



Reason to smile

From left, Davina Cortes, Lakai White and Stephen Melville chase bubbles in the playground during recess at the Early Childhood Education Center. **Story, pages 6-7**

PHOTO: SEAN BROWNE

Educating paraeducators

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

A new wave of paraprofessionals is being born, thanks to a collaboration of the district, Springfield WORKS, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the Springfield Federation of Paraprofessionals and Holyoke Community College.

The program, DTA Works Paraeducator Training, launched in January. Participants gain job readiness skills through Holyoke Community College curriculum and an internship at one of the schools in the district. There is also a stipend of \$125 per week for DTA-qualified applicants throughout the training and internship.

It is based on DTA Works, which is a work-ready program that provides recipients of Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TADC) with the opportunity to acquire or develop skills necessary to re-enter the workforce through an on-the-job work experience.

See **PARAEDUCATORS, page 9**



Paraprofessional intern Brittany Rosa shares a viewfinder toy with Rebecca Johnson School students Janeisis Valentin, left, and Bobby Owens

PHOTO: SEAN BROWNE

INSIDE



Students in the middle of justic conversation, page 8

In Springfield, a Portrait worth admiring



DANIEL J. WARWICK

As you may know, we have partnered with the community over several years to develop Springfield's vision of what students need upon graduating high school to be successful in college, career, and life, our Portrait of a Graduate. Once the Portrait was completed, we continued working with our community to create a strategic plan focused on reimagining

instruction and revising our systems and processes to best support students to realize the vision outlined in the Portrait. The draft strategic plan is on track to be released for public review this summer. Although the next strategic plan will be ambitious, we intend to roll it out thoughtfully by implementing different parts of the plan over time and not all at once. Over the next six years, every SPS school will participate in a Portrait of a Graduate Cohort, engaging in a three-year process of partnering with the entire school community to reimagine instruction and the life of the school in alignment with the Portrait of a Graduate. Described here are a few key changes being pursued in alignment with the Portrait of a Graduate. They are the outgrowth of conversations had with more than 4,000 people from the community and from within Springfield Public Schools as part of our Portrait of a Graduate process.

Redesigning Grading - We heard that students should have frequent opportunities to revise, resubmit, and demonstrate their progressive learning. So, starting this summer, teams at elementary, middle, and high school levels will be convened to propose revisions to the district grading framework and report cards.

Creating Space for Depth and Interdisciplinary Learning - We heard that students should have learning experiences that are connected to their lives and real world applications. So, we will develop teams to review, among other things opportunities for inquiry-focused, interdisciplinary, and student-directed learning activities.

Expanding Community Partnerships - We heard that a more efficient and effective system is needed to connect schools with community partners who can provide services that enhance, extend, and expand supports for students to realize the Portrait of a Graduate. So, the district will create a system for schools to identify partner opportunities, for partners to identify resources and capacity they can offer to schools, and to match the two. In development over next school year, the goal is to ensure that schools can find and partner with organizations who can provide services to students during and outside the school day.

Modifying the District Assessment Program - We heard that student learning should be assessed in multiple ways and there are too many district-directed assessments to create space for alternate forms of assessment. So, at all grade

levels, the assessment program and calendar will be revisited to ensure that no student takes more than one district-directed assessment per subject in any given month of the school year.

Reimagining the Use of Time - We heard that there is not enough time in the school day and week for instruction in all content areas, social-emotional learning and student wellness activities, and essential educator collaboration and planning. So, this summer, teams at elementary, middle, and high school levels will be convened to develop alternate daily and weekly schedules or instructional blocks that reimagine the use of time during the day and week.

Focusing on Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Equity - We heard that the district focus on Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Equity (DIRE) needs to grow and the work of implementing the Portrait of a Graduate needs to be aligned with the work of the DIRE Committee formed in partnership with the Springfield Education Association. So, we will continue and expand ongoing efforts in two key areas: **1)** recruitment, support, and retention of a racially diverse workforce increasingly reflective of our student population; and, **2)** professional development and learning for all staff on diversity, inclusion, and racial equity. In addition, the district will work closely with the DIRE Committee on the formation and membership of teams reviewing grading, pacing, and use of time.

Daniel J. Warwick is superintendent of schools.



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Remembering State Rep. Raymond A. Jordan

Springfield lost one of its most distinguished citizens earlier this year.

Raymond A. Jordan died in February at the age of 78.

Jordan was the first Black state legislator from Springfield, and the longest-serving vice chairman of the Massachusetts Democratic Party. Jordan was elected to the state legislature in 1975, representing the residents of the 12th Hampden District. He went on to work for former President Bill Clinton, becoming the New England Special Project Officer for the U.S. Department of

Housing & Urban Development. Even in his retirement, he was active within the city and was instrumental in the construction of the new Springfield senior center, which was named after him.

"This one hits home," said Mayor Domenic Sarno. "Ray was a dear friend whose advice, wisdom and support I respected and cherished. Ray was a caring and shrewd gentleman, who could work both sides of the aisle in order to deliver for the people, families and businesses of his district."



