



School Talk

A Newsletter of RSV 54/MSA 54

E.O.E.



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Fall Festival Brings Together In-Town Schools

Next fall, the Margaret Chase Smith Community School will open, combining North Elementary, Margaret Chase Smith, and Bloomfield Elementary schools. To help prepare for and to celebrate this change, the three Skowhegan schools invited all students and families to a fall festival.

There was a huge turnout! Those who attended enjoyed face painting, yard games like cornhole and parachute, and storybook time. They also munched on popcorn and apples, and pumpkins were available to take home.

Many students dressed in costume, and all were invited to walk through the “Magic School Bus” that had been decorated for Halloween.

As a final bonus, Officer Dave ran races around his car, and Fire Fighter Rick allowed students to explore the inside of the fire truck.



It was wonderful to see all of Skowhegan’s elementary students united for an afternoon of camaraderie and fun.



Fire Safety Program Engages Students at MSES



On October 8, students at Mill Stream Elementary School (MSES) had the opportunity to participate in a hands-on fire safety program in collaboration with the Norridgewock Fire Department. The event, designed for students in grades Pre-K-2, provided an engaging and educational experience focused on crucial fire safety skills.

Throughout the morning, students learned about the importance of fire alarms, what to do if they hear one, and the steps to take if they encounter smoke or fire. Norridgewock firefighters gave demonstrations on how to stop, drop, cover, and roll; and they emphasized the importance of staying low to the ground when there is smoke.

The firefighters also showcased their gear, giving students a close-up look at the equipment used during emergency responses, including fire helmets, protective suits, and oxygen tanks. This demonstration provided students with a clear understanding of how firefighters keep themselves safe while helping others. By dressing in their full gear, they helped students understand that they should never be afraid of a firefighter, even though they may look different during an emergency.

Students were encouraged to ask questions, which led to important discussions about creating family escape plans, practicing fire drills at home, and knowing emergency contact numbers.

Both students and teachers appreciated the valuable information shared by the Norridgewock Fire Department, and the event reinforced the school's commitment to providing a well-rounded education that goes beyond traditional academics, focusing on life skills that students will carry with them for years to come.

A Fall Full of Learning and Fun at CES



The school year began at Canaan Elementary School (CES) with the annual open house. Parents, students, and families were welcomed into the school to see their classrooms, meet teachers and staff, and reunite with friends. It's one of the best days of the year seeing all the students back and ready for a new year of learning and fun.

In addition to our classroom learning, the entire school traveled to Lakewood Theater to see *Snow White, the Evil Queen, and the Three Slobs*. Students gave the Lakewood Jesters a five-star rating. The Canaan Fire Department brought the smoke house and taught us lessons around fire safety, and the Canaan Public Library treated the students in PK-2 to a performance by "Mr. Sean and his Puppets." Mr. Sean's 30-minute presentation titled, "The Umbrella of Happiness," focused on the importance of kindness and resilience.



Finally, we collaborated with The Pieces of Canaan Quilters and artist Saskia Reinholt on creating barn quilts. For five weeks, each grade traveled to the Canaan Farmers Hall with their teachers and parents to help paint and learn about barn quilts. Some of these quilts were auctioned at a “quilt extravaganza,” but six will be displayed in different locations around town, including CES. Students will be able to see their amazing creations for many years to come.

It has been a busy and fulfilling fall for the staff, students, and community of Canaan.

Motivating Students’ Learning at BES



MSAD 54’s guiding beliefs provide direction for staff and students that help create an environment for all learners to thrive. At Bloomfield Elementary School (BES) we foster learning by noticing that students’ learning styles differ and that they demonstrate their intelligence in many ways.

First graders participated in “Dot Day,” a global celebration based on the book *The Dot* by Peter and

Paul Reynolds. *The Dot* is a story of a young girl named Vashti who did not believe she could be an artist. Luckily, Vashti had an art teacher who told her anyone can be an artist; they just must make a dot and then sign their name. In the story, Vashti’s creativity, confidence, and courage grow with each dot she makes.

To celebrate Dot Day, BES first-grade teachers set up six rotations for students to cycle through. Students made dot names, chain links, pastel dots, Play-Doh dot structures, dot day crowns, Q-tip paintings, coffee filter drawings, and so much more. Students absolutely loved this celebration.

