

Schalmont News

CENTRAL SCHOOLS

New school year brings many changes

Now that the new school year is underway students are settling in to a routine—quite possibly in a new building.

This year marks the first time that students in kindergarten through fourth grade are learning together in one building while fifth-graders attend the middle school.

The changes follow the school board's decision to close the district's two smallest elementary schools—Mariaville and Woestina—last year due to declining enrollment, rising operating costs and decreasing aid.

Students and staff returned to school a day later than originally scheduled due to flooding, road closures and emergency evacuations following tropical storms Irene and Lee.

"We're doing everything possible to provide a positive learning environment for all of our students," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey.

School officials continue to build their new school communities while ensuring the transition process is as

smooth as possible. Relief and recovery efforts continue to help students and staff who have been deeply affected by the storms.

"We're stronger than ever because of everything we've endured over the past year and the challenges we continue to face," said Kelsey.

This year also brings unprecedented changes within the field of public education—from a new evaluation process for teachers and principals to the implementation of common core learning standards and a new property tax levy cap.

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School officials have been working slowly and systematically to meet these new requirements.

Read on for more details. ❖

Property tax levy cap changes budget landscape

For many years, New Yorkers have paid some of the highest property taxes in the country, spurring individuals and business owners to increasingly clamor for tax relief.

This summer, state leaders responded by enacting a law that places new restrictions on how school districts may increase their tax levies.

"There is currently a lot of misinformation circulating about the impact of this new law on individual school districts and homeowners," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey.

Although the new law has been referred to as a "2 percent tax cap," it does not in fact restrict any proposed tax levy increase to 2 percent.

The law does, however, require at least 60 percent voter approval for a school budget if the proposed levy increase exceeds a certain amount. That amount, called the "tax levy limit," will be based on a formula outlined in the law and will vary by district.

Just because a district can legally exceed its tax levy limit does not mean it will, though.

"We will continue to be mindful of the district's mission to provide a quality education for all students while recognizing the economic challenges facing our district and taxpayers," said Kelsey.

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District awarded \$47,800 grant to expand safety, security

Schalmont is beefing up its safety, security and training efforts, thanks to a \$47,800 Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS) grant the district has received in partnership with the Rotterdam Police Department.

The funds come at a time when the state has made significant decreases in education funding and is providing increasingly less support for school districts and municipalities.

“We’re absolutely thrilled to partner with local law enforcement on this new initiative to create a safer and more secure campus for our middle school and high school students,” said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey.

The district has enjoyed a successful partnership with the department for more than a decade through the School Resource Officer (SRO) program, in which a police officer is stationed inside the high school building.

SRO Richard Kranick will play an integral role in implementing the new security measures, which include the addition of more video cameras to monitor hallways, school grounds and building access points from a central location inside the district or via a remote location.

“After several construction and renovation projects were completed, we recognized the need for additional cameras to expand coverage to all areas of the school,” said Kranick.

To better monitor all individuals entering the school building, an electronic access control system will also be installed to create a single point of entry for visitors and late arrivals via

the high school main entrance.

In addition, the grant will provide for a series of trainings to help faculty and staff recognize symptoms of drug use, alcohol abuse and children in crisis. It will also equip staff with the tools necessary to prevent crisis situations and address incidents already in progress.

“By training staff in these areas, it will reinforce how important it is to be aware of issues that can lead to crisis,” said Kranick. “Our goal is to help staff recognize potential problems and be trained to handle them before they escalate.”

Each of the new security measures were identified based on feedback

from a school climate survey conducted last year. The district’s SAVE Committee—a team of teachers, parents and staff that meets regularly to evaluate school safety, identify areas of concern and make recommendations to resolve safety and security issues—has also been instrumental in the process.

“Safety for our students and staff has always been a top priority,” said Kelsey. “This grant affords us the opportunity to continue our efforts without further burdening our taxpayers.”

