

Education Update

December 2020

Together, we've adapted and grown

IN December 2019, the world learned of a cluster of patients in China who were afflicted with a type of viral pneumonia – what we now know as COVID-19. The story was a mere blip on the media radar. Even as further reports of the severity and high infection rate came in during January, the epidemic seemed so far away, something that couldn't happen in the U. S.



a message from the SUPERINTENDENT Dr. Robert Zywicki

Now, as we ride out the second virulent wave and prepare to close the door on 2020, I can't help but look back on just how far we've come as a school district.

In early March, a cloud of uncertainty hung above us as we worked on our pandemic response. *What will life be like in quarantine? How can we provide the best instruction and support services to students?* It was uncharted territory. Our instructional planning was not top down, but bottom up; we empowered our teachers to make the most appropriate choices for their own students.

Then again in the summer as we prepared for a return to in-person instruction, more questions arose. We wondered how students and staff members would react to the "new normal" of masks and distancing, coupled with hybrid learning.

Together, we adapted, grew, and made it all work. There were certainly challenges and there will, no doubt, be more ahead; however, Mount Olive School District staff members responded with remarkable dedication and resilience, particularly our technology team which was tasked with keeping thousands of electronic devices working and our network

secure and reliable.



MOHS senior Ainsley Stewart examines the skeletal system

MOHS adds interactive anatomy displays

Mount Olive High School students enrolled in anatomy & physiology classes have a new instructional tool at their fingertips. Four interactive computer displays were recently added which allow users to zoom in, zoom out, and rotate the human body as if they were working on a giant iPhone. With this ability, anatomical parts and systems can be examined at real-life size.

The high-resolution displays, made by Anatomage, also lie flat and can be loaded with animal anatomy graphics. This gives students the opportunity to complete virtual dissections.

secure and reliable.

Students and their parents gave us their understanding and commitment to learning. Our guidance staff reached out any way they could to help our students with their emotional and academic health. And our teachers, who are on the instructional front lines every day, worked tirelessly to deliver engaging and innovative lessons – most while challenged with bridging the digital expanse which separates them from their students.

Adversity has brought out the best in all of us. I am so proud of the efforts of this school community; I am so proud to be the superintendent of a district that has led the way in the planning and delivery of instruction and services during this crisis. I'd like to thank everyone in the district for going the extra mile for our kids.

Thankfully, it appears that the hardest part is behind us. The end of the tunnel is close and we can see the light.



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MOHS GUIDANCE

Creative strategies help keep young minds healthy



Ian Perez designs a military medal for bravery



Army vet provides insight

AT Chester M. Stephens Elementary School, third-graders in a class taught by Catherine Figueiredo and Amber Roselle heard stories about military life from a recently retired Army veteran. Dr. Ashley Roselle-Hourigan, their co-teacher's sister-in-law and a medical doctor with the rank of major, virtually spoke with students.

During her talk, Roselle-Hourigan discussed the intense physical training she had to complete, her work with wounded soldiers, and the various awards and ribbons she

received. She also spoke about the Army's need for personnel with a variety of different skills to serve as teachers, architects, mechanics, and dentists.

Prior to meeting Roselle-Hourigan, the students brainstormed qualities that they thought would be important for military personnel to possess. They then took those traits – which included brave, intelligent, kind, and selfless – and designed medals to honor the men and women who exhibit those qualities.

Meet the new vice principal at MOMS

When Agatha Wilke joined the district as Mount Olive Middle School's new vice principal, a rare education quartet was completed. She added "school administrator" to her experience,



which also includes serving on a board of education, parenting two school-age children, and teaching for two decades. That multi-tiered level of experience – parent, teacher, administrator, board member – provides her with a unique understanding of education and the delivery of instruction.

"I have a holistic view of how a district functions," Wilke said. "I think when I speak with students, I am genuinely able to say to them that I understand them and what they're experiencing because of raising my own kids. I can empathize with teachers because I know the trials and tribulations of the classroom from my 20 years teaching, including teaching synchronously which I did last year for three months. All this gives me the insight to help and support everyone as best I can."

Before coming to Mount Olive, Wilke spent all of her educational career teaching seventh and eighth grade social studies at Randolph Middle School. She also served as eighth grade faculty leader and led professional development presentations on such topics as classroom management, co-teaching models, and writing in the humanities. She has also been a presenter at Montclair University's summer conference and the annual workshop of the New Jersey Council for Social Studies.