BES Garden Club members were busy this fall harvesting, cooking and tasting vegetables from our school garden. Students used their produce to prepare and enjoy fresh pesto, salsa, baked potatoes, and squash bread, the latter of which was shared with the third-grade classrooms at snack the next day.

Students also had fun examining the giant sunflowers and harvesting seeds; they even had a chance to observe a star-nosed mole near the garden! We are so thankful to our volunteers Robert Turner, Janice Malek, Karyn Bigelow and Sara Haiss for assisting with this club.

In September the first, second, and third grade went to Lakewood Theater to see *Snow White*, the *Evil Witch*, and the *Three Slobs*. The students enjoyed the theater experience, the humor of the play, and especially the opportunity to say hello to the characters from the play after the performance. The return trip to Bloomfield was filled with chatter and laughter.



These are a few of the many unique learning opportunities we offer BES students; these experiences heighten their motivation for learning and contribute to their ongoing development and success.

REACH “Keeping the Lights On”: Six Years and Counting



The REACH Afterschool Program celebrated six years of keeping the “Lights on Afterschool” with their annual open house event on October 26.

Over 150 staff, students, caregivers, and community partners came together to celebrate the program’s contribution to student success. The open house was a vibrant showcase of all the student programs at the three program sites, including the 18 different clubs offered at the middle school.

Attendees enjoyed free, kid-friendly activities, such as making origami pumpkins, racing robots, and tasting the delicious food prepared by the cooking club students.

Bloomfield showcased their learning labs that help connect their students’ academic learning to a play-based model. They set up a vet clinic and a daycare center for students to experience.

The Margaret Chase Smith site ran a STEAM center featuring three different science and engineering experiments. Part of REACH’s overall mission is to connect its learners to educational enrichment opportunities related to 21st Century careers.

With the four-year renewal of the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, REACH reaffirms its unwavering commitment to remain a solid and consistent presence in the community by supporting working families during afterschool hours. Although REACH currently works with over 180 students, it is not just about numbers. We are striving to build a stronger, more engaged community, one student at a time.

MSAD 54 Awarded “First 10” Grant



MSAD 54 is excited to announce that we were selected by the State of Maine to receive the First 10 Grant. The “First 10 Schools and Communities” initiative unites school districts, elementary schools, early childhood programs, community partners, and families to improve teaching, learning, and care for young children.

First 10 includes families and children prenatal through age ten with the goal of providing necessary support for all children and families to have a strong start. Investing in the first decade of a child’s life, when 95% of brain development takes place, has been proven to positively impact a child’s success in school and beyond. This initiative, funded by the Maine Department of Education (MDOE), will allow our district to become a Resource Hub to increase connection between our school, our families, our students, and our community.

Although North Elementary School is the central focus for the first year of this three-year grant, MSAD 54 plans to implement this initiative throughout the entire district. With the upcoming opening of Margaret Chase Smith Community School next year, we will be working hard to create smooth transitions for our students from early childhood through elementary school.

Over the summer, we assembled a First 10 team to start planning and implementing the grant. This team includes teachers, administrators, parents, community members, local childcare providers, and other dedicated individuals.

One of the many benefits of the First 10 Grant is the State funding for a Community Outreach Coordinator, Kasey Purington. Mrs. Purington will work closely with educators and community partners

to ensure that families have access to essential resources during the early years of a child's development.

Our team has set several goals, including supporting incoming Pre-K and kindergarten students, organizing "Play and Learn" events for young children in the community, launching a parent communication campaign, and providing ongoing support to families. All events, resources, and activities will be provided district-wide and will be open to anyone in our community.

Building Bridges: A Collaborative Learning Experience Between MSES and MSLC



Last spring, the kindergarten teachers at Mill Stream Elementary School (MSES) sought to enrich their students' experience from a field trip to the Northeast Livestock Expo at the Windsor Fairgrounds. To expand upon this educational adventure, they partnered with the dedicated staff and students of Marti Stevens Learning Center (MSLC).

