

# SCHOOL TALK

*A Newsletter of M. S. A. D. #54*

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## **Canaan Elementary School Scores High on MEAs**



*Students and staff at Canaan Elementary School work year-round to prepare for MEAs.*

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In just a month or so, students in grades 3-8 throughout Maine will take the Maine Educational Assessment test. It will be a nerve-wracking time for many of those students, but not for those at Canaan Elementary School.

CES has scored at or above the state level in MEA scores consistently for years, and above the district level every year. According to principal Steve Swindells, that's thanks to the hard work of everyone involved. "It's not because our kids are

*See "Canaan MEAs" on page 2*

## *Canaan MEAs* continued from page 1

gifted,” he said. “We have some of the lowest socio-economic kids in the district. But if you raise the bar for them, they’ll perform. We’ve done a really great job of preparing our kids.”

Maine makes available a variety of MEA materials and questions for teachers and schools to use to prepare themselves for the annual testing. Canaan Elementary staff spends their school year working with this material.

“All grades support the tests, and as a staff, we discuss what the tests look for, and we practice those skills in all grades, even if they are a grade that is not testing students,” Swindells said. “The first staff meeting is dedicated to reviewing how we did on the test, and looking at areas to focus on where we seemed to do lower as a school, not an individual class.”

Another key to CES’ success is consistency, said Tabitha Brewer, a fourth grade teacher. “There is great consistency here,” she

said. “The students in grades K-6 are housed in the same building and teachers know the students and families. The staff works together for common goals and our number one concern is to give the children the skills they need to succeed.”

“The teachers show the kids what MEA examples look like,” Swindells explained. “The kids get a really good idea of what the MEA’s are looking for, and they have a much better idea of what they have to aim for.” He said that in addition to learning what the state wants from students, the preparation work gives the students a sense that they’re smart and they can be successful.

Canaan Elementary begins working on MEA skills as early as Kindergarten, and the teachers and students are working on those skills throughout the year. When the MEAs come around each March, the students spend an hour a day for two weeks taking tests, and they don’t get so

overwhelmed with testing, explained Brewer.

Swindells said that repetition and skill drills are an important part of MEA preparation at Canaan Elementary. “You can’t do open-ended higher-level thinking without the knowledge of the basic skills,” he said. “There’s no shortcut to being successful, you have to work hard.”

“We’re good at making kids feel like they can do it,” said Swindells. “There are no put-downs in our school, no loud voices. The climate is very friendly, open to questions, kids feel free to work with the teachers and ask for help.”

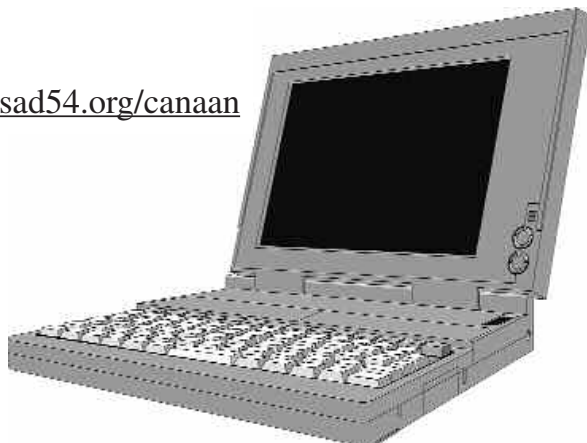
“Our motto is ‘Don’t quit – keep trying’,” said Swindells. “This is a good place to be, kids want to come to school and parents feel like they’re listened to, then the parents support us. It’s a partnership that works.”

Brewer said that even if the students don’t come up with the right answer at first, they’re still encouraged and recognized for their hard work. “We don’t care if they ace it,” she said, “as long as they do their best.”

“We’re proud that our kids are successful in life,” Swindells said. “They’re good people. If the MEA is the guideline, then we want them to do well at them.”

For more information visit our website at:

<http://www.msad54.org/canaan>



# Rick Wilson Takes on SAHS Leadership

For a number of years, Rick Wilson has wanted to take a leadership role in education. Luckily for Skowhegan Area High School, the vacant role of principal provided that opportunity for him this year.

Wilson previously served as Assistant Principal at both Portland High School and at Gardiner High School, and for 20 years before that, he was a math teacher at Traip Academy in Kittery. He thinks that his years of teaching experience combined with playing and coaching football and basketball in the past has prepared him well for his new role.

