

NF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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the importance of families helping children establish good study and reading habits while also staying engaged in their lives outside the classroom. He urged parents to pay particular attention to their children's social media activity and to encourage involvement in school and other activities.

"Please, families, monitor your kids' activity on social media. Protect them against some of the nefarious actors on social media," Cipollone said. "Keep them focused on what's important, what's relevant. Keep them engaged in school and activities."

He also stressed the value of regular communication between parents and children, saying that "nothing beats a conversation with your child around the dinner table" or while taking a walk.

Superintendent Dr. Kenneth Craw echoed the positive assessment of the opening weeks.

"From all observations, it has been a tremendous start to this new school year," Craw said, thanking teachers, administrators, families, and students. "They have conducted themselves as they should. They've come in ready to learn."

Attendance continues to be a major focus. Dr. Craw reported that chronic student absenteeism was just over 8 percent last year, compared with 9 percent two years ago. Staff attendance was approximately 95 percent.

"My biggest piece of advice this year is -- I've mentioned this in previous years -- you have to be here as much as possible, unless you're sick," the superintendent emphasized.

He said the district is putting additional strategies in place at the high school, where absenteeism has been higher than at the lower schools, with the goal of bringing the districtwide rate below 8 percent.

Student representative Hailey Lofaro, a senior, also described an upbeat beginning to the year.

"We had an amazing start to the school year," she said. "It was definitely full of energy on the seniors' behalf and the rest of the grades too."

Among the district's instructional priorities is increasing student engagement while continuing curriculum work in English, mathematics, social studies, and world language. The district also plans to strengthen intervention services for students struggling to reach grade-level standards in literacy and math.

Technology and digital wellness will receive increased attention as well. Dr. Craw said the district is examining "how we're purposely using technology and not overusing AI," while recognizing that artificial intelligence is now part of students' world. The district also wants to provide more screen-free opportunities for students to collaborate face-to-face and reduce reliance on cell phones and personal devices.

Another initiative being explored is a later, or "healthier," start time for New Fairfield High School. Dr. Craw emphasized that the proposal is in the study stage and would involve significant operational considerations, including the possibility of two waves of school buses.

"This is looking out two years for the potential of a later start time for the high school," he said.

Special education has been given its own category among the district priorities this year. Plans include better aligning classroom and testing accommodations to promote student independence and expanding therapeutic and behavioral services.

"We also, as you know, have a need to expand and enhance our therapeutic and behavioral services," Dr. Craw said. "The more that we can enhance these services, so that we can educate children in district as much as possible, we're engaged in that."

BOE Vice Chair Samantha Mannion asked that the district also establish more visible goals for STRIDES, its program serving students ages 18 to 22 as they transition to adult life.

"I would love to see a subset in there for STRIDES that is different from everything else," she said, pointing to areas such as "employ-

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ment readiness" and "work skills training."

Campus security is another area under review. Dr. Craw said the district is studying whether a controlled access point could be established at the main campus entrance to better monitor who enters the property during the school day. He cautioned that such a change could be a multi-year project.

Longer-term facilities costs are also on the horizon. A condition study of New Fairfield Middle School is underway, and district officials anticipate developing a financial plan for eventual roof and mechanical-system replacements once the study is completed.

On the financial side, the district closed the previous budget year with an approximately \$25,000 surplus, pending the final audit. Officials noted that the year had included higher-than-expected costs in areas including utilities and special education.

Development of the next school budget begins Oct. 1. Dr. Craw said administrators will use a zero-based approach, starting from scratch and seeking to make the process "as transparent as possible."

The board also approved adding eligible occupational and physical therapy employees working more than 30 hours a week to the district's 401(a) retirement plan. Officials said the benefit will be funded through existing forfeiture funds in the retirement plan and will have no impact on the operating budget.

The meeting also included several celebrations. New Fairfield's athletic department has received the Michael's Cup Sportsmanship Award for the fourth consecutive year. "We're very proud of our student athletes," said the superintendent.

The district is also unveiling an interactive Hall of Honor that will recognize achievements not only in athletics, but also academics, fine arts and contributions to the schools and community. The unveiling coincides with the 50th anniversary celebration of the first graduating class of New

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NF BOS

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amended, as the district shall decide to undertake.

First Selectman Ms. Pat Del Monaco shared, "This is an area in the Ball Pond district that has historically had issues plowing snow and maintaining roads, and a group of residents have petitioned for a tax district, hoping that that will provide the support for them to do those types of things." Following the delivery of a completed petition of this sort, the Town is bound by specific state statute requiring that they hold a Town Meeting within 30 days of receiving the petition.

Del Monaco explained that a tax district "means any fire district, sewer district, fire and sewer district, lighting district, village, beach, or improvement association, and any other district or association except a school district wholly within a town and having the power to make appropriations or to levy taxes, so that's the main purpose of a tax district. They have to be organized under statute." She went on, "they have to name themselves and then elect officers, and then they proceed as a subdivision of the municipality, so they would have to follow all the same rules in terms of calling meetings, for example, as the town does, and then they are required to have at least an annual town meeting."

Selectman Ms. Khrist Hall shared her experience living on a private road, "which means that our road does not get paved, repaired, plowed, or maintained through Town efforts, everything we do on the road is done by the people who live on the road." She's not alone, in all, 50% of the roads in New Fairfield are private. And, without a tax district, "It's very difficult to come to an agreement on paving the road, plowing the road, and the roads fall into disrepair. And it's not only an inconvenience for residents; it's also a public safety issue, as ambulances, fire trucks, etc. have trouble getting to the residents...there's very little the Town can do in terms of helping them with repairs."

Having heard from residents in this area before, BOS members were all pleased to see the petition come through, and Hall said, "I view this as a very good step forward by local residents to try to address some of the problems that they face in their everyday life where they live."

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Fairfield High School, with additional Hall of Honor content expected to be available by Homecoming on Oct. 16.

Board members also encouraged families to attend New Fairfield Day on Sept. 26, where the schools will have a community presence. High school student volunteers are expected to help with an activity for children, and board members encourage residents and families to stop by and participate.

The next regular meeting of the New Fairfield Board of Education is scheduled for Thursday, October 15, at 7pm. Residents may attend BOE regular meetings in person or watch recordings available on the district website.



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