



Danbury Digest

District News & Highlights

Spring 2020

Superintendent's message

Dear Danbury Staff, Parents and Supporters,

I hope this finds all of you safe and healthy. We are almost at the finish line of a very challenging school year. First, I want to say thank you to everyone – students, parents, family members, teachers, administrators, community members – for making it possible to complete this school year successfully. I am especially proud of our many teachers, who spent innumerable hours moving their classes online and helping students acclimate to the new platform. These changes have placed an enormous strain on students and their families. However, by working together and recognizing that not everyone had the same challenge and by being patient, it all came together. When it came to light that there were needs in the community not being met once the schools had closed, the school community and supporters throughout the district came together to help. Whether it was to provide food, internet service, computers, or any other crucial items, these individuals did whatever was necessary to get those needs met. This crisis has proven that we may be temporarily isolated, but we are forever united as a community of caregivers. What an important lesson that we teach our students.

Despite our having left the school campuses for the virtual classroom, DPS still had many accomplishments to celebrate over the past several months, including being recognized by the state as having seven schools of distinction and having students recognized at several virtual competitions. While we did not have an active sports season, the coaches maintained contact with students online and made sure that students did not feel forgotten. I have seen this compassionate connection across the school community and it has made a tremendous difference for our students.

As we continue to make sense of all that is happening and wonder what the near future holds, please be assured that behind the scenes the Board of Education members, school administrators and faculty are constantly assessing the situation to make certain that we give our best to our students. Please continue to support your students and those in your community. Without your support, all of these miracles could never be possible.

Stay safe, stay healthy and enjoy the summer with your families,
Dr. Sal

Seven Danbury 'Schools of Distinction' recognized for academic improvement

For a second consecutive year, seven elementary schools in Danbury were named "Schools of Distinction" for the 2018-19 school year by the Connecticut Department of Education. The announcement was made in February of this year. According to a recent report, Hayestown Avenue, Mill Ridge Primary, South Street, Great Plain, Ellsworth Avenue, Stadley Rough and Western CT Academy of International Studies schools were all noted for their performance and/or growth in student success.

This recognition is given to schools in the top 10 percent of the state for performance and/or growth. The Danbury elementary schools were among the more than 100 recognized statewide from more than 1,000 Connecticut public schools. Danbury had the highest number of recognized schools, along with the Greenwich district.

As for the schools of distinction, Great Plain was named as a high performance and high growth school for all students; Ellsworth, Hayestown, South Street and AIS were also recognized for high growth in all students.

"We are proud of all of our schools, and this recognition is indicative of the hard work that our teachers and administrators put into making sure that our students are achieving their academic goals," said Superintendent Dr. Sal Pascarella. "We are a community of learners and this recognition is confirmation of that."

Titled "Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System," Department of Education's standards rely on a broad set of 12 indicators that measure how well a school is preparing students for success in college, careers and life. The system now moves beyond test scores and graduation rates that, in addition to measuring academic achievement, also focuses on student growth over time. The assessment also includes additional key indicators, including academic achievement status measured by new assessments; academic growth; assessment participation rate; chronic absenteeism; and preparation for postsecondary and career readiness – coursework and exams.

Out of this world: DHS senior recognized for discovering new planet



Danbury High School senior Alton Spencer's interest in stars and planets has outgrown our universe. In fact, the 17-year-old student is now being recognized as one of the researchers who recently discovered an exoplanet that is potentially habitable and roughly the size of Earth.

Using information from advanced satellites, specifically NASA's Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS), Alton estimates that this exoplanet – 100 light years away – is orbiting a parent star with a radius and mass 40 percent of the sun and which is relatively 2 percent as bright. He also estimates that TOI-700d is about 18 percent bigger than Earth, has an orbit lasting only 37.4 days and receives 93 percent as much sunlight. He draws estimates based on the planet's transit, a tiny dip in starlight caused when it eclipses its sun. Sensitive telescopes record the brightness over time in a light curve, where the transits can be identified.

According to a NASA website, "The Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS) is the next step in the search for planets outside of our solar system, including those that could support life." TOI-700d was found to be 22 percent larger than Earth and get 86 percent as much sunlight, close to Alton's original estimates and making it likely to be rocky like Earth and cool enough for liquid water.

Though he pursues his research independently, Alton's advances have led to opportunities to work collaboratively with professional scientists.

In July, Alton was invited by astronomer Andrew Vanderburg to work with a team of astronomers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on transit proposals for NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope to confirm the signal of TOI-700d was real. NASA accepted the proposals and the team received transit data for an observation of the exoplanet in October and again in January. As a result of the data gathered, three research papers were published and Alton was credited as a co-author on one of them.

