

# From Jim Agostine

Monroe's Superintendent of Schools

March 2015



Monroe busses warming up this winter

Welcome once again to the Superintendent's Newsletter. It is my hope that you will find the contents of it informative. This newsletter is one aspect of our commitment to better communicate with you. If you would like to see more information on a particular topic or if you would like to make a comment, please feel free to email me at [jagostine@monroeps.org](mailto:jagostine@monroeps.org).

As I compose this opening letter, the outside air temperature is 14 degrees F, and we are expecting another six inches of snow over the weekend. As bad as this winter has been, I know that spring is around the corner and soon the 4 a.m. wake up calls will be only a foggy memory.

The 2015-16 budget process, which began in October for us, is well underway. The BOE adopted a \$54,123,758 budget for the 2015-

16 school year. This budget is 2.25% above the current year's budget. The budget is now in the hands of the First Selectman, the Board of Finance, and the Town Council. As we have done over the past several years, this budget reduces both certified and non-certified staff commensurate with our student enrollment decline. This year, we are recommending a 5.2 FTE reduction in certified staff and a 3.0 FTE reduction in non-certified staff. Since 2008, we have reduced certified staff by 43.6 people and non-certified staff by 13.78 people. I expect much discussion over the next two months or so, as we approach the referendum on April 7, 2015.

The budget also includes \$120,000 for a new K-5 Mathematics program which is sorely needed. At this time, we have 12 teachers piloting 2 different programs to provide the Math Committee with important information about each program. Our goal in the budget process is to remain true to our educational mission and honest and transparent to the taxpayers of Monroe. To view the proposed budget, please find the link on our website at [www.monroeps.org](http://www.monroeps.org). If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Wishing you the best,

*Jim Agostine*

## da Vinci Festival Returns to Monroe

We are excited to announce the return of our annual *da Vinci Festival!* This special two-day event is a culminating, district-wide celebration of the Arts. Once again, our festival will be held at Masuk, encompass all schools in the district, and showcase the wide-range of the Arts offered in the Monroe Public Schools. Please save the date and begin your journey through the festival in our elementary wing, seeing how our students embark on their exciting journey into the Arts. Then peruse your way through the many other spaces, showcasing all the upper grade levels, and the ever-expanding options available to

our children as they progress their way through our Monroe Public Schools system. This exceptional event will be celebrated with our Monroe community on the evening of **Friday, March 27, from 3-7 p.m.**, and **Saturday March 28, from 10-2 p.m.**

It is truly a unique experience and an event not to be missed. Please come with families and friends to enjoy all our students' hard work and their many talents, as they are showcased again in da Vinci 2015! We look forward to seeing you there.



**Friday, March 27, from 3-7 p.m.**, and **Saturday, March 28, from 10-2 p.m.**

Written by Debbie Kovachi, Principal Monroe Elementary School, Rebecca Kosisko, Principal of Fawn Hollow Elementary School, and Bruce Lazar, Principal of Stepney Elementary School

Each of our elementary schools focuses their efforts on developing a positive school culture. Although each school has a unique character, all our elementary schools share a passion for instilling kindness in the young people of Monroe.

At Monroe Elementary School, our theme for the year is to “Be Kind”. It all started when I found a Ben’s Bell hanging on a tree in front of our school, with a note to spread kindness throughout the world.

In school, we are reinforcing positive behaviors by awarding “Be Kind” stickers and necklaces to children for being kind. These rewarded behaviors are simple and genuine acts of kindness observed by the staff throughout the day.

The culture and environment of our school is the most important aspect of our community. Both academic achievement, and social/emotional development are impacted by the culture of a school. Children need to feel comfortable in the school, in classes, and with their peers before they are able to learn and grow academically, socially, and emotionally.

Encouraging children to be kind and recognizing these acts, be it large or small, is a step in creating a positive school culture. We also teach our children positive social behaviors through our Developmental Guidance Program. Through regularly scheduled lessons, Ms. Sacco, our school counselor, helps children learn how to cope with difficult

situations and conflicts. The children are learning to resolve their conflicts and seek out an adult if they need assistance.

