education news

an official publication of the Little Falls Township Public Schools

LITTLE FALLS TOWNSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

June 2025

Referendum on Sept. 16

Improvement plan alleviates ***space crunch****, upgrades* ***infrastructure***

AFTER months of analysis and design, the district is moving forward with a proposed building improvement plan. The project focuses on new classrooms to house a surging student enrollment and to enhance education, as well as facilities upgrades to systems that have reached the end of their lifespans. A referendum is slated for Tuesday, September 16.

Need for space drives project

The district has struggled with a space shortage for years as more young families with children have moved into town. A recent demographic study indicates that in just four years, the district will have 10 more classrooms of students than in 2018-2019 – an increase of 23%. That's an increase of an entire School No. 3.

Enrollment will likely continue to rise; the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority indicates that by 2050, the town population will be **25% more** than in 2020.

Two of our three schools are already over their functional capacity. At School No. 1, students eat in 20-minute shifts to avoid overcrowding the cafeteria which cannot seat an entire grade level. At School No. 2, music and art are taught by teachers without dedicated rooms who travel from class to class with carts of supplies.

This year at School No. 3, fourth grade class sizes have risen above the board of education's recommended guidelines.

The building project, finetuned after community input, has been methodically designed. It maximizes existing space through renovation and carefully adds instructional space and core facilities where needed to support increased enrollment and improve education.

Plan highlights

School No. 1 – A new multipurpose room, with the existing multipurpose room converted to a cafeteria. Conversion of existing cafeteria to two classrooms. Mechanical, electrical, lighting, plumbing, and fire alarm upgrades.

School No. 3 – Three new classrooms and an auxiliary cafeteria that can also serve as a music area. Mechanical, electrical, lighting, and plumbing upgrades.

School No. 2 – Eight new PK classrooms. Mechanical, electrical, lighting, and plumbing upgrades.

The state is now finalizing the amount of aid the district will receive, so the precise cost to homeowners cannot be accurately reported yet. More information will be provided as the referendum date nears. You can also check the referendum section of the district website: www.lfschools.org/referendum. To receive email notices of upcoming presentations, please send an email to **referendum@lfschools.org**.

Property tax RELIEF

Referendum has no cost for seniors in Senior Freeze program

The state has three programs that provide property tax relief.

Senior Freeze reimburses eligible senior citizens and the disabled for property tax increases or mobile home site fee increases on their principal residence. **The district's referendum will not cost anyone in Senior Freeze any additional money!**

Stay NJ provides property tax benefits to eligible homeowners aged 65 and older with income below $500,000. It reimburses applicants for 50% of their property tax bills, up to a maximum of $13,000. To qualify, you must have owned and lived in your home for the full 12 months of 2024.

ANCHOR offers property tax relief to New Jersey residents who own or rent property in New Jersey as their main home. Eligibility: homeowners with 2024 New Jersey gross income not more than $250,000; renters with a 2024 New Jersey gross income not more than $150,000.

For more information, go to **propertytaxrelief.nj.gov** or call the Division of Taxation at **1-888-238-1233**.

Little Falls
Board of Education
32 Stevens Ave
Little Falls, NJ 07424

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Paterson, NJ
Permit No. 32

**********ECRWSS******

Residential Customer

REFERENDUM SITE

See www.lfschools.org/referendum for more info

SCAN
with your cell phone or tablet

New recognition program

THE district has launched a new Superintendent Challenge Coin Program to celebrate individuals who exemplify the values that define the district's Portrait of a Hornet traits. They include: hard working, resilient, empathetic, communicator, leader, empathy, inclusive, problem-solver, considerate, and active participant.

Presented personally by Superintendent Tracey Marinelli, the coin serves as a lasting symbol of recognition for students, staff, and community members who go above and beyond. Whether it's a student showing initiative, a teacher inspiring learning, or a volunteer making a difference, recipients embody the spirit of what it means to be a Little Falls Hornet.

On one side, the heavy coin features the district's hornet mascot; on the other, the colorful icons that represent the Portrait of a Hornet traits. The coin has enameled gold and green accents, the district colors.

"This is more than just a keepsake," said Marinelli. "It's a powerful symbol of community and character. My goal is not only to celebrate excellence, but to inspire it."

Marinelli presented the first honorees with their awards in May. Beth Billig, a retiring teacher who served the district for 30 years, was recognized for her exceptional leadership, professionalism, and unwavering commitment to student success. Throughout her tenure, she taught a diverse array of courses, demonstrating versatility and a deep passion for education. Her leadership extended beyond the classroom. She took on pivotal roles in district committees, contributing significantly to teacher development and curriculum enhancement which have left a lasting impact.

Coin recipients Maximus Castillo and Gabriella Thompson stand with Superintendent Tracey Marinelli

Eighth-graders Maximus Castillo and Gabriella Thompson received their awards for embodying all of the Portrait of a Hornet traits.

Challenge coins have a long-standing history in the military and other organizations as a way to build pride, unity, and tradition.

Handling tough situations

WHAT would you do if someone cuts ahead of you in line or tells a joke that hits a little too close to heart?

