



# The Exchange

[www.blindbrook.org](http://www.blindbrook.org)

WINTER 2008

## Middle States Planning Well Underway!

A year and a half ago the Blind Brook Rye School District began the task of applying for accreditation through the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The district chose one of the most challenging of all of the reaccreditation protocols that is available: *Pathways to School Improvement*. There are two key phases in the Pathways to School Improvement protocol. The first is the Data Gathering Phase, and the second is the Planning Phase.

Last year, for a period of nine months, a small committee called the Data Gathering Steering Committee collected information that would be ultimately used to develop goals and an action plan for the Blind Brook Schools. The year was a total success. Every constituent group in the district participated via a variety of means, ranging from attending workshops and meetings, to filling out surveys and analyzing curricula. Additionally, two Superintendent's Conference Days were held and solely dedicated to the process.

Currently, the two internal coordinators, Christopher Griffin and Jane Wermuth, are leading a multi-constituent

group called the Planning Committee for the second phase of the process. The objectives of this committee are to develop a set of belief statements that serve as the moral compass for the district, as well as a mission statement. Next, the committee defines three instructional and three organizational goals that will serve as a road map for the direction the district will take over the next five years. The last imperative is to develop action plans that will help the district meet these goals.

Now, a mere five months are left before the team visit, which is scheduled for April of 2008, and the Planning committee is in great shape. We have already identified our six goals and will embark on the development of action plans before December's holiday break. The process thus far has been an enriching experience for the members of the planning team, and we hope to have goals in place that will help our district develop to better serve our students.



*BBHS Assistant Principal, Jane Wermuth and Christopher Griffin, Director of Guidance and Counseling (both pictured above) are giving a presentation on the Middle States Evaluation at the February 11, 2008 Board of Education meeting. For more information, visit [www.blindbrook.org](http://www.blindbrook.org).*



Dear Residents,

As the holidays approach, Blind Brook can celebrate several landmark achievements.

We've completed our \$18 million capital construction project with students and community benefiting from new classrooms, cutting edge science labs, 21st century playing fields and a community track.

A four-year teacher's contract through 2011 was agreed to that increases instructional time for all students by lengthening the elementary school day 10 minutes; provides 6-12 students access to 40-minutes daily of additional academic assistance and extends Kindergarten by 40-minutes daily to ensure a consistent school day from 8:30 a.m. to 3:10 p.m. for all K-5 students.

#### *Graduate Survey*

Less publicized, but equally historic, was the completion of the first alumni study ever conducted of Blind Brook High's graduates.

Thanks to Chris Griffin, our Director of Guidance, Futuristics Research surveyed 132 graduates from the class of 2002 through 2006 that represented a very respectable 41% response rate. What they had to tell us will be taken very seriously.

#### *What did our graduates like?*

Of all graduates, 89% told us they were well-prepared for college and left Blind Brook with a "very favorable" rating of 3.89. This was only slightly below 4.0, which is the highest "extremely favorable" rating.

Students reported they were very satisfied with Blind Brook's computer access and their preparation in reading, math and making oral presentations. Academic departments were rated positively, as were Blind Brook's capacity to develop future responsibilities, such as "making informed educational choices," "thinking creatively" and "accepting citizenship responsibilities." Overall, learning skills were rated very highly, ranging from "Problem Solving" and "Teamwork" to "Communication" and "Study" skills. Satisfaction with "Guidance" has also improved noticeably over the past two years.

#### *How can we do better?*

As generous as graduates were in their praise, they were genuine and forthright in their criticisms.

More than 1 in 4 graduates told us they were not adequately prepared in writing and research skills. They believe we must do a better job in educating them to "handle social pressure," "making informed career choices" and "money management." The lowest rating we received was 2.88, a whopping unfavorable grade for helping graduates to "appreciate diversity." Finally, graduates would have liked a more comprehensive computer technology course of study and some improvements in our modern language and fine arts curricula.