“The comraderie of sports added to my development educationally and made me feel connected with the kids,” Wilson explained. “Having been in the trenches teaching for so long, I really feel I have a good understanding of what everyone goes through in wanting the best for their students. I have the same passion for education that I had on the field or on the basketball court, and that has made me want to connect with more than just the 20 or so kids in a single classroom.”

As a teacher, Wilson said he loves to figure out how to do things better and how to make his students feel good about learning. “I want kids to feel passionate about the learning,” he said.

“For me, the dream of being an administrator was affecting students and making kids’ lives better,” said Wilson. “Too often, administration is about the nuts and bolts of running a school, but

this place was already running so well when I walked in here that I’ve had the time to talk to teachers and students.” He said that he’s spent a lot of time since the fall actually in the classrooms trying to learn

what goes on at the school. With more than 80 faculty and staff and almost 1,000 students, Wilson has had his work cut out for him.

Over the years, Wilson has learned that schools are not traditionally structured for teachers to actually have conversations with each other, he said. “I want to try to schedule some common planning times for teachers so they can get together to plan, share ideas, and talk,” Wilson said. “One of my goals is to get us all on the same page here and have a culture where there’s no isolation and we can come together as a group.”

Another important goal Wilson has set for himself and his school is building up his students’ aspirations for their futures. “We’re learning that you can’t get by on a blue collar education anymore,” he said. “As teachers, we’re now asked to take every student and make them ready for college if they choose to go. That’s a huge shift in terms of mindsets.” He believes teachers were just not trained that way in



Rick Wilson is the new principal at Skowhegan Area High School

the past, so it’s going to take some learning on everyone’s part to get there – including the students.

“We have to make sure we are making kids successful, then work within the community to support that,” said Wilson. “We also need to work at having every kid feel that this is their school and they have a connection, that they’re not just a number, that if they’re not here, someone will notice.”

Wilson said that six months into his new job, his goals are still the same as when he began. “It’s just been a matter of learning and building relationships,” he said. “My words don’t mean much, it’s my actions. I have to build trust and we have to come to an agreement that we’re in this together.”

“I feel very fortunate to be here,” said Wilson. “I think I’m very lucky. Until you actually get into a new position, you just don’t know whether it’s going to work for you or not. I’m glad I’m here.”

# Dave Keaton Back to Voc Education

It took leaving the field of education and working in a business climate for Dave Keaton to realize that vocational education is where he belongs. Now, as the new director of the Skowhegan Regional Vocational Center, Keaton is happily settling back into the business of educating students and setting them on the road of reaching their dreams.

Keaton was a social studies teacher for 13 years in Limestone, as well as a principal there. He was principal of Ashland Schools for two years, director of the Vocational Center in St. John Valley Schools in Frenchville, then left education to become the Director of Learning at the Loring Job Corps Center for three years.

"I wasn't happy in the corporate world," admitted Keaton. "I felt like we really lost kids in the shuffle. What's good for kids is my thing."

When he heard about the open position in Skowhegan he put his hat in the ring. "I had a good experience with vocational education and I wanted to get back into it," he said.

"Vocational education is the one aspect of high school education that's very relevant to kids, that's why I'm so drawn to it," said Keaton. "Everything they do, they can see why – 'if I do this then it leads to this'," he explained. "It's the piece a lot of kids are looking for."

Keaton gets excited when talking about vocational education and kids in general,



*David Keaton took on the leadership role this year as director of Skowhegan Regional Vocational Center*

and is happy that his transition to his new role has been smooth. "I'm fortunate in that I've done this job before so I have a good idea of what needs to be done," Keaton said. "I have to pace myself on things I want to change."

So far, Keaton has spent a lot of time listening and observing, and he plans to keep things status quo for the time being. "This year I just want to watch, learn and keep the programs stable and functioning," he said. "I'm not the type to walk in and make a hundred decisions immediately. I need to spend a year and figure things out before I decide to make any big, sweeping changes. You need to figure out what's going to work and what's not going to work under your leadership."

