education news

an official publication of the Little Falls Township Public Schools

LITTLE FALLS TOWNSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 2021

School improvement plan under development

Preliminary draft includes added instructional space, addresses basic building needs

THE Little Falls School District is developing a school improvement project to add instructional space and to address its facilities needs.

At the heart of the project is the construction of **new instructional areas** at all three schools. Among the work called for in this early draft: eight new preschool classrooms at School No. 2 which will allow the expansion of the Pre-K program, an auditorium at School No. 1, and a new cooperative learning room at School No. 3 to provide more space for collaborative and hands-on activities.

> **"The project will make basic upgrades to our aging buildings and provide additional space for our students to learn and grow."**
>
> **Tracey Marinelli**
> *Superintendent*

Also in the preliminary plan is the replacement and upgrades of **building components** that have come to end of their practical lifespans. This includes heating and ventilation units, air conditioning, and energy controls; the modernization of these basic infrastructure items will make the buildings much more energy efficient and will allow the installation of more powerful air filtration systems. Flooring replacement districtwide is also part of the project.

Over the past six weeks, Superintendent Tracey Marinelli has met with a dozen community groups and leaders to share the conceptual draft of the plan and hear input. Additional community meetings will be held once the plan is refined.

Precise financial estimates have not been completed at this point in time; however, aid from the state is expected to offset a significant amount of the cost. The project, which will be financed over a period of years, is expected to be submitted to the community for voting some time next school year.

"We are still early in the development process," said Marinelli. "The project will make basic upgrades to our aging buildings and provide additional space for our students to learn and grow. The great educational program we've all worked so hard to build will have the room to expand, allowing us to provide students with an even more challenging and dynamic school experience."

The school improvement project has its roots in the district's multi-year strategic plan which was developed collaboratively by community members, parents, teachers, students, board members, and administrators. Those objectives, coupled with the board of education's 2019-2022 goals, provided the foundation for the board's buildings & grounds subcommittee and the education subcommittee to craft the improvement plan.

More information will be provided as the project is further developed.

Second-grader Cecelia Ostrowski attaches her name and act of kindness to a bulletin board in School No. 2

Students spread kindness

In February, School No. 2 celebrated New Jersey's Kindness Awareness Month and National Random Acts of Kindness Day.

Teachers submitted to Principal Jill Castaldo the names of students who performed good deeds. The names of the students and descriptions of their kind acts were then displayed on a "Be a Rainbow" bulletin board.

Student names were also submitted to the Little Falls Municipal Alliance for its annual kindness recognition program. Each kind child received a free pair of earbuds from the alliance.

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SCHOOL STORE

Showing off the cookies that School No. 1's student council sold are Victor DePadova, council treasurer, and Sophie Baker, council president

Student council sets up shop

SCHOOL No. 1's student council is in the retail business. The council recently started a school store, stocked with spiritwear hoodies and tee shirts.

The Hornet's Nest, the name for the store chosen through a schoolwide vote, is a portable pop-up right now; it operates outside the cafeteria during lunch periods. However, the hope is that some permanent space can be found in the future for the council to set up shop.

"Everything is student run and student driven," said Principal Dana Sprague. "The council did a great job choosing the logos and designs for the spiritwear."

Down the road, purchases at the Hornet's Nest might also be able to be made using a school currency that teachers and staff members can award for positive behavior and academic achievement. At the moment it's cash only, though the acceptance of credit/debit cards is being researched. A broader product selection is also planned.

The student council sold cookies in a February sale, practicing the money management and sales skills they'll needed to run the Hornet's Nest. Nearly $350 was brought in, which will be used for a future school activity. The school's cafeteria staff baked the cookies for the sale.

Restrooms renovated

ALL student restrooms at School No. 2 were recently renovated from top to bottom. New tile, fixtures, stalls, and ceilings were installed. Plumbing and ventilation upgrades were also completed. The district's colors, yellow and green, were used in the color scheme.

The renovation is just one of the projects completed this year as part of the board of education's five-year facilities plan.

Ionization add extra COVID protection

The district has added a new weapon in its fight against COVID-19. Bipolar air ionization units were recently installed in the vents of classrooms and instructional areas. The technology emits negative and positive ions into the air. This kills bacteria, viruses, and mold spores. The ions also cause pathogens and particles to clump together so they can be easily filtered.

Approximately 150 units were purchased and installed.

