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# SCHODACK

CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



APRIL 2015

## Skyping with Authors Encourages Students to Read

Fifth grader Lukas read so many books this school year he kind of lost count.

“I think I read 17 books,” said Lukas, rattling off several book titles. “There were so many, I’m not exactly sure.”

Lukas wasn’t alone. Fifth graders were voracious readers this year thanks to an annual project at Castleton Elementary that gets students excited about reading.

The project is built around the Newbery Medal, a national award that honors the best children’s literature each year. Fifth graders participate in a variety of hands-on activities that encourage reading and builds researching, debating and other skills.

For students, the most exciting activity is talking with authors through Skype. The videoconferencing technology allows students to gather around a screen in the school library and talk face to face with authors from around the country in their homes.

“Skyping with authors is a great experience,” explained Tobiah Gieser. “When you Skype you get a chance to talk to authors you wouldn’t otherwise get to talk to. We learned about the writing process, like some authors created pictures before they wrote.”

“It’s good to see them face to face,” said Samantha Malchow. “You can ask them questions and they’ll answer.”

“It’s really inspiring,” added Landon Flach. “It’s exciting when you’re talking to an author who’s won Newbery’s.”

Students were particularly excited this year because they spoke twice with author Kwame Alexander, winner of this year’s Newbery Medal. Mr. Alexander was so impressed with Castleton Elementary students when he Skyped with them earlier in the year, he Skyped with them the day after he won the award as well.

“I wrote a letter to Kwame and that led to our Skype with him,” explained Ben Marra. “When we found out we were going to Skype with Kwame we jumped up and down with excitement.”

“When we Skyped with him after he won the award, Kwame came up on the screen and he started screaming with excitement and then we started screaming,” added Eli Charlebois.

Library Media Specialist Stacey Rattner and Teacher Sid Reischer, who work together to create the Newbery Medal project, explained students Skyped with nine authors already this year. Students also held debates to argue which book they thought should win the award and created podcasts and videos.

“This is an amazing project,” said Ms. Rattner. “It aligns to Common Core. We’re debating, we’re analyzing, we’re doing story elements, we’re writing, we’re producing podcasts.”

“Our goal is to get them excited about reading,” added Mr. Reischer. “For students who enjoy reading, they get to read great literature. For other students, it turns the light switch on, that reading is fun.”



## Educators Refining Capital Project to Meet Student Needs

Faculty, staff, students and administrators have been busy since November when voters approved a Capital Project, meeting regularly to discuss how to best design school renovations that support student learning.

“We’re not only designing better classrooms but the academic programs to go along with them, just as our community asked for,” said Superintendent Bob Horan. “As we move forward, we keep going back to the Educational Summit in 2013 when more than 60 community members helped us create a vision for our project.”

Educators have joined together for numerous meetings and brainstorming sessions over the past months where discussions revolve around what is best for students. Flexible classroom spaces,

how to best integrate grades 7 and 8 to the High School building, and technology needs are just some of the topics discussed.

Administrators and teachers also continue to visit schools, colleges and businesses for ideas for classrooms and student spaces that will engage students for years to come.

“We are looking at schools that are excelling to see how we can design a building for 21st century learning that is student-focused where students are comfortable learning,” explained Mr. Horan.

The Capital Project is still on schedule to be ready for the start of the 2017-18 school year. As planning progresses, the district will continue to keep our community aware of developments. An update on the Capital Project is also made at every BOE meeting.

# MHMS Students Produce TV Morning Show

Like a veteran news director, 6th grader Josh Lugo sits behind his control panel each morning and emphatically counts down from three to one with his fingers as he starts the Morning Show.

With George Isbester by his side, the two classmates direct the show, bringing up graphics and cueing the on-screen talent, students Elaina Champigny, Aidan Fletcher and Jenna Hoffman who lead the Pledge of Allegiance and share news throughout the school's classrooms.

"It's fun working the board," Josh explains. "It was really hard at first but now I've mastered it."

Each quarter, a new group of students gets to run Maple Hill Middle School's Morning Show, which is broadcast on TVs throughout the school. Teacher Kristopher Navratil advises students but encourages them to learn from each other.

"Instead of hovering over their shoulders, I had the students from the previous quarter teach them," Mr. Navratil explains. "It involves that peer-to-peer mentoring that students love."

Mr. Navratil also encourages students to take ownership of the show. As a result, each group of students brings their own flavor. Students even prerecord their own segments to air.

"This is a great opportunity for students," said Mr. Navratil. "It allows them to use the cameras and edit video. It gets them out of the box and be creative. If they want to get out of study hall, they can come down and work on a segment."

Jenna Hoffman said she might want to work in television when she gets older so it's great to try it out. "I like technology and there's a lot of technology to it," she noted.