#### *Where do we go from here?*

This survey data was so powerful and instructive that we will begin surveying this year's senior class to assess more completely purported inadequate

areas. Likewise, we will invite graduates to come in and speak to us more in depth regarding their perception of our strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, we've developed a two-track plan to implement improvements. Some changes can be made as soon as next school year, such as a "money management" elective course, and three credit computer education course of study and a strengthened writing/research program. Other changes will be integrated into our five-year Middle States Performance Plan to upgrade the entire K-12 curriculum and programs.

Thank you, Graduates!

Sincerely,

Ronald D. Valenti, Ph.D.

U.S. News & World Report has issued its first ever ranking of "America's Best High Schools" (November 29, 2007) and BBHS ranks #75 on their top 100 list. U.S. News engaged "School Evaluation Services," a K-12 Data Research Firm run by Standard & Poor, to measure student performance on state tests and the level of challenge of college course work, among other factors, to select top schools.

Blind Brook is no stranger to the top 100 High Schools, since Newsweek — using the Advanced Placement Challenge Index as their benchmark — has placed BBHS in the highest tier of American secondary institutions for 2005 and 2006.

Kudos to our entire K-12 faculty and students who continue to excel in their academic achievement!

## Board of Education Meetings

January	February	March
<p>7th – Board Workshop <i>Presentation: High School Initiatives</i></p> <p>28th – Regular Board Meeting <i>Presentation: Elementary Initiatives</i></p>	<p>11th – Board Workshop <i>Presentation: Middle States</i></p> <p>25th – Superintendent's Proposed Budget – BBHS Auditorium 2008-2009 <i>Presentation: Senior Options</i></p>	<p>10th – Community Budget Discussion of the 2008-2009 Budget</p> <p>31st – Community Budget Discussion of the 2008-2009 Budget</p>

## Message from the Board of Education President

My colleagues on the Board of Education extend to you Best Wishes for the Holidays.

We are especially gratified to have successfully completed our collective bargaining with the Federation of Teachers in August, and ratified a new four year agreement on September 10, 2007. We were further delighted to hear that the Federation rank and file approved of this contract with an 87-0 vote.

I have referred in public to this agreement as a "win-win." But, in many ways, it goes beyond the two parties involved; this contract contains major advantages for our two largest constituencies — our taxpayers and students.

Here are some of the highlights of our agreement:

**1) Increase Instructional Time.** The Board was committed to more student/teacher contact time. This was accomplished by adding instructional time to the BMP-RSS school day and having our teachers agree



to provide academic assistance in lieu of one "prep period" at both the middle and high school.

**2) Strengthen Teacher Evaluations.**

In keeping with the philosophy of the Board's agreement with our administrators, this contract formalizes teacher evaluations for ALL teachers, including yearly observations of tenured teachers.

**3) Reward Teacher Excellence.**

The Blind Brook community is indeed fortunate to have an exceptionally dedicated, hard-working and talented staff. The Board felt it important to reward their diligence with a generous pay increase.

**4) Control Escalating Health Care Cost**

This issue is not only germane to Blind Brook, but to all large organizations including GM, Ford and the majority of Fortune 500 companies. In order to insulate our taxpayers from huge yearly increases (>10%), the Federation and Board have agreed to "partner" health care costs. Any further increases to health care premiums will be shared at 50/50, starting next year. This is truly "groundbreaking" not only in Blind Brook, but in Westchester County and probably New York State.

In conclusion, it appears to the Board that we really have a "4 win" agreement. All four parties — the students, teachers, Board of Ed and taxpayers — have benefited greatly from our contract. However, we believe our students are the *biggest* winners.

## FACULTY NEWS: ANDREA HAMILTON!



**B**lind Brook would like to welcome Andrea Hamilton, who now serves as the Middle School Administrative Intern. Andrea completed her internship in Guidance and Counseling under the supervision and direction of Christopher Griffin earlier last year. She comes to us as a certified Guidance Counselor, and a former Career Counselor and Alumni Coordinator from The College of Westchester.

