Reader-Funded News for Philipstown and Beacon

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Improvised Strings
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Most high school students, including those in Beacon, have not had a "normal" academic year since middle school. *Photo by Valerie Shively*

PART 1

Are the Kids Alright?

School is back to normal but students may not be

By Jeff Simms

The Beacon High School parent described her teenage daughter as "the glue of the family" — a headstrong young woman who always "wants to make sure everybody's well and together."

But by the summer of 2020, after students in New York finished the last three months of the school year behind computer screens because of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, something had changed.

One day that summer, the mother took her daughter to Long Dock Park at the Beacon waterfront for some fresh air. The girl wore a sweater. "I thought it was weird, because it was hot out," said the mother, whose identity, along with her daughter's, is being withheld so she could speak candidly about her family's mental health.

Later that summer, her daughter was in the kitchen "grabbing something — and that's when I noticed her arm," the mother said. The girl, who said she felt isolated because of the shutdown, and feared she or her parents would contract COVID before vaccines were available, had been cutting herself with a razor blade.

While her reaction was extreme, the Beacon student was hardly alone in her

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Beacon Will Add Metal Detectors at Night Games

Move made in response to shooting in Newburgh

By Chip Rowe

The Beacon school district said this week it will make "security enhancements," including handheld metal detectors, at its evening football and soccer games following a shooting after a high school game in Newburgh.

In addition, the contents of bags and backpacks will be inspected, games will have a single point of entry and no spectator who leaves will be allowed to return.

The measures will be in effect for the varsity football games tonight (Oct. 7) and Oct. 21 and boys' soccer games on Oct. 12 and Oct. 18, said Superintendent Matt Landahl in a statement.

"Having these evening events is very important to us and we love providing our students and the community a place to cheer on our student-athletes and also hang out with each other," he said. "These changes are not in response to any specific Beacon-related concern but instead are an attempt to be proactive."

The changes come in the wake of a shooting after a Newburgh Free Academy game on Sept. 30 that left three adults with injuries. Police said shots were fired at about 9:35 p.m. during a fight near the north parking lots as the crowd left the game. The victims were all Newburgh residents but not students; they were shot in the thigh, foot and ankle. No arrests have been made.

The Newburgh district said this week

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Outside Money

Millions pour into local House races for negative ads

By Victor Feldman

At a pizza parlor in Kingston, a stark black-and-white image of Rep. Pat Ryan, the former Ulster County executive who is running for the U.S. House district that will include Beacon, appears on a bar TV screen. Ryan, the narrator says against a background of ominous music, wants to disarm the police and free violent criminals from prison. The video cuts to an image of an inmate behind bars, then back to Ryan's face. "Pat Ryan is dangerously liberal," the narrator warns.

Another ad, this one online, features an image of Republican House candidate Colin Schmitt, broadly grinning. "Anti-choice and doesn't stand up for kids," asserts the video's narrator over a background drumbeat. The ad cuts to an image of a woman looking up from a voting booth. She peers into the camera, an expression of disgust across her face. "New Yorkers are on to Colin Schmitt," the narrator declares.

National political groups, including the

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Are the Kids Alright?

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emotional struggles during the pandemic.

Last month, schools in the Highlands began the 2022-23 academic year unfettered by the pandemic for the first time since early 2020. Classes are being held in person and there are no mask or distancing requirements.

But according to school officials, teachers and parents, not everything is back to normal. Problem-solving and other skills have diminished in the classroom, they say, while many children are more withdrawn and fearful of making mistakes, and less able to regulate their emotions. In this series, we hope to provide insight into what's happening with children and teenagers, the youngest of whom have never attended school without precautions.

Anxious times

After discovering she was cutting herself, the Beacon girl's parents removed knives from the kitchen and shaving razors from the bathroom. If she needed to shave, her mother would stay in the bathroom with her. The couple installed security cameras inside their home to keep an eye on her.

"It was something that came out of nowhere for us," the mother said. "We never thought that she would be suffering like that."

The girl told her parents that, in the moment, cutting made her feel better. Research has shown that cutting often begins as an impulse and, because it provides a temporary sense of relief from other painful or overwhelming emotions, can become habitual. "It may help for that moment, but you have to address the core of the problem," the mother told her daughter. "Whatever you're dealing with is still there."

Although public schools in Beacon reopened for "hybrid," two-days-per-week in-person instruction in the fall of 2020, the girl began having stomach aches and continued to feel anxious around crowds. At one point, feeling unsafe at home, she asked to be admitted to a mental health treatment facility.

The stay only lasted a few days; upon returning home, she committed to learning to manage her anxiety. The parents met with school administrators and designed a plan that allowed the girl to give teachers a nonverbal signal and leave class to speak with a counselor if needed. She was also provided extra time to complete tests, to counter anxiety.

Her mother said as she and her husband helped their daughter, "we found out that some of her other friends were dealing with the same issues, becoming very depressed or dealing with anxiety. It was a real eye-opener."

Of course, many children and teenagers were hurting before the pandemic; the U.S. surgeon general noted in an advisory last year that "an alarming number of young people" struggled with depression and thoughts of self-harm even before the shutdown. But the isolation of COVID did nothing to help.

Topsy-turvy

Last month, while reviewing state testing scores with the Beacon school board, Sagrario Rudecindo-O'Neill, the district's assistant superintendent of curriculum and student support, presented a chart to summarize the issue.

In one column were students' grade levels — first, second and so on. In the other was the grade at which the students last experienced a "normal" year.

For a teenager entering the ninth grade at Beacon High School, for example, the last uninterrupted academic year was 2018-19, when he or she was in the sixth grade. For a third grader, the last typical year would have been kindergarten.

In the fall of 2021, "our second grade students were technically coming in for the first time like kindergarten students, emotionally," Rudecindo-O'Neill noted in an interview. "When you come into kindergarten, we're teaching things such as eye contact, sharing and sitting in the seat and sustaining attention. So all those pre-writing skills that you need in order to be able to learn, we had to start those over again, because your typical second grader didn't get an opportunity to do that."

The gap in emotional development is even more evident among middle and high school students.

"The last time ninth grade students had a normal school year, they were sixth graders," Rudecindo-O'Neill said. "So now they're going into high school, not having had that real experience of middle school, which is when your body is changing and you're changing emotionally. That's why middle school is so tough.

"They get into high school, and they're struggling to sustain attention and fulfill the expectations that a 'regular' ninth grader would be able to. You have to be ready to learn in order to learn," she said.