STOP THE SWERVE CAMPAIGN

Billboard Winners

First Place Winner

The Final Walk - Springfield Renaissance

School Representative: Arria Coburn

Students: Shane Dillon, Meghan Curley, Nazarelie Gonzalez, Jaidin Lizardi, Sophia Romeo, Oliver Figueroa, and Shalin Payne

Third Place Winner

One Drink Can Turn Life Upside Down - Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy

School Representative: Sharon Nieves and Amy Scott

Students: Alondra Nieves Rivera, Felix Valentin, Parmila Sarki, Jesmary Gonzalez, Elise Hansel, Dey Garcia

Public Service Announcement Winners

First Place Winner

Would Have - Central High School

School Representative: Michael Aloisi

Students: Josh Valle, Dominick Lupien, Andrew Forbes

Honorable Mention 1

The Champ - Central High School

School Representative: Michael Aloisi

Students: Tessa Dill, Tom Sambou, Kameran Parker

Honorable Mention 6

Lights - Central High School

School Representative: Michael Aloisi

Students: Justin Ayala, Jada Rivera, Jayden Philbrick

Honorable Mention

One Can't Hurt but it Can Kill - Putnam

School Representative: Sharon Nieves and Amy Scott

Students: Alondra Nieves Rivera, Felix Valentin, Parmila Sarki, Jesmary Gonzalez, Elise Hansel, Dey Garcia

Honorable Mention

Stop the Swerve 2022 - High School of Commerce

School Representative: Tammy Grimes

Students: Para'Dise Howard, Mone Finegan-Naylor, Hendell Moise, Tiara Ortiz, Yanni Gedeon, David Ninh, Zuliany Torres, Kemler Evans, Jaydalee Serrano

'Monster' experience for Duggan students

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

When Duggan Academy students read "Monster" earlier this year, they never imagined they'd be able to connect on Zoom with one of the producers who worked tirelessly to bring the novel to the screen.

Duggan seventh-graders read the award-winning young adult novel as part of their English language arts curriculum. Written by Walter Dean Myers, it tells the story of a high school honors student and aspiring filmmaker whose world comes crashing down around him when he is charged with felony murder.

"I thought, wouldn't it be great to see if there's a movie to help them place the characters and visualize the story," said teacher Melvin Murry.

He quickly discovered that a movie had been made. It premiered at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and was released to Netflix last year. And, one of the producers, Tonya Lewis Lee, happened to be a former classmate and friend of Murry's.

"I reached out to her earlier this year to see if she could speak to them about producing and selling a movie," said Murry. "She said she'd love to do it."

Lewis Lee, who is married to iconic director Spike Lee, is the co-founder of ToniK Productions. The company's mission is to create diverse, quality, thought-provoking entertainment across all media platforms. It is headed by Lewis Lee and Nikki Silver, who, together, have more than 25 years' experience producing film and television, and have won five Emmy Awards.

Lewis Lee joined nearly 100 Duggan students via Zoom, with Murry as the moderator, in November.

"The kids were really stoked," said Murry. "She's very engaging and really pulled them in. She talked about why this project was so important to her and she answered the questions they submitted. It went really well."

Monster is a film that Lewis Lee had been hoping to get made for more than a decade. It was shot entirely in New York City and stars Kelvin Harrison Jr., Jennifer Hudson, Jennifer Ehle, A\$AP Rocky, Nas, Tim Blake Nelson, John David Washington and Jeffrey Wright. When it was released, Lewis Lee said she believed the current social and cultural landscape made the message of Monster even more relevant and important.



Duggan Academy student Austin Masfield reads the book "Monster," which students discussed with movie producer Tonya Lewis Lee.

PHOTO: SEAN BROWNE



Abdiel Perez participated in a Zoom conference with Tonya Lewis Lee.

PHOTOS: THE REPUBLICAN



Tonya Lewis Lee spoke to Duggan students via Zoom.

Assistant superintendent calls it a career

BY AZELL CAVAN

Capping a 28-year career with Springfield Public Schools (SPS), defined by an ascent from substitute teacher to appointment as the district's first Latina assistant superintendent in 2012, Lydia E. Martinez-Alvarez retired from Springfield Public Schools this January.

"It has been my honor and my pleasure to serve the staff and students of Springfield Public Schools. In many ways, the very idea of retirement from the district seems surreal because the children of Springfield Public Schools and their future has been the focus of my life for so long," said Martinez-Alvarez. "But the time has come for me to shift that focus to my other family and our best interests, knowing that I will forever cherish the work I've done on behalf of Springfield's youth and that I will never stop loving them."

Martinez-Alvarez' SPS career spanned seven promotions, four superintendents and more than 100 high school graduation ceremonies; and witnessed the technological shift that replaced chalkboards with smartboards, necessitated a cell phone policy, and called for social media guidelines.

Her front row seat in education resulted directly in the opening of the district's first school of the arts, blazed a trail for Springfield Public Schools students to become Springfield Public Schools teachers, and even opened up new, nationally recognized opportunities for the city's adult learners.

Superintendent of Schools Daniel Warwick, who hand-picked Martinez-Alvarez as his second in command, said her departure is a great loss for the district.

"The two greatest elements that make Lydia such an effective assistant superintendent is the level of education doctrine knowledge that she possesses; and her unapologetic passion and love for Springfield kids," said Warwick. "She's a great advocate for our Springfield community and her contributions to our school district reflect her sincere belief in our students and all they can achieve."

Warwick pointed to Martinez-Alvarez' work around student attendance, which included leadership of the district's attendance officers, Springfield Attendance Resource Center and Attendance Matters campaign.