For as long as he can remember, Alton has wanted to study astronomy and said by eighth grade he knew he wanted to focus his career on researching exoplanets and planetary systems. He has spent the majority of his time independently discovering and analyzing exoplanetary systems through various research methods as a citizen scientist. For Alton, it means utilizing data gathered by NASA's Kepler/K2 and TESS telescopes to find exoplanets.

When he isn't discovering exoplanets and calculating data, Alton is in school and says his favorite class this year is AP Environmental Science. He is also a member of the school's robotics club, which he finds is an avenue to connect with other students outside of the classroom. He hopes to attend MIT after his graduation from DHS in June.

"I never knew that Alton dabbled in astrophysics when he's not in the robotics lab," said DHS teacher and Robotics Team adviser Erik Savoyki, who described Alton as low key and cerebral. "Although I expect great things from all of my graduating team members, I believe Alton's contribution to this world will be out of sight, literally."

Story and photo by Brendan Dyer

Shelter Rock students collect food donations to help others

In February, Shelter Rock School donated boxes of food items to help those in need in the Danbury area. As part of its annual "Hearts United Against Hunger," students and staff collected 1,526 items to donate to The Dorothy Day House.



With help from community,

Broadview 'Angels' provide meals to Danbury families



Photo collage contributed by Jennifer Donovan

After the pandemic hit and schools closed in mid-March, Broadview Middle School counselor Christine Miller told students that she would find some way to get meals to them during the school closure. Miller made good on her promise with an outpouring of help from the school community and beyond.

Danbury Public Schools has long been providing meal assistance to families who need help and it's long been a districtwide community effort with teacher, paraprofessionals, administrators, community members and even the students themselves pitching in so that no one goes hungry. Broadview has long been one site where students and families can procure food with its "Backpacker Food Program" with the CT Foodbank and "Friday Food" program. But the closure of schools changed everything as families scrambled to feed their families.

"On March 12, as schools were closing, we handed out as much as we could to our kids and we promised them we'd continue to help," Miller said. "After a few weeks of totally scrambling to do so, we were able to have donations from our Amazon list shipped to Halas Farm to be stored in their greenhouse."

And the new program grew from there.

Teacher Alexandra Clarke created an Amazon list so people could donate to the pantry and the food was then shipped to Broadview for distribution.

"We would not be able to do any of this without Halas Farm. Laura Halas is a paraprofessional at Broadview who has, in addition to her other duties, spent HOURS helping sort and organize the food. She's been helped by Lauren Hudak, another paraprofessional who lives nearby. All work is done following the rules of social distancing, so it is very challenging," Miller said.

The program has also received many donations, including \$2000 from Gerard Booker, a retired Westport teacher who has spent much of his life working to end child hunger. Another \$2000 came from the teacher's union. Miller said community members have also made contributions, including Broadview student Frankie Demunda who raises money by selling his woodworking.

Most recently, the program has delivered bread, meat, produce and other items to 37 families weekly.

Miller said the deliveries are made by the "Broadview Angels," a team of staff members including Sue Mills, Lisa McCarthy, Dallas Moore, Val Anderson, Jeanette Draper, Jennifer Donovan, Noreen Bach, Linda Thomas and Jennifer Looby.

Westside student semi-finalist in National Geographic Bee



Photo contributed by Singh family: AJ Singh at last year's National Geographic Bee state competition

Aditya Jay "A.J." Singh, a sixth-grade student at Westside Middle School Academy, learned qualified as a competitor in the state round of the National Geographic Bee.

This was A.J.'s third time qualifying for the state-level Geo Bee.

A.J. was a student at King Street Intermediate School the first two times he qualified for the competition after defeating competitors at his school. This year, Joseph Nigro, a fourth grader at King Street won the school competition.

One hundred statewide winners were chosen to compete in the March 27 competition at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain. Although this year's competition was cancelled due to the pandemic, annually the state competition is open to students in grades four through eight; 10,000 schools across the country compete in the National Geographic Bee for a chance to win a \$50,000 scholarship.

A.J. prepares for the competition by reading many geography books and studying maps.

DPS music education program receives national recognition for second consecutive year



The Danbury Public Schools district was named a 2020 “Best Communities for Music Education School District” for its commitment to and support of music education for a second consecutive year.

On March 25, the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) released a list of 754 school districts nationwide, 21 of them in Connecticut, recognized as 2019 Best Communities for Music Education.

The NAMM Foundation is a nonprofit supported in part by the National Association of Music Merchants and its approximately 10,400 members around the world. The foundation advances active participation in music making across the lifespan by supporting scientific research, philanthropic giving and public service programs.