The veteran educator hit the job running when she began in August. Taking on a new position in a new district is normally difficult on its own, but learning new faces and procedures while in the midst of pandemic instructional planning provided unique challenges.

Wilke is the building's third vice principal, joining Chris Reagan and Nick Cutro. Each VP now supervises a different grade level and will stay with his or her students as they advance through their middle school years. The house plan is designed to create meaningful connections between administrators and kids.

Wilke holds a bachelor's in political science from Rutgers, a master's in the art of teaching from Marygrove University in Detroit, and a master's in education leadership from Centenary University. She was born in Poland and immigrated to the U.S. when she was 9. In her spare time she enjoys she enjoys reading, traveling, and baking.

Raising a native NJ species

FIFTH-GRADERS in an extracurricular program at Sandshore Elementary School are witnessing the miracle of life. The students are raising rainbow trout in Tricia Mitchell's classroom and follow every stage of their development from eggs to fingerlings.



Gina Ciccarella feeds the trout for the day

On Trout Tuesdays, Mitchell remotely teaches students about the trout life cycle and biology, the habitat needed for the trout's survival, the impact of humans, and the importance of conservation.

"These students are the future stewards of the planet and this project drives home their role in conservation," said Mitchell. "The project also reinforces some of the key concepts in the science curriculum."

The trout are incredibly delicate, sensitive to the most minor temperature changes and pollutants. Even in the controlled environment of the classroom, only a few of the 80-100 eggs are expected to live and mature enough to be released into local fresh water this spring.

This unique program is made possible through a partnership with the Pequest Trout Hatchery in Oxford, New Jersey in association with Trout Unlimited, a national conservation group, and the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife.

The three other elementary schools in the district are also raising trout from the hatchery. They are teaching and involving students in different ways.

Keeping young minds healthy

HS guidance team uses digital strategies to support kids during pandemic

Anxiety.
Depression.
Stress.
Grief.
Impaired focus.

National research shows that the pandemic and the necessary changes to the school day have emotionally impacted students. It is, after all, easy for even adults to feel overwhelmed during this time. Students might be concerned about the health of family members or be grappling with the loss of a loved one. They could be stressed from newly unemployed parents or the isolation of quarantine, or have trouble adjusting to remote instruction.

The guidance department at Mount Olive High School has worked hard to establish a support system to help students navigate through their individual struggles.

A focused, department effort

Student needs at the high school level are different from other grades and can be more complex. High-schoolers are dealing with concerns about college applications, the loss of athletics and other social and extracurricular activities, and the uncertainty of traditions and milestones of senior year.

The guidance department has developed creative strategies to reach out and help students. With in-person instruction limited or suspended completely, resources and support are typically provided digitally.

Each grade level has its own class in Google

Classroom which provides applicable guidance info. Typical items include testing information, weblinks for virtual college visits, and links to virtual meet and greets with college admissions representatives which are hosted regularly during the school year.

Through Google Classroom, students can easily schedule time to speak with counselors too, either through video or using the old-fashioned telephone. Every Monday, counselor Zach Heeman also holds an open forum on Google Meet. Here, students can virtually drop in and chat about whatever concerns them, without having to make an appointment.

“We have the best counseling staff,” said Robert Feltmann, vice principal of student services. “They’re always thinking, always trying to find new ways to support kids.”

The department’s most recent initiative is MO Meditation, a website designed to be a clearinghouse of relaxation and self-care resources. Student assistance coordinator Jacqueline Skutka developed the site after receiving input from the entire guidance staff.

“It’s a unique time and we’ve been trying innovative ways to connect with kids,” Skutka said. “Everyone wants to reach out and help students with anything that impacts their



ability to thrive and succeed academically. The website is a way to provide kids easy access to things that they can do for themselves.”

Though intended for students who are reluctant to seek professional help and want to go it alone, the site can be useful for kids and adults alike. You can find mindfulness tips, calming music, and self-care videos. Check it out at www.tiny.cc/MOmeditation.

All guidance events and updates are listed in the department’s electronic newsletter. Published monthly, the newsletter also includes articles about the importance of various character traits as well as academic tips. One newsletter included stories about gratitude and coping skills, for example, and tips for success in AP courses. Another contained suggestions on writing college essays.

Weblinks and phone numbers to outside support organizations are also provided.