This year, Andrea is completing her second Masters in Educational Leadership at Manhattanville College. She was ecstatic about coming back to Blind Brook and working in the Middle School. She really enjoys working with the children and her experience here in the middle school has been very exciting and lots of fun, "I have to say I am so happy to be back at Blind Brook, and this year working with Middle School Students is so exciting! I am looking forward to every moment of it and I am so glad to be back."



## WHAT IS YOUR HOUSE WORTH?

Check out the October 2007 issue of Westchester Magazine, featuring a series of articles on "What Is Your House Worth, Now?"

The magazine's editors listed 44 Westchester communities, "By the Numbers." While Rye Brook's average property taxes rank 17<sup>th</sup> when compared to the region, Blind Brook's students rank near the top in combined SAT Verbal, Math and Writing scores for 2006 (1,850) and the four-year high school graduation percentage rate (99%).

Blind Brook's schools will continue to strive to deliver quality instruction in a cost effective manner, sensitive to our taxpayer's ability to pay.



## Ridge Street: Adding It All Up!

As the second year of our implementation of the *Everyday Mathematics* program is underway, the Ridge Street School is off to a great start! In November, Ridge Street School teacher representatives from each grade level were on hand to provide a glimpse of mathematics instruction from K-5, as well as answer any pertinent questions.

Here are just a few suggestions about how you can learn about the mathematics your child is studying in school, and help reinforce their math learning at home:

- A Home Link or Study Link homework assignment is included with almost every lesson in the program. Periodically, these homework assignments include a Parent Letter explaining various aspects of the program. Be sure to read these letters and discuss what's going on in math class with your child. If there is something unfamiliar to you in these assignments encourage your child to "teach" you about what they are working on in class. If an assignment is confusing or difficult for you or your child, jot a note explaining your difficulties on the Home or Study Link paper and return it to your child's teacher.
- Frequent practice is necessary to attain strong mental arithmetic skills and reflexes. *Everyday Mathematics* also encourages skill practice through games. Encourage your child to teach you the math games he/she is learning in school, and play these games whenever you have an opportunity.

We will host our next *Everyday-Mathematics* Parent Workshop on Tuesday, January 22, 2008 from 7:00pm - 8:00pm, and a repeat session will be held on Wednesday, January 23, 2008 from 9:00am - 10:00am. This workshop will focus on computation and algorithms, where you will be the students and the teachers will teach you the algorithms your children are learning in school. Hope to see you there! 🍎

*Note: There is going to be a presentation on "Everyday Math," as well as other elementary initiatives, at the January 28, 2008 Board of Education Meeting.*



*Clockwise: Middle School Students hard at work. From artwork to computers, these children have their hands full.*

## Blind Brook Middle School News

Our connection to the high school brings both benefits and challenges in building our unique character and identity as a Middle School. Sharing staff, facilities and a common schedule makes it all the more important to embed programs and activities that meet the academic and developmental needs of young adolescents. Here are some recent examples:

- In Grade 6, there is a new program called Literacy Lab, which addresses our students' need to be able to communicate effectively across all subject areas. In Lit Lab, students have a period each day devoted to learning about the writing, reading, speaking, listening, research and technology skills that they will use in all areas of learning and life. The sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teachers teach the new classes, but Lit Lab is truly an interdisciplinary team approach. This fall, for example, the sixth graders learned about genetics in their science class. In science, Mr. Horowitz assigned a web-based research project in which students investigated genetically transmitted diseases. During Lit Lab classes, students conducted web searches in the library as well as on the new laptops available for use in the classrooms. Working with ELA teachers Mrs. Brodsky, Ms. Messina and Mrs. Stevens, the students were

introduced to the steps required in conducting research, citing bibliography sources, understanding plagiarism, creating note cards and organizing material for presentations and reports. A collaborative Social Studies project is currently in progress with the ELA teachers. Students are using text and internet sources to research ancient civilizations with Mr. Dakers, to write reports in Lit Lab. As the year progresses, similar interdisciplinary projects in partnership with math, LOTE and literature study are planned to further build these cross-curricular communication skills. The emphasis on writing and literacy extends to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, where creation of common benchmarks, use of formative assessments, and adoption of common instruments to promote and identify growth in writing is progressing.

