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Spotlight on New Milford Schools

Volume 4, Issue 7

Spring 2014

Spotlight on Early Education



For some parents, the arrival of spring means the school year is winding down. Parents start to wonder how many snow days we've had (7 at the time of publication) and what the last day of school for students is (June 17th barring more bad weather). Summer vacation plans become a priority. For a select group of parents though this spring is a very special time: the *Countdown to Kindergarten*, one of many district programs that put the focus on early childhood education.

The New Milford Public School district recognizes the importance of making connections with parents and students at an early age. This takes place through a variety of district programs some of which are "spotlighted" over the next few pages.

♦ EXCEL Inclusive Preschool Program

The EXCEL (Experiential Center for Early Learning) preschool program provides children with a high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool program run by professional educators. It is an inclusive preschool that provides services for children with special needs and their typical peers together within one setting. Enrollment of students with special needs is done through a Planning and Placement Team process. Inclusion students, a.k.a. "community friends," are enrolled through an application and lottery system.

Northville Elementary School EXCEL teacher Jennifer Sheaffer says, "It is so rewarding to teach a program where special needs students and children without special needs can come together to form a community. It is amazing to see how the staff, children and parents work together to create a community that supports good character and early learning."

Our educational focus is to provide high-quality early learning experiences with clear goals for each student that supports their early learning and growth."



These EXCEL students are learning through play, acting out *The Mitten*, and enjoying time outdoors.

All three elementary schools host the program which has a current enrollment of 86 students. Sessions are run for both 3 and 4 year olds. John Pettibone School EXCEL teacher Gail Burger says "I love teaching this age level because the children are very excited about learning. It's fun to see the growth from when they start until they enter Kindergarten."

Hill and Plain EXCEL teacher Valerie Clapp has been teaching the EXCEL program for the past 26 years! Ms. Clapp says "Over the years I've had the opportunity to get to know so many children and their families and I have learned so much from them. I think they teach me as much as I teach them. They are amazing! To watch children grow and learn and to have been a part of that is something I will be forever grateful for."

♦ Early Childhood Council (ECC)

This group is a collaborative between the New Milford Public Schools and community preschool and daycare programs. According to teacher Debbie Clark, a Council member, "the ECC was developed to improve the transition from preschool into Kindergarten. Members come from the public schools (EXCEL teachers, kindergarten teachers, reading teachers and administrators), local preschools, the New Milford Public Library, Literacy on the Green volunteers and include parents as well." The group is actively involved with promoting early childhood literacy as well as aligning curriculum with state Pre-K standards. Members participate in joint professional development as well as attend evening meetings and workshops to which parents are invited.



Parents and community preschool program staff participate in a *Make It and Take It* literacy event.

♦ Countdown to Kindergarten Program



This annual evening orientation event is designed for parents of incoming kindergarteners. Any child who will be five years of age on or before December 31st is eligible for kindergarten the next year. The evening provides information about kindergarten expectations and affords parents the opportunity to learn about the necessary benchmarks for transitioning preschoolers.

Elementary principals provide an overview of the orientation and registration processes while kindergarten teachers

describe a kindergarten typical day. Community partners such as the New Milford Public Library and PTO are also present to provide information and field questions. Parents sign up for individual kindergarten registration appointments that night. These appointments take place later in the spring at each elementary school. Parents attending the event receive literacy bags (funded by the CT Community Foundation) filled with resource information as well as books, crayons and scissors to help parents prepare their children for kindergarten.



Literacy bag contents

♦ Full-day Kindergarten



Since its adoption in the 2011-2012 school year, the full-day kindergarten program has won praise from both parents and educators alike. Teachers point to the gains students make in learning, creativity and social skills. Parents remark on the confidence they see their children develop as the year goes on.

The full-day program provides time for students to develop more fully their academic and social skills and allows for exposure to other programs such as music, art, physical education and developmental guidance. As Northville Principal Susan Murray states, “Full-day kindergarten enables the students to quickly settle into Day 1 of first grade to continue their learning.”

♦ Early Childhood Education at NMHS

Three, four and five year olds aren't the only ones involved in early education. Some New Milford High School students explore the topic from another angle. The high school offers classes in Early Childhood and Child Development and a class on Children's Literacy and Literature.



In the **Children's Literacy and Literature** class, students learn the fundamentals of children's literature and study a wide range of genres from folktales to modern fiction. In addition, the class studies how children learn to read. The culminating project for this course requires students to write their own children's book and create a lesson plan to be taught on a field trip to one of the elementary schools, like the one to NES pictured at left.