Teacher wins new classroom furniture

Bethanne Strippoli, a teacher of gifted & talented students at School No.1, won a classroom redesign, new class furniture, and high-tech presentation equipment valued at up to $50,000. The veteran educator of 24 years was the grand prize winner of a contest sponsored by Dancker, interior designers and integrators, Smith System, a company that specializes in K-12 furniture solutions, and ScreenBeam, a maker of wireless presentation systems for classrooms.

In her video and essay, Strippoli discussed the ways that the instructional process has changed over the years and the benefits that a reimagined classroom space would provide to the teaching and learning experience.

Company representatives visited School No. 1 on March 9 and surprised Strippoli with the award. Dancker will work with her this spring on the vision for the design. The new classroom furniture and technology should be in place by the start of the 2021-2022 school year in September.

Register your child for kindergarten

Parents who need to register their children for kindergarten should first pre-register online at https://tinyurl.com/3y9kephe then contact School No. 2's Sherri Kopf for an appointment: 973-256-1386.

All eligible kindergarten students must be 5 years old on or before October 1, 2021.

Superintendent speaks on webinar

Tracey Marinelli, superintendent of schools, recently spoke on a webinar about supporting student engagement during remote instruction. The webinar was sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences, the statistics, research, and evaluation arm of the U.S. Department of Education.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL

Supporting the school community

Anxiety. Depression. Stress. Grief. Impaired focus.

National research shows that the pandemic and the necessary changes to the school day have emotionally impacted students. They 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 from the isolation of quarantine, or have trouble adjusting to remote instruction.

Teachers and parents are also feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of daily life brought on by the pandemic.

The district's special services team has supported the entire school community in navigating through these uncharted waters. It's been all hands on deck for guidance counselors, social workers, and the district psychologist, Sherri Glassman, Ph.D.

> **"You have to engender in kids a sense of control where they know what tomorrow brings, and they know how to prepare."**
>
> **Dawn Daura**
> *Director of special services*

"In the beginning it was a little easier," Glassman said about pandemic life. "We could go outside, see our friends, get some exercise. There was a connection to other people. As the weather got colder, it became tougher. Now, we ask ourselves what we can do each day to nurture students, their families, and ourselves."

Students themselves have even taken active roles in keeping their peers stay positive and energized. In School No. 3, for example, the student council regularly leads fun, remote activities and games to create a sense of togetherness and build school spirit.

Dr. Sherri Glassman speaks with a student

Providing help to parents and staff

In addition to the work done by the special services department, the district brought in extra help to support teachers and parents.

Several presentations were remotely conducted by Alisha De Lorenzo, an expert on social emotional health. De Lorenzo, who has worked with organizations including the New Jersey Department of Education and the New Jersey School Boards Association, spoke with three groups. She facilitated training sessions for teachers and district administrators that provided tools to help them manage their own stress and emotions in order to stay productive. During a parent presentation, she discussed the best ways for parents to deal with their own mental health and support their children, both emotionally and academically.

Several parent workshops have also been conducted by Lauren Floroff, a licensed counselor from mental health organization Care Plus New Jersey. Floroff works full time with Little Falls students during the day, but devoted several nights to parents. The topics, developed with the district's director of special services, Dawn Daura, included active listening, empowering children to be emotionally prepared for the future, and establishing routines and rituals.

"It is so important for parents and teachers to give children structure and predictability," Daura said. "You have to engender in kids a sense of control where they know what tomorrow brings, and they know how to prepare."

Floroff's final presentation of the school year is set for the evening of June 3 and will address "Mindful Parenting."

"Parents need to be mindful of their own emotions and not transfer negativity to their children," Floroff said. "Stay in the moment and don't think about the 'what ifs' of tomorrow. Handle the day to day of what you can control."

The **June 3 webinar** will be held on Zoom, beginning at 6 p.m. See the district website at https://www.lfschools.org for instructions on logging in.

Hard work keeps kids on track

ASSESSMENT data shows that most students this year are making academic progress that is comparable to previous years. That's a testament to the efforts of everyone in the school community: teachers, students, staff members, administrators, and parents.

It's no secret that school this year is much different than in the past. The school day is abbreviated, collaborative activities and school events are limited, and about 25% of students are being taught remotely because of health concerns. Ensuring that students are on track to meet state educational standards for their grade levels has meant trying new teaching strategies and developing new supports.

The hard work can be seen on the front lines of the educational process – the classroom. Teachers regularly assess student learning and adjust their instruction to give each child what they need to succeed. It could be, for example, targeted assignments that students work on during the day or at home; or it could be additional face-to-face direct instruction through Zoom after the school day. Both teachers and students have risen to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

"Our teachers are amazing at differentiating instruction for students at different levels," said Nicole Dilkes, district curriculum coordinator and principal of School No. 3. "And the kids are motivated and want to achieve. Instruction during the pandemic has had its ups and downs, but every day our staff and students show just how extraordinary they are."