He also pointed to the tens of millions of dollars Martinez-



Lydia E. Martinez-Alvarez

Alvarez brought to SPS through her leadership with school turnaround work, which included an influx of funding as schools elevated in levels; her ability to formulate meaningful relationships with education-supporting businesses; and her acuity in re-defining accountability practices required by the district's grants department.

"This is bittersweet," said Mayor Domenic J. Sarno. "Lydia has been a steadfast and unyielding advocate for our children and their families and to our Springfield Public Schools family. She is a trailblazer, serving as our district's first Latina assistant superintendent. Superintendent Warwick and I will truly miss her as she has been instrumental in a number of SPS initiatives and a strong voice within our community. Throughout her 28-year career, starting as a substitute teacher and raising through the ranks to assistant superintendent, Lydia has done a tremendous job. On behalf of the City of Springfield and the School Committee, I want to wish Lydia and her family good health and continued success on a well-deserved retirement."

More inclined to delight in her impact on the lives

of students and community than in her work in the executive suite, Martinez-Alvarez said her most-prized accomplishments are those that met students and families where they were.

She used her role as a district executive to breathe new life into the home visit program and expanded pockets of summer school opportunities to include students in every school.

Under her tutelage, programs such as Innovative Pathways and the Student Employment Program afforded new career opportunities for SPS students.

And while her commitment to outfit schools with an organized means of providing critical resources to families for free; and to connect educators with donors seeking opportunities to positively impact education at the classroom level focused on students and teachers, projects like her creation of the Parent Community Advisory Council focused on parent engagement.

Additionally, her creation of the district's first Diversity, Inclusion and Racial Equity Committee substantially girded the district's commitment to better operate from that lens daily.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Martinez-Alvarez has been entrenched in adapting the education process to the global pandemic from an executive and administrative position. Still, she takes great pride in "meeting families where they are" accomplishments. Successful campaigns such as the one to secure tens of thousands of donations from toiletries to school supplies for convenient distribution to families in need during remote education.

"I just know how brilliant our kids are and I know what their needs are," said Martinez-Alvarez, a lifelong Springfield resident and Springfield Public Schools graduate. "I know because I'm one of them, I will always be one of them." Martinez-Alvarez said she looks forward to spending more time with her husband Rafael, and their large families in retirement. "It's the right time for me to do this. But as education and children will always be my heartbeat, I'm sure I will find ways to feed my passion and hopefully continue making a difference in Springfield."

Swan song: School gets a new name

In November, the School Committee unanimously voted to rename Homer Street School in honor of retired State Representative and Civil Rights Icon Benjamin Swan.

The Benjamin Swan Elementary School will be part of a consolidated school project, estimated at \$95 million, that will replace two schools. DeBerry School was built in 1951 and can no longer accommodate the needs of students and staff. The former Homer Street School was opened in 1898 and lacked the space and amenities needed such as a cafeteria and gymnasium. The new DeBerry-Swan School will be on the site of the existing DeBerry School property on Union Street and DeBerry Park. The school is scheduled to be completed and open by August 2023.

"It has been a long time coming and to stand beside the iconic Representative Benjamin Swan as his namesake school comes into fruition is an absolute honor and

privilege," said Superintendent of Schools Daniel Warwick at the topping-off ceremony. "I am grateful to Barbara Gresham and the entire School Committee for their vision for our community in the renaming of Homer Street School in honor of Rep. Benjamin Swan. We are ensuring that the contributions this icon made to local and national civil rights will live forever in our school district."

It is tremendous that we honor a legend of a man in our Springfield community, former state Representative Benjamin Swan, by putting his name on the school so that our children who will walk the halls can learn about his life and legacy," said State Representative Bud Williams.

Much like the Brightwood-Lincoln School, the new consolidated DeBerry-Swan School will have separate entrances and each school would retain their names, but would share some common areas such as a gymnasium and cafeteria-auditorium.



State Rep. Benjamin Swan

Sci-Tech teacher making a difference

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Stefan Davis never imagined he'd make a career working with at-risk youth, having been one himself.

But the job suits him.

"I understand our population, because I was there," said Davis. "They are me; and I am them."

Davis had a difficult childhood, and he has the emotional and physical scars to prove it. His stepfather was abusive, and he was beaten out of the gang he joined. He was almost ready to give up, but he didn't. His love of football helped and he earned a full scholarship to play at American International College in Springfield.

He left college with an associate's degree and later started working with youth at Westover Job Corps Center, helping them find job opportunities, and then with Brightside for Families and Children. Following that, he worked at an alternative school and as a liaison to schools, coached and even interned with the NFL's Houston Texans.

Eventually, he took a job as a paraprofessional and football coach in Springfield Public Schools.

"One of our past assistant principals, Roland Brooks, told me I was wasting my talent," said Davis. "He said 'you have a gift. You're good with these kids. You can truly make a difference.'"

Davis went back and earned his bachelor's degree in psychology, and later earned his master's in special education. He has been working as a behavioral interventionist for at-risk students and families at Springfield High School of Science and Technology. The program, Fresh Start, began nearly 10 years ago. It is a credit recovery and turnaround program for students on the brink of dropping out due to disciplinary issues, poor attendance, family problems and more.

"It gives these kids hope to think 'if coach could do it, I could do it,'" said Davis.

Davis says many of the students gradually begin try their hardest and show up every day on time.

"It's a joy to be around them," said Davis. "They're helping me as well. Adults can get so caught up in word 'adult,' but these kids have a lot of great answers to a lot of things."