CURRENT GRADE	LAST NORMAL GRADE
12th grade	9th grade
11th grade	8th grade
10th grade	7th grade
9th grade	6th grade
8th grade	5th grade
7th grade	4th grade
6th grade	3rd grade
5th grade	2nd grade
4th grade	1st grade
3rd grade	Kindergarten
2nd grade	Never
1st grade	Never
Kindergarten	Never

Sagrario Rudecindo-O'Neill, the Beacon school district's assistant superintendent of curriculum and student support, in her office *Photo by Valerie Shively*

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

One of the mental health positions added in the Beacon school district through American Rescue Plan funding was a high school teacher focused on restorative practices, a discipline that involves "interventions," or face-to-face meetings, between parties involved in conflict.

The technique was historically found in Indigenous communities and religious traditions. It began seeping into mainstream culture in the 1970s and was first implemented in Australian schools in the 1990s as an alternative to punitive discipline.

Sagrario Rudecindo-O'Neill, Beacon's assistant superintendent of curriculum and student support, explained how the practice is implemented in a school setting.

"If you think about how we have traditionally handled discipline, if you do something, there's a consequence," she said. "Restorative practices empower our students to have a voice, to be able to say, 'We're noticing things in this space that aren't helping us to be productive.'

"Having that open method of communication goes both ways, as opposed to, 'I'm the authority figure and you're not, so what I say goes.' There's a meeting of the minds because they're living there [in the educational space]. What's also missing in our discipline is a student might do something and there's a consequence, but there's not an opportunity to have reconciliation.

"If I did something that hurt or offended you, we're able to sit down and have that conversation, where you're telling me how my actions may have hurt you or disrupted the environment. Then we can say, 'We're going to move forward; and here are some of the ways.' That holds more weight.

"If we look at our penal system, we know that, statistically, punishment doesn't work. But when you look at countries where they do restorative practices, people don't repeat. Because there's a human element to it, where you're seeing what the consequences of your actions are, but you're not an outcast from society. There's an understanding that, yes, this happened, but we still respect you and want you to be a part of our community."

ment of Health reviewed hundreds of reopening plans, the Beacon, Haldane and Garrison districts began the year offering a mix of in-person and virtual instruction. It was the first opportunity for students to return to school since the shutdown six months earlier. Families choosing a hybrid plan sent their children to in-person school two days per week, while all-virtual options were available for students whose families did not want to send them back into classrooms.

As students bounced between virtual and in-person schooling, administrators were juggling mask mandates, contact-tracing and temporary closures in an effort to keep school open while mitigating a highly transmissible virus that by the end of 2020 was killing 2,700 people in the U.S. daily and would get even worse in 2021.

In the spring of 2021, in-person learning was expanded in Beacon and at Haldane High School and — despite the super-contagious Delta variant, which spread throughout the country that summer — in the fall of that year, schools in the Highlands reopened for full-time in-person instruction, albeit with mask requirements.

For students who had been all-virtual, the return to classrooms required some adjustment.

"It's different when you're at home," Rudecindo-O'Neill explained. "You don't have to change clothes if you don't want to; you don't have to turn on your camera. It's a different space than coming in [to the

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> If there were negative behaviors in school, those came back even more pronounced, which demanded further intervention on our part in ways that we weren't doing before the pandemic.
>
> **~ Haldane Superintendent Philip Benante**

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school building], where there's all these expectations of interaction."

Online, "you can't freely speak the way you would in person," she said. "You have to wait. When you go into those breakout rooms, it's very different. And God forbid if the technology isn't working right. In an in-person conversation, you pick up body language, you pick up nuances and you know how your behavior is affecting someone else. You don't get to do that virtually."

Anxiety in children and teens manifests itself in many ways, said Rudecindo-O'Neill. "There's inattention and irritability, or misinterpreting things from other students. We've had to go back to things that we had under control before — how we treat one another in the [educational] space."

At Haldane, Superintendent Philip Benante said students have been dealing with similar circumstances. In 2020-21, "we were still seeing signs of kids who were struggling to demonstrate pro-social behaviors," he said. "For some, it was clear that they hadn't been around other kids for some time. There was this disconnection, or lack of engagement, or, when they were engaging, it was in ways that weren't the most constructive.

"If a student was already struggling in school, socially or emotionally, that was exacerbated," Benante said. "If there were negative behaviors in school, those came back even more pronounced, which demanded further intervention on our part in ways that we weren't doing before the pandemic."

A second account

Another Beacon High School parent shared in an interview how she, too, grew concerned about her son's social and academic well-being during the pandemic.

Before the shutdown, her son was "friendly, but not the most social kid." Once virtual schooling began, he was in his room alone from 8:30 a.m. until 2 p.m. every day, and the isolation intensified.

While the mother hoped her son would become more social as he grew older, the pandemic accelerated the opposite effect. Friendships fell by the wayside, and the teen showed little desire to get together with peers outside of school. He would shoot baskets at home but wasn't interested in trying out for the basketball team at school.

Her son appeared "happy in his own little world," his mother said, but "I don't want him to miss out on forming close friendships. I want him to have fun and still be a kid."

Academics became more challenging, as well. Over Zoom, the teen didn't get the one-on-one interaction he needed and fell behind. The boy's mother said that "some teachers were great," while others "just made assignments." At times, the boy would make a "technology" mistake, such as forgetting to hit "submit" after finishing an assignment, and get a zero, even though the work had been completed.

That led her son to become disheartened with school. "Even when students went back to in-person instruction, if he didn't have a teacher that was on top of things," his mother said, the boy would make comments like, "'This class is a waste of time.'"

As the 2022-23 school year approached, she noticed that he had become less motivated and more judgmental. He remarked that he hoped he wouldn't have any "lousy" teachers this year, his mother said.

Few openings

Denise Angelo, a licensed clinical social worker based in Cold Spring, counsels children as young as 3 years old in Dutchess and Putnam counties. She believes the explosion in pandemic-related anxiety in children and teens stems from a need for stability.

Denise Angelo, a Cold Spring-based therapist *Photo by Ross Corsair*

"The pandemic dropped their basic stability, which was school," said Angelo, who was a social worker at a Westchester County middle school for 23 years before going into private practice. "I used to see kids whose behavior would worsen when summer was coming, because school was the only stable thing in their life. Whether or not they liked it, school was stable, it was someplace to go. The teachers were always there. The social worker was there."

When schools went virtual, and interactions with friends and their extended families were relegated to FaceTime and other digital mediums, children sought something to attach to, she said.

"A lot of kids only see their friends in school," Angelo said. "So what's happened is you have a lot of virtual friends, and kids see them as their 'real' friends, as their lifeline. Their sense of security says, 'Well, I attach to these people,' and that's their whole socialization."

But a life lived via text messages, or through FaceTime or Discord, can lead to misinterpretation, hurt feelings and anxiety. "I've seen so many kids coming in with anxiety," Angelo said. "We're living in a crazy world that has everyone in anxiety, but the anxiety level of children has risen so much."