Our focus on fostering kind interactions will, in turn, positively impact our school culture. Our continued efforts will contribute to our children making gains academically, socially, and emotionally. That is our ultimate goal!!!

At Fawn Hollow, we CARE-Choose Responsibility, Act Safely, Respect Others, Everywhere! Through a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model, we build upon our positive nurturing school climate to grow students' sense of responsibility, reinforce respect, and ensure safety everywhere.

The PBIS system provides a researched-based approach to establishing behavioral supports and social culture to benefit all students in school. We chose to use this system to help every child attain social, emotional, and academic success at Fawn Hollow. Our staff establishes clear expectations for student behavior and takes proactive steps in teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate CARE behaviors school wide. We teach what to do, rather than what not to do. We chose three behavioral expectations that are positively stated and easy to remember in our CARE motto. A significant benefit of PBIS

is tiered intervention specifically designed to support any student requiring assistance in learning the behaviors of CARE. Our program continually evolves to meet the needs of our students in a nurturing and developmentally appropriate way.

Fawn Hollow celebrates exemplary student behaviors! Students demonstrating CARE behaviors earn tickets to enter into a grade level raffle at the end of each week. Grade level winners spin the prize wheel every Friday afternoon for a chance at one of twelve prize privileges including Teach Your Topic, Superstar Art or Music, Read to a Kindergarten, and Teachers Helper. Enthusiastic congratulatory cheers can be heard across the school when the winning names are announced over the loudspeaker. Whole-school rewards such as Team Jersey Day are earned by collective cooperation and kindness. We monitor this progress through CARE hearts displayed on the office Bulletin Board as tangible evidence of the shared commitment and increasing success in making our Fawn Hollow Family the best community we can be.

Approximately a year and a half ago, Stepney School was introduced to the Kind Kids Campus program. The major tenets of the program are to “catch” people being kind, and to give opportunities for young people to practice kindness. In order for these things to occur naturally, staff mem-

bers need to be invested in not only teaching kindness, but in recognizing it in their own students and other staff members.

Our first major step in moving toward a Kind Kid Campus model was to create a Kindness bulletin board. The theme of the board changes ever few months, but the purpose remains the same...to recognize students and staff who show kindness to others. The student or staff member fills out a slip explaining what kindness they witnessed and whether they were the recipient of that kindness or not. These slips are then hung on a board at the front of the building for all to see. This month’s theme is Kindness is Cool.

A new application for Kindness Coins has been submitted to Ben’s Bells, and we are patiently waiting to see if we will be receiving more. Each year that our school registers to be a Kind Kid Campus, we will be given some Kindness coins to distribute. Our hope is that teachers and staff members use these to recognize acts of kindness in their own classrooms. They can be made into necklaces or back pack charms, or pass on to someone else they feel are deserving of recognition.



## Monroe Public Schools Director of Finance Addresses the Careers in Food Preparation Class

This year, Ms. Gabrielle DiBlasi, the Director of Finance for the Monroe Public Schools, was a guest speaker in Lynn Costello’s Careers in Food Preparation class. Ms. DiBlasi’s presentation focused on her oversight of the town school cafeterias.

The various financial aspects regarding the school cafeterias were discussed. The bid process that occurs was explained to the students and an analysis was presented. In addition, the federal government food guidelines were reviewed. Ken Price, a sophomore, had this to say after the present-

ation: “I learned that if you have the job of Director of Finance for the Monroe Public Schools you have a lot of responsibilities, and you also have to take care of all the cafeterias in the schools.”



Pictured left to right: Valentina Rrapi, Hayley Larson, Anabella Nicefaro, Gabi DiBlasi, Director of Finance, Ken Price, Sarah Tobin, and Brooke Levinson.

## Career Day at Masuk High School



- Arts and Media
- Business and Finance
- Construction Technologies and Design
- Environmental, Natural Resources and Agriculture
- Government, Education and Human Services
- Health and Biosciences
- Cosmetology and Hair Stylist
- Technologies, Manufacturing, Communications and Repair

The Career Fair is sponsored by the Citizen's Advisory Committee which is comprised of Masuk staff and Monroe community members. It is chaired by Career/College Coordinator, Carmen Mancuso, and School Counselor, Penny Ploski.

