



# DANBURY DIGEST

*District News & Highlights Summer/Fall 2014*



## What's Inside:

- Hundreds wait in line to tour new magnet middle school
- Literacy van promotes reading all summer
- Setting an example: Danbury educators continue to learn

## Superintendent's Message

Dear Danbury Staff, Parents and Supporters,

Welcome to the 2014-15 school year. This year promises to be exciting as we continue to build on our great progress as a growing and successful school district.

We are pleased to fully implement a full-day kindergarten program this fall that ensures a spot for every child in Danbury entering kindergarten. We have also added a total of 18 new classrooms to the Shelter Rock, Stadley Rough and Park Avenue elementary schools. And, we opened the doors to our newest school, the Westside Middle School Academy. The WSMSA on School Ridge Road will have two learning academies: the STEM academy and the global studies academy.

We have accomplished much over the past year and we are eager to continue on our successful path. Our district offers more opportunities and more educational choices for our students than ever. We appreciate your contributions to our school family because your support is what helps us and our students continue on a path of successful growth.

We remain committed to providing the best educational experience possible to every student, and we look forward to seeing all of our students when they return to school.

Dr. Sal Pascarella  
Superintendent of Schools

## Danbury's newest school offers STEM, global

The Westside Middle School Academy has opened its doors for the 2014-15 school year, welcoming 400 district middle school students. The magnet school has two academies: one with a focus on a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and one for global studies. The new WSMSA will accommodate 600 students by 2016-17 and will open with 300 students in STEM and 100 students in global. More students will be phased in over the next two years being chosen through a districtwide lottery system.

Principal Dr. Frank LaBanca said the school will be progressive in the way that teaching and learning will take place. Students will be encouraged and expected to problem-solve and be creative. The magnet school, which draws students from all over the district, has an exploration theme. STEM exploration will be scientific challenges, whereas the global academy will explore challenges based on global issues. For instance, LaBanca explained that if students were faced with the

current issue of water quality around the world, the STEM students will look for ways to purify water and devices necessary for that process. The global students would explore the geo-political point of view and campaign to educate people to find solutions. "Each can take an issue and develop real solutions that are useful," LaBanca said. "Students take ownership of their education and the teachers are there to help students construct understanding and meaning."

## Danbury teachers chosen for LearnZillion ‘Dream Team’



Rachael Saunders

Danbury High School physics teacher Jameson Parker and Rachael Saunders, math instructional coach for the Danbury schools, were two of the eight educators from Connecticut and 200 nationwide chosen from an international pool of 4,000 educators to participate in LearnZillion’s “TeachFest,” a professional

development event focused on creating high-quality Common Core curricular resources. In June, the Dream Team participated in TeachFest in New Orleans to gather best practices as input for their work with LearnZillion, a company that promotes learning and teaching through assessments, video and progress reporting that highlight Common Core standards.

Dream Team members now apply what they’ve learned to the district and work as part of a LearnZillion-facilitated digital professional learning community. Saunders is already using what’s she’s learned to impact her students. This was Saunders second year on the Dream Team.

### Board of Education Members

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## District’s mobile library promotes summer reading

This summer, the ice cream truck had some competition. The district’s literacy mobile had students running for free books when it rolled into their neighborhoods. Throughout the summer, the literacy mobile makes its rounds, stopping at least once at five areas throughout the district. Donated to the city 12 years ago, the recreational vehicle-turned-mobile library sat until two years ago when Anne Mead, administrator for DPS Early Childhood Education and Extended Learning programs, and her husband Jim decided to turn it into a library. Jim Mead drives the van to the various locations. Superintendent Dr. Sal Pascarella said that the

main goal of the literacy mobile is to extend learning beyond the school year by making reading fun and exciting. “The literacy mobile provides an opportunity for students to see their teachers, report on their reading progress and engage in independent reading,” Pascarella said. “This ensures that students keep their learning skills sharp and don’t lose any progress from the school year.” Bonnie Caton, a literacy specialist at Stadley Rough elementary school, said she got involved with the program because she wanted to see her students keep up their readings skills during the summer months. The traveling library is the perfect solution to getting

students excited about reading.