Since reopening, Beacon, the largest of the three Highlands districts with about 2,600 students, has added two social workers, as well as a teacher focused on social and emotional learning and another on "restorative practices" (see Page 18). It now has 23 mental-health staff members across its six schools.

Haldane, with about 800 students, added a behavior analyst (therapist) and has six full-time mental-health staff members, as well as a part-time psychologist. Garrison, with 215 students, has a psychologist and a guidance counselor, the same as before the pandemic. (The American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students.)

Beacon and Haldane funded their new staff with a combination of money from the American Rescue Plan, a $1.9 trillion COVID relief bill enacted in March 2021, and state and local funding.

Before the pandemic, Nick DeMarco, a psychologist at Beacon High School, would refer students to private therapists "pretty frequently" for issues more substantial than "go to counseling, and then go to math class." But now, with DeMarco seeing 40 to 60 students during a busy week — roughly double his pre-COVID caseload — there's an increased need for referrals but nowhere to send them, he said.

Angelo said she began working one to two days a week as a private therapist after retiring in 2014. "I'm now working four days a week, sometimes as early as 9 a.m., until 8 p.m. Then, every other Friday, I come in to see a number of kids. I come in one Saturday a month to see someone else who can't come another time. And I'm always getting referrals — I had two yesterday and one the day before," she said in August.

Angelo estimates that she sees around 35 to 40 clients each week, most of them children and adolescents. Before the pandemic, her caseload was about half that. She does not advertise or have a website; referrals are all word-of-mouth.

"I'm totally booked. I'm trying to figure out my schedule for the school year," Angelo said. "I have three groups on Wednesdays, a group on Monday and a group on alternate Thursdays. That way I can see more children and work with their needs, because some kids do better in groups and a lot of kids are socially isolated. That was something that started with the pandemic and it keeps going."

Mental Health Staffing at Schools

DISTRICT (# OF STUDENTS)	Psychologists	Social workers	Guidance Counselors	Special-Assignment Teachers	Behavior Analyst
BEACON (2,600)					
2018-19	6	6	7	-	-
2022-23	6	8	7	2	-
HALDANE (800)					
2018-19	1.5	2	2	-	-
2022-23	1.6	2	2	-	1
GARRISON (215)					
2018-19	1	-	1	-	-
2022-23	1	-	1	-	-

How High School Students Felt

24%

Boys who reported they experienced poor mental health "most of the time or always" during the pandemic

49%

Girls who reported the same

31%

Boys who reported in early 2021 that they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the previous 12 months

57%

Girls who reported the same

53%

Boys who reported feeling close to people at school during the pandemic

41%

Girls who reported the same

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, based on a 2021 survey of 7,705 high school students. The report's authors recommended "comprehensive strategies that improve connections with others at home, in the community and at school."

Next week:

Social media, self-image and testing data

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Transforming Spaces
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Pastors Fight Gun Restrictions

Wappingers Falls church and others cite safety concerns

By Leonard Sparks

New York officials believe shootings that have killed religious worshippers in recent years justify the banning of weapons in churches, synagogues, mosques and temples.

The Rev. Scott Harris, pastor of Grace Bible Church in Wappingers Falls, believes the prohibition makes his church unsafe for the same reason.

It is a conviction he shares with Christian ministers in 19 other New York counties who, along with an evangelical advocacy organization called New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, filed a federal lawsuit this month challenging the constitutionality of the designation of houses of worship as a "sensitive location" under the state's Concealed Carry Improvement Act.

Enacted eight days after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 23 that New York's 109-year-old law limiting licenses for concealed weapons violated the Second Amendment, the legislation requires gun owners who want a concealed-carry permit to complete 18 hours of training, pass a marksmanship test, demonstrate "good moral character," sit for an in-person inter-

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Quin Carmicino sits at the West Point Foundry Preserve, where she and friends gathered during the pandemic shutdown. *Photo by Valerie Shively*

PART 2

Are the Kids Alright?

Pandemic, isolation exacerbate struggles

By Jeff Simms

Quin Carmicino, a junior at Haldane High School in Cold Spring, remembers the lengths she went to trying to preserve some normalcy during the pandemic.

Sitting with friends on a brick wall at the West Point Foundry Preserve, each of them 6 feet apart. Dyeing a friend's hair in her garage, with masks on and the door open, on a frigid January afternoon. Getting to know every nook and cranny of the nearby public parks.

At the time, Carmicino, who was in eighth grade when schools in New York closed in March 2020, took it in stride. "I accepted it quickly and became close to a few people," she said. But now, two years older and with the benefit of perspective, she recognizes it wasn't the smooth transition that it seemed.

"I've just now realized how terrible my mental health was" during the pandemic, said Carmicino, 16, in an interview last month. "I was so isolated. I didn't realize how much I'd shut that part of my life out. I think there was so much wrong with the world, that I wasn't able to deal with anything that was wrong with myself."

As we reported last week, students in the Highlands struggled mightily during the pandemic. While the 2022-23 school year began last month with no COVID-related restrictions, it's not as easy as the flick of a switch to get back to "normal."

In this series, which will conclude next week with some ideas about what can be done, we hope to provide insight into what's happening with children and teenagers.

Unprecedented

By the last week of March 2020, students in the Highlands were attending class virtually, limping to the finish line of a school

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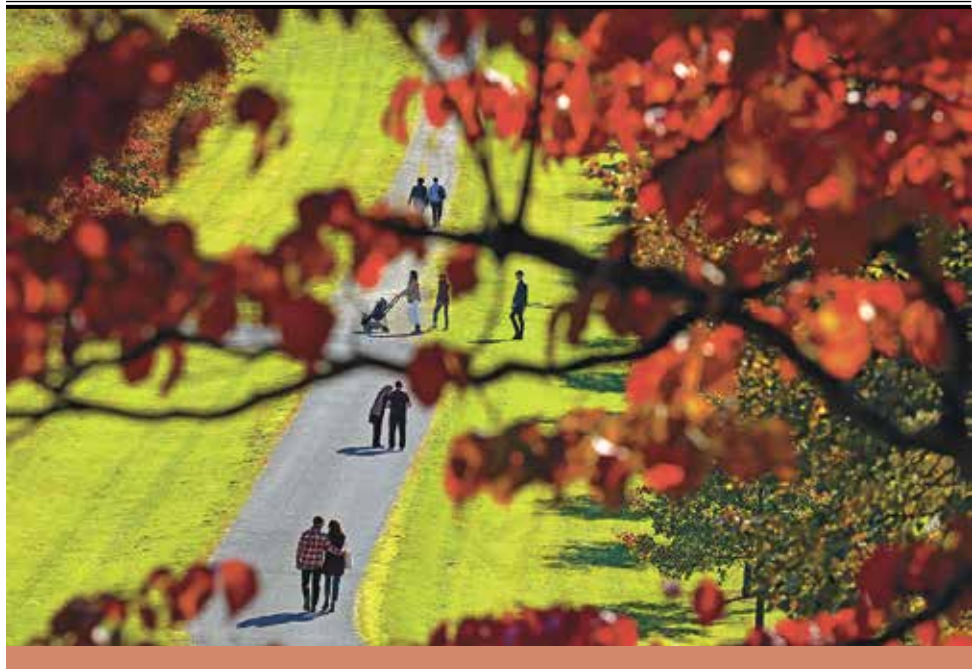