Jill Russell-Benner, the DPS K-8 music

department head, serves as the liaison between schools and nonprofit organizations and has been instrumental in getting funding to the schools specifically for music education.

“Being recognized as a ‘Best Community for Music Education’ two years in a row is an honor and speaks to the dedicated music staff and students in the Danbury Schools,” said Russell-Benner. “One of our primary goals has been to create access for all students in the arts and as a district, we continue to build on this each year. This award exemplifies our community’s belief that music and arts are an integral component of our students’ educational experience. We would like to thank the NAMM Foundation for this incredible distinction and continued support of Music Education in Danbury.”

In 2018, the Redding-based SpreadMusic-Now gave \$40,000 to VH1 Save the Music Foundation to support the donation of musical instruments to Danbury schools. VH1 Save the Music donated \$120,000 in musical instruments and supplies for elementary band programs at Ellsworth, Hayestown and Stadley Rough schools. NAMM donated \$20,000 to the foundation, as well. Since that time, efforts continue to make certain that eventually all K-8 students will have access to musical instruments and education.

“It is wonderful that students can experience learning an instrument and workin with each other in a musical group,” said Superintendent Dr. Sal Pascarella. “We are so fortunate to have Jill working with the nonprofit communities. It is community partners like these that enable our students to be successful.”



Practice, practice, practice:
Danbury student performs at
NYC’s legendary Carnegie Hall

King Street Intermediate School fifth-grader Lucia Trudo has played the piano for five years and practices at least an hour a day and takes weekly piano lessons. Her hard work paid off when she competed against 40 other pianists and was chosen to perform at the famed Carnegie Hall in February.

Despite her dedication and talent, Lucia took nothing for granted when she competed in the Crescendo International Music Competition in December. “I was hoping to get second or third place, but thought maybe I would get honorable mention,” Lucia said.

The nonprofit Crescendo International Music Competition is held annually for musicians five through 22 and is open to all instrumentalists (piano, strings and winds), vocalists, duets and ensembles. Lucia played composer M.K. Oginski’s “Polonaise in A minor,” which she had practiced faithfully since September. “I was proud, but it was nerve wracking. I was proud of myself for doing it,” said Lucia, who plays in a worship band at her church.

Lucia said that she enjoys playing the piano, but mostly enjoys the challenge of new compositions.

“I like learning new pieces, and not repeating things over and over,” Lucia said. Despite her talent, Lucia said that she isn’t likely to pursue music as a career, mostly because she prefers science and academic pursuits.

“I’d like to be a scientist, but I do want to keep playing,” she said. Her advice for aspiring musicians is to “practice, and you’ll get to your goal.”

Ten Westside students recognized at virtual Connecticut Science & Engineering Fair

WMSA highest performing middle school at fair



Maria Eduarda Sousa at the 2019 Westside Middle School Academy Science Fair

Ten Westside Middle School Academy received awards for their science-based research projects at the Connecticut Science & Engineering Fair held in mid-March. The fair moved to a virtual format in light of the pandemic. Westside was also recognized as the highest performing middle school at the online competition.

The ten Westside students were among 450 competing students who submitted digital uploads of their presentations for the virtual fair. The Danbury finalists were among 120 from across the state. This is the sixth consecutive year that WMSMA has been among the top schools in terms of winning entries.

WMSMA science teacher and STEM theme coach Jon Neuhausel has led students who participates in the fair each year said this year's fair went smoothly, despite the new format.

"It was impressive to see the fair, which hosts over 600 projects, put on a virtual event in a matter of days," Neuhausel said.

The online setting of the fair allowed for students to still show off in-depth knowledge of their particular topic of study with top performers taking part in virtual interviews with the judges. Neuhausel "was able to see firsthand how to help our students with their presentation and communication skills."

The winning students are as follows:

Anoohya Allenky, Grade 7

Quantification of Caffeine in Coffee Using Different Brewing Methods

- 2nd Honors

Ava Amatulli, Grade 8

Citric Acid Synthesis using *Aspergillus niger*

- 2nd Honors

- Urban School Challenge: Middle School Finalist – Medallion

Ella Brown, Grade 8

Kombucha SCOBY Infused Hydrogels as a Natural Bandaid Stopping the Growth of *Escherichia coli*

- 1st Honors
- Life Sciences: 3rd Place- 8th grade
- Urban School Challenge: Middle School Finalist – Medallion
- Biotechnology: 2nd Place- Biotechnology
- Meyerand Young Woman Scientist Award
- Invitation to compete at Broadcom MASTERS National Competition