## Danbury principal chosen for 'Google Teacher

Dr. Frank LaBanca, principal of the district's new Westside Middle School Academy, was one of 50 teachers nationwide selected for 'Google Teachers Academy' this summer.

The Google Teacher Academy (GTA) is a professional development experience designed to help primary and secondary educators from around the globe get the most from innovative technologies. Each GTA is an intensive, two-day event during which participants get hands-on experience with Google tools, learn about innovative instructional strategies, receive resources to share with colleagues and immerse themselves in a supportive community of educators making impact.

"Westside Middle School will be a technology-enhanced learning environment," said LaBanca. "The GTA will enhance my skills as an instructional leader to share cutting-edge technology with the faculty." Some 50 innovative educators from around the world are selected to attend each GTA and include classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, technology advocates, librarians, administrators, professional trainers, and other education professionals. Participants are selected based on their professional experience, their passion for teaching and learning, and their successful use of technology in school settings; GTA says on its site that they are particularly interested in educators who actively provide mentoring or training for other teachers. The GTA

is designed to create a strong professional community of educators who support each other over the course of a year. LaBanca is a graduate of Western Connecticut State University's doctoral program in instructional leadership. The new school is a magnet school because of its theme-based curriculum, but the curriculum will also follow the standard district academic criteria.



## A garden grows at Rogers Park Middle School

By tearing down vines of invasive plants, by moving rocks and logs to build a bog, and by crawling around in the dirt to plant strawberries and lettuce, eighth graders at Rogers Park Middle School proved that learning doesn't always happen in the classroom.

After months of working in their school's backyard, the students officially presented this year's garden to schoolmates, teachers and members of the community on June 11. The vegetable garden is made up of eight beds of lettuce, kale, peas, onions, potatoes and other edibles. The ecological garden that sits outside the fenced in vegetable area is teeming with native plants intended

to attract bugs and replace the invasive plants that once dominated the grounds.

The garden is part of the science curriculum for the eighth-grade cluster overseen by science teacher Bernardo DeCastro and social studies teacher Daniel Heitor. Teachers George Hochsprung, Dr. Gerard Werner and Nilda Amonte have also made substantial contributions to the garden since its inception several years ago. Each student is involved in some aspect of the garden, from report on its progress to planting and caring for the garden to cooking with the produce. The area that was previously overgrown with invasive plants is now

the Native Plant Garden and the Hochsprung Outdoor Classroom. The classroom is named for George and Dawn Hochsprung. After 40 years in the Danbury schools, George Hochsprung retired last year from Rogers Park and taught the same students who are tending this year's garden. His wife, Dawn Hochsprung, was principal of Sandy Hook Elementary School when her life was taken in the December 2012 tragedy there.

A small Nyssa Black gum tree is planted in the garden to honor George and Dawn Hochsprung. The tree is a food source for birds and will grow for hundreds of years.



## STEM Summer Experience 2014

For four weeks this summer, dozens of elementary students learned about science, technology, engineering and math with hands-on projects, field trips and competitions. From examining specimens under a microscope to building mousetrap racecars, there was a different activity every day at STEM Summer Experience. Partial funding for the STEM Summer Experience also comes from the CT State Department of

Education's Inter-district Grant. The purpose of this funding is to bring students from diverse communities together to learn about each other and to build an appreciation for all students and their families. This is the fourth year that Danbury has been awarded this funding. The summer program is an opportunity for students to maintain their academic skills while exploring activities and experiences that

are of interest. The Summer Experience is one of five initiatives the Danbury school district offers to combat summer slide for its students. Throughout the school year, the students will have the opportunity to continue their studies on two Saturdays a month. Parents who are in the STEM fields are encouraged to share their expertise. Students will continue to do hands-on activities and go on field trip to local corporations.