STORM KING — It was a beautiful day on Saturday (Oct. 8) for a visit to the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor. Works by Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu will be on display on its grounds through Nov. 7. *Photo by Ross Corsair*

Weatherman Could Not Have Predicted This

Jim Witt's calendar, in its 37th edition, raises $185,000 for local kids

By Alison Rooney

In the beginning, more than 50 years ago, not even Jim Witt would have been able to forecast the impact of his annual weather calendar.

The calendar, which foretells daily conditions 14 months in advance, is available every fall at retailers in the Hudson Valley (and online at hfyf.org), with proceeds benefiting charities that help children.

In 2021, the Hope for Youth Foundation, which collects and distributes the proceeds, raised $185,000 for 32 organizations, including the Desmond-Fish Public Library in Garrison, the Garrison Volunteer Ambulance Corps. and the Philipstown Behavioral Health Hub in Cold Spring. Since 1998, the foundation also has awarded college scholarships to students from Haldane, Lakeland, Walter Panas, Putnam Valley and Peekskill high schools.

The calendar was born in the early 1980s when Witt was "the weather guy" at WHUD Radio in Beacon. He would make predictions further out than the typical two- or three-day range — "I'd say, 'Coming Jan. 5, there'll be a snowstorm,' " he recalled — and the station owner, Gary Pease, observed: "People go nuts over this long-range stuff — maybe we could do a forecast for [the entire] winter."

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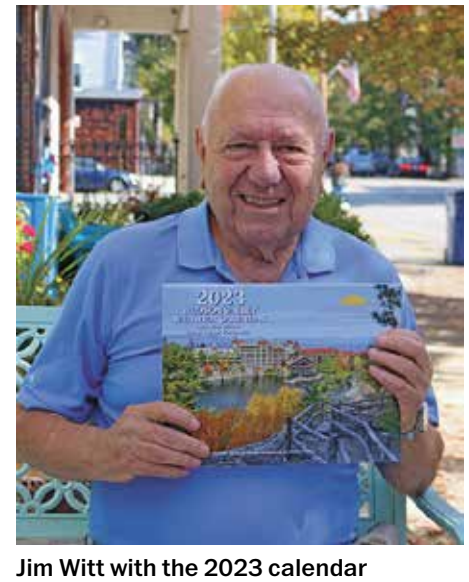

Jim Witt with the 2023 calendar *Photo by Michael Turton*

Ryan Biracree at the Desmond-Fish Public Library in Garrison *Photo by Ross Corsair*

Healthy Usage

Ryan Biracree, a Beacon resident who is the digital services librarian at the Desmond-Fish Public Library in Garrison, held a workshop last month to teach parents and children how to use social media in a healthy way.

The program, which will be held again Nov. 16, provides instruction on the differences between online and in-person interactions, what information to share (and not to share) and how sites like Facebook use algorithms to push content to users.

Biracree noted that his presentation differs from a course on online safety, which might educate users on sites to avoid or red flags that could identify a scam. Those topics are important, he said, but may not match up with his audience's typical usage.

His message is that online life is real life for teens or younger children who have never known a world without the internet. "You have to treat it like real life, because in their brain, it is just as real as their offline interactions," Biracree said.

As an example, he discusses the online relationships that he maintains with friends from graduate school. He may never see those people in person again, but the relationships are meaningful to him. "It's not the same as an in-person relationship, but that doesn't make it invalid or worse," he said. "It's something that's just different."

It's also important to recognize what online communication lacks, such as tone of voice or body language, he said. Take perceived slights, for instance. "There's a lot more space to overanalyze your relationship if it's preserved [such as through text messages or other digital mediums] and it's not supplemented by something in person," Biracree said.

With more "cultural permission" today to discuss emotions and mental health, Biracree encourages parents to help their children engage with others online in a balanced way. "Parents shouldn't feel like this is going to be a fight with their kids to talk about these things," he said. "Kids are talking about it with each other."

Test Results

Voluntary annual state testing in language arts and math provides metrics for student progress but may not yet be a good measure of the effect of the pandemic on learning, educators say. The tests weren't given in 2020 and few students took them in 2021. More took them in 2022 but not at pre-pandemic levels.

With that caveat in mind, the numbers below show the percentage of students in grades 3 to 8 who met or exceeded grade-level standards. (Eighth-grade students in accelerated math classes take Regents exams, not the state assessment.) Statewide figures have not been released for 2022, but in 2019, 45 percent of students in grades 3-8 were judged proficient in language arts and 47 percent in math.

Haldane	2019	2022
LANGUAGE ARTS	66	68
MATH	63	58

Beacon	2019	2022
LANGUAGE ARTS	47	47
MATH	45	32

Are the Kids Alright?

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year they'll never forget. That fall, Haldane students in kindergarten through eighth grade returned to school full time, while high school students started the year in a "hybrid," two-days-on, two-days-virtual schedule. (Everyone was virtual on a fifth day.)

In Beacon, a much larger district than Haldane, all students began that year either hybrid or all-virtual. Garrison, with 215 students on a 60,000-square-foot campus that allowed distancing, offered a full-time, in-person option, as well as virtual.

Because she only saw half of her classmates through virtual learning, Carmicino said she felt unable to connect with others and expand her social circle. "I was basically stunted at the emotional maturity of an eighth grader," she said. In 2020, "I had this instinct to shy away from people physically, but when you're always shrinking away, you can't get close to people. I'm only now making all the connections that I should have made two years ago."

In-person learning was expanded for high school students at Haldane in the spring of 2021. Everyone was in person, with masks, for the 2021-22 academic year, but the atmosphere was far from normal, Carmicino said.

The current class of seniors at Haldane, students Carmicino would have normally looked up to, are "these people I've only just met," she said. "It's like I fell asleep one day when I was 13 and now I'm 16."

Denise Angelo, a licensed clinical social worker based in Cold Spring, said the dramatic shift brought on by the shutdown led to more sustained anxiety than she was used to seeing among teenagers.