Masuk High School held their annual Career Fair on Thursday, November 20 with sixty exciting careers represented by volunteers from Monroe and surrounding communities. Over 600 students attended the program this year, and there were many positive comments from the presenters about the thoughtful questions and engaged student body. The career volunteers represented the following career clusters:

Special thanks to Ben Maini and Reynolds & Rowella for their generous donation of six \$50 Amazon gift cards that were given away in a drawing for which all student attendees were eligible. Ben Maini is an employee of the company as well as a Citizen's Advisory Committee member and career presenter.





## Monroe Public Schools in Partnership with Columbia University's Teachers College



*Mrs. Mc Cauley and Mrs. Wassmann conferencing with a group of Grade 4 students.*

The Monroe Public School District's teachers, at the three elementary schools, are participating in year two of professional development with Columbia University's Teachers College. Teachers in Grades Kindergarten through 5 take part in on-site training with Columbia University's Teachers College Staff Developers five times during the school year.

Staff developers spend the day at each of the elementary schools providing demonstration lessons and coaching teachers on best practices in process writing. Staff

developers are coaching our teachers in units of study based on the writing genres of narrative, information, and opinion.

During the summer of 2014, four classroom teachers, Mrs. Becky Kosisko, Fawn Hollow Principal, and Debbie Walls, K-5 ELA Coordinator, attended week-long training Institutes at Columbia University. Classroom, reading, and special education teachers also participate in one-day workshops on a variety of language arts topics at the university in New York City during the school year. Many Monroe teachers also attend Saturday Reunions at Teachers College. These Reunion Days provide an entire day of free workshops for all who attend. Teachers College opens its doors to thousands of educators from around the world for more than 140 free workshops

on these days. Monroe teachers have had the opportunity to hear renowned keynote speakers and authors like Kate DiCamillo and Timothy Rasinski. They have participated in workshops on state-of-the-art methods in the teaching of reading, writing, performance assessments, and Common Core.



*Mrs. Angela Baez coaching Kindergarten teachers during student writing.*

## Fawn Hollow & Washed Ashore Project



Third grade students, from Mrs. Weir's third grade class at Fawn Hollow, participated in the Mystic Aquarium "Washed Ashore" project during the month of November. The project provided an opportunity for students to apply their learning to address the very real problem of pollution in our world. They created a sea-themed wreath out of recycled plastics and repurposed materials. Wreaths were used to decorate the aquarium during the holiday season and to educate people about plastic pollution in our waters. The student work complemented the amazing Washed Ashore exhibit of artwork and sculpture made from marine debris featured at Mystic Aquarium.

Students worked with Mrs. Weir and Mrs. Haughton, our K-5 Science Coordinator, to choose materials and design their contribution. They recycled plastic tablecloths and plastic bags to make the wreath. Students reused colorful plastic snack wrappers to create decorative sea creature ornaments. Many students (and a few parents, too!) volunteered before and after school with Mrs. Haughton to complete the project.

# A New School Voice



Jockey Hollow Middle School has a new voice: Student Council. Mrs. Hall and Mrs. DeVecchio, advisors for the group, have shaped a way for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders across both main campus and STEM to collaborate on innovative ways to lead the school. After much research coupled with meeting with Masuk's Student Council advisor, these two teachers have helped transition students into leadership roles. According to a recent guidebook published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, "Practices at the best schools honor the developmental uniqueness of young adolescents, including the provision of a safe school environment, student initiated learning, student roles in decision making, and strong adult role models."

The initial goal of Student Council was to find a means to inform all grades at both middle school campuses of the activities and ideas occurring within the myriad of middle school clubs. Since then, Student Council has modeled itself as a hub, the center for the school's academic and extracurricular events, and because many of the Student Council members are involved in other school groups, it makes sense for this group to be the "sound board" of the school, the voice of the school.



To date, Student Council has brought grades and schools together in raising awareness about the Monroe Food Pantry through the first dance of the year. Students who donated food recorded their names on a "Tree of Giving" leaf. Along with this, Mrs. Healy, an 8th grade science teacher, and Student Council members, led the Food Bucket challenge across both campuses, helping to donate 1,300 pounds of food. To raise spirits, Student Council and Student Activist visited St. Vincent's Children's Hospital and decorated for the winter season. Recently, after working with 6th grade teachers and the Help for Haiti club, the first 6th grade social was a success, raising over \$300 for a school in Haiti.