"I like coming in early and getting ready for the show," added Aidan Fletcher. "The cafeteria can be a little crazy in the morning so it's fun to come in here and be productive."

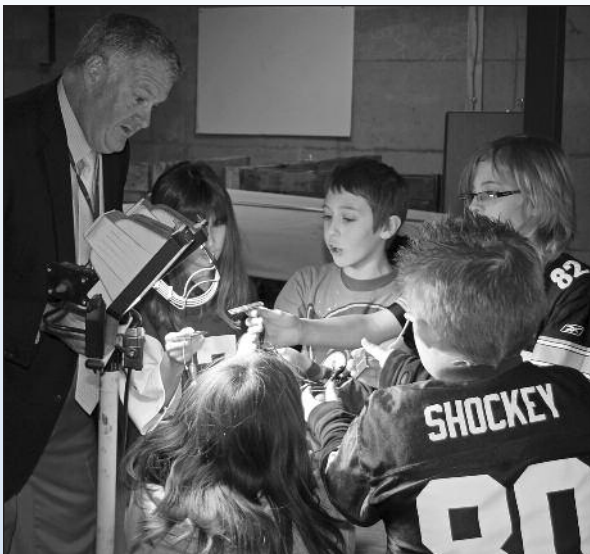


Standing just out of camera view, Principal James Derby watches the students proudly as he waits for his cue to help read the Paw ticket winners.

"It's a great way to give students ownership in their school," Mr. Derby said after the show. "That's one of the biggest parts for students, along with the opportunity to get behind cameras and work with technology."

## Students Have Fun Learning at STEM Day

The 3rd Annual STEM Day at Maple Hill Middle School was a hit once again this year with students in grades 5-8 enjoying a day of hands-on learning in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.



"The purpose of STEM Day is to take a different approach to STEM learning by making it a day of engaging activities that also allows our students to explore STEM career opportunities," explained Principal James Derby.

Students traveled from classroom to classroom through the day, learning from special presenters including Bob Kovachick from WNYT discussing meteorology, RPI students explaining materials science, and Dutch Hollow Farms demonstrating how technology is instrumental to agriculture.

One of the most popular activities involved a robot from the Northeastern Regional Information Center. Students used laptops to program the robot, making it move, dance and speak.

Faculty and staff also led activities throughout the day including showing how solar energy works, teaching engineering principles by building bridges from dried pasta, and simulating DNA extraction.

"I was extremely impressed with what we had today," Mr. Derby said after the event. "It's a credit to our teachers and staff who organized it and to our business and college partners who volunteered their time. Every room I visited the students were engaged and having fun while learning."

## Scientists Answer Questions About Careers

To help students understand what careers in science are available to them, Maple Hill High School invites scientists and business representatives each month for guest lectures.

Science teacher Kaitlin McGann started the Science Seminar program to help better prepare students for college and careers.

"While we do a good job of teaching students the skills and content they need, I thought we needed to do something more to show them what they could do with all of that beyond school," explained Ms. McGann.

Researchers such as Dr. David Putnam from Cornell University's Department of Biomedical Engineering and business representatives such as President/Co-Founder Brent Solina of MICROorganics are just some of the speakers who have visited with students to talk about what they do.

Given the varied careers available in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), Ms. McGann noted it's difficult to answer the students' questions about careers. The speakers, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds, can speak directly to that.

"We often get questions from students like 'Okay, I get all of this, but what does a chemist do?'," explained Ms. McGann. "I thought the best way to answer their questions was to put them face to face with some of the careers that are out there."

## Leonard Bacon Named Master Teacher

Maple Hill High School science teacher Leonard Bacon was named a Master Teacher by New York State and the State University of New York in January.

"We are very proud of Mr. Bacon. He is an outstanding teacher in the classroom and has a great vision for where we should be heading in the education of students in the future," said Principal Ron Agostinoni. "He will be a perfect fit for the New York State Master Teacher Program."

Master Teachers are considered the highest-performing STEM teachers in the state. There are only 66 master teachers in the Capital Region.

Mr. Bacon joins Maple Hill High School math teacher Janice Balogh, who was selected as a Master Teacher last year.

## Business Incubator Helps Teach Students

In the back of the bus garage, the district's latest business incubator is building a 40-foot boat to show solar powered boats are a practical option.

David Borton retired from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to work full-time on his business, which he calls Solar Sal. A former engineering professor, Mr. Borton enjoys speaking with Schodack students as much as working on his boat.

"This project has everything educationally," Mr. Borton explains. "It has engineering, art, math, physics and solar energy. There's chemistry with batteries used to store solar energy, mechanical energy to move the propeller and the boat has momentum."

Mr. Borton brought his project to Schodack CSD after hearing about Superintendent Bob Horan speaking at an event where he pitched the district's business incubator initiative.