"I used to see a lot of kids with short-term anxiety," said Angelo, who was a social worker for 23 years in a Westchester County school before going into private practice in 2014. "Say their parents were getting a divorce. What happens with kids is they're anxious about what's going to happen, but once they have some kind of agreement, the kids will say, 'OK, he's still my dad, she's still my mom and I'm still going to see them,' then everything settles down and they get back to a new normal.

"I'd see a teenager for a couple of months to get them through that transition," she said. "But now, they have this anxiety that continues. Sometimes it permeates everything." The pandemic shutdown, and the isolation, "rocked their world," Angelo said.

A 'toxic' space

This week, a federal task force recommended that children and teenagers from ages 8 to 18 be screened by their primary doctors for anxiety. The volunteer panel, which focuses on preventive medicine, also affirmed a previous recommendation that adolescents from 12 to 18 be screened for depression.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, before the pandemic, 5.8 million children had been diagnosed with anxiety and 2.7 million with depression. Both diagnoses are more common as children get older. In 2019, a national survey found that 9 percent of children and teens between ages 3 and 17 were taking prescribed medications to address emotional or mental health issues.

At Haldane, Superintendent Philip Benante said students have demonstrated more social and emotional problems than academic ones over the last two years.

One of the unintended consequences of pandemic learning, Benante said, was the increased amount of time students spent online. While virtual schooling was structured,

Study: Children Especially Vulnerable

How do children and teens respond to adverse events? In 2005, researchers at Columbia University released the results of a study of New York City public school students following one of the most traumatic days in U.S. history — the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Researchers interviewed more than 8,200 students in grades 4 through 12 during the six months after the attacks, including an oversampling of children who were closest to the World Trade Center and in other high-risk areas, such as neighborhoods where a large number of the residents were first responders.

They found that 29 percent of the students identified with one or more of six anxiety or depressive disorders. The most prevalent were agoraphobia (a fear of crowded places, or of leaving one's home), separation anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Girls and children in grades 4 and 5 were the most affected.

The research team, which was led by three members of the Department of Psychiatry, said that one of 9/11's most profound consequences was "a direct assault on the population's mental health" and that the results of its survey "support the need to apply wide-area epidemiological approaches to mental health assessment after any large-scale disaster."

Earlier research suggested that, in the context of mass disasters, children may be especially vulnerable, they said. Post-disaster studies also reported a greater prevalence of physical symptoms among youth dealing with post-traumatic stress.

"What we understood from 9/11 is that the effect of extreme stress is not limited to only one condition," such as post-traumatic stress disorder, Yuval Neria, the director of Columbia's PTSD research program, said in an interview published by the university in September 2021. "With COVID, like 9/11, you see effects on sleep habits, you may see an increase in consumption of alcohol and drugs, you can see both depression and PTSD and, of course, you can see grief among those who lost loved ones."

with a teacher leading students through lessons via Google Classroom, "I don't think when school ended our kids were inclined to just turn it off," he said. "They were switching over to Snapchat or TikTok and interacting with one another." When negative interactions occur online, "things can exacerbate or spiral because it's an uncontained environment," Benante said.

In fact, since students returned full time, school social workers and psychologists have been "seeing a significant increase in students dealing with anxiety or things outside of school that carry over" into the classroom, said Nick DeMarco, a psychologist at Beacon High School. "Kids aren't feeling like they're comfortable in their own skin."

Social media impacts on impressionable children and teens were a concern before the pandemic, especially for girls. A study published just before the shutdown that analyzed the social media habits of nearly 11,000 14-year-olds in the U.K. found that girls were more likely to be involved in online harassment (either giving or receiving), have low self-esteem or body weight dissatisfaction and to be unhappy with their appearance than boys. It also found that girls slept less while reporting more social media use than boys did.

Another study, released earlier this year, found that U.S. children between 8 and 12 years old average 5½ hours per day on screens, not counting school or homework. For teenagers, it's about 8½ hours a day. Both were increases over two years earlier. Girls were also found to post more often about emotions, dating or accomplishments — topics related to peer acceptance — than boys.

Through airbrushed photos of perfect skin and images of micro-waisted women, children were exposed to "distorted beauty standards and pushed even more into a totally impossible realm" while isolated, Carmicino said. Now, she said, "people are more attached to their phones than ever. It's like tearing your leg off" to get teenagers to put them down.

Children and teens lack the emotional maturity to weigh the unrealistic and unhealthy expectations they see being set online versus the natural desire for acceptance at that age — a problem exacerbated when students had few options for in-person interactions during the pandemic, said Sagrario Rudecindo-O'Neill, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and student support for the Beacon school district.

"They're living in this space that isn't even real," she said. "Our kids are on Instagram or TikTok and they're trying to find self-worth through these artificial realities," such as amassing followers. Describing some of the content on social media as becoming "more and more toxic," Rudecindo-O'Neill used the annual Scripps National Spelling Bee, won this year by 14-year-old Harini Logan of Texas, as an example.

"I follow the Spelling Bee every year and I read an article and happened to scroll down to the comments," she said. "Most of them were positive, but there were some people saying, 'Oh, she won $25,000 — maybe she can fix her teeth now.' These were adults tearing apart a 14-year-old girl. That's the space our kids are living in."

NEXT WEEK:
What could be done

New England asters

White wood asters

Wrinkle-leaf goldenrod

Photos by P. Doan

Roots and Shoots

Falling for Asters (and Goldenrod)

By Pamela Doan

I think it was the drought. After that period in July and August when any plant that wasn't getting watered suffered or went dormant, a bit of rainfall in September came just in time for the fall-blooming asters and goldenrod.

While I've always used both in my landscape, I've regarded them as a necessity for foraging pollinators, and undervalued them for their natural good looks.

This fall, that pop of purple, white and blue from the asters and bright yellow from the goldenrods was a blessing in my brown landscape. That the plants persevered through the severe conditions demonstrates their hardiness.

There is something about inter-planting them that is also aesthetically pleasing. Purple and yellow are opposites on the color wheel, making them complementary, and both colors attract bees and butterflies.

For anyone who wants to support monarchs on their long fall migration, having asters is the way to be rewarded. At a time of year when most flowers are finished, asters and goldenrod serve as a lifeline for pollinators. While chrysanthemums are ubiquitous at garden centers, they don't provide the nectar that bees and butterflies need.

There are many native species and cultivars of asters and goldenrod, so you can find the right plant for almost any growing conditions. There are more than 100 aster species native to North America and a range of cultivars bred for larger bloom size, color and other characteristics. They are truly low-maintenance plants in the landscape, left alone by browsing deer, too.