Davis really puts his heart into his work, and says he never clocks out when the bell rings.



From left, Sci Tech students Ethan Deleon, Faisal Mohammed, Iyanah Wills, Moises Garcia and John Athan are doing well in Stefan Davis' Fresh Start class.

PHOTOS: SEAN BROWNE

"It doesn't just stay in school," he said. "Kids and their families have access to me at all times. I treat them as my own, and they look to me as a father figure. One thing that they get out of this is that I listened to them."

One other —more tangible — thing that they have gotten out of the program has been a new addition to their closets. Davis purchased suits for the male students and appropriate business wear for the females.

"I wear suits every day, and I want them to be able to dress the part when they have interviews or anything else," he said.

Inspired by his work with Sci Tech students, Davis also founded a nonprofit, I Found Light Against All Odds. The organization is dedicated to helping youth address any social, emotional and economic issues they are experiencing. Davis

hopes to provide them with the tools and opportunities to break the cycle of poverty, desperation and dependence, and enable them to become contributing members of the community.

As part of those efforts, the organization offers scholarships to qualified candidates that have been accepted to college. Davis is also opening the Lighthouse Home, a safe haven for homeless girls ages 17-19.

In February, Davis was featured in BusinessWest and named one of its 2022 Difference Makers. The honor acknowledges individuals, groups, businesses and institutions that make a difference within their local community. He is also a past recipient of the Association of Black Business and Professionals' Social Impact Award.



Faisal Mohammed is happy to be a part of Fresh Start.



As part of his lessons, Stefan Davis hopes to prepare students for success in life.

Expanding opportunities for youngest learners

By MEAGHAN CASEY

Springfield Public Schools is making history by prioritizing its youngest learners.

Starting in the fall, the district will be the first in the state to provide free, universal full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-old students.

"This is a monumental development for our community and something that we've been working towards for years," said Superintendent of Schools Daniel Warwick. "To have the ability to provide a foundation for our students before they start kindergarten is going to greatly influence their readiness and really help to set our youngest students up for academic success right from the start."

In May, the School Committee approved a FY23 budget that provides approximately \$15 million in funding for the expansion of preschool classes.

"It will pay dividends down the road for our kids," said Warwick. Approximately 2,000 seats for 3- and 4-year-olds will be available. Full-day classes will be offered in every elementary school in the district and at Margaret C. Ells Preschool and the Early Childhood Education Center. There will also be a new preschool-only school at 111 Seymour Avenue, which currently houses the administration of the Springfield Virtual School.

Warwick said finding that space was key to the expansion, because so many half-day programs were previously able to operate out of the same classrooms. Staffing was another important issue. The district is hiring approximately 30 new preschool teachers, as well as 30 new paraprofessionals.

Springfield Public Schools has been moving toward this goal of expanding preschool seats for the past 10 years. The last major expansion was in 2019, representing a district investment of more than \$1.5 million. Impressive, but since two-thirds of the seats offered were for half-day programs, Warwick was determined to do more.

"As a former elementary school principal, I know the importance of pre-K education in terms of readiness," said Warwick. "This should be a game changer. Two-and-a-half hours a day just wasn't enough time. The full-day model will help students and will be much more convenient for working families."

The full-day session will start at 8:50 a.m. and end at 2:30 p.m. The district has already piloted full-day classrooms at Ells Preschool, the Early Childhood Education Center and Boland, Brightwood, Lincoln and Sumner Avenue elementary schools.

"We had amazing results," said early childhood and special education supervisor Rosemarie Waltsak. "It's exciting to see how much they learn and how quickly they pick things up. It helps them develop a drive to learn."

Waltsak says the program focuses on play that is purposeful and engages students in a variety of ways. Social-emotional learning is a big component, along with developing pre-literacy skills.

For more information or to enroll for 2022-2023, visit [Pre-School Enrollment - Springfield Public Schools](#).



1.



3.



6.



2.



4.



5.

1. Boland School preschool student Kairo Reyes is pushed on a tricycle by classmate Jaela Alexander. 2. Alaia Cabrera-Polanco sprays a paper towel with water for her beans to sprout as teacher Mary Foley looks on during class at the Early Childhood Education Center. 3. Boland School preschooler Tessa Archdiacono focuses on her coloring. 4. Boland School preschool teacher Lisa Gagnon has already piloted a full-day program. 5. Boland School students work on flower projects. 6. Alaia Cabrera-Polanco hops off the slide during recess at the Early Childhood Education Center.

PHOTOS: SEAN BROWNE



Students in the middle of justice conversation

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Students from Duggan Academy, Kiley Middle School, Springfield Renaissance School and Kennedy Middle School are getting schooled on the law—in the best way possible.

The students in grades 6-8 have been taking part in Discovery Justice's after-school programming.

Since 1998, Boston-based Discovering Justice has worked in partnership with school systems, judges, nonprofits, community volunteers and the legal community to examine the workings of the court system, explore the ideals of justice and help young people understand complex concepts like democracy and governance. The goal is that by the time students reach high school and college, they have foundational civic skills and the ability to engage as active democratic participants.

The organization kicked off its 20th season of its Mock Trial program in October with a record 23 teams of students from 12 cities and towns. Springfield had three teams with students from Duggan, Kiley and Renaissance.