- "Great! Awesome! Better Than Camp!" were just some of the words our 6<sup>th</sup> graders used to describe their Outdoor Education Trip to the Sharpe Reservation in October. They learned as much about each other as they did about such things as ecological systems, geology, herpetology, orienteering and other exciting applications of science and other subjects. Project Adventure and other team building activities fostered cooperation and teamwork, and the sixth grade teachers have seen their students apply their experiences from the trip to the classroom.

Sleeping in cabins, eating in the dining hall, hiking in the woods, learning and working together – students all agreed that this was an experience not to be missed! Special thanks to the parents who volunteered to chaperone this great trip. Planning for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade Gettysburg trip is underway!

- Extracurricular activities are up and running, and some new clubs (Chess, Dance, Art, Model Cars, Italian, Jazz Ensemble, etc.) have provided more choices for students. An after school Intra-mural Program for each grade level provides a new way for students to enjoy sports. Destination Imagination Teams at each grade level are anticipating the March 1 competition. The Middle School Drama Club is off to a great start. Students are learning improvisational games, vocal exercises, staging and the value of ensemble work through the theater arts.
- Early adolescents are focused on fitting in with their peers, and these years can be the most difficult ones for students emotionally. Although incidents of



Blind Brook Middle School spreads the Christmas spirit.

physical aggression or intimidation are extremely rare here, we do need to focus on promoting positive student interaction and reducing the teasing and exclusionary behaviors that can be so hurtful to young people. Currently, we are exploring approaches to promote empathy and address the kind of bullying that can occur. A survey provided by the Olweus Bullying Prevention program will be given to assess our students' experience and attitudes toward bullying as we formu-

late an approach that is appropriate for our school. Our Student Support Team, which consists of our counselors, social worker and school psychologist, is exploring programs and presentations we could bring to our students as well. For example, Caitlin Finley, Grade 6 Counselor, recently attended a workshop presented by Rachel Simmons, author of *Odd Girl Out* to learn more about the exclusionary behaviors young adolescents often use to reinforce their own sense of belonging. Andrea Hamilton has been planning a "Mix It Up At Lunch Day" to encourage students to have conversations with some new peers and be more open to the idea of new friendships. As the year progresses, we hope to have information and activities around the topic of bullying that involve parents, since that involvement is essential to promote school efforts to address student behavior. 🍎

## STUDENT RECOGNITION!

### AP SCHOLARS

Andrew Becker  
Erica Dayan  
Amanda Gottlieb  
Adam Harris  
Athena Lo  
Rebecca Somers

### AP SCHOLARS w/HONORS

Amanda Louis

### ALTERED EGO

Athena Lo  
Amanda Louis  
Nicole Kelly

### ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT/SPORTS

**Boys Soccer**  
Harris Brett  
Brett Novick

### Girls Soccer

Jillian Forbes  
Amanda Louis

### Girls Tennis (All-League & All Sectionals)

Hayley Gordon  
Dana Silverstein

### Girls Tennis (All-League)

Michelle Caley  
Samantha Levine

### Volleyball

Alexandra Matthews

### HONORABLE MENTION

#### Boys Soccer

David Levinson

### Volleyball

Emily Howe  
Brooke Scelfo

### Boys Soccer Team

Azia, Jacob  
Babat, Andrew  
Becker, Andrew  
Bernstein, Spencer  
Benowich, Andrew  
Brenner, Dustin  
Brett, Harris  
Coby, Daniel  
Fisher, Miles  
Fuchs, Daniel  
Godoy, Alexander