Students in all three school buildings have visited Mr. Borton's workspace to learn about the project. Middle and High School students have even helped work on the boat, gaining experience using hand tools.

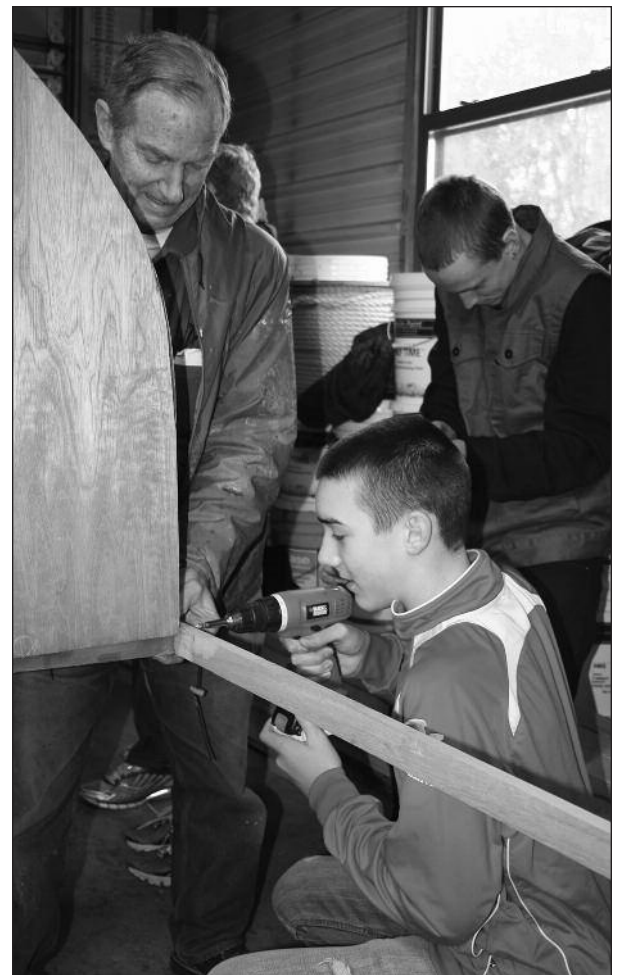
"I think everybody needs that hands-on experience," Mr. Borton said. "It gives you more appreciation of how things work."

But student learning isn't limited to working on the boat. Mr. Borton visited the High School's AP World History class, for example, to discuss the direction of renewable energy.

"He provided a historical overview of power because we're studying the industrial revolution," explained teacher Sue Wollner. "We were learning about water and steam power so this fit in."

Students later visited the bus garage where they asked questions about the boat project. Before long, Mr. Borton put students to work, attaching a piece of wood to the frame.

"It becomes more real to them to see a project that will be used on the Hudson River because we've spent a lot of time talking about local history, trade and travel on the Hudson River and the Erie Canal," said Ms. Wollner.



## Postal Customer

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# Distance Learning Creates Opportunities

Instead of spending time in study hall, a group of 6th and 7th graders learned about biofuels this year from an educator at the Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The activity was made possible through Distance Learning where a museum educator led the lesson to a room full of excited students who hung on every word she said through videoconferencing.

"We learned about biofuels and fossil fuels and the color of gases," explained 7th grader Claudia Eckel. "We also learned about how corn is used in more than 4,000 products as well as being used to feed animals."

While the educator was nearly 1,000 miles away, the lessons were hands-on. Students used materials that were shipped to the school in advance of the lesson.

During one activity, students followed the educator's instructions as they made corn and switchgrass molecules from foam and pipe cleaners. Another activity involved students blowing through straws into cups of cabbage juice that changed color as the liquid became more acidic from the carbon dioxide they exhaled.

"The idea was to show how the burning of fossil fuels creates CO<sub>2</sub> that is making the oceans more acidic," said Principal James Derby. "The cabbage juice is an acidity indicator and changed colors as they blew into it."



As the educator led the lesson, teacher Ed Finney helped students in the classroom. He explained students have participated in a number of similar Distance Learning opportunities, talking to individuals from the Pro Football Hall of Fame, a Smithsonian museum and other organizations.

"This was one of the best ones we've done," said Mr. Finney. "It was fun for them and it's great that they're learning in study hall and getting excited at the end of the day."

## MHHS Honors Memory of Student

To honor Chris Beebe, Maple Hill High School held its annual Rent-a-Teacher Day in March, an event started by the former student who passed away in 2011.

"We do it to raise money for Key Club but more importantly to honor Chris's memory," said Principal Ron Agostinoni.

Students bid on teachers and staff who then had to follow what students told them to do. Teachers dressed up in costumes and followed directions, such as teacher Kevin Hunter performing a dance and Mr. Agostinoni announcing how his favorite team, the Dallas Cowboys, would lose to rival Philadelphia Eagles this year.