"To see how the kids have transformed, gaining confidence and presenting a case in front of a judge, it gives you goosebumps," said Mary Kay Brown, director of partnerships at Duggan Academy. "A lot of them come away from it thinking 'this is pretty cool.' It makes them feel comfortable and think maybe that's what they want to do for a career."

The program, which runs for 10 weeks, pairs middle school students and legal mentors for weekly sessions to prepare a case before a judge and a jury. The case for this year addressed the issue of unpopular speech on a school campus and how it tests the guarantees of free speech in the First Amendment. The case involved a fictional high

school student, president of his school's Planet Club, who organized an event with a provocative speaker who believed it was morally wrong to eat meat. In a community with many farms, there were concerns his speech would be harmful to residents' livelihood. The student was suspended when he refused to cancel the event, and he in turn sued the district, arguing the suspension was a violation of his right to free speech.

"They always come up with cases that appeal to students," said Brown.

Duggan and Kiley students partnered with mentors from Western New England University, while Renaissance students worked with mentors from Community Legal Aid. They presented their cases to judges at the U.S. Federal Courthouse in Springfield.

"It was great to have students and legal mentors back in the courthouses," said Mock Trial program manager Luke Matys. "We were so happy to bring everyone together to experience being in a courtroom and facing a real live judge."

He also highlighted the help of legal professionals across the state.

"The program wouldn't be possible without our volunteer legal mentors," said Matys. "The connection and relationships they form with our students make the program special."

This spring, Kennedy students, partnering with Western New England University mentors, have been participating in Discovering Justice's other after-school program, Mock Appeal. Whereas the Mock Trial Program invites students to present their cases before judges and juries made up of community members, the Mock Appeal program allows



Jazzleyn Cruzado Torres from Renaissance School presents her case at the U.S. Federal Courthouse.

PHOTO: THE REPUBLICAN

students to craft oral arguments and answer judges' questions in order to appeal their cases before panels of judges. It is based off of the same case as the fall semester of Mock Trial.

SPS getting more families connected



Crystal Carmen, a digital ambassador at the Student Assignment Services Center, helps parents to access WiFi at home.

PHOTO: SEAN BROWNE

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

If there's one thing the pandemic made abundantly clear, it's that we are living in a digital era and families need to be able to access online education.

"Internet at home is as essential as electricity and heat," said Paul Foster, the district's chief of Strategy, Innovation and Accountability. "Learning doesn't end when the bell rings. We're still sending laptops home with kids and they're still getting online assignments."

Earlier this year, Springfield Public Schools partnered with the national non-profit EducationSuperHighway on an outreach initiative to make families aware of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). This federal government program provides up to \$30 a month as a discount on Internet service, and a one-time discount (up to \$100) for a connected device such as a laptop, desktop computer or tablet purchased through a participating provider. Funding for the programs comes from the federal Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act. The district participates in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which automatically makes every family eligible.

"Our goal is two-fold: making families aware of this program and helping them sign up," said Foster.

EducationSuperHighway employees trained parent liaisons at the district's Student Assignment Services (SAS) Center (formerly the Parent and Community

Engagement Center) to make calls to families.

"Their employees were also on the calls with us, answering questions," said Foster. "They've been side-by-side with us through the whole process."

"One thing we talked about, and it was why we were eager to have our folks be a part of it, is that schools have relationships with parents," said SAS senior administrator Jeff Welch. "Our liaisons are known for what they do, and other parents might be more inclined to answer the phone and listen to them."

"We're still getting inbound calls about the program," he added.

EducationSuperHighway provided stipends to the parent liaisons for their work. The organization aims to close the digital divide for the 18 million U.S. households that have access to the Internet, but can't afford to connect. It previously helped to close the K-12 classroom connectivity gap -- as evidenced by 99.3 percent of the country's schools having a high-speed broadband connection.

For families interested in applying for this benefit, you can find more information and apply online at [ACPbenefit.org](https://www.acpbenefit.org). You can also contact the SAS Center between the weekday hours of 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. at 413-787-6959, or visit [educationsuperhighway.org/acpbenefit](https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/acpbenefit) for help applying.

Boland teacher has a new title: author

By MEAGHAN CASEY

Like many parents, Jason Perkins struggled to get his young son to sleep – that is, until he played some heavy metal.

“He wasn’t napping, and I tried everything,” said Perkins, a teacher at Boland Elementary School. “I had just gotten some new records and, giving up, I put on a Metallica album. A minute later, I looked over and he was fast asleep.”

That event inspired Perkins to write a children’s book, “Rock Stars Don’t Nap,” which is scheduled to be released in the fall of 2023. The main character, Jimmy, was born to rock, but his mother insists that showtime becomes naptime. The book is being published by HarperCollins and illustrated by Cale Atkinson.

“He’s knocking it out of the park,” said Perkins of the illustrator.

Perkins, who grew up in Springfield, has always had an interest in writing.

“Since I was old enough to hold a crayon, I’ve dreamed about becoming a published author,” he said. “I always liked writing and drawing, and I wrote quite a bit as a kid. I was always telling stories to my siblings, and I remember I wrote a whole sequel to the Transformers movie.”

That interest was rekindled while he was earning his master’s in special education and was tasked with writing a children’s book. Two weeks after earning his master’s in 2010, Perkins’ daughter, Tallulah, was born and he took two months off. He dabbled in some writing projects,

began researching publishing companies and joined the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators.