Recognized as 2024 Maine Agriculture in the Classroom Teachers of the Year, the Marti Stevens educators bring unique hands-on learning experiences to their students through their beekeeping program. This initiative was taken a step further when MSLC students, in collaboration with Aspire River Hawks, traveled to Norridgewock to engage in a series of activities with the kindergartners.

The interactive sessions covered essential topics such as plant growth, the workings of a beehive, and

even a delightful honey tasting! This collaboration not only provided a rich educational experience for both groups but also fostered a sense of community and shared learning.

Building on the success of this initiative, MSLC students interested in early childhood education have been visiting MSES weekly this fall to assist during center time. Recently, the kindergartners have been engaging in dramatic play activities, acting as librarians and barbers as they learn what these jobs entail.

These visits have allowed MSLC students to explore their potential career paths while facilitating meaningful connections between curriculum content and real-life applications for the kindergartners. The partnership between MSES and MSLC exemplifies the power of community in education, demonstrating how shared experiences can enrich the learning journey for both younger and older students alike.

Somerset County Jail Sends Fresh Produce to Local Schools



MSAD 54 applied for and received a grant from "Full Plates Full Potential," a Maine non-profit whose mission is "to strengthen child nutrition programs as critical tools for ending childhood food insecurity in Maine."

Through this grant, MSAD 54 has partnered with the Somerset County Jail, Somerset Public Health, and fellow school districts RSU 74 and MSAD 59.

This fall, schools received their first delivery of vegetables grown and harvested by residents of the Somerset County Jail. Schools will continue to receive fresh produce for the next four years and beyond.

\$300,000 Grant Supports Literacy Development



MSAD 54 was awarded a \$300,000 grant to enhance literacy instruction for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The funds will be used to support professional development for K-5 staff focusing on evidence-based practices and new literacy resources.

To kick off this effort, Jan Burkins and Kari Yates, renowned literacy experts and authors of *Shifting the Balance*, provided onsite training for educators on August 5-6. Their book was provided to all participating staff.

“We were thrilled to bring in Burkins and Yates as part of our professional development efforts,” said Mark Hatch, Assistant Superintendent. “Their work on bridging the gap between balanced literacy and the science of reading is essential to helping our teachers meet the diverse needs of their students.”

In September, teachers, educational technicians, and administrators also participated in two days of professional development connected to the text *Teaching Reading* by Fisher, Frey and Lapp. The book and presenters offered practical strategies for integrating the latest research on the science of reading into daily classroom practices.

Alex Higgins, a second-year teacher at MCSSS stated, “I love how this [training] is connected to our new reading program; it is all making sense, and I can use this in my room on Monday.”

The grant also provided teachers in grades 3-5 with access to the EL Education curriculum, a comprehensive literacy program designed to support high-quality, rigorous instruction. The curriculum emphasizes deep reading, writing, and thinking skills, and aligns with state standards.

“This core program provides us with guidelines, resources, and quality reading texts, to help students dive deeper into grade level material. Not to mention, [it provides] a refreshing facelift for us veteran teachers’ instruction,” said Carla Seymour.

Kara Bubier added, “We believe that by investing

in both our teachers and students, we can continue to close the literacy gap and create lasting change.”

This Maine Department of Education grant is a major step in the district’s ongoing effort to support literacy achievement. We believe that this investment in professional development will have a long-term impact on student success, particularly in the critical early grades where foundational reading skills are developed.

SPH and SAMS Work to Prevent Student Substance Use

During her sixth annual Opioid Response Summit, Governor Mills praised Somerset Public Health (SPH) and Skowhegan Area Middle School (SAMS) for their efforts to educate students about the risks of substance use. SPH developed an informative module called “Rick’s Risk” that they recently presented to over 400 students at SAMS. (The full video of the Governor’s remarks can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3prV4eHkCBU&t=6s>.)

“Rick’s Risks” was part of SAMS’ ongoing iPOWER initiative, which seeks to address needs demonstrated by students. Data collected from the 2023 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) indicated that the need for prevention is strong. The survey revealed that over 30% of our middle school students feel there is slight or no risk to having one or two daily drinks of alcohol, and 45% of students had similar perceptions of marijuana use.

Because low perception of risk can be a predictor of future use, school-based prevention programming like Rick’s Risks is vital. Among other topics, SPH shared information about vaping and the marketing tactics used by big tobacco.