Shriya Jonnalagadda, Grade 8

Designing an Automatic Watering Device using an Arduino

- 2nd Honors
- Petit Family Foundation Women in Science & Engineering: Finalist – Medallion
- Robert Francoeur Memorial Award --- Creative or innovative project in engineering or computer science by female students

Ryan Lincoln, Grade 8

The Effect of Different Types of Water on the Efficiency of Hydrogen Energy Production

- 2nd Honors
- Maria Nascimento, Grade 7

The Effect of Different Preservatives on Bread Mold

- 2nd Honors
- Richard Parker, Grade 8

Making an Affordable Ozone Sensor and Proofing its Accuracy

- 2nd Honors
- Urban School Challenge: 2nd Place Middle School and highest

- Placing 8th grader

- IEEE, Connecticut Section Award

- Dreams Unlimited Award

Kaitlyn Salvatore, Grade 8

The Effect of Habitat Loss on a Cockroaches Stress and Well Being

- 1st Honors
- Life Sciences: 2nd Place-- 8th grade
- Petit Family Foundation Women in Science & Engineering: 1st Place
- Urban School Challenge: 3rd Place Middle School
- Biotechnology: 1st Place
- Invitation to compete at Broadcom MASTERS National Competition

Sabrina Serpa-Smith, Grade 8

Testing *Escherichia coli*'s Resistance to Different Dilutions of Bacteriophage

- Coliphage T4 and Coliphage T4R
- 1st Honors
- Life Sciences Awards: Finalist – Medallion

Maria Eduarda Sousa, Grade 8

Tumor Suppression of *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* in *Daucus carota*

- 1st Honors
- Life Sciences Awards: 4th Place- 8th grade
- Urban School Challenge: Finalist – Medallion
- Alexion Biotechnology Awards --- 5th Place- Biotechnology 8th grade- trophy
- Invitation to compete at Broadcom MASTERS National Competition

DPS receives funding for 'Portrait of the Graduate' program Initiative to focus on improving graduate skills, knowledge

Danbury Public Schools received funding in February from the Barr Foundation for its initiative "Portrait of the Graduate," to focus on assuring graduates are well prepared for jobs and careers after high school.

The Barr Foundation's mission is to invest in human, natural and creative potential, serving as thoughtful stewards and catalysts. Based in Boston, Barr focuses regionally, and selectively engages nationally, working in partnership with nonprofits, foundations, the public sector, and civic and business leaders to elevate the arts, advance solutions for climate change, and connect students to success in high school and beyond. In addition to evaluating efforts in the classroom, the district will seek input from others.

"All schools, from pre-K to grade 12 will be engaged in the process, but this is a community initiative not just schools," said Assistant Superintendent Dr. Kevin Walston, "We want to hear from residents, students, teachers, business and community partners. "The POG will also help inform curriculum revisions from elementary through secondary education so that by the time students graduate, they have acquired the knowledge, skills and behaviors for thoughtful and prepared graduates."

A established POG steering committee is working to organize a Danbury Coalition. Those interested in participating can send an email to: POG@danbury.k12.ct.us.

DPS partners with NYU to offer teaching program

Danbury Public Schools has partnered with New York University's Steinhardt program to provide a one-year combined residency and master-of-arts teaching program for college graduates to become public school teachers.

Information sessions were held in February and again in May. Qualified candidates need only have a bachelor's degree.

The Danbury initiative will begin in the fall to prepare middle and high school teachers in English, math, science, social studies and special education. The program uses a transformative approach to teacher preparation by combining comprehensive instruction with holistic support including school-based mentors and hands-on classroom experience.

For more information, contact Shuvi Santo at shuvi.santo@nyu.edu or Anne Mead at (203) 830-6508.

DHS students advocate for school funding at state legislature



Some Danbury High School students seized the opportunity to advocate for the district's educational funding when they participated in Women's and Girls' Day events held at the State Capitol Building on March 6. Eleven DHS students, chaperoned by Ms. English, were among 120 young women from across the state to attend the Women's History Month event. "Danbury was represented well as two of our young women spoke about school funding and how they hope to make it better for Danbury in the future," said Ann Tucci, head of the DHS Social Studies Department. The house minority leader addressed the group and women of all backgrounds gave testimonials. Students also had a session on women's history in the state, and attended a career, health and safety fair.

Hatters girls' basketball coach named 2020 St. Clare Award winner

After leading the Hatters for more than 30 seasons and reaching 500 career wins last winter, Danbury High School girls' basketball coach Jackie DiNardo is once again being recognized -- this time as the St. Clare Award winner by the Franciscan Life Center in Meriden.