“I started going to conferences and made some great



Boland teacher Jason Perkins is publishing his first children’s book.

PHOTO: MELISSA PERKINS

connections,” said Perkins. “I also joined a critique group.”

When his son, Oliver, was born in 2016, he began to take his writing even more seriously. It took about four years of revisions before HarperCollins expressed interest and made an offer. Perkins, who is represented by Natascha Morris of the Tobias Literary Agency, was thrilled. He is currently revising a sequel to the book.

At Boland, Perkins is a special education teacher for students in grades 2-4. Having attended Springfield Public Schools and graduated from Central High School, Perkins always knew he would return to the district. He had been substituting during college and was hired in 2001 to teach at Boland—and has remained there ever since.

“The teachers I had here in Springfield motivated me to go into teaching,” he said. “It was always my goal to come back here.”

While at German Gerena School, Perkins remembers helping out with a second-grade art class and volunteering to walk students out during dismissal. His mother, Alberta, was a paraprofessional in the district for 20 years. While in high school, Perkins volunteered at Sunshine Village in Chicopee, which serves adults with developmental disabilities. Those experiences shaped his decision to pursue both elementary and special education.

“I’ve really enjoyed special education and working with small groups,” said Perkins. “I’ve had an amazing experience here, both as a student and as a teacher. For me, there was no other choice but Springfield.”

Educating paraeducators in Springfield

PARAEDUCATORS from page 1

Anne Kandilis, Springfield WORKS and Working Cities Challenge Initiative Director, says Springfield WORKS wanted to bring a DTA-supported program to Springfield. She met with Maegan Pedemonti, DTA Works Coordinator for the West and Central regions.



Boland School paraprofessional Valerie Rivera works with student Harold Rosad-Malave.

PHOTOS: SEAN BROWNE

“We agreed that the paraeducator track was a great career track and a much-needed program for our community,” said Kandilis. “Thankfully, Springfield Public Schools and Holyoke Community College thought so too and came on board.”

This type of collaboration is part of the mission of Springfield WORKS, which was founded five years ago when the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston awarded the initiative a \$475,000 Working Cities implementation grant. It engages and aligns employers, educators, community leaders and jobseekers to address the economic needs of both residents and local businesses. Kandilis says the paraeducator training will be a real model going forward.

District leaders would also agree that it’s been successful.

“So far, it’s working,” said Valerie Williams, the district’s senior administrator of Talent and Diversity Development. “Principals and staff have had rave reviews.”

“They’ve been doing a fantastic job,” said Natalie Henry, assistant principal at Rebecca M. Johnson School, where there are two interns. “They have a great repertoire with the children and the teachers love having them.”

Since the training program’s launch, there have been two cohorts, each with 10 participants. Valerie Rivera, who was part of the first cohort, has since passed the WorkKeys test and has been hired by Boland Elementary.



Rebecca Johnson School student Bobby Owens shares his viewfinder toy with intern Brittany Rosa.

Williams expects to see more participants pass the exam and be hired by the district in the coming months. This program has aligned wonderfully with the district’s efforts to attract new talent from its own community and to grow a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline.

“Paraprofessionals are vital team members of the school,” said Williams. “They serve as mentors, and they’re the backbone for education. They’re tireless, working long hours and providing extra hands in the classroom to support, encourage and nurture students.”

Meet some members of the Class of 2022



Commerce:

Xiomareliz Rivera and **Ilianys Robles** both received full, four-year scholarships to Baypath University. While at Commerce, Xiomareliz exhibited leadership skills and was recognized as a future leader in her community. With a focus on social justice issues, she has a bright future in community activism. Punctual, organized, respectful and compassionate, Ilianys did her best at everything she tried at Commerce. She is the type of scholar all teachers enjoy in class.

Jaydalee Serrano has been accepted to 14 colleges and has saved \$15,000 in college costs by participating in the Commerce dual enrollment college pathways program. She is known for her self-advocacy and exhibits wisdom beyond her years. She will attend Shippensburg University in the fall.

Duggan:

Jancarlos Cabrera completed the Baystate Springfield Educational Partnership (BSEP) program last year, and is currently working part-time at Baystate. He was accepted into the pre-med program at Elms College and hopes to pursue a career as a general surgeon. At Duggan, he was captain of the volleyball team and a member of the National Honors Society.

Very focused and goal-oriented, **Gloria Cruz** will be enrolled in the nursing program at Elms College this fall.

Valedictorian **Raylan Little** has been accepted to five colleges and has been offered more than \$480,000 in scholarships. He is interested in pursuing a career in computer engineering. He has been a member of Duggan's National Honor Society and runs the 100-yard-dash in outdoor track.

Salutatorian **Aliceya Lopez** has been accepted to 11 colleges and has received more than \$800,000 in scholarship offers. She would like to pursue a career in teaching and be a social justice advocate for the LGBTQIA community.

Winson Ni is an active member of the community and has been working at his parents' restaurant since he was 14. Helping his parents with the business has taught him responsibility, work ethics, values and perseverance. He will be attending WNEU, pursuing a career in computer science, and has been offered more than \$24,000 in scholarships.

Simesha Wallace has had perfect attendance this year, and is considered to be a role model for other students. She completed the BSEP program in her junior year. She will be attending Elms College, studying to be a speech and language pathologist, while also earning a minor in teaching.