Here are some other facts SPH would like all to consider:

- Many youth (and adults) overestimate the rates of substance use among youth. Actual substance use rates demonstrate that healthy behavior is more common than perceived.
- Prevention requires a community-wide effort.
- Parents can reinforce prevention messaging by modeling healthy choices, staying involved in their child’s lives and activities, making time for meals together, understanding the warning signs, staying informed about current drug trends, establishing clear rules and consequences, and establishing shared expectations

If you have any questions about SPH's work, please reach out to sphinfo@rfggh.net or visit somersetpublichealth.org. For questions related to iPOWER at SAMS, please reach out to mbigelow@msad54.org, zlongyear@msad54.org, or call (207) 474-3339.

A Seat at the Table: Skowhegan Students on the School Board



Last school year marked the first time that students had a seat on the MSAD 54 Board of Directors. In May of 2023, the school board approved a policy that created two non-voting student positions (one junior, one senior) in order to better incorporate student perspectives as part of district decision making. On January 18, 2024, Carly McCabe became the first student to fill one of the two open seats on the school board.

Is it uncommon to have a student on the school board? Not at all. Both RSU 9 (Mt. Blue) and Bangor, for example, have long had students on their boards. Moreover, the Maine State Board of Education, which has oversight of school districts across the state, has had students actively serve on its board since 2008.

This September, two new students joined the MSAD 54 Board. The structure, which calls for students to start as juniors and spend two years on the board as non-voting members, resulted in two open seats this year because last year's lone member, McCabe, graduated. This year senior Sydalia Savage and junior Olivia Huff both went through an application process and were welcomed on as student representatives.

Huff says, "I am very excited and fortunate to have been given this opportunity. [I look forward to] being able to give a voice to my peers...while I have a seat on the school board."

Student representatives can participate in all open board meetings; they also have a seat on the Education Policy & Program Committee. With these appointments, MSAD 54 has provided more opportunities for students to shape their own education.

When asked of the impact the position had on her, former student representative Carly McCabe said, "The biggest lesson that I can take into life with my time on the school board is that everyone is just trying to do what they think is best, and in a divisive world, that's really important to learn and know."

New Firefighter Program at SCTC



The Somerset Career & Technical Center (SCTC) has launched a new firefighting program! This program will help students gain the skills they need for a career in firefighting and emergency services.

A huge thank you to our partners at the Skowhegan Fire Department and Fairfield Fire Department. Their hard work and support have been essential in getting this program started.

We also want to express our gratitude to Mid-Maine Technical Center for their generous donation of firefighting equipment, which will provide our students valuable hands-on experience.

Classes are being held at the Kennebec Valley Community College Hinckley campus, and training is taking place at the Fairfield training facility.

We're excited for our students and can't wait to see how they grow in this program. Thank you to all who helped make this initiative possible.

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MSAD 54 Adult Ed and Community Partners Providing Technology Support

Need help learning how to use that smart phone?
Unsure how to set up a social media account? We've
got you covered.

MSAD 54 Adult Education, with the generous
support of the Town of Skowhegan, Somerset
Economic Development, and the National Digital
Equity Center, has three options for one-on-one
technology support.

In Bingham, Somerset Economic Development
has leveraged grant funds to establish the "Somerset
Connect Center." Located in the former Quimby
Elementary School building, this space offers internet
access, devices, and technology help. Amy Haynes
is on site on Monday, from 8:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m., and
Tuesday, from 12:00-5:00 p.m. Individuals can either
walk in or call the Adult Education office at 474-7553
to make an appointment.



Scarlett DeShong, a Digital Literacy Navigator, also
sometimes works in the Connect Center. However,
she can travel throughout Somerset County to help
groups and individuals with their technology needs.
To schedule an appointment or for more information,
contact Scarlett at Scarlett@digitalequitycenter.org or
(207) 220-7735.



Last but certainly not least, MSAD 54 Adult Education
has offered the Tech Spot in downtown Skowhegan for
over a decade. Evelyn Perry and Micah Weatherford
provide individual help sessions in the Skowhegan
Municipal Building on Tuesday and Wednesday from
2:30-4:30 p.m. Appointments are required. Please call
the Adult Education office at 474-7553 to schedule.