Hymowitz, Jason  
Kaufman, Scott  
Levinson, David  
Linder, Max  
Novick, Brett  
Paterno, Brett  
Prusak, Aaron  
Rifkin, Marshall  
Schultz, Benjamin  
Shepard, David  
Silverman, Jordan  
Wirshba, Aaron

### JRH SCHOLARSHIP

Andrew Solomon

### NATIONAL MERIT HISPANIC RECOGNITION PROGRAM 2007-08 SCHOLAR

Manuel Davila-Molina

### NATIONAL MERIT SEMI-FINALISTS

Andrew Becker  
Rachel Polonsky  
Madeline Sims

### NEW YORK STATE PTA AWARD OF EXCELLENCE & PRE-TEEN AMERICA SCHOLARSHIP

Josephine Yalovitsner

### WESTCHESTER BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF "A CHRISTMAS CAROL"

Sarah Ackerman

### \$600 IN CHARITABLE RASINING FUNDS

Brett Paterno  
Marshall Rifkin

**AP Scholar:**  
Granted to students with grades of 3 or higher on three or more AP Exams.



**AP Scholar with Honor:**  
Granted to students with an average grade of at least 3.25 on all AP Exams taken, and grades of 3 or higher on five or more of these exams.

purchasing top of the line equipment and software, Blind Brook students will be able to take responsibility for production for years to come, and it doesn't have to stop at just producing a newspaper.

*Focus* has and always will be a forum for student expression, and as such, it is a place where students can learn how to share their views with the public and further their civic understanding. Bringing the paper in-house strengthens students' responsibility, due to the pride and ownership they take in their work, the discussions staff and editors have about what is important to cover, as well as the way stories are handled. It additionally reinforces students' understanding of their 1st amendment right.

Lastly, the BOE also wanted to make sure *Focus* became a member of Quill and Scroll, the NSPA (National Scholastic Press Association) and the CSPA (Columbia Scholastic Press Association), so that it could participate in their competitions without questioning our eligibility as a truly student run newspaper. This goal has also been fulfilled, and on Monday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, the entire Editorial Board, as well as many staff writers, made the trip to New York City to participate in the CSPA Fall Conference.

Sincerely,  
 The *Focus* Staff

*Note: After careful consideration, the administration and Board have agreed to return distribution of Focus to the Westmore News. It was determined that this is the best possible way to reach the greatest number of families in the BB school district. Students, though, will retain independent control over the layout of the paper. For those that have purchased a subscription, you will receive a refund from the district in the coming weeks. If you wish to continue your subscription, please contact us at [focus@blindbrook.org](mailto:focus@blindbrook.org).*

**Tenure Announcements**

*The Blind Brook School District is committed to recruiting and retaining high quality staff. Prior to receiving tenure, administrators, coordinators and teacher mentors work individually with probationers to provide support and professional development. Probationary teachers must attend a minimum of 15 hours each year of staff training and education.*

*School supervisors and the Superintendent of Schools regularly evaluate each probationer, through announced and unannounced observations, to offer suggestions, monitor progress and assess improvement.*

*In addition to the valuable insights offered by administrators and mentors, parents can provide helpful information by speaking directly to a teacher.*

*Tenure recommendations are being considered for the staff members listed below.*

**Ridge Street School**

- Shannon Smith
- Heather Dipaola
- Keri Fischer
- Sanchita Krishna
- Lauren Didomenico
- Michele Marallo
- Cynthia McQueen

**Middle School**

- Marianne Rodriguez

**High School**

- Julie Kenyon
- Michele Sugantino
- Ryan Collins
- Megan Petras

**Administration**

- Kevin Fittinghoff
- Christopher Griffin
- Gene Wolotsky

**Blind Brook Public Schools**

SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE

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