### CALENDAR

**Monday, Aug. 25: First day of school, full day**

**Monday, Sept. 1: Labor Day - Schools closed**

**Friday, Sept. 19: Schools closed, Professional Development**

**Thursday, Sept. 25: Rosh Hashanah - Schools closed**

**Tuesday, Oct. 7: One-hour early release for students/PD**

**Monday, Oct. 13: Columbus Day - Schools closed**

**Tuesday, Oct. 21: One-hour early release for students/PD**

### Board of Education meetings

2014

every second and fourth Wednesday at 7 p.m. (except as noted)

Sept. 10 and 23 (Tuesday)

Oct. 8 and 22

Nov. 12 and 25 (Tuesday)

Dec. 3 - Annual Meeting

### School lunch prices increased this fall

School lunch prices for 2014-15 have increased by 10 cents. This increase was mandated in order for the school district to maintain federal and state funding for its lunch program.

## Hundreds from community wait to tour district's newest school

Hundreds of community members – from students to faculty members to state representatives and neighbors – turned out for the Aug. 20 ribbon cutting as Mayor Mark Boughton and school administrators opened the doors to the Westside Middle School Academy. The ceremony also acknowledged completion of 18 additional classrooms at Stadley Rough, Shelter Rock and Park Avenue elementary schools. Dr. Sal Pascarella addressed the crowd by asking if there were any students or teachers and a throng of hands went up.

"We've had hard times and the community wanted better," Pascarella said, adding that what is more important than the newly refurbished school building is what's inside.

"It's a beautiful building," said WSMSA principal Dr. Frank LaBanca. "What's going to make it fantastic is the students, faculty and staff. We'll make it a community."

While students gave tours of their new school, hundreds of

community members waited their turn in a line that extended from the front door to the school's side parking lot. The side lot is configured with a new parent drop off and a fresh white façade.

Once inside the building, residents and parents could see for themselves the work involved in making the existing building look virtually brand new. The school is equipped with state-of-the-art media-scapes, a new music room, and science and engineering labs.

Sixth-grader Kymberly Gondinho said she was excited about "all the new stuff."

Resident Kiyoi Vanwright said her daughter Kayla, formerly in the STEM program at Rogers Park Middle School, is in eighth grade at the new school. "I'm excited about the technology and project-based learning," Vanwright said. "Kayla is excited about the technology too; she is thinking about a career in graphics."

BOE member Annrose Fluskey-

Lattin has two children in the school. "I'm excited for this new chapter in Danbury," Fluskey-Lattin said. "It brings a choice and it reduces the student population at our existing middle schools. This is much needed."

Sixth-grader Rafa Hassan likes that WSMSA has a higher concentration of her favorite subjects, math and science. "I'm looking forward to getting to know this place," said Ashley Lema, who is coming from Shelter Rock Elementary School and will be in sixth grade global studies program. "I wanted to come here to learn different languages. I want to learn Spanish and Mandarin."



City and school officials hold a ribbon cutting for the Westside Middle School Academy on Aug. 20

## Students get in academic shape at kindergarten 'boot camp'



Students prepare for the first day of kindergarten by learning their ABC's

They learn to stand together in a straight line, open their own juice boxes and raise their hands to ask a question. Since these are the keys to success for any kindergarten student, Danbury Public Schools offers a quick prep course for students who didn't have the benefit of preschool. The "Kindergarten Summer Skills" program for incoming kindergartners is held at the Family Learning Center, 49 Osborne St. in Danbury.

Because kindergarten registration takes place in the same building as the summer program, administrators are able to assess whether children need a little more preparation before beginning their first day at school. "It's a real quick lesson on letters, shapes and numbers. Some children haven't had experience with crayons and play dough," said FLC coordinator Loren Daly, who has run the program for the

past three years. "A big focus is learning to sit in a circle and learning to line up. In the first week, we focus a lot on separation (from parents). That's a huge part of our day." The teacher-to-student ratio is 1-to-3, which allots plenty of per student instruction and guidance. "We can really focus on them," Daly said.

## Setting an example: Danbury educators continue to learn

The end of the school year is filled with parties and celebrations of students and all they have accomplished. But this summer, the students weren't the only ones with accomplishments to celebrate. Joining the ranks of many of their colleagues, two Danbury administrators: Kristy Zaleta, associate principal for instruction at the middle schools; and Anna Rocco, principal of Ellsworth Avenue School, both earned their Educational Doctorates in Instructional Leadership from Western Connecticut State University in May.