Sun-loving asters

Aromatic aster
(Symphyotrichum oblongifolium)

The size and shape of this plant make it an easy choice for small gardens and for gardeners who want wildflowers but not a wild aesthetic. They tend to have a mounding, bushy shape and are shorter than many straight-species asters. They bloom for about a month in late September and October.

New England aster
(Symphyotrichum novae-angliae)

These are what many gardeners think of as an aster. They can be quite tall — 3 to 6 feet — and make good back-of-the-border plants. They are known to be excellent at self-sowing and the flower heads can be cut off when the blooms are finished to prevent spreading. This plant provides nectar to at least six types of bees, is a host plant for the pearl crescent butterfly and serves at least 10 other types of insects.

Shade-loving asters

White wood aster
(Eurybia divaricate)

I discovered these plants growing naturally in my woods. They do well in partial or full shade and can grow when there's a mass grouping. They make a great ground cover and top out at about 18 inches. Single plants draw in the eye for a closer look at their many petaled flowers.

Blue wood aster
(Symphyotrichum cordifolium)

An online listing for this plant includes a note that it is used by 109 caterpillar species. That makes it a powerhouse for birds, too. Consider planting it for the delicate blooms and pretty heart-shaped leaves.

Other recommendations: heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides*) and calico aster (*Symphyotrichum lateriflorum*).

Goldenrods for sunny areas

Early goldenrod
(Solidago juncea)

I don't recall buying or planting this in my yard but I have one and it gets more action from a diverse group of insects than any other plant. It blooms in July, the peak of summer, for about a month. It's planted near a walkway, which is not ideal for people nervous about buzzing plants, but the bees are too busy to notice humans.

Canada goldenrod
(Solidago canadensis)

This is the plant that is frequently mistaken for ragweed. It is also an aggressively self-seeding plant and can dominate a disturbed site within a few years. Control it by cutting it back after blooming.

Other recommendations: Blue-stemmed goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*) and showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciose*). Zig-zag goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*) works well in shadier areas.

Reader-Funded News for Beacon and Philipstown

The HIGHLANDS Current

October 21, 2022

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A Twist on The Witch
Page 11

Some educators believe that unstructured play, pictured here in Beacon, is what children need to recover from anxiety brought on by the pandemic. *Photo by Valerie Shively*

PART 3

Are the Kids Alright?

Could movement bring anxiety under control?

By Jeff Simms

The text at the top of the company's website declares, in all capital letters: "Teachers need tools to bring balance into their classrooms."

Teachers and students in the Highlands may all be seeking balance. They returned to classrooms last month for a school year free from restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but, as we've reported over the past two weeks, the effects of the pandemic shutdown and the monkey wrench it threw into society, and education in particular, have not been easy to shake.

Counselors and school officials say anxiety among children and teenagers is higher than anytime in recent memory. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy last year issued an advisory highlighting the "urgent need to address the nation's youth mental health crisis" — a problem that Murthy said existed long before the pandemic, but grew far worse after the arrival of COVID in early 2020. But that doesn't mean that nothing can be done.

(Continued on Page 20)

Highlands to Get New State Senator

Poughkeepsie mayor, Beacon resident face off

By Leonard Sparks

For the first time since 2015, someone other than Sue Serino will represent Beacon and Philipstown in the state Senate.

Redistricting reshaped the boundaries of the 41st District that the Republican represents. Beacon and Philipstown are now part of the reconfigured 39th District, which starts west of the Hudson River in Montgomery, encompasses Poughkeepsie to the north and reaches east to the Connecticut border.

Without an incumbent, two first-time Senate candidates are running for the seat: Julie Shiroishi, a Democrat in her first campaign for elected office, and Rob Rolison, a Republican who is the mayor of the City of Poughkeepsie.

Shiroishi is a book-publishing profes-

(Continued on Page 8)

Julie Shiroishi

Rob Rolison

GREAT AND SMALL — The Beacon Sloop Club hosted its annual Pumpkin Fest at Riverfront Park on Sunday (Oct. 16), including educational displays. Here, Josh Kogan and his son, Alo, prepare to offer passersby a peek at the insects and tiny plants that populate the river. Their presence demonstrates the quality of the water. *Photo by Valerie Shively*

The Effects of Bail Reform

New data offer first look at impact of changes

By Leonard Sparks

On Sept. 28, the Putnam County Sheriff's Department issued a press release about the arrest of a Bronx man on the Taconic State Parkway.

The New York Police Department had put out an alert about a shooting, the suspect's car was spotted, a chase ensued, the vehicle was ditched in a driveway in Putnam Valley and the male driver arrested, "processed and released."

The department's Facebook page exploded. "Shooting... police chase... released?" "This state is such a joke. How demoralizing that they get released with the hope they show up at court. Why bother anymore?" "God help us with this bail reform."

However, as the Sheriff's Department later clarified, the driver was not charged in connection to a shooting — the NYPD was just looking for the car. He was charged with two misdemeanors — fleeing a police

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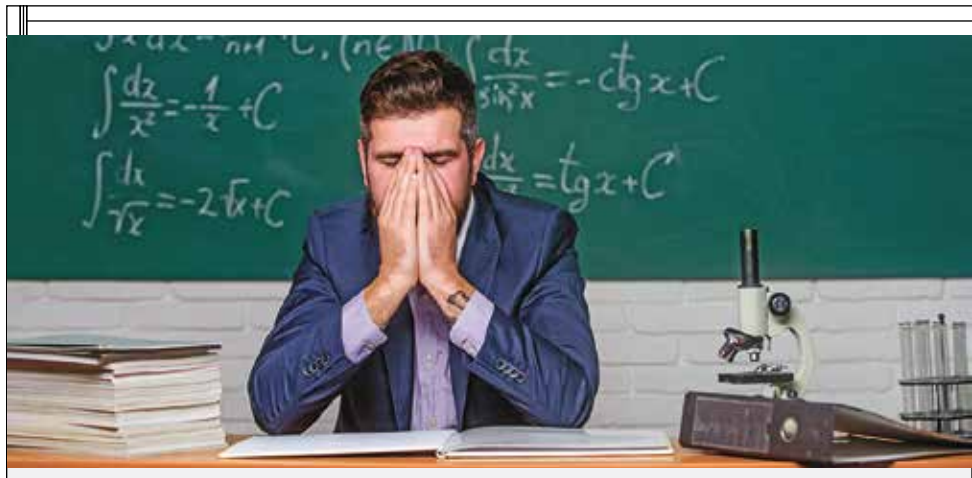

Teacher Burnout

While this series has focused on the mental-health impacts of the pandemic on children, they haven't been the only ones affected.

