

EducationUpdate

February 2022

New program helps students with disabilities develop job skills

MARAUDERS Believe, a new program at Mount Olive High School, is helping students with academic and developmental disabilities prepare for independence and adult life. Though academic support is an important part of the program, the real heart and soul of Marauders Believe is hands-on job training and life skills practice.

Innovative vocational opportunities, both at the high school and in the Mount Olive community, have been developed to provide work experiences that are appropriate for each student's individualized needs, strengths, and interests.

"Transitioning young adults with disabilities from school to the adult world requires careful planning," said Sharon Staszak, director of special services for grades 6-12. "Marauders Believe was designed to provide practical opportunities to help our students be successful and as independent as possible after graduation."

Students in the program, for example, might make snacks and handmade crafts that are then sold from the Café Connect cart in the commons area. Working at Café Connect reinforces real-world math skills, but more importantly provides valuable experience in communication. It's called Café Connect for a reason: Customer interaction takes place through the communication method best suited for the Café Connect worker, which is not always verbal. Workers and customers might use sign language, iPads, or speech-generating devices to converse.

Through an internship with Sodexo, the district's provider of food services, students also have a chance to prepare, sort, and package school lunches.

Trying different jobs

Job sampling is available too, and provides

students with real-world job experience. Students explore careers by working at outside businesses or organizations several days per week, learning the unique, practical skills necessary to be successful. Each quarter, the students move to a new work experience at a different business. Job roles and functions include receptionist, stock, food preparation, hall monitor, staff assistant, manufacturer, sports announcer, and more. The high school has partnered with a range of local organizations to offer these job training opportunities, including: ShopRite in Flanders and Stanhope, House of Good Shepard, Ashley Farm, McDonalds, Ace Hardware, Paragon Village, RH Farms, Lowe's, and Eleventh Hour Rescue.

"They are done with their academics, they've learned their reading, writing, and 'rithmetic," said teacher Christopher Bosch, transition specialist. "And now they're learning practical job skills as they put rubber to the road."

Learning life skills

Students with developmental and learning disabilities often require practice with everyday life skills. In the independent daily living component of the program, teachers



Students work at the Café Connect cart in the high school commons

work with each student to develop an individualized plan that will provide the necessary living skills to help them reach self-sufficiency. This might include meal planning and cooking, financial management, health care, clothing care, and home safety.

Discussions of available community resources also take place so that students know there are resources to turn to for support when they leave the nurturing confines of the high school.

Three classrooms in the building have been configured into instructional stations for Marauders Believe. A kitchen is devoted to food prep for Café Connect. A large work area provides the space for hands-on activities such as craft projects, laundry, office tasks, and grocery shopping. A third section is dedicated to practice job interviews, mock job sampling, and recreation.

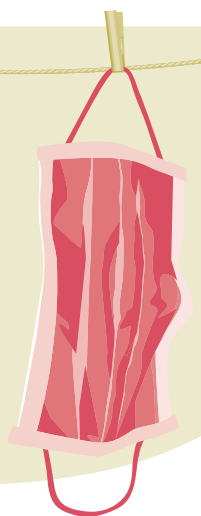


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Fourth-graders love to code

SOME day in the future, circa 2035, a young computer programmer will return to Mountain View Elementary School to thank Emily Cali for starting them down their chosen career path.

The fourth grade teacher is helping her students learn to code by using Google's CS First, an online computer science platform. The CS First curriculum centers on project-focused lessons which build in complexity as student skills increase.

The class recently completed the "Music and Sound" unit which provided students with an introduction to coding and showed them how to string pieces of code together to create finished projects. The students animated characters for dance parties, created interactive musical artwork, and made music videos. The assignments used Scratch, a drag-and-drop visual programming language designed for children 8–16.

"The kids are really enjoying it and are excited to share their projects with their friends," Cali said. "Really what coding does at this level is teach students problem-solving, logic, and communication skills. And persistence. It also gives them a hint



A fourth-grader in Emily Cali's class works on a coding project

of the work involved in creating video games, which of course they all love."