DiNardo will be recognized at the 35th Annual Franciscan Sports Banquet and Silent Auction on Sept. 1 along with retired New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning, recipient of the 2020 St. Francis Award.

"Jackie is very deserving of the St. Clare Award," said DHS Director of Athletics Chip Salvestrini. "This award represents giving back and helping others, and these are things Jackie has done all her life. Jackie's goal, as a coach and as an administrator, is to give young people avenues to make the right choices in their lives. Jackie has an unrelenting work ethic with a heart to match. This award is a wonderful acknowledgement of her work throughout her career."

DiNardo's long career of accomplishments include being named a National High School Coaches Association finalist. She led the Hatters when they won the FCIAC Tournament Championship in 2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14, becoming one of three teams to win a triple championship. In 2015, DiNardo was inducted into the Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference Hall of Fame.



DHS, Westside students excel at regional virtual CT History Day competition

Eight students from Westside Middle School Academy and 17 Danbury High School students earned awards for their history research projects at the Connecticut History Day regional competition. This year the competitions were virtual, and students submitted their work on March 21. Connecticut History Day, an affiliate program of National History Day, is for students in grades six through 12 and encourages historical exploration through research, analysis and interpretation. This year's theme is "Breaking Barriers in History." The Danbury student winners are as follows:

Category: Junior Individual Documentary

Third Place: Viewing Barbara Walters. Westside Middle School: Jenna Saltzman

Category: Junior Individual Website

Second Place: Space: To the Moon and Back. Westside Middle School: Zachary Wright

Category: Junior Group Exhibit

Second Place: Chicago Freedom Movement School. Westside Middle School: Aekom Diogun, Colin Gordon, and Xavier Going

Third Place: This Project Won't Put You To Sleep: Westside Middle School: Emili Lopez-Gibbons, Chloe Djilani, and Ethan Kennedy

Category: Senior Group Documentary

First Place: Breaking Barriers: The Danbury Railroad Station. DHS: Valentina Ramos, Amy Cordova, Megan Bhatti, and Hibba Qureshi

Category: Senior Group Website

First Place: Breaking Barriers: The Danbury Fair. DHS: Melissa Jimenez, Allyson Vecchia-Spooner, Caitlin Van Tronk, and Sarah Barta

Third Place: King of the Court: Billie Jean King. DHS: Juliana Wiseman, Riya Patel, and Kaya Fahsbender

Category: Senior Group Exhibit

First Place: Breaking the Ice: Welcoming Antarctica to the World. DHS: Faith Thomas, Ana Dela Cruz, Sarah Hwang, and Laura Snow

Second Place: Breaking Barriers During the Kosovo War. DHS: Arta Berisha and Patriot Berisha

The state level of the competition will also be held virtually at a date to be determined. The National History Day competition, also virtual, will be held in June.

Rogers Park Middle School runs meal train for area families

After several weeks of collecting donations, Rogers Park Middle School has raised more than \$5,500 to help purchase groceries for area families affected by COVID-19 due to job loss and financial difficulties. Prior to the close of Danbury Public Schools on March 12, Rogers Park had a backpack program that sent students home on Fridays with a backpack full of donated food for the weekend.)

"The program has expanded as so many of our families have become food insecure," said principal Kristy Zaleta.

For RPMS families to access the program, they need to go to the link of the RPMS website and enter their names to be added onto the meal train recipient list. One of the staff members calls the families and does shopping for them through Instacart. The groceries are then delivered directly to their homes.

"We're very proud of the way our RPMS community has come together to support one another in such a caring way in these unprecedented times."



SCHOOL CALENDAR

June

10: DHS graduation for
students A-F

11: DHS graduation for
students G-O

11: ACE Graduation 3
p.m.

11: Virtual moving up
ceremonies for eighth
grade

*Rogers Park Middle
School 5:30 p.m.

*Broadview Middle
School 7 p.m.

*Westside Middle School
7 p.m.

12: DHS Graduation for
students P-Z

12: Reach/Endeavor -
graduation and
8th moving up 12 noon

12: Last day of school

Danbury Public Schools grateful for community support



Since schools closed on May 12, Danbury Public Schools has been providing meals to families who are facing challenges. Among the companies who came forward to help provide meals whether by providing groceries, drivers, donation or anything to help this massive food drive include: Boehringer Ingelheim, Sodexo of BI, Food Resue USA, The New American Dream Foundation, The Amber Room, United Way and the numerous drivers for the Beaver Street, Eden Drive, and Laurel Gardens housing communities, Morris Street and Park Avenue schools and the Danbury Early Childhood Center. More than 12,600 meals have been served over the past eight weeks to children in these communities by community partners and volunteers.

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