The grant was written in cooperation with the Capital Region BOCES Grants & Development Service. ❖

School board adopts 2011-12 goals

Setting goals isn’t just for students.

Each year, Schalmont’s seven-member Board of Education meets during the summer to identify district priorities and set measurable goals for the upcoming school year.

“The goals really help guide our decision-making process and keep us on track,” said board president Sandra Beloncik.

Working under the guidance of the superintendent, board members review existing goals, examine where they are in terms of meeting those goals, and develop new goals, as appropriate.

This year, while many of the goals are a continuation from the previous year, several additions have been made to ensure compliance with new federal mandates and changes in state education funding.

For example, school officials are planning to revise the math and English curriculum

to incorporate the state’s new Common Core Standards.

They will also be working to better understand the recently-enacted property tax cap, which is expected to significantly change the school budget landscape.

“It’s critical that our entire school community better understand this piece of legislation and its impact on our schools,” said Beloncik.

Additionally, conversations with neighboring school districts are planned to identify potential areas for cost-savings and collaboration (see page 4 to learn more).

School officials have already begun working with faculty and staff to apply these goals throughout the district.

“It’s definitely a team effort,” said Beloncik.

Download a copy of the complete board goals by visiting the school board section of the district website. ❖

District pulls together to help flood victims

The log cabin Kathie McKeon's husband built for their wedding was supposed to last a lifetime.

Instead, the home the couple has shared in Pattersonville for more than 30 years will probably need to be excavated in the wake of two tropical storms and the subsequent flooding of the Mohawk River.

McKeon, a guidance secretary at the high school, is one of nearly 100 district families throughout Rotterdam Junction and Pattersonville whose homes were completely destroyed or damaged from flood water contaminated with oil, sewage and other pollutants.

In the wake of the storms, approximately 45 Schalmont students are living in temporary housing throughout the Capital Region. District officials continue to provide them with school bus transportation to and from school.

"It was very important for us to provide our students with a sense of normalcy by ensuring they could return to a familiar and welcoming environment," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey. "At a time like this, it's not about the additional expense, but doing what's in the best interest of our students."

According to PPS Director Shari Lontrato, some students literally returned to school with only the clothes on their backs.

"Devastation isn't the right word to describe watching people put their entire lives on the curb," said Lontrato, after visiting the Junction. "It was unlike anything I've ever seen before."

McKeon remains surprisingly optimistic despite losing everything in her home including the toys she was saving for her grandchildren.

"They can take everything but my smile," she said before describing the sensitivity town employees' expressed as they hauled away her damaged goods and the parent who brought her a tray of cookies, a home-cooked meal and bottle of wine. "Everyone has been wonderful."

"We're more united than ever because of everything we've endured over the past year and the challenges we continue to face," said Kelsey. "We are Schalmont, and together we're building a stronger school community."

Community rises to the occasion to help

The ways in which school board members, teachers, staff, students and parents have been providing assistance seems to be endless. The entire community has truly been instrumental in the area's recovery and rebuilding efforts.

"As awful as it must have been to lose everything, I heard so many people say they never would have known how many great people there are in the world," said Lontrato.

Jefferson Elementary School teachers Susan Hennessey and Marie Drislane assisted with clean-up efforts in Schoharie and Rotterdam Junction.

"We pulled wood out of basements, sprayed for mold and inserted a sump pump," said Hennessey. "We also walked down the street and picked up people's life-long possessions that were swept away and deposited onto

someone else's front lawn."

High school teachers Aimee Yankowski and Melissa Pierson assisted with clean-up efforts on Isabella Street—one of the hardest hit areas in the Junction.

"We could not believe the destruction," said Pierson. "It was so sad to see so many people lose everything."

The Schalmont Teachers Association collected more than \$10,000 in store gift cards and pre-paid debit cards, which will support Rotterdam Junction relief efforts. A student-run bake sale raised more than \$850.