To provide students with some real professional insight into programming, Cali arranged for two Google software developers to remotely speak with the class. The developers described their careers and spoke about their starts in computer science; then, they walked students through a special Scratch lesson.

Rather than devote a block of classroom time to coding, Cali uses CS First as one of the math centers in her classroom. Math centers are areas where students work on different math activities, either independently or collaboratively.



Rachel Bilse jumps rope during phys ed class

Focusing on heart health in phys ed

Sandshore Elementary School students are raising money for the American Heart Association. During the Kids Heart Challenge, formerly known as Jump Rope for Heart, the students also learn about their hearts, heart health, and the importance of helping others.

This is the 10th year in which Sandshore has participated in the Kids Heart Challenge. By the end of this year's fundraiser, the school's total donation to the AHA is expected to surpass \$60,000.

"It's always a highlight of the year," said physical education teacher Nick Falkman. "The kids love the feeling of helping others and really understand the importance of staying physically active and eating right."

On the day of the Kids Heart Challenge event, students will jump rope and rotate among other exercise stations set up in the gym.

Students participate in CMS science fair

More than 150 students recently participated in Chester M. Stephens Elementary School's science fair, sponsored by the School Community Association.

The winners were: Jack Schweizer (kindergarten); Aradhya Premkumar (first grade); Adhir Shahin (second grade); Aalisha Metrani (third grade); Vincent Payyappilly (fourth grade); and Elizabeth Coronato (fifth grade).

Sumayya Sheikh won the Judges' Choice award, Farrah Flood and Adriana Vilasco took home the Best Display award, and Whitney Flood and Kaiya Vilasco won for Best Presentation Skills.

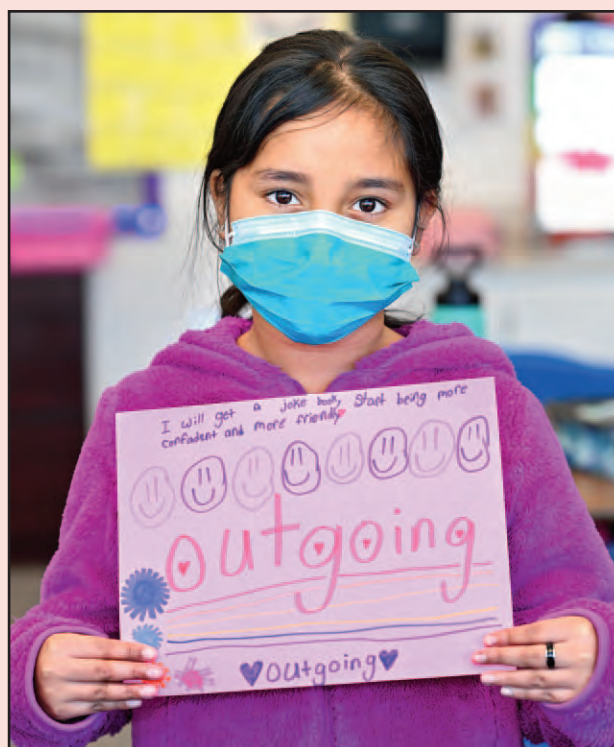
Being their best selves

THIRD-GRADERS in Devon Marques and Lauren Pedersen's class at Sandshore Elementary School know themselves and who they want to be.

Each student in the class recently chose a character trait that he or she would like to work on during the rest of the school year. Mentioned were qualities such as bold, brainy, adventurous, and responsible.

The students designed small posters that show who they hope to be in 2022. Hung along the classroom windows, the posters serve as a daily reminder that we all are works in progress. Every day during the class morning meetings, the students also get a chance to talk about the steps they've taken to be who they want to be.