Shea Sweeney reads “Ruby Finds a Worry”

New books focus on diversity

TINC Road Elementary School has added books that celebrate diversity and explore the African-American experience. Classes will primarily read the books during morning meetings – a time devoted to social emotional learning which helps students develop self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

The books, chosen by each grade level team, underscore some of the messages discussed at a recent staff conference day. That presentation inspired second grade teacher Laura Iacampo to find a way to bring discussions about race and di-

versity to the classroom during the morning SEL time. She saw a selection of appropriate Scholastic Books and asked the school’s parent teacher organization to fund the purchase.

Selected books include both fiction and non-fiction titles. Among them are “Through My Eyes,” an autobiography written by civil rights icon Ruby Bridges, and “We’ve Got A Job” about the famed 1963 Birmingham Children’s March.

Storybooks include “Be You” by “The Dot” author Peter Reynolds and “New Kid,” a winner of several awards for excellence in children’s literature.

CSI: Northern Italy, 3300 B.C.

MOMS students become forensic investigators to solve an ancient case

SIXTH-GRADERS at Mount Olive Middle School were recently challenged to solve a cold case. Ice cold.

The mummified body of a 5,300-year old man was found 30 years ago, literally in the middle of nowhere: in the snowy Northern Alps along the border of Austria and Italy. Named Otzi the Iceman by researchers, he initially was thought to have frozen to death, a logical thought given the climate and terrain; Otzi was later found to have an arrowhead lodged in his shoulder, as well as wounds to his hands.

Who was this Copper Age man? Was the arrow wound severe enough to cause his death, and if not, how did he die?

The students worked in teams to research Otzi, the oldest human mummy ever found. They examined the four prevailing theories on Otzi's cause of death by using a variety of text and video resources, including the information on a website that the sixth grade social studies teachers put together. The research teams then were

asked to form their own evidenced-based conclusions.

Did Otzi freeze to death?

Was he killed by his own people?

Was he the victim of a ritual killing, perhaps sacrificed to the deities who were thought to live in the mountains?

Was he killed in self-defense?

With no witnesses to question, the students had to solve the mystery using forensic reports, photos of the artifacts found in Otzi's possession such as his copper axe and arrows, and photos of his clothes. The evidence all had stories to tell, often contradictory.

"This project challenged students to think like archaeologists," said social studies teacher Jennie Merklin. "They had to analyze primary and secondary sources, and examine evidence to form their own inferences on how Otzi may have died as well as what his life may have been like in prehistoric times."

The teams presented their theories to their classmates, citing the evidence that supported their conclusions.



Bianca Marrow researches Otzi the Iceman

Looking inside the judicial branch

Students at Mountain View speak with a judge through video conference

WITH the general election held in early November, the month is a time when elementary teachers traditionally teach about aspects of the U.S. government. In Angela McCort and Kelly Wronko's class at Mountain View Elementary School, the third-graders went beyond learning about the three branches and the balance of power. They went inside the judicial branch and learned from a real judge what takes place.



Judge Michael Wright

The students virtually met with state Superior Court Judge Michael C. Wright. During the 30-minute conversation, Wright discussed the education and qualifications needed to be a judge and spoke about the types of cases that come before him in family court. He talked candidly, but in child-friendly terms and with an energy that kept students engaged every second of the virtual meeting.

At times, the talk became deeply personal, particularly when Wright spoke about the career support given to him by his mother and sister, and the happiness he felt when they were with him when he was sworn in. The judge also shared a bit about the emotional weight of making decisions that affect the lives of others. Unlike civil and criminal courts, which Wright has presided over in the past, family court does not have juries; justices are responsible for not only the proceedings but

also the outcomes.

"It's incredibly hard," Wright said. "The decisions [I make] affect people so much. A bad decision can really destroy a life, and that's not what I want to do. I want to help. Even when you do the right thing, though, it really hurts sometimes."

Toward the end of the meeting, a student asked Wright to give advice to kids. His words resonated with both the students and the adults listening in.

"It is not too early to work hard in school and position yourself to do great things," Wright said.

"I know you're 8 years old, but it's not too early. And also make sure in the next few years you take time to enjoy life, because life goes fast. Have fun, but while you're having fun work hard. One day I was 8 years old and I went to sleep, and when I woke up I was 56."

Kelley Anthes-Smith arranged the virtual discussion. Anthes-Smith works for the judge and is the mother of a student in the class. Before the students met Wright, she delivered a brief introduction about the work done in family court.