Students at School No. 3 are learning to navigate these tricky moments through "Sticky Situations," a twice-per-month virtual series created and hosted by school counselor Emily Conti. The live episodes, screened on classroom whiteboards, provide practical, real-life strategies designed to help kids amicably resolve tough social interactions. Role-playing skits with student guest stars show the various skills and suggested responses in action.

During a live broadcast, school counselor Emily Conti discusses a sticky situation with guests Vivian Termanini, Paityn Cavanagh, and Alex Garcia

"Providing students with conflict resolution skills helps them become more self reliant and also more aware of their own behavior," said Conti. "Sometimes students don't know what to do in a tough situation, or they worry they'll make it worse. 'Sticky Situations' gives them a chance to practice and see that solving their own problems is something they can do – and feel proud of."

Gossiping and rumors, name calling, and cyberbullying are a few of the other subjects addressed this year.

"Sticky Situations" began in January.

STAFF PROFILES

School counselors join district

TWO new school counselors have joined the Little Falls School District family, filling positions left open by departing staff

Emily Conti

Emily Conti, the new counselor at School No. 3, always knew she wanted a career that would let her help others. "My role as a school counselor is to love, support, and advocate for each student – and I'm grateful for the opportunity to do that every day here in Little Falls. This age is so special, children are so full of excitement, yet also able to engage in meaningful conversations as they explore the world around them."

Conti holds a bachelor's in human services from the University of Delaware where she minored in educational studies and disability studies. She earned her master's in school counseling from Montclair State University.

"Emily's kind, compassionate, and upbeat, a perfect addition to the School No. 3 staff," said Elba Castrovinci, principal. "She's truly genuine, and the students are naturally drawn to her warmth and authenticity."

Martha Kochanowski brings to School No. 2 a wealth of experience from her work with children at a counseling center in Rutherford and at a New York City organization supporting children with behavioral, intellectual, emotional, and academic challenges.

Martha Kochanowski

"I love creating SEL group activities that feel like a safe, joyful space where kids can be themselves, connect with others, and learn to understand their feelings," she said. "Through games, stories, and shared moments, I get to witness the magic of growth, when a quiet child finds their voice, when a shy smile turns into laughter, or when a simple game teaches kindness and empathy. These moments remind me every day why I do this work."

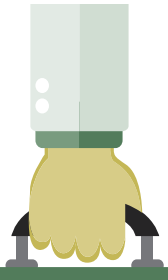
Kochanowski earned her bachelor's in psychology with a concentration in elementary education from Drew University and her master's in social work from Fordham.

"Martha's experience helps us provide students with a wide range of early intervention strategies, emotional support, and coping skills," said Principal Jill Castaldo.

Entrepreneurs in training

Hands-on program teaches School No. 1 students business skills

A one-stop shopping spot for empanadas, pet clothes, handmade soap, and boba tea? Welcome to the TREP$ marketplace, the grand finale to a hands-on entrepreneurship program in which every seventh-grader becomes a business owner for a day.



"I feel like starting your own business would be hard work, but really cool and fun."

Part of the semester-long Personal Finance course taken by all seventh-graders, the TREP$ program walks students through the ins and outs of running a small business. Students brainstorm product ideas, draft business plans, analyze costs, and learn about marketing and customer service – all in preparation for their debut as vendors at the marketplace.

In the May marketplace, the 56 students participating this semester sold their products to parents, family members, teachers, and friends who turned out en masse to see their creativity and ingenuity. But TREP$ isn't about jewelry, stress balls, or decorative pins; it's learning from experience and inspiring another generation of entrepreneurs.

"It teaches us how it is to run a business," said Evelyn Chichester, who worked with Madelyn Larionoff and Camilla Petracca on wood-burning products. "I feel like starting your own business would be hard work, but really cool and fun."

***Top,** Mahmoud Hazin and Brayden Moreno; **right,** Evelyn Chichester, Madelyn Larionoff, and Camilla Petracca*

Entrepreneurship has always been a hallmark of America's growth and history. But with reality shows such as "Shark Tank" and well-known tech entrepreneurs regularly in the news, students have never been more interested in innovation and business ownership.

"This is a great program," said Jim Simmons, Personal Finance teacher. "It allows students to take pride in the ownership of their business. There is nothing more satisfying than seeing their creativity come to life and watching their passion as they sell their products."

TREP$ was started in 2006 by two New Jersey teachers and its popularity has soared since then. This is the sixth year School No. 1 has run the program.

A living wax museum

SCHOOL No. 3 fourth-graders stepped into the shoes of famous artists, scientists, leaders, and changemakers for the school's annual living wax museum.

Dressed as luminaries from the past and present, the students stood silently in the school gym until visiting parents and staff members pressed "play" buttons at their stations. Then the students came to life and delivered short speeches about the people they were portraying. For many, it was a chance to share the story of someone they admired or felt connected to.

The museum is the culmination of a research project that mixes English language arts and social studies. Each fourth-grader read a book about a well-known historical or contemporary figure from the popular "Who Was?" series of biographies. They practiced important academic skills including note-taking, synthesizing information, and summarizing key facts to create biographical summaries. The information was further distilled down to speeches of two minutes or less that could be easily memorized.