In just a few days, the district collected so much clothing and supplies it could no longer accept donations. Special education teacher Cori Kinns was instrumental in facilitating a distribution center along with a number of volunteers who distributed supplies to community members in need.

The center is currently located in the former Mariaville Elementary School building where it is open by appointment-only.

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Helping those in need



Thanks to the generosity of the entire community, an unbelievable amount of clothing, household items, cleaning supplies, toiletries, first-aid supplies and non-perishable food were collected and distributed to flood victims.

■ Tax levy cap

– continued from pg. 1

“Living within the realities of the new law—while mandated costs escalate and the pressure to control taxes continues—will likely force difficult decisions again this year,” said Kelsey.

To that end, Kelsey is projected that next year will be another challenging budget year for Schalmont schools.

District officials await further clarification

In this first year of the property tax levy cap legislation, information about its provisions and implementation continues to evolve.

District officials continue to await further clarification from the New York State Office of the State Comptroller, Department of Taxation and Finance, Education Department, Division of the Budget and the governor’s office.

In the meantime, please take some time to read the answers to some questions that parents, taxpayers and school staff may have, based on what is known as of this printing.

Stay tuned to district’s many communications vehicles to get more information as it becomes available.

Does the new tax cap law mean school tax levies can’t increase by more than 2 percent?

No, the law does not prohibit tax levy increases greater than 2 percent. Despite how it’s been described by some politicians and the media, the legislation signed into law in June requires every district to calculate its own “tax levy limit.” Two percent (or the rate of inflation, if less) is just one of eight factors in this calculation. The law also establishes a higher threshold of voter approval for a budget to pass if that district’s proposed tax levy increase (before exemptions outlined in the law) exceeds its individual

“tax levy limit.”

What is a “tax levy limit?”

For school districts, the “tax levy limit” is the highest allowable tax levy (before exemptions) that a school district can propose as part of its annual budget for which only the approval of a simple majority of voters (more than 50 percent) is required. Any proposed tax levy amount above this limit will require budget approval by a supermajority (60 percent or more) of voters.

How is the “tax levy limit” determined for school districts?

The law dictates an eight-step formula that each school district must use to calculate its individual “tax levy limit.”

In particular, the calculation adjusts a district’s tax levy to reflect growth in the local tax base (if any) and the rate of inflation or 2 percent (whichever is lower).

What happens if the budget is not approved by voters?

If a proposed budget is defeated by voters, a school district—as in the past—has the option of putting the same or a revised budget up for a revote, or adopting a contingent budget. A school district that adopts a contingent budget may not increase its current tax levy by any amount—which would mean, in effect, a zero percent increase.

Read more questions and answers on the district website at www.schalmont.org. ❖

Schalmont, Mohonasen explore options for sharing services

In light of the current economic climate, declining state aid and a new property tax levy cap, the Schalmont and Mohonasen school boards are exploring ways to share more services and ultimately save money.

The neighboring districts held a joint board workshop in mid-August. The meeting served as a brainstorming session, at which board members informally discussed whether they would support or were interested in studying potential areas for shared services.

Areas of discussion included transportation and a bus garage, business support services, administration, faculty and staff, special education, alternative education, professional development, athletics and academic programs.

Board members overwhelmingly agreed that they would like to continue the conversations and learn more about the logistics of sharing services, especially business office functions and other support services, and a shared bus garage. They discussed the possibility of pursuing an efficiency study to better understand the pros and cons—as well as the potential cost savings, if any—of combining or sharing certain district functions.

Members of both groups stressed the importance of maintaining each district’s identity, traditions and culture. However, as fiscal constraints continue to grow both groups acknowledged the benefits that sharing services could provide to taxpayers and students.

Both districts faced difficult budget decisions during the 2010-11 school year.

In Schalmont, the school board made nearly \$2 million in budget reductions, which were achieved through a combination of school closures and personnel reductions affecting 24 full-time equivalent teaching, support staff and administrative positions.