Putnam Voc-Tech Academy:

Parmila Sarki has been an outstanding student leader for all of Putnam's Herren Project initiatives, and she was awarded \$500 as the 2022 Spirit of Purple winner. Through the Herren Project, she created a public service announcement for the district attorney's Stop the Swerve event. Her submission and video won honorable mention and a \$1,000 award. Additionally, she was a student ambassador for Putnam's Be a Friend anti-bullying campaign. She was also selected to be a part of the school's student leadership team for the Start with Hello/Sandy Hook Promise initiative.

Renaissance:

Alejandra Almanza's next stop is UMass Amherst, where she will be studying biology in the Honors Program, with hopes of continuing on to medical school. At Renaissance, she enrolled in AP courses and participated in the dual enrollment program. She spent time during the pandemic volunteering at Bay State Medical Center Hospital. Additionally, she participates in boxing and jujitsu outside of school. She was a four-year member of the Renaissance varsity soccer team. Her dedication as a student-athlete garnered her state recognition as a Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA) student-athlete of the month award in September.

Shane Dillon will be attending Amherst College to study political science. Active in politics, he has served as a formal mayoral intern with Mayor Domenic Sarno and congressional intern for Richard Neal. Also, he was the successful campaign manager for Ward 8 Springfield City Councilor Zaida Govan. Most recently, he was appointed delegate to the 2022 Massachusetts Democratic Party State Convention. At Renaissance, he was enrolled in AP courses and participated in the dual enrollment program. He was the senior class president, a member of the high school task force and the founder of Springfield's first chapter of Massachusetts High School Democrats.

Nazarelie Gonzalez has earned a full scholarship to Dartmouth College as a QuestBridge Scholar. The scholarship program annually awards 1,200 students with this distinction. At Dartmouth, she will study biology, and hopes to continue to medical school. At Renaissance, she was a high honors student, enrolled in multiple Advanced Placement (AP) classes. She also participated in the dual enrollment program through Springfield Technical Community College. She was a varsity softball player, student council representative, prom committee member and a leader with the high school task force.

Shalin Payne will be attending Smith College as a recipient of

the Springfield Scholarship, which awards her a full scholarship. She will be studying environmental science. She has been a top student at Renaissance, recognized as a Renaissance Scholar every quarter. She enrolled in all AP classes this year. A talented artist, she designed the winning billboard for the Stop the Swerve Challenge, hosted by the district attorney.

Also a QuestBridge Scholar, **Sophia Romeo** will attend Boston College on full scholarship. There, she will study biochemistry. Ranked in the top five of her class, she has been recognized every quarter as a Renaissance Scholar. She enrolled in multiple AP classes and participated in the dual enrollment program through Springfield Technical Community College. In addition, she participated in the Bay State Springfield Educational Partnership (BSEP) for students interested in the medical field. She also works in the community as a lifeguard for the City of Springfield. Within Renaissance, she was a varsity member of the swim team, and a prom committee and yearbook member.

CLASS OF 2022 GRADUATION CEREMONY SCHEDULE			
MONDAY, JUNE 6TH	CENTRAL	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
TUESDAY, JUNE 7TH	SCI-TECH	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8TH	CONS OF THE ARTS	CONS OF THE ARTS	6:00PM
THURSDAY, JUNE 9TH	DUGGAN	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
FRIDAY, JUNE 10TH	VIRTUAL SCHOOL	VIRTUAL CEREMONY	3:00PM
MONDAY, JUNE 13TH	COMMERCE AND SHA	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
TUESDAY, JUNE 14TH	RENAISSANCE	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15TH	PUTNAM	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
THURSDAY, JUNE 16TH	ALTERNATIVE	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM
WEDNESDAY, AUG 17TH	SUMMER GRADUATION	SYMPHONY HALL	6:00PM

Familiar face provides winning formula

By RICH FAHEY

When longtime Springfield Central girls basketball Coach Eric Maurer left the position after the 2020-21 season, the man waiting to step in was a familiar face: assistant coach James Gee, a Central alumnus and history teacher.

All Gee did in his first season as head coach was lead the Lady Golden Eagles to a 22-1 record and a historic Division 1 state championship in the first year of the MIAA's new statewide tournament format.

The Eagles streaked out to a 20-3 early lead in the state final against Andover but had to rely on two of their trademarks – toughness and defense – to clamp down in the final moments and preserve a 43-40 win.

Gee, 44, had spent 10 years as an assistant coach before stepping in to replace Maurer in the midst of a COVID-19

pandemic at a chaotic time for interscholastic sports. “I think it was very important to have someone who was in and around the program whom they could trust and they already had a relationship with,” he said.

Springfield Public Schools Athletic Director Dwayne Early said Gee was the right man at the right time and it paid dividends.

“I think having James in place meant everything,” said Early. “Having a familiar face with the young ladies, a voice they knew cared for them, on and off the court. There couldn't have been a better time for a new coach familiar with the team to step into the role.”

Early said the students didn't know what the next day would bring in these tumultuous times and having Gee's steady hand at the helm was reassuring, especially when

the program suffered a long COVID-related shutdown this winter.

“We kind of got back to normal this year and James helped ease the transition,” said Early.

Gee, 44, was born and raised in Springfield, eventually attending Central Academy in grade 9 and then Central itself after the schools merged. He earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees from UMass Amherst and has been a teacher for 15 years.