Benante

At Haldane, Superintendent Philip Benante called teacher burnout "under-explored right now," but predicted it will grow in importance as schools realize "the long-term consequence for staff who are trying to balance the needs of kids, which come first and foremost, but against their own needs as adults, with their own families and their own kids, and trying to maintain some sense of balance with that."

Andrea McCue, a special education teacher who is the president of the Haldane teachers' union, said that a handful of teachers in the district retired sooner than they might have if the pandemic hadn't happened. "The past two-and-a-half years have been extremely stressful" for educators, she said.

Benante noted that toward the end of the 2021-22 academic year, as New York State ended its mask mandate for schools, a sense of normalcy began to return for students, "but the staff burnout started becoming more of a factor."

"It was exhausting," he said. "It certainly took its toll on me. And I know if it was taking its toll on me, it was taking its toll on everybody."

This year there's been an increased emphasis on staff wellness, "because we realize that if the individual in front of the classroom is not in a good place, that has an impact on our kids," Benante said. "I need to make sure that I'm eating right, exercising and doing all those things that we know are important to our own well-being, so that we can be in a position to do our work for our communities, and the school has a responsibility to its employees" to encourage a healthy work-life balance.

The superintendent said that wellness has been supported through state legislation that increased opportunities for paid time off for educators. In addition, Haldane elected not to furlough any part-time employees in 2020 during the shutdown.

"Our transportation workers, maintenance and custodial — we made sure we kept everybody employed," Benante said. "We felt we needed to make sure that we could maintain a level of financial stability for our employees, so they could take care of themselves and their families."

This year, the faculty break room has been stocked with fruits and vegetables and staff are encouraged to get outdoors for a hike or a walk when possible. "We live in a beautiful area, so we've organized times that allow our staff to connect with each other, while also engaging in healthy activity throughout the year," he said.

Pamela Gunther, who lives in Nelsonville, at the headquarters of her company, Fit & Fun Playscapes *Photo provided*

Are the Kids Alright?

(Continued from Page 1)

According to several agencies, including the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and a national alliance of health and physical education teachers, one of the keys to establishing the balance that educators and students seek is movement.

SHAPE America — the Society of Health and Physical Educators — in 2019 created a "crosswalk" — a framework for aligning national physical education standards with the strategies of social and emotional learning, a holistic educational approach that has grown in popularity. Integrating physical exercise, in which the onus is often on children to problem-solve, the teachers say, can help students develop the skills to "deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges."

In the crosswalk, a document that's available on its website, SHAPE America matches its K-12 physical education standards with social and emotional skills that the exercises reinforce.

The connections are more conceptual than literal. In other words, the group doesn't make specific recommendations, such as playing volleyball, for example, to support team-building skills. Instead, it walks you through its core goals for students, one of which is to exhibit "responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others."

That's in one column. Beneath it, desired outcomes, such as students learning to accept the differences between their bodies and the idealized images they see portrayed by elite athletes or through various media, are explained further.

In another column, the organization identifies social and emotional goals — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness — which can be realized through meeting the physical education standard.

The CDC agrees, noting that schools are in a unique position to help children attain a recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. The agency encourages school leaders to incorporate physical activity in the classroom, to "reinforce what is taught in physical education and give students a chance to practice their new knowledge and skills."

Ways to help

The website quoted at the beginning of this article belongs to Fit & Fun Playscapes, a business founded in 2011 by Nelsonville resident Pamela Gunther. The firm, which Gunther moved to Poughkeepsie last year, creates paint kits, "sensory pathways" made with stencils or stickers, and indoor and outdoor games to enhance tactile learning.

A multicolored, nature-themed sensory pathway encourages younger students to step, march, jump or "crab crawl" to get their bodies moving. Stickers that teachers can place on students' desks help children learn to verbalize how they're feeling, what they may need and how to support peers.

Gunther, a former co-president of the Haldane PTA, believes that something as simple as a greater emphasis on physical activity could help students bounce back from the effects of the pandemic.

"What happens at recess is a microcosm for the rest of their lives," she said. "It's not just running around; they're learning so much more. They're learning how to negotiate, how to compromise, how to deal with bullies. This is the place where they can figure this stuff out."

While those skills are taught in the classroom, "handouts are not going to replace recess," Gunther said. "The kids have to work these things out on their own."

Some high school athletics were postponed in 2020, and others frequently interrupted in the years since, when COVID infections forced student-athletes into quarantine. Despite the stoppages, the Haldane school district in Cold Spring kept its extracurricular and athletics programs going during the pandemic.

"Even when teams may not have been competing, we still had the coaches meeting with kids in some capacity, because we knew that was important to the kids' experience and their connectedness to school," said Superintendent Philip Benante. "We were still paying our coaches and encouraging them to have some sort of engagement, even if it was a Zoom session where they were running drills."

The district also hired more assistant coaches "to increase the number of adults who are working with our kids through athletics," Benante said.

Cold Spring-based therapist Denise Angelo shared other tips, in addition to exercise, for helping children who are struggling with anxiety, especially if they experience panic attacks.

"I tell kids to start with 99 and count backward by threes," Angelo said. "It needs to be something that's not easy. Even telling them to count 1-2-3-4-5 and then again backward is fine for little kids. But if you have a teenager with a panic disorder, you need to stimulate the frontal lobe to quiet down the brain and stop the anxiety. Another thing I've told them to do is pick up a book, find a sentence and read the words backward."

She also suggests asking a teen to recall their family's phone number from a previous residence, or a friend's mailing address. "Then they have to think, and once they start using that part of their brain, things quiet down," Angelo said. "I use puppets and have little kids talk to them. I've given kids a stuffed animal to talk to or hug and that becomes what they use to cope. It's their lifeline."

Journaling or writing down recollections from dreams can also help. "Some of it is dark, but they're getting it out," she said. However, "you need to know the kid and get into their head to find out exactly where the anxiety is coming from and what would work best for them. There's no cookie-cutter measure."

Parents can help, too. Before the pandemic, Haldane held a series of Friends and Family Universities — joint sessions at which parents, guardians and staff came together to discuss an issue. The district typically paid to bring

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in an expert for the dialogue, which helped create shared understanding and strategies.

The sessions were paused during the pandemic but are being revived, with the first scheduled for Nov. 16. Katie Greer, a former intelligence analyst for the Massachusetts State Police and director of internet safety for the Massachusetts attorney general's office, will speak about digital health and safety and meet with students from grades 3 through 10.

Benante said the district was talking about how to help students navigate social media and other online spaces even before the pandemic exacerbated the challenges. "We want to make sure that we're doing what we can with our parents to support our kids in healthy online behaviors and healthy use of the technology that they now have in their hands," he said.