At Mohonasen, school leaders made \$2.7 million in cuts and eliminated 34.5 FTE positions district wide in the 2011-12 budget. Voters in Mohonasen also rejected a \$43 million capital project in the fall of 2010.

Both districts already successfully share a number of programs and services. These include a community transition program for students with disabilities and a shared swim team. They are also part of a consortium of districts that purchase equipment, supplies and health insurance together. ❖

Students settle in to the “new” Jefferson

On the first day of school, faculty and staff greeted every single student as they arrived at Jefferson Elementary School.

“It made everyone feel so comfortable and welcome,” said Alana Stelling whose two daughters previously attended Woestina Elementary School.

For the first-time, all kindergarten through fourth-graders are learning together at Jefferson following the closure of Woestina and Mariaville elementary schools due to declining enrollment, decreasing state aid and increasing costs. Fifth-graders are attending the middle school.

“My girls came home so happy—talking about the new friends they made and their excitement for the upcoming school year,” said Stelling who also serves as the Jefferson PTO vice-president.

The act of welcoming students and escorting them to their classroom on the first day has been a long-time practice at the school. However, a greater emphasis was placed on establishing a connection and commonality among all of the students this year, especially those new to the building.

“We didn’t focus on the fact that a student was new or different,” said Gifford. “We tried to get to know them by asking about their previous teacher rather than their former school building.”

Students were paired with a buddy familiar with the building to help navigate their new school.

Within the first couple of days, students were mingling among each other no matter what school they originated from.

“It’s not like there are Jefferson, Woestina and Mariaville students—it’s all one big family,” said Stelling. “We’re one big school now.”

Students have settled in to their routines and become familiar with lunch, recess and school bus procedures. They’re able to find their way to classrooms individually, without assistance from a peer or staff member.

“It has been amazing to observe them learn so quickly,” said Gifford.

Stelling said her daughters have learned nearly everything they need in order to thrive in their new school.

“They are excited to go to bed at night because they can’t wait to go to

and throughout the summer. Many of the events were coordinated jointly by the three school PTO groups.

“By working together, they have really helped to bond this community,” said Gifford.

Stelling said she got involved with Jefferson’s PTO the minute she found out Woestina was closing.

“It’s one way you can start to feel comfortable in a new school,” said Stelling. “It has to be one of the greatest feelings for a child to watch someone they love participate in a school activity.”

There are a ton of opportunities for parents to get involved at Jefferson—from serving on the PTO to volunteering in the classroom and attending school events.

Classroom teachers have also been instrumental in the transition process.

“They’ve really taken extra steps to make their students feel welcome and connected to the larger school community,” said Gifford.

Grade level colleagues are able to collaborate even more now that they are all in the same building.

“I can peek my head next door to ask another first grade teacher a question and get instant feedback,” said Jamie Pink who previously taught at Woestina. “We have always had a great first-grade team but now that we are all together it helps build our unity.

That sense of togetherness and community has certainly trickled into the classroom to become a natural part of the learning process.

“Our school has become bigger and better because of this transition,” said Gifford. ❖

Students return to newly configured school district



Schalomont was filled with excitement as students returned to school in September.

school in the morning,” said Stelling. “They love every part of being at Jefferson.”

According to Gifford, the transition process started long before students walked through the front doors in September.

Students from all three schools joined together for several special events held at Jefferson at the end of last school year

Fifth-graders navigate the middle school campus

Ask any fifth-grader what his or her favorite part of being at the middle school is and they'll likely tell you their lockers.

They aren't just a place to store coats and a book bag—they symbolize the transition from an elementary school building to the middle school.

"Isabella feels like she has a little independence," said Felicia Amoroso about her fifth-grade daughter. "She knows where to find all of her stuff. It's also great practice for next year."

The 2011-12 school year marks the first-time that fifth-graders are attending the middle school. The changes come as a result of the school board's decision to begin teaching all students in kindergarten through fourth grade together in one building, shifting fifth-graders to the top floor of the middle school.