The introspection and discussions about being our best selves parallel the conversations taking place during English language arts time. The class is reading "Wonder," the popular



Sophie Khan wants to be more outgoing

novel made into a successful 2017 film, and spends time examining the personality traits of the characters and the book's themes.



New science resources ratchet up student engagement

STUDYING science isn't just about hitting the books. This year, the district introduced new elementary science materials and activities for grades K–5 that have kids out of their seats watering



Step into a classroom with a lab in progress and you'll instantly feel the excitement in the air. Kids are engaged, working together, and showing genuine scientific curiosity."

Dr. Robert Zywicki
Superintendent

plants, studying the states of matter by making ice cream, and creating their own electromagnets. The project-based learning assignments are hands-on, allowing students to actively explore and test the scientific principles they learn about.

"Step into a classroom with a lab in progress and you'll instantly feel the excitement in the air," said Superintendent Robert Zywicki, Ed.D. "Kids are engaged, working together, and showing genuine scientific curiosity. This type of active learning is very

powerful. Research shows that by asking students to investigate, problem-solve, and discuss science, they can connect concepts to real-life. And they retain more knowledge."

The curriculum for each grade is divided into four topics per year. Each unit usually culminates with a cooperative scientific challenge of some sort.

The study of physical sciences, for example, is a major component of the fourth grade science curriculum and covers forces and energy. Fourth-graders in all four district elementary schools recently wrapped up the unit by working in teams to design and build their own rollercoasters.

Students took on the role of mechanical engineer to put into action their knowledge about force, velocity, friction,



At Chester M Stephens Elementary School:
Above, Adalyn Smith tapes a piece of cardboard tubing



Left, Mason Hayek, Destinee Charlemagne, and John Bowden show great teamwork

Far left, Cristian Moreno, Joshua Pineda, and Vanya Morsu tackle sections of their coaster



and other principles. Using common items such as paper towel tubes and milk cartons, they created rollercoasters with a very specific mission: have a steel ball traverse the coaster course and hit another steel ball, propelling it forward into a cup.

Students tested, reworked their designs, and tested again, just as real engineers do. When they had completed the project, they summarized the ways that the activity reinforced their learning by writing observations that explained their successes and failures, and that identified the scientific principles that were at work.

Celebrating the Year of the Tiger

In art class, kindergartners at Tinc Road Elementary School learned about the Chinese New Year and the significance of the lunar Year of the Tiger, thought to be a year of positivity and hope in East Asian countries.

Using paper plates and craft sticks, the kindergartners then made fans painted in gold, red, and black. The fans were displayed in a hallway showcase, accompanied by a paper dragon. The dragon in Chinese culture is a symbol of good luck, strength, and health.



Zayn Najjar holds a display of fans

Registration open for kindergarten

Online kindergarten registration for the 2022-2023 school year is now open. Follow the link on the district home page: www.motsd.org.

To be eligible for kindergarten, a child must be age 5 on or before October 1, 2022.

Required documentation includes an original birth certificate with a raised seal and proof of residency in the parent's name.



Mutual canine pals inspire project

MOUNT Olive Middle School students have organized a fundraiser and donation drive for OSCAR, an animal rescue organization in Sparta. In addition to money, the drive is accepting gently used blankets and cat and dog food/treats through the end of February. The effort has its roots in a discovery of a shared passion and empathy. One day, eighth-grader Cheyanne Harding was with several friends, chatting and laughing over lunch with Vitina Krentz, an MOMS counselor. When Krentz told the story of her family's 2019 adoption of two quirky and affectionate mixed-breed dogs, Oliver and George, the bells sounded for Cheyanne.

Krentz had boarded Oliver and George several times at Petra's Dog Resource Center where Cheyanne and her mother work.

"I remembered having them," said

Cheyenne. "They're very energetic. It was funny and kind of cool that I knew them."

