pens, pencils, highlighters, and other supplies.

Mrs. Offerding also created a simple sign-out method for the fourth-graders to select the seating they'd like for the day; it's a matter of a student just moving a magnet on the front board to reserve a particular piece of furniture. While intuition would suggest that students might all be clamoring for the plush high-backed rocker chairs, that has not been the case at all. Alternative seating makes students think about their learning every day and consider how they can maximize their own productivity.

“The classroom rule is to share,” Mrs. Offerding said. “Students have a choice and select what suits their mood. It's been very successful. The flexible seating allows kids to easily move around, work together, and get their wiggles out.”



Sixth-grader Besian Hadzovic discusses his schedule with MOMS principal Matthew Robinson on the first day of school

Coming Home

September 4 marked the opening day of the school year. For Matthew Robinson, it was his first day of school in the district in two decades – this time not as a student but as the new principal of Mount Olive Middle School. He graduated from the district in 2001.

“It's a homecoming for me and an opportunity to give back to the district that prepared me for success in life,” Mr. Robinson said.

For the past two years, he served as the superintendent at Stillwater Township School.

Michael Cravotta - editor

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