Academically, the fifth-grade curriculum remains unchanged.

"I'm doing things the same way as I did them at Jefferson," said fifth-grade teacher Mary Zanta. "I'm getting the same questions and concerns that I would have received in the elementary school setting."

Students spend most of their days in self-contained classrooms except for lunch, which is separate from older grades, and when teachers escort them to and from special classes such as art and music. A special drop-off and dismissal procedure has fifth-graders riding on elementary school buses each day.

"I think we're off to a really good start, and students seem to be enjoying themselves," said Principal Michael Kondratowicz.

Lunch and recess are also a big hit.

Students have a little more freedom at lunch to sit with their peers from another page 6 ► FALL 2011

fifth-grade class as opposed to sitting with just their class.

This summer, school officials created a new fenced-in recess area for fifth-graders at the middle school that features a basketball hoop and four-square. Students can also play a variety of games on the upper soccer field.

"For a middle school to have all of this, it's really good," said fifth-grader Nicholas Ragucci. "The field is a lot of fun."

Parents and staff seem to be pleased with the transition as well.

"I think they're doing a great job," said Amoroso, who also serves as the fifth-grade parent representative. "As the days have progressed things have gotten better and better. The principals have been great. They listen to our ideas and are ready to do anything to make the transition easier."

School officials have been working in conjunction with fifth-grade parents through a subcommittee of the PTO to determine students' participation in age-appropriate activities.

The decision was made last year to wait until fifth-graders began attending the school to open up activities to them.

"We just weren't sure how things would work out so we decided to make a conscience effort to make those types of decisions together," said Kondratowicz.

Following the success of the first joint fifth/sixth-grade Sabre City, fifth-graders have since been invited back as well as to a few other combined grade-level events.

"I'm glad they're involving the fifth-graders," said Amoroso. "They aren't in the elementary school anymore, so



Fifth-grade teacher Mellissa West instructs a student seated at her desk, which is grouped with her peers in the traditional elementary school format.

technically, if you don't include them in anything at the middle school they are sort of out of place. It makes sense to involve them."

Fifth-grade teacher Melissa West is focusing on teaching her students responsibility and better organization skills—key areas needed for success next year.

"It's easier to teach them more independence here at the middle school," said West. "I set the expectation that students needed to come to class prepared."

West said students' participation in Sabre City will teach them about acceptable behavior while helping them feel like part of the middle school.

Fifth-graders will continue to enjoy an end-of-the-year class trip, for which the subcommittee is currently fundraising. They are also discussing the yearbook and opportunities for parents to get involved in class events or activities.

"Once parents are here, they'll see that this is a really well-run building," said Zanta.

"It's a really nice place," said Nicholas.

To learn more, contact Amoroso at 355-5839, the principal at 355-6255 or visit the district website. ❖

Collaboration is key to implementing new learning standards

The implementation of Common Core Learning Standards has Schalmont teachers focused on working together this year to improve instruction and student achievement.

The new federal standards will replace the former math and English language arts standards in grades K-12. They are designed to better align what is being taught in the classroom with college and work experience. There are also new standards designed to supplement the curriculum for history/social studies, science and technical subjects in grades 6-12.

They will ultimately replace the learning standards that all state assessments and classroom curricula are currently based on by the 2013-14 school year.

These changes are just one part of the Race to the Top (RttT) federal education initiative, which is designed to equip students with 21st century skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation.

"Students will be able to better apply these skills to the world in which they live and work," said Schalmont Teachers' Institute (STI) Director Bronson Knaggs. "This is important for students whether they're entering college or the workforce."

In addition to incorporating more rigorous standards, the new federal requirements call for the implementation of a new student data reporting system, adoption of a new evaluation system for teachers and principals (dubbed the Annual Professional Performance Review) and the creation of school-based inquiry teams to focus on improving instruction.

"This is a massive undertaking," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey. "We're facing change at all different

levels of our organization."