Keaton admits that he misses being in the classroom, so he's continuing a practice he started years ago of classroom visits to

keep him connected. "I make it a practice to have contact with the students, I need that connection," he said. So, Keaton walks in to every program every morning to see what's going on, then does the same thing every afternoon. With around 200 students at SRVC, he admits he may not get to know each student personally, but they'll know he's there. "They'll know I'm accessible," he said. "My role is to be a supporter of what we do for the kids."

With all that's going on in the world of education today, Keaton still believes there will always be a place for vocational education. "Any kid can attend a vocational school," he said. "Vocational education is always changing with industry, so we're very adaptable. "It's a stay-tuned for future updates and innovations kind of thing."

# Field Hockey Indians Are 06 in '06

If there's one thing that folks in MSAD 54 can count on, it's a powerhouse field hockey program, thanks to Paula Doughty and her team of dedicated professionals.

Doughty, chair of the social studies department at Skowhegan Area High School, has led the field hockey program there for more than 30 years. She began coaching the sport when opportunities for female sports were not abundant in the district, but she's brought home nine state high school field hockey championships (six consecutive), and 12 Eastern Maine field hockey championships. The high school team has also been the Eastern Maine runner-up five times.

A number of former players have gone on to top colleges and universities through field hockey scholarships. "This program presents an opportunity for lots of local girls who might never have left Maine," she explained. Doughty said that, this year, of the approximate 60 girls who play field hockey, almost all of them are currently on the honor roll at school. "We have great schools looking at our girls, and some of these girls probably never would have even thought about attending them," she said.

Over the years, Doughty and her staff have built a local field hockey program that is offered to girls as young as first grade. After the youth program, which is now run through the local recreation department, girls can play on one of five teams –



*The Skowhegan Area High School Varsity Field Hockey Team celebrated another state championship with a fire engine parade through town.*

seventh grade, eighth grade, freshman, junior varsity and varsity. "Basically, any kid in the district that wants to play, can play," Doughty said. "My staff and I all share the same philosophy – we don't cut anyone. We've never cut a child from a team."

"We have a lot of kids who have never played a sport, but they can play field hockey," Doughty said. "Many of them play because they just want to have some fun."

Doughty said she and her staff take each year as it comes and try to play as many kids as they can each game. "If someone doesn't play in the varsity game, they get a chance to play in the junior varsity game," she explained. "We'll swing kids back and forth between teams. We try to get the kids to work together."

At the age of 55, people have begun asking Doughty how much

longer she'll dedicate her time to field hockey. Right now, she doesn't have an answer. "I'll keep doing it until I'm bored with it," she said. "It's a huge job, and it's year-round, but I love it."

"When you're a young coach, it's all about winning," Doughty said. "It's fun to win championships, and we still play to win, that's what we train for. But for me, it's all about the kids. I'm proud of them, and they're proud of each other's achievements. I love the competition, but I love to see the kids grow. They leave this program with confidence, and they're not afraid to take chances"



# Speech Team Still on Top

Once again this year, the Skowhegan Area High School Speech Team took home the state championship, holding on to an undefeated streak that's been in place since the team starting competing back in 1993.

For some people in the community, it's not really news when the SAHS Speech Team wins the state trophy. They win every year, right? What's the big deal? But for coach Robin Lisherness and assistant coach Joanna Hopkins, each win is just as exciting and important as the last. It never gets old.

"I'm a very competitive person, I like winning," admits Lisherness, who has coached the team for 34 years. "I have to say, though, the past few years it's been pretty easy."

Lisherness took on the task of coaching the Prize Speaking program when he began teaching English at SAHS so many years ago. The program morphed into a very local Speech Team until around 1993, when they discovered that there was such a thing as the Maine Forensics League and they they could actually compete against other teams. That first year of competition, the Skowhegan team took seventh place. The next year, fourth. "Then we took first place, and we've placed first or second every year since then," recalled Lisherness.

"Our secret is talented students," Lisherness said. "That, and the support of our administration and school. People around here realize that Speech Team is an important activity, it's as valid as any sporting event and it complements the drama program." In fact, many students who participate on the Speech Team are also involved with drama, and



*Speech Team members Robert Boudreau, Samantha Allen, Jake Withee and Emma Brown tally proceeds from a Speech Team fundraiser benefitting the Somerset Humane Society.*

vice versa.