Seeing students at all grade levels having mutual goals is truly uplifting, as it proves that with effective leadership, a positive school culture can be reinforced. Along with this, Student Council is thrilled about its PBS Committee chairperson who will sit in on staff meetings to offer student input about various activities such as Lion's Den topics. Moreover, after reviewing the various leadership characteristics (Habits of Mind) with Student Council, both listening and communication were skills that students wanted to strengthen. Both council president and public relations director will soon begin to seek out community leaders to speak with the group.

Establishing a student council at Jockey Hollow Middle School enables students to develop an array of skills needed for success in the 21st century. Student Council is a means for growth, communication, teaching, learning, and unity-what better way to achieve this than through students leading students in a positive direction.

\*\* After speeches and voting, government positions have been filled! \*\*

**President:** Melissa Psaras (8th grade)  
**Secretary:** Caroline Jennings (7th grade)  
**Treasurer:** Abigail Clausen (7th grade)  
**Public Relations:** Thomas Samperi (6th grade)  
**Dance Committee Chair:** Margaret Didio (8th grade)  
**Fundraising Chair:** Elizabeth Winnington (6th grade)  
**Advisory Chair:** Jessica Sokal (8th grade)



## School Counseling in the Monroe Public Schools



Monroe School District's School Counselors (K-12)

### *"Inspiring Others to Reach their Potential"*

The Monroe School District has a school counselor that services each school in the District.

#### Elementary Schools

Our elementary school counselors, Mia Cueva and Traci Sacco, have extensive knowledge and experience in counseling and education. Part of the elementary school counseling model is a developmental guidance curriculum that is in alignment with Connecticut School Counseling Association standards. Classroom developmental guidance lessons begin in September and continue through June. Topics range from identifying feelings, conflict resolution, friendship, knowing where to go if you have to speak to someone about an issue, dealing with adversity, transition, problem solving, puberty, goals, kindness, and a myriad of other topics. The counselor plays an integral part in creating a positive school culture and establishing expectations for how students treat one another and themselves. Other responsibilities include: facilitating groups that talk about grief, divorce, anger management, self-esteem, social skills, etc., individualized counseling dealing with problem-solving, personal issues, social skills, stress, familial difficulties, celebrating successes, etc., advocating and case managing 504 students (counselors collaborate extensively with parents, teachers, and administrators to support the plan implementation, consulting other mental health professionals and community resources to help the student and family receive the services needed).

#### Middle School

Our middle school counselors provide developmental guidance lessons to all students in the middle school.

At Jockey Hollow Main Campus, there are two counselors, Cathryn Johnson and Romina Bourdoulous, and the STEM campus has one school counselor, John Bevilacqua. These counselors support the student body with their emotional, social, and mental development. Counselors see students individually and/or in a group for a variety of reasons ranging from post middle school planning, anti-bullying, acceptance, respect, academic counseling, student mentoring, familial and/or personal issues. Middle school counselors are members of the different middle school teams and collaborate with teachers to provide insight and strategies into dealing with different learners. The middle school developmental guidance curriculum teaches students about learning strategies, coping strategies, college and career readiness, dreams, goal setting, career interests, caring for others, and respect of self and others. Organizing the OLSATS/DRPS/SBAC and providing input in the master schedule are also counselor responsibilities. Middle school counselors also support and manage the implementation of the 504 plans for their students.

Programs that are sponsored by our middle school counseling department are: 8th-9th grade transition planning and orientation program, 5th-6th grade transition planning and orientation program, Red Ribbon Week (anti-bullying and drug prevention programs), Engineering Day with Sikorsky Aircraft, Random Acts of Kindness (showing kindness to others), Self-Respect (Treating yourself and others with Respect).

#### High School

Our high school counselors, Kathy Kean, Marylu Matott, Penny Ploski, Laurie Ricco (Alternative School), Megan Scanlon, Beth Young, and Ann Odooy work with all students in the area of academic counseling, college and/or career placement, and personal and social/emotional issues. Masuk counselors work closely with their students regarding course scheduling and track each student's credit situation so that all are in compliance with graduation requirements.