Schalmont is fortunate to have a teachers' institute, which is largely responsible for professional development. Rolling out the new standards will become its primary focus in the coming years.

"Turn-key training is what the STI is all about," said Knaggs. "It creates and maintains a professional conversation around instruction."

The larger school community will be trained by their peers and receive valuable information during professional development days and other appropriate times throughout the year.

"As a professional learning community, we have often expected students to learn, but we haven't always focused on our own learning," said Knaggs. "This is truly a shift to a deeply reflective practice."

Schalmont received a portion of federal funds to help implement all of the changes. However, the amount—

just \$6,500 per year for four years—is hardly enough to cover the costs for compliance.

To that end, the district pooled its funding with 21 other districts to establish a regional Network Team—consisting of experts in the areas of curriculum, data analysis and instruction, who are responsible for overseeing implementation of the changes.

The team is working directly with members of recently formed school-based inquiry teams in each school building, who will become experts in accessing, understanding, and using data to facilitate changes in instructional practice to accelerate learning for underperforming students.

"The whole idea behind this is to look more in-depth at individual student data to help inform instruction," said Kelsey.

For more information on the federal reform initiatives, including a copy of Schalmont's APPR, visit www.schalmont.org.

■ Flood relief efforts

— continued from pg.3

"So many people are living with only what they need at the moment," said Lontrato. "With continued access to the center they'll be able to stock up on items they need when they have found an established residence."

Building a stronger community

District officials knew the Schalmont school community would come together in a different way this year after the closing of two longtime schools.

"We're more united than ever because of everything we've endured over

the past year and the challenges we continue to face," said Kelsey. "We are Schalmont, and together we're building a stronger school community. The bricks and mortars don't matter as much as the sense of unity, community and pride that we're continuing to build and rely upon."

The entire community has pulled together to help their friends, neighbors and even complete strangers in the face of such devastation.

"Simply saying thank you just doesn't suffice," said Kelsey.

More information about the relief efforts is available on the district website. ❖



Produced in cooperation with the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service.

Schalmont

CENTRAL SCHOOLS

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WHAT'S INSIDE? Understanding the property tax levy cap, flood recovery efforts and student transitions to new buildings

School Board Calendar

Schalmont Board of Education public meetings are held at 7 p.m. unless otherwise noted.

November 14, 2011

Jefferson Elementary School
100 Princetown Road

November 28, 2011

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Dr.

December 12, 2011

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Dr.

January 9, 2012

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Dr.

January 23, 2012

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Dr.

February 13, 2012

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Dr.

Reunion Calendar

None at this time. Visit www.schalmont.org/District/dstreunioninformation.htm for the latest updates or to submit information on a class reunion.

Schalmont goes social

As part of its ongoing efforts to keep its many publics informed, Schalmont continues to provide updates via Facebook, Twitter and other online communication tools.

“We’re committed to being the first and best source of information about our schools,” said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey. “We recognize the power social media has to quickly and efficiently reach a large and diverse audience.”

Access each of the following tools by visiting the district website.

Facebook

Join more than 400 of your friends and neighbors by “liking” us on Facebook. Fans receive helpful reminders about upcoming events, links to feature stories and more. They also have the ability to comment on postings, ask questions and share information.

Twitter

You can follow Schalmont news and announcements on Twitter by signing-up for your own Twitter account.

School News Notifier (SNN)

SNN is an opt-in news service designed

to keep parents and the community more in touch with what is happening at Schalmont schools via e-mail and even text messages in the event of a school closing or delay.

Highschoolsports.net

Get immediate access to Schalmont’s sports schedules via highschoolsports.net.

Parent Portal

Parents and guardians of fifth through twelfth grade students may sign-up for the portal to access their child’s schedule, report cards, progress reports and attendance information by period. ❖

Beethoven teaches students to never give up



Thanks to the generosity of Jefferson’s PTO, students were treated to a special visit by Beethoven—in the person of Dennis Kobray. Learn more by visiting the district website.