The students also applied what they had learned by creating cereal boxes which described the history and accomplishments of their notable figures. The boxes served as visual anchors to the presentations.

This year, the students incorporated traits from Portrait of a Hornet, a districtwide initiative highlighting character strengths such as being hard working, empathetic, and resilient. Students chose the traits that best aligned with their chosen figures and included them in the displays and speeches. Weaving in the traits helped students gain a deeper understanding of the qualities that contribute to greatness.

Among the important figures portrayed this year were Rosa Parks, Julia Child, Albert Einstein, Picasso, Sally Ride, Abe Lincoln, Oprah, Ronald Reagan, and Jane Goodall.

***Left,** Aiden Chavez as Albert Einstein; **above,** Eris Suparaku as Milton Hershey, Nola Monochello as Picasso, and Madison Vinces as Rosa Parks*

2025 NICHE BEST SCHOOLS

A+
#1 BEST TEACHERS IN PASSAIC COUNTY
Little Falls School No. 1

A–
#2 BEST PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN PASSAIC COUNTY
Little Falls School No. 1

A–
#5 BEST PUBLIC ELEM SCHOOLS IN PASSAIC COUNTY
Little Falls School No. 3

Niche.com

Learning energy efficiency

FOURTH-GRADERS at School No. 3 recently put their math and science skills to real-world use thanks to a hands-on program focused on energy efficiency and climate science.

Armed with infrared thermometers, light meters, watt meters, and water gauges, students moved throughout the building measuring the energy usage of lighting, appliances, and HVAC systems. They examined ways to save energy and reduce waste, just like professional energy auditors. Along the way, they learned how small changes can lead to big savings.

Aiden Fisher calculates energy usage

The program was made possible through a grant from the Empowered Schools Program, funded by PSE&G. The grant provided science and math teachers with special lessons on energy and climate, as well as the energy measurement devices students used. Lessons explored conservation, the impact of fossil fuels, climate change, and how humans can adapt to extreme weather. The program also included educational games and a special in-class STEAM challenge.

Energy and weather are important parts of the fourth grade science curriculum, so the program aligned perfectly with New Jersey standards.

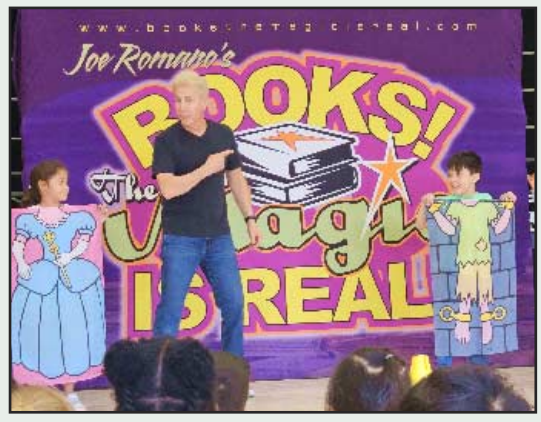
During the school's end of year celebration, three students were honored with Empowered Schools/PSEG awards. Nolan Bogatch, Isabel Crespo, and Siancya Maksymowicz were recognized for their science knowledge and enthusiasm for learning.

Alex Bajerowski uses an infrared thermometer

Jasmin Nazhi stands in front of the mural

New mural

This year, schools have been buzzing with activities centered around the district's Portrait of a Hornet – a set of character traits important for success in school and life. At School No. 2, parent Lauren Farrelly created a mural on the second floor that showcases companion traits to those in Portrait of a Hornet, including kind, clever, thoughtful, and encouraging.



The magic of reading

Storyteller and magician Joe Romano recently visited School No. 2. He entertained first-graders with illusions based on popular books and mixed into his presentation messages about the importance of reading. He also discussed his own book, "My Dad Invented The Smile," and donated a copy to the school library.

The Little Falls School #2/3 PTA sponsored Romano's visit.

Omar Gumustepe and Gian Kim show off their fossil sketches and creation

Fair showcases artwork, STEM

HUNDREDS of STEM projects and student artworks filled the School No. 2 halls during the annual art and maker fair. The fair roared to life this year with a dinosaur theme. In addition to art displayed throughout the building, STEM projects on display included handmade fossils with 3-D printed bones, pasta-sculpted dinosaurs, and stop-motion dinosaur animations.

During the fair, art teacher Lisa Spero guided students through an activity using replica dinosaur eggs made from baking soda. With a few spritzes of vinegar, the eggs bubbled and dissolved, revealing plastic baby dinosaurs hidden inside.

This year's dinosaur focus concluded just before the summer recess with a visit by Sara Levine, author of several children's books about bones and fossils.

education news
June 2025
an official publication of the Little Falls Township Public Schools
Michael K. Cravotta, editor • mkc@flight19media.com

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Dr. Rachel Capizzi, *President*
Nicole Smith, *Vice President*
Janine Barone
Desiree DiBuono
Patricia Lijoi
Vincent Miraglia
Michael Tullo
Shannon Zurbruegg

Tracey Marinelli, *Superintendent*