The **Early Childhood** class is a one semester course offered to students who want to learn about the development of children or who may want to work with children in a future career. The course content includes information about children's growth and development from prenatal to age three. In addition, the course covers parenting and communication skills, nutrition for a healthy baby and growing child, and past and present theories on child growth and development.

Child Development is a junior/senior elective course that provides a foundation in understanding the ways that children develop. It is designed for students interested in becoming child care professionals in such fields as nursing, teaching, psychology or child care. Students are introduced to basic philosophies concerning child development including language, motor, social, cognitive and perceptual skills. Parents and children who want to try out the preschool experience can sign up for a free ten-week preschool program administered as part of this class. Students, under teacher supervision, prepare and present lessons and observe and interact with children aged 3 1/2 to 5 years old in a preschool classroom setting.



"Student teachers" prepare for story hour in the preschool classroom.

The focus of all these programs, both for the children themselves and the students learning about child development, is to ensure that the learning process gets off to a smooth start and continues successfully for our littlest children as they start down the path of their school careers.

New Milford Students and Teachers Make Education Connections

Every year select students and staff members choose to participate in programs sponsored by Education Connection. Established under Connecticut General Statute 10-66, Education Connection is one of six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESC) in the state. The Center provides programs and services to 30 member school districts and their communities in western Connecticut. Services include professional development for district staff on topics such as teacher evaluation, common core, differentiated instruction, formative assessment and other topics as desired. Education Connection also provides our students and staff with opportunities to participate in regional interdistrict programs with students and teachers from surrounding towns. Program offerings and participation vary from year to year.

Mrs. Tracy Nevins, 7th grade Science teacher at Schaghticoke Middle School, is participating in four programs this current year! "Tails to Tales" is a summer program that integrates literature and animal science. SCOPES (Science Opportunities in Healthcare Environments) introduces students to careers in medicine. Through the interdistrict program Science Saturdays, Mrs. Nevins and a Science teacher from New Fairfield provide fun, hands-on science activities around a common theme to a group of grade 3-4 students who meet on five Saturday mornings.



Academy of Science and Agriculture participants enjoy a field trip.

Mrs. Nevins is also overseeing 26 SMS seventh graders who have chosen to participate in the Academy of Science and Agriculture program through Education Connection. The students join other middle schoolers from Waterbury, New Fairfield and Region 7 to engage in experiential outdoor science education at various farms and nature centers. Learning units focus on the science of growing and include farming, farm animals, dairy, eggs, aquaculture, polyculture and sustainability. So far, the group has completed two of four planned field trips.

Field trip number one was to the Pratt Nature Center where students were divided into groups for workshops on gardening and permaculture, greenhouse gases and climate change, food miles and transportation of food, and the importance of purchasing local food. This field trip culminated in students making salsa with local food products.

During the second field trip, students learned about healthy food options and GMO's (Genetically Modified Organisms) at New Morning Market and then spent part of the day with sophomores at Nonnewaug High School. Students participated in workshops led by the sophomores which included learning the basics of taking care of horses, transplanted plants, raising tilapia, giving a physical exam to a sheep, and learning about different types of cows.

Another long-running program through Education Connection is Project CLEAR (Candlewood Lake Environmental Awareness and Responsibility). According to NMHS Science teacher and program facilitator Catherine Gardner, "Project CLEAR emphasizes science and environmental education. New Milford, Bethel, Brookfield, New Fairfield and Danbury High School each get to send 25 participants each year to the program. Students participate in several field days during the school year in which they focus on a specific aspect involving Candlewood Lake. The study areas include Water Quality, Forestry, Plankton, Biodiversity, Aquatic Invasives, Fish, Shoreline, Streams, Aquatic Insects, and Terrestrial Insects."



Project CLEAR volunteers hard at work.

During the school field days, students work with teachers from the five area schools as well as experts and professionals in each of the study areas. They will use the skills and knowledge they gain from these school field days for a week long experience on Candlewood Lake during the summer. During the summer week, students get to travel all around Candlewood Lake to collect data and conduct studies focused on

their specific area. They then analyze this data and present it to the public and government officials at the end of the summer field days.