His playing career was cut short by injuries suffered in a car accident. The perspective he gained from the accident he has passed on to his student-athletes. “Basketball is great.” He said. “But there's life after basketball and you have to prepare for that.”

Gee also takes it to heart that wherever he and his team go and whatever they do, they are onstage.

“I feel that when you're outside the school you represent yourself to the world who you are, and when it comes to Central, we're one of the top sports schools in the state and that means a lot of attention,” he said. “People see how we act and respond.”

“I believe firmly you learn tremendous amount of life lessons from sports,” said Early. “And James is able to impart those lessons with a calm demeanor.”

Springfield's latest state champion shined a bright light on women's sports, which often struggle to get the same coverage as the males. But when you make history, people have to sit up and take notice.

Early said Gee didn't blink when it came time to test his commitment to academics. Even though a player was eligible by MIAA standards, he sat her down for a tournament game because she had failed to complete an assignment.

“He made her sit out until she did what she had to do,” said Early. “He set them up for success and she was ready to play the next game.”

That's championship leadership.



Coach James Gee won a state championship in his first season with Central.

PHOTO: THE REPUBLICAN

Central girls state their case: We're No. 1

GIRLS from page 12

sustained success provide the players opportunities to play in college. The program's goal is to prepare the students to take advantage of those opportunities.

“Basketball can take you anywhere, but you still have to have character, integrity, be a good person and academics and grades have to be a priority,” he said.

When the team recently visited a middle school in the city, the players were surprised to learn that the middle school students knew their names.

Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno proclaimed March 24 Central Girls Basketball Day and awarded the team the key to the city. “We are all so proud of these young ladies both on and off the court,” the mayor said.

“They coped with everything that came their way,” Central Principal Thad Tokarz said. “They're tough kids. “They work all year round and you can see them in the weight room. They're strong, gritty and in shape and they want to win.”

Springfield Public Schools Athletic Director Dwayne Early said it means the world to the school and the city to have such a success story. “These young ladies won the first true statewide Division 1 tournament and they'll always have their place in the history books,” he said.



The team celebrated Central Girls Basketball Day, as proclaimed by the mayor, on March 24.

PHOTO: THE REPUBLICAN

Central girls state their case:

We're No. 1

BY RICH FAHEY

Defense, hard work and toughness travel. And they can take you as far as you want to go.

The Springfield Central High School Lady Golden Eagles used all three to capture their first MIAA Div. 1 state basketball championship since 2017 on March 20 at the Tsongas Center in Lowell, defeating Andover 43-40. The birthplace of basketball is home to a champion once again.

After scoring the game's first 12 points and taking a 22-point lead at one point, Central had to make three late stops to preserve the lead and take home the title in the MIAA's first-ever statewide tournament.

First-year coach James Gee led Central to a 22-1 record marked by comebacks and a long shutdown forced by COVID-19. It was sweet redemption after Central fell in the Western Mass. final last season.

"It was more exciting for the girls with the whole state involved," said Gee. "It had more of the feel of March Madness with the college-style bracket and everyone in state playing."

Gee noted the adversity the players had to overcome to scale the mountain, including an 11-point halftime deficit in one tournament game and Andover's frantic comeback in the final. The biggest hurdle, though, was a COVID-19 outbreak that shut the program down for the better part of a month. The long layoff was a factor in Central's only loss of the year to California power Cathedral Catholic.

Gee said his defense did indeed travel well and was one of the hallmarks of the championship season. In the MIAA tourney, opponents averaged just 38 points a game against Central.

"Defense is one of the principles of the team along with teamwork and camaraderie," he said. "Our players bought into the concept of good hard defense for all four quarters and recognized that good defense wears down the other team and makes a difference at the end of the game."

The good times could continue as Central featured a balanced scoring attack this season led by four junior guards: Julia Bahati with 304 points, Amany Lopez with 291, Heaven Morris with 202 and Jordis Tautalatasi with 154. Lopez scored 16 points in the final against Andover.

Two other junior guards – Brooklyn Oliverio and Jordyn Robinson – shared the scoring load and junior Sydney Dobbs returned from injury to help out, and the Golden Eagles also had contributions from senior forward Jasmine Love, senior guard Amani Smith, freshmen Angela Hector and Alaysia Mondon and junior Jadah Stokes. Love and Smith leave the program as champions.

Gee said while the roster may seem guard-heavy, the players are "very versatile and we teach the girls to be interchangeable, to move from one position to the next. It makes it easier to deal with injuries and foul trouble."

Gee said the entire coaching and support staff deserve credit for the championship, including assistant coaches Michael Anderson, Jasmine Lovejoy, Ashley Grant and Arielle Ward, as well as statistician Ray Dandurand and trainer Sarah Hoder.

"Our staff is the heart and foundation of the program," Gee said. "They are very caring; they advise me and they work closely with the team. They're always there for the players' social and emotional well-being."

Central began the MIAA tournament with an easy 58-25 win over Lexington and followed up with a 58-47 victory over Hingham. A 61-42 win over Franklin put the Golden Eagles in the state semifinals vs. Wachusett at Worcester State University, with Central pulling out a hard-fought 45-36 win.

That set the stage for the championship game in Lowell, where an early rout turned into a hang-on-by-your-fingernails finish against Andover.

Gee said the championship, the coverage it brought and the program's

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The Central team celebrates a championship title.

PHOTOS: THE REPUBLICAN



Team members pose with Mayor Domenic Sarno when he presented them with the key to the city.