In addition to the academic support provided by classroom teachers, the district is remotely running its Boost program. Boost provides students with extra instructional time after the school day.

A summer Boost program is now in the planning stages. During these sessions, students who have not made the expected academic strides during the school year will work on the specific New Jersey educational standards they need help with. Data collected during the spring will be used to identify the recommended students and the problem standards (e.g., determining central ideas or themes, converting a number to a decimal using long division, using place value understanding to round off decimals, etc.).

Summer Boost will run for approximately four weeks and include both math and English language arts instruction. The goal is to help all students become proficient in grade level standards before starting the new school year in September.

Little Falls celebrates

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

THE district celebrated Black History Month, held annually every February, with a variety of activities and projects highlighting the contributions of Black people. Individuals discussed included artists, civil rights leaders, writers, musicians, politicians, athletes, scientists, and actors.

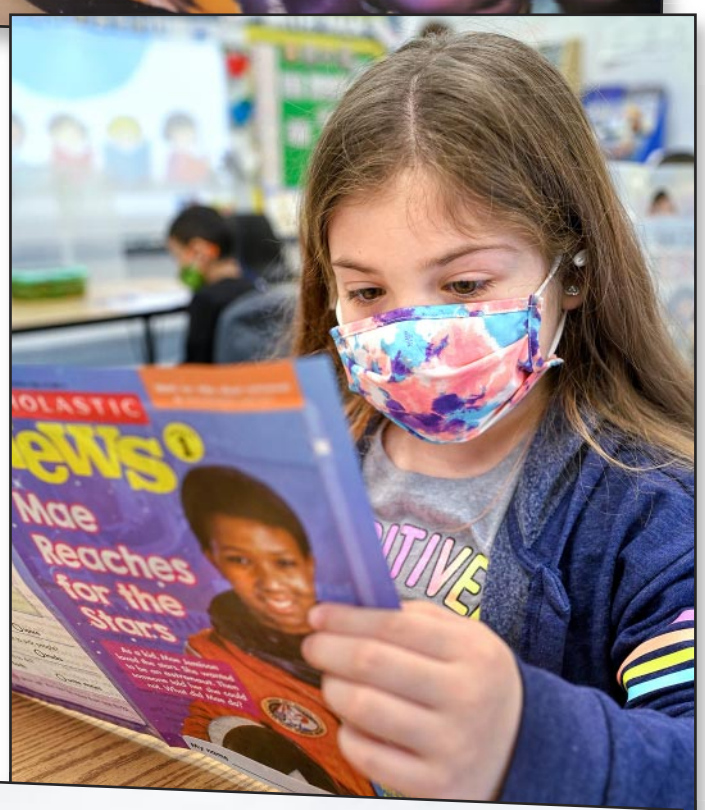
At School No.1 and School No. 3, for example, the morning video announcements were used for short schoolwide lessons. Each day featured a different biographical profile. Once per week at School No. 1, a student volunteer presented information on a Black American lesser known to typical students.

Assignments were also done by individual classes and grades. In School No. 1, Rebecca Calderone asked students to each choose a notable figure that was somehow connected to their English language arts class or themselves. The students then presented highlights to their classes, listing important facts and inspiring quotes. Among the notables chosen were poets Amanda Gorman, Phillis Wheatley, and Maya Angelou.

In Cortney Caruso and Christina Montesano's class at School No. 2, a book about astronaut Mae Jemison, the first Black woman to travel into space, was a student favorite. The teachers followed up with an issue of "Scholastic News" devoted to Jemison, then asked students to make connections between the book and news article.

In addition, all schools read recently purchased books about diversity that were written by Black authors. Afterward, teachers led students through discussions about the themes of the books and the problems addressed by the characters. At School No. 3, Shirley Cutruzzula and Kelly Gonzalez's fourth grade class took the lessons a step further.

"The conversations ultimately turned to appreciating the differences in ourselves, other people, and our cultures that make us all beautiful," Gonzalez said.



Top right, *Paige Wagoner reads a book written by Kenyan-Mexican actor Lupita Nyong'o, as teacher Kelly Gonzalez looks on*

Middle right, *Ava Masino learns about astronaut Mae Jemison*

Right, *Ava Casale presents biographical info about poet Phillis Wheatley*

Left, *Dominic D'Allegro reads a book that explores colorism and self-esteem*

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