Schools as 'fixers'

The mental health services available in schools have increased many times over in the last two decades. Today, the Beacon school district has 23 psychologists, social workers and other mental-health staff in its six schools. Haldane has six full-time mental-health staff members and a part-time psychologist, while Garrison, by far the smallest public school district in the Highlands with 215 K-8 students, has a psychologist and a guidance counselor.

The staffing levels "reflect an increased societal awareness around mental health over the last decade or two," said Beacon Superintendent Matt Landahl, noting that "it's a complicated time to be a young person."

Many feel that mental-health staffing levels still aren't enough. In 2021, Beacon school officials conducted a social and emotional learning study that included interviews and surveys of hundreds of students, parents, community members and teachers. Among its findings were to consider new ways to support existing staff as it relates to mental health, and the need to hire more mental-health support for students.

When the district hired two additional social workers that year "their caseloads were filled within weeks," Landahl said. "If we hired more, their caseloads would probably fill quickly, too."

The need is especially glaring when schools are already asked to do so much, said Sagrario Rudecindo-O'Neill, the district's assistant superintendent of curriculum and student support. "The thing about education is that we are required to fix all the woes of society," she said. "If you look at trends, anytime something happens within our society, it always goes back to schools to fix it. But trying to do this with a lack of resources is very, very challenging.

"There was a struggle at the elementary level when I was a principal [in Orange County, before coming to Beacon]. We had a lot of students who struggled and there was a one-year waiting list to see someone that would work with children," said Rudecindo-O'Neill. "We're not trained for that. I don't have a degree in psychology. We have one person in each building [in Beacon] who does, and we're a district with almost 3,000 kids."

Rudecindo-O'Neill cited the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s as the time when schools began pivoting from "just being a place of academics" to "using education as a way to remedy some of the inequities within society, to a place where we could provide support to the entire family."

She agrees that schools should be "places of innovation, where we look at some of the issues in society and start teaching our students how to fix these issues that are affecting our everyday life." But if so, they should be funded as such, she argued.

Looking ahead

That could become an issue in budget deliberations, especially in Beacon, where two of the district's recently added mental-health staff were hired using federal American Rescue Plan funds.

Landahl conceded that the federal funding, part of a pandemic relief bill enacted in March 2021, allowed the district to hire the staff members — an elementary teacher focused on social and emotional learning and another at Beacon High School focused on restorative practices — "that we probably wouldn't have done in a normal budget year."

He and other administrators are meeting regularly with the teachers and studying data to determine whether the positions will be retained longer-term. "We're not saying flat-out that this is a one-year thing," Landahl said, adding that future budget talks are likely to become more complex, as school districts address the need not just for educational staff, but for mental health, as well. "It's going to be of continued importance," he said.

How long will the "mental health crisis" among young people last? Nick DeMarco, a psychologist at Beacon High School, said earlier this month that he's still seeing ripple effects from the isolation caused by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. "Anxiety is still on the rise, and I'm still seeing issues with the amount of services that are available out in the community," he said.

Carl Albano, the superintendent of the Garrison school district, said that students this year "are exhibiting a bit of a delay as far as social skills" after missing out on normal social interaction for much of the last two years. "Nobody misses remote learning," he said.

"I haven't been able to stop because of the need," Angelo, the private therapist, said. "I don't have any spots available. But I take kids who I know I can help."

Gunther, the Nelsonville resident who founded Fit & Fun Playscapes, sees a light at the end of the tunnel. "These are fixable things, and daily movement is one of the best tools that can help," she said. "We need to go back to the basics of kids being kids again."

This series was funded by contributions from readers to our Special Projects Fund (highlandscurrent.org/donate).

For parts 1 and 2, see highlandscurrent.org.

In the fall of 2021, a group of SUNY Potsdam students went on a rafting trip on the Indian and Hudson rivers organized by the university's Center for Diversity. *SUNY Potsdam*

Report Advocates Diversity in Nature — of Humans

State, nonprofit outline plan to widen access to outdoors

By Brian PJ Cronin

A free electric bus that travels from urban areas to state parks. Halloween "hike and treat" events in the woods. Camping trips in which the gear is provided by someone who shows you how to use it.

These are a few of the initiatives highlighted in a newly released report, *Open Spaces for All*, produced by the nonprofit Open Space Institute and the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition. The latter includes state and federal agencies such as the National Park Service and the state Department of Environmental Conservation, environmental groups such as Scenic Hudson and Riverkeeper, outdoor retailers such as REI and community groups such as the Catskill 3500 Club and Outdoor Promise.

When the COVID pandemic shutdown began in early 2020, the number of visitors to state and national parks increased dramatically. But park officials noticed the visitors didn't reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the region or the country.

For instance, 75 percent of the people who visited national parks were white, said Kathy Moser, chief conservation officer for the Open Space Institute. In response, the nonprofit reached out to other outdoor and environmental groups to identify barriers that were keeping people from the outdoors.

The most obvious were lack of transportation and specialized recreation equipment such as snowshoes or kayaks. But Moser said that one of the more surprising findings was that some people had uncomfortable experiences at parks.

"They didn't see people that look like them there, the signage was confusing and there wasn't programming that people wanted," she said. Hearing this, a colleague of color said: "We don't want to be invited to the table, we want to be in the kitchen, making the meal. We want to be sitting down with state parks and saying, 'This is the kind of park we want,'" according to Moser.

The report recommends that the state be more proactive in reaching out to underserved communities to engage them in decision-making processes. Approaches include working with churches, health care professionals and community groups such as Black Girls Hike Buffalo, which has organized snowshoeing and hike and treats during the pandemic.

The state already runs a first-time camper weekend in which families can borrow equipment and receive assistance from parks personnel who demonstrate how to pitch a tent and tend a campfire. Moser said she would like to see the program expanded with assistance from outdoor recreation companies to include other activities.

"If you got to Bear Mountain and you wanted to learn how to snowshoe, is there a way that you could borrow snowshoes?" she said. "All that outdoor gear is expensive. What can REI or L.L. Bean do?"

The report also recommends that underserved communities be included in discussions about the locations of new parks. Gov. Kathy Hochul, for example, has advocated the creation of a Rochester High Falls State Park in downtown Rochester, which would allow access to the Genesee River gorge.

The report highlights the need to increase communication with Indigenous communities. The DEC recently announced the creation of an Office of Indian Nation Affairs, and the report recommends that the state parks department do the same. Once established, these offices would bring Indigenous "knowledge keepers" into the land management process.

OSI and the state plan to continue surveying visitors and collecting data in 2023 to implement the recommendations. In the meantime, Moser said she hopes local organizations will be inspired by the findings and examples.

"It doesn't have to be New York State implementing this," she said. "It could be a county or a municipality that can implement this in their own park system."

The report is available at openspaceinstitute.org/research/openspacesforall.