NMHS students may also participate in the Western Connecticut Regional Internship Program which offers high school students the opportunity to participate in medical and healthcare internships that are designed to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century workplace. Students attend after-school workshops as well as participate in an on-line component. According to NMHS Health teacher Denise Duggan, "We help coordinate the Regional Internship program with Karen Moore from Education Connection. We have six students currently in the program. The students give Karen their areas of interest and she places them in a hospital or health facility. They actually get paid to do this for 3-6 hours per week. I have one student who gave her areas of interest and is going to Danbury Hospital to spend time in all the areas she requested."

All Education Connection programs are limited in the number of students who may participate. While the programs provide wonderful opportunities for experiential learning, they usually require extra commitment and time on the part of the student in addition to the student's regular school work. Sometimes this is a field trip during the day or an extra session on the weekend. Those students (and teachers) lucky enough to participate in the programs would tell you it is very much worth it!

Saving Money through Energy Initiatives



Like all of us, the New Milford Public School district is concerned about its energy bills and constantly looking at ways to find savings. This is especially important with over 846,042 square feet of buildings to manage. Just think how many thermostats, light switches, and windows a house that size would have!

One program that has proven to be extremely valuable in this regard is the **Energy Management Program**. Started in 2006, this comprehensive energy conservation and management program works to ensure that students and staff are comfortable during class time and scheduled activities while making sure that energy is used only as necessary. As a key part of the program, an in-district Energy Manager tracks energy consumption – including electricity, water, sewer, natural gas and fuel oil – using energy accounting software approved by the U.S. Department of Energy to measure energy use. The software compares current energy use to a baseline period and calculates the amount of energy that would have been used if conservation and management practices had not been implemented. It adjusts for weather, equipment additions or deletions, and changes in building use. By tracking consumption and analyzing energy use, the software helps the Energy Manager quickly identify and correct areas that need immediate attention.

Many of the tasks performed by the Energy Manager are crucial in eliminating energy waste. These include auditing buildings during unoccupied times, monitoring building usage during occupied times, tracking and analyzing consumption for building efficiency, minimizing consumption and demand charges, auditing utility bills and meters for errors and overcharges, and evaluating usage trends for abnormalities.

In 2006, the first year of the program's existence, the New Milford Public Schools avoided over \$202,000 in energy costs and saved over 518,029 kilowatt hours of electricity. At the time, it was estimated that these savings environmentally equaled: 1,211,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions being prevented, or 113 automobiles being removed from the highways annually, or 234 acres of trees being planted. Not bad for freshman year!

Energy Manager Bill Knipple gives an update to the Facilities Sub-Committee of the Board of Education each year. You can view the update on the [district website](#). In this year's update, Mr. Knipple was pleased to report that the district is over \$2,700,000 for cost avoidance during the life of the program. Additionally, the percentage of cost avoidance has increased each year.

Says Mr. Knipple, "Kudos to the district's maintenance and custodial staff and to the buildings' occupants for helping to make the program such a success."



New Milford Public Schools

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Spring Break!!

With the annual spring recess fast approaching and the weather finally getting warmer, we wish students, parents and district staff an enjoyable week with family and friends.

Whether you are staying close to home or taking a trip, your favorite device can be a great asset. Take a minute or two to search for helpful free apps such as these:

Planning a trip? Try *Trip Planner Pro* or *Pack It* to make sure you don't leave anything behind.

Not sure where to go? Take a peek at *ParkFindUSA*, *ParksNReviews* or the *Museum Locator* for ideas.

Staying closer to home? How about looking at the *CT Travel Guide*, *Day Trips & Getaways* or *New York City Outdoor Adventures* for suggestions of things to do.

Spending time outdoors? Lots of interesting apps for that. Search for *iTrack Wildlife Lite* or *Leafsnap* or *iBird Lite Guide to Birds* for guides to the natural world around us. Look up at the night sky using *Star Chart*.

If you are feeling really adventurous, there is always *Camping Recipes*, a free app with ideas for (you guessed it) cooking out...

And, just in case, don't leave home without the free app *First Aid by the American Red Cross*. It never hurts to be prepared!

If your device doesn't support the suggested free apps, feel free to search for others with similar titles. There are lots from which to choose.

Whatever you do, have fun. We will see you when we return on Monday, April 21st!

Spring means

The mission of the New Milford Public Schools, a collaborative partnership of students, educators, family and community, is to prepare each and every student to compete and excel in an ever-changing world, embrace challenges with vigor, respect and appreciate the worth of every human being, and contribute to society by providing effective instruction and dynamic curriculum, offering a wide range of valuable experiences, and inspiring students to pursue their dreams and aspirations.