The love of animals shared by Krentz and the students inspired action. As the plans for the drive came together, MOMS staff member Cathy Chessen and MOMS counselor Julie Kester volunteered to help. Legendary comic actress and animal activist Betty White had just died, only weeks from her 100th birthday. Her passing spurred a national animal rescue campaign. Chessen wanted students to be able to take part and honor White's endearing legacy.

The MOMS drive officially began on January 17, the day the "Golden Girls" and "Mary Tyler Moore Show" star would have turned 100.



Top, Alyssa Rodriguez, Arianna Barra, Emily Sweeney, Eva Villafane, and, **right,** Cheyanne Harding collect donations during lunch



Lessons support student wellness

A decade ago, two Harvard psychologists released research data which revealed that we spend about 47% of our waking hours mentally wandering, thinking about something other than what we are doing.

The exact opposite of that mental detachment is something called mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state in which you are focused on the here and now, fully engaged in the present.

Nicole O'Connell-Gonzalez, Tinc Road Elementary School's instructional supervisor, recently wrapped up a series of four mindfulness lessons for second-graders. The sessions were designed to help students concentrate and be more aware of their emotions and behavior. Research shows that mindfulness decreases anxiety, increases attention, improves relationships, strengthens compassion, and supports emotional regulation.

"The world seems to work harder against us every day in our fight to stay focused and productive, and I'm not talking about just kids, I'm talking about everyone," said Principal Mark Grilo. "The pandemic, social media, video games, the beeps of text messages, that long 'to do' list on your

kitchen table.... We live in an age of perpetual distraction. We can all use a little nudge now and then to bring us back into the moment."

O'Connell-Gonzalez, certified in mindfulness education in 2016 and a creator of a mindfulness program for grades K-5, went into a different classroom each week to deliver a lesson; school counselors Lisa Barba and Alina Szast sat in, then used the strategies and material to teach the remaining second grade classes later in the week.

The lessons were kept simple and practical. Techniques such as breathing exercises were taught which can help the young students re-center their thoughts.

"Children often hear 'We need you to focus,' but kids don't necessarily know how," O'Connell-Gonzalez said. "Mindfulness training gives students the tools to let them tune-in to certain things and tune other things out."

The second-graders also learned ways to help them listen mindfully, be aware of their bodies, and to practice a mix of kindness and mindfulness.

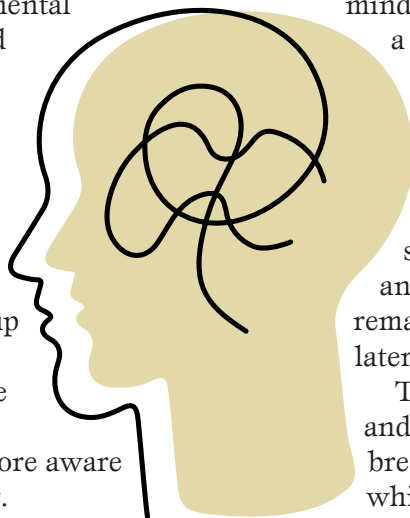
Social and emotional instruction is an

important part of the school district curriculum. Lessons and school activities address relationship building, interpersonal communication, and the cultivation of positive character traits. O'Connell-Gonzalez views this mindfulness training as a complement to social and emotional instruction.

The second grade teachers were provided with ideas and activities for honing the mindfulness techniques covered in each lesson. These suggestions, such as asking students to keep mindfulness journals, reinforced the concepts and encouraged mindful habits during the school day.

"The mindfulness lessons are great," said teacher Laura Iacampo, who has embraced the mindful practices. "The children really enjoy them and any books I read to them about mindfulness. They use the techniques quickly and know what to do. If I even just say 'mindful bodies' they know that means to tune-in to what they're doing at that moment and to redirect in some way; they try to breathe intentionally and understand the importance of recognizing any emotion they're having. They're generally more focused and self-aware."

The weekly mindfulness classes were so well-received by teachers and second-graders, they will continue to be offered; mindfulness will also be introduced to other grades.



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