"I love learning and always found myself expanding my knowledge base through reading and collaborating with other educators. Once in the program, my love of learning was further fueled by the rich discussions and varying perspectives of other educators, including teachers and administrators from a diverse group of districts," said Zaleta. "My perspective of education grew from my own classroom to a larger district level and then outside of Danbury's unique set of challenges."

Linda Harris, middle school humanities chair, received her Ed.D.

in Curriculum Leadership degree from Northeastern University also this year.

"I applaud and remain grateful to DPS administrators for encouraging me to take this arduous journey and for supporting me and my research along the way," Harris said.

"Ultimately, I believe students are the greatest benefactors from all continuing education teachers and administrators pursue. As professor and researcher Dr. John Hattie opined: 'the more the student becomes the teacher and the more the teacher becomes the learner, the more successful are the outcomes.'"

Dr. Sal Pascarella, who earned his Ed.D. from Loyola University and is also on the faculty at Sacred Heart University, said that a solid number of the district's educators -- both teachers and administrators -- are working on or have gone on to earn their doctorates.

Deputy superintendent Dr. William Glass and Dr. Harry Rosvally, district coordinator for STEM, both earned Ed.D.s at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Other Ed.D. educators are Meghan Martins, associate principal of

instruction for secondary schools, and Mary Cronin, principal of Mill Ridge Primary School. Frank LaBanca, principal at the district's new Westside Middle School, and Laura Mead, mathematics specialist in the schools, received Ed.Ds at WCSU.

Edie Thomas, principal of Pembroke Elementary School, is working on her Ed.D. at Northeastern University and is scheduled to finish in 2016. Helena Nitowski, principal of the Academy for International Studies (a magnet elementary school), and Tina Hislop, principal of the King Street campus, are currently in the Ed.D. in Instructional Leadership program at Western and are scheduled to finish later this summer and next summer, respectively.

Kara Casimiro, K-12 humanities curriculum administrator, is currently in her last year of doctoral course work at Northeastern University in curriculum, teaching, learning and leadership.

## DHS education club (DECA) earns top state award



A new electronic sign welcoming visitors and students to the campus of Danbury High School is the result of much devotion from the community and the hard work of many students, especially those in the Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA). Not only did their perseverance in a nationwide campaign competition result in a \$100,000 check last fall, but this summer, DHS DECA was one of several high

school clubs in the state recognized by the Connecticut Board of Education for their exceptional efforts. The state BOE recognized DHS DECA as a recipient of the "Career and Technical Student Organizations Outstanding Service Project Award."

The recognized project was the club's involvement in the "Celebrate My Drive" campaign sponsored by State Farm Insurance.

Students sought out community members to text in votes for their school about safe driving. The contest ran for a week in October and by the closing hour Danbury reported more than 132,000 online votes. DHS was one of the top six winners nationwide. In addition to their national standing in the campaign, the DHS group also came in fourth for its creative marketing in the national DECA. DHS will participate in the challenge again this fall.

## School competition inspires student to patent invention



Samatha Sperrazza has a patent pending for her kandy bandZ invention

Samantha Sperrazza, a student at Stadley Rough School, loves science class – the experiments, the “explosions” and the chance to discover. What she discovered through her science courses and this year’s Danbury Public Schools invention convention is that she is an inventor.

More than 300 students participated in the annual districtwide competition and set up tables to “market” their inventions. kandy bandZ, which has a patent pending, is a pliable clear plastic bracelet filled with tiny candy beads and fastened with a colorful band that opens to allow access to the candy. It can be washed and refilled.

Parents Marisa, a stay-at-home mom, and Jeff Sperrazza, a commercial construction

manager, said the idea for the bracelet “just kind of came” to her. Her father brought home tubing of all thicknesses and they played around with making the appropriate size before deciding on the perfect prototype.

“It was pretty easy to do once I thought of it,” said Samantha, who wrote an entire booklet of inventions to make her mom’s life easier.

As for factory production: “We’re the big factory,” said her mom. Mom and daughter assemble the product, fill it with candy and package it.

Several area stores have already ordered up to 100 of the bracelets.

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