School counselors are versed in many different mental health issues and are available to provide assistance and counseling to all students.

Visiting and communicating with all levels of colleges/universities, counselors have expert experience working with admissions officers. SAT/ACT/AP/ASVAB testing are all tests that are facilitated through the counseling department and the UConn ECE registration is initiated by our counselors. Classroom developmental guidance lessons are provided to grades 9 and 10 in regard to goal setting, career interests, and college readiness, and aspirations and the 11th and 12th graders work frequently and consistently with their counselor regarding post secondary planning. All counselors are program managers for their 504 students and provide significant support and collaboration to implement the student's accommodation program. The high school college career center offers students opportunities in career internships, shadowing, scholarships, and summer educational and leadership programs. Other responsibilities of the counselor:

Student Programs: Career Day, Alumni Day, Bridges Program, College admissions visits, Career Technical Fair, Career Shadowing, College Fair Field Trip, Awards Night

Parent Night Programs: Freshmen Orientation to Pupil Services, Sophomore Parent Night, Senior Financial Aid Night, Juniors and Parents College Night, College 101 Financial Aid Night, FAFSA Night, Scholarship Information Night, Senior Award Letter Night

At each development level, school counselors support students in their academic, personal, and career pursuits. Every student has an individual journey to wellness and counselors guide and support students to reach their potential as academic and positive citizens in the community.

If you have any questions, concerns, or needs, please do not hesitate to email or call your child's school counselor.

*"School counselors help students focus on academic, career, and social/emotional development so they achieve success in school and are prepared to lead fulfilling lives as responsible members of society."*

*American School Counseling Association*





## New grant highlights proven methods for better performance

Region 5, Monroe, New Haven, Waterford win Schools of Distinction Best Practice Grants

The State Department of Education today announced the winners of a new grant designed to help top performing schools share best strategies for boosting student performance and replicate those practices throughout Connecticut. The first Schools of Distinction Best Practice grants were awarded to four schools: Amity Regional High School in Woodbridge, Engineering and Science University Magnet School in New Haven, Clark Lane Middle School in Waterford, and Masuk High School in Monroe. They will serve as Spotlight Schools and help lead efforts to replicate their award winning programs in schools throughout the state.

“With this grant, we want to shine a light on the best practices for improving student performance and make them available to other schools and districts in the state,” said Interim Commissioner of Education Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell. “These four schools have earned recognition as Schools of Distinction by excelling at high levels of performance. By taking their best ideas and putting them into practice, we will strengthen our efforts to turn around underperforming schools. The winning proposals will serve as models for others to follow, and we will be working with them to help disseminate their ideas and practices

Masuk High School was awarded \$16,000 to improve student literacy and to use technology for assessing and analyzing literacy data. “The Monroe school community is proud and honored of the achievement of Masuk High School,” said Monroe Superintendent of Schools James Agostine. “Masuk, and all of our schools, have made significant investments in technology integration through Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) initiatives, inquiry based instruction, and flipped classroom development consistent with the Monroe Board of Education’s Goals and Action Plan.

We feel privileged to have the opportunity to share the insights we have gained over the past four years with other Connecticut schools.”

Connecticut recognizes Schools of Distinction as part of its school rating and accountability system. Announced last year during the second annual Schools of Distinction awards in May, 73 schools were invited to submit grant proposals based on their performance that led them to earn the School of Distinction honor. Out of 10 eligible applications, the Department chose four that were best suited to the purpose of this new grant program.

The Department of Education will schedule the four winners to lead a workshop for Alliance District or Commissioner’s Network schools. (Alliance Districts are Connecticut’s 30 lowest performing districts; Commissioner’s Network schools are the state’s most chronically underperforming schools.)





**MONROE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
— MONROE, CONNECTICUT —

**Monroe Public Schools' Mission Statement**

**The mission of the Monroe Public Schools is to ensure that all students reach their full potential as innovative thinkers and responsible citizens through a challenging, inquiry-based curriculum delivered by skilled, dedicated, and engaging educators.**

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