Forensics competition gives students who participate valuable lifelong skills, believes Lisherness. "They can interpret poetry or prose, they can write their own piece, they can compete in groups or individually, they can interpret famous speeches, there are so many opportunities," he said. Over the years, he said, the competitions have become much more demanding and professional. "The kids aren't necessarily more talented these days, but the competitions are stronger," said Lisherness.

This year, Lisherness and Hopkins have about 35 students on the Skowhegan Speech Team. "I'm really proud of that," Lisherness said. "Some bigger schools are lucky to get even five or six kids to join." He believes that so many students join the SAHS team because they believe in it. "They see it as something that's important," he said. "They want to be part of a winning team."

The team's reputation and spirit has also been an inspiration to others, as evidenced by a note sent to the Skowhegan team from retiring

Lewiston High coach John Blanchette. "Though I have my own team, I have always considered all of you MY students," he wrote. "The Skowhegan Speech Team has proven itself to be a gold standard – one that all other teams aspire to become – and better yet, to beat... It would be easy for you to rest on your laurels – but you as a team have not! Even they you have enjoyed a dominance of the event unparalleled in MFA history, you continue to strive for excellence...you make the rest of us work harder in an effort to keep up. In so doing, you elevate the standard for all – and you make the entire state of forensics better for it. You also have the single best speech coach in the MFA – and that, too, is a big part of your success."

The Speech Team season is long – they begin in September and wrap up with the state competition in January each year. There are many, many practices and lots of hard work, but it's worth it, Lisherness said. "I love working with the kids," he said. "They are such a joy to work with, most of the time. They're so creative and they enjoy it so much, they make me enjoy it too."

# Erica Thompson Named Distinguished Educator

Erica Thompson has been named a Distinguished Educator by the State Department of Education.

Thompson is the Special Education Co-Coordinator for MSAD 54. As a Distinguished Educator, she will spend a year “on loan” to work with the State’s Early Childhood Special Education program. She will travel throughout the state visiting and monitoring the 16 Child Development Services sites.

Thompson was chosen for the position after serving for five months last year on a legislative committee that studied Early Childhood Special Education.

Thompson said she faced a big decision when she was offered the

Distinguished Educator position. “I’ll be traveling all over the state, not to mention the daily drive to Augusta,” she said. “I had to really think about the effect that would have on my family. However, it’s a new adventure for me and I see it as a new door being opened which will lead to new professional opportunities.”

Thompson said that while she’s excited about the new opportunity being presented through the Distinguished Educator position, she’s also planning to be back in March 2008 when her year-long assignment ends. “I have a very strong commitment to this district, my roots are here,” she said. “There are a lot of unknowns, but I hope to be back here in a year.”



*Erica Thompson has been named a Distinguished Educator for the Maine Department of Education*

# School Talk Has New Editor

Kathy Dion has been named the new Editor of *School Talk*, the MSAD 54 district newsletter.

Dion has almost 20 years of experience in writing and editing. She was a staff writer and news assistant for the Portland Newspapers for 11 years, and has served as a communications director and manager in Maine independent high schools for five years. She’s spent time this school year getting to know the teachers, staff and students in MSAD 54, and said she’s looking forward to doing much more of the same. “This is a great school district and

there are so many wonderful stories,” Dion said. “I’m looking forward to learning more about all of the great programs, classes and people who make up this district, and sharing those stories with all of our readers. Working with the Digital Graphic Arts program at Skowhegan Regional Vocational Center has also been fantastic,” she said. “The students do a really professional job that I’m proud to be a part of.”

To share a story idea or photo opportunity, email Dion at: [kdion@msad54.org](mailto:kdion@msad54.org).



*Kathy Dion is the new editor of School Talk, the MSAD 54 district newsletter*

# *Postscripts from the Superintendent's Office*

We hope you enjoy our second edition of the year of School Talk. As always, we have a range of articles for you to sample. Our first edition identified 29 new para and professional staff members. This edition will provide profiles of two new administrators, Richard Wilson, Principal, Skowhegan Area High School and David Keaton, Director, Skowhegan Regional Vocational School. In addition, Erica Thompson, Co-Special Education Director, and our new School Talk editor, Kathy Dion will also be highlighted. Finally, we hope you enjoy the stories of our field hockey and speech teams. Each is a

highly successful and respected tradition within our district. The students and staff involved in these activities have received high praise and innumerable accolades locally, state-wide, nationally, and internationally.

As always, if you have any questions or comments, please send them to:  
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