

education news

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Little Falls Township
Public Schools



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Enrollment SURGE!

Demographic report forecasts enrollment in 2029–30 will be 23% more than in 2018-2019; BOE considering options to add instructional space

A five-year demographic report just completed for the school district shows:

- Enrollment will continue to set record highs into the foreseeable future as the town grows.
- In the 2029-30 school year, the district is projected to have 1057-1069 students – that's an increase of 23 % from 2018-2019. It's 100 more students than today.
- Two of the three schools are already operating way above their functional capacity.

The board of education is considering options to address the enrollment growth without significantly increasing class sizes or impacting the quality of education. Portable trailers and the construction of additional classrooms and core spaces are among the options.

"Because it's so visible, the new construction in town is easy to blame for the enrollment increases, but families with children are also moving into existing homes at a fast rate," said Tracey Marinelli, superintendent of schools. "It's wonderful that people consider Little Falls to be such a great place to live and raise a family; the impact to the district is significant, though. In just a few years we'll have the equivalent of 10 more classrooms of kids than we had in 2018. To put that in perspective, that's an entire extra School No. 3."

The district has grappled with a space crunch for several years. At School No. 2, music and art are taught by teachers without dedicated rooms who travel from class to class with carts of supplies. At School No. 1, students eat in 20-minute shifts to avoid overcrowding

Celebrating autumn

School No. 2 students in the district's two preschool classes celebrated the season with a harvest festival. The three- and four-year-olds sang autumn-themed songs they had learned, engaged in a variety of craft activities such as making bagel bird feeders, and played lawn games with their parents.



Rian Abduramani and his mom play a game

the cafeteria which cannot seat an entire grade level.

This year at School No. 3, fourth grade class sizes have risen above the board of education's recommended guidelines. This makes it difficult to meet the unique learning needs of each student.

Enrollment will likely continue to increase beyond 2030, the last year covered by the demographic study. A projection by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority indicates that the total town population will be more than 16,500 in 2050 – 25 % more than in the 2020 census.



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GRANT MONEY

Grant funds library storage and seating

SCHOOL No. 2 has a refurbished library/media center, thanks to a creative reconfiguration of building space, the Little Falls Education Foundation, and two partner companies.

In the spring, the school won the annual Reimagine Your Classroom contest sponsored by Dancker, an interior design and integration firm, and Smith System, a company that specializes in K-12 furniture solutions. During the summer, the library was relocated and doubled in size, and Dancker and Smith provided the designs and new furnishings for the space. The Little Falls Education Foundation purchased hundreds of books to fill the brand new shelves.

The reimagined library is now an area large and flexible enough for STEAM activities and other hands-on learning. Previously, the library/media specialist traveled from class to class with a cart to bring STEAM activities to kids, which limited the complexity and scope of the projects that could be completed.

The library had its official ribbon-cutting in mid-September. Representatives from Dancker and members of the school board, PTA, and LFEF joined the celebration.

Three years ago, School No. 1 won a Dancker grant for new technology, flooring, and furniture for the classroom used for gifted and talented classes.



School No. 2's larger library provides enough space for small group instruction and STEAM activities



Learning the grind

A group of third and fourth-graders recently visited The Fine Grind on Newark Pompton Turnpike to learn the secrets of running a successful coffee house. Owner Rhonda Mallek demonstrated the preparation of several beverages while sharing several of her marketing strategies. She also showed off Buddy, the Grind's resident robotic server who adds a futuristic touch to the cozy shop.

The students run their own mobile cafe for staff members and serve coffee, tea, hot chocolate, and a variety of store-bought and non-bake sweet treats. The young entrepreneurs create different menus every month, meticulously tracking expenses and revenue.

"The kids saw the different duties of each employee and how they worked together as a team," said teacher Marissa McCluskey. "It was a great learning experience. Rhonda gave them great tips and encouraged them to think outside the box."

Inspired by Mallek, the students



Rhonda Mallek, owner of The Fine Grind, introduces students to the cafe's robot server, Buddy

developed their own loyalty program to reward frequent customers. For December, the students added a season twist to their menu with several flavored coffees such as peppermint and gingerbread.



Averie Stolz holds up the sticker she made to celebrate World Kindness Day

Celebrating World Kindness Day

CUSTOMERS at The Fine Grind recently had something to smile about besides great coffee. Attached to their cups were messages of kindness and positivity, courtesy of the third- and fourth-graders at School No. 3.

The students created colorful stickers in honor of World Kindness Day, and came up with their own personalized messages of optimism, hope, and encouragement.

"The goal of the project was to spread kindness beyond the school and into the community," said school counselor Emily Conti who led the activity. "Hopefully the stickers brighten everyone's day and provide a reason to smile."

The Fine Grind is a valued partner of the school and district. (See story at left.)

AI is here

Using artificial intelligence as an educational tool

DANA Sprague, principal of School No. 1, has launched a series of presentations to help her teachers responsibly bring artificial intelligence into the classroom. The goal is to encourage them to introduce practical AI tools to students and to inspire her team to harness AI to enhance their own instructional planning and practices.

“Rather than fight against it, let’s use it to our advantage,” she said. “AI will only grow more sophisticated, so let’s show kids how to use it with fidelity and awareness, but with limitation. “It’s here to stay, so let’s be proactive.”

Lessons from the past

In the words of a local legend and baseball icon, “It’s like déjà vu all over again.” Just as the wide accessibility of calculators and later the internet sparked concerns about hindering learning, AI has sparked a similar fear even more intense than in the past. And for good reason.

With a power to seemingly think, AI could complete entire assignments for students, hampering their acquisition of basic skills and knowledge, and impacting the development of their critical thinking, problem-solving, and research skills. The future promises even more capabilities that were formerly only possible through human intelligence and creativity.

Sprague believes that in a world where technology is everywhere, schools must embrace AI thoughtfully and strategically. Kids are

likely to encounter it regardless, so teaching them to use it productively and with limitations is the best course of action; it’s a lesson learned from education’s adaptation and integration with technology that we all now carry around in our pockets.

AI integration and responsible use

During Sprague’s first presentation in October, the tech aficionado discussed large language models such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Google’s Gemini. She also presented an array of other applications, many designed specifically for students.

The goal was to get her staff buzzing with the creative possibilities of using the new technology to supplement learning – not as a replacement for it. For example, students could use AI as a brainstorming partner to generate ideas for a project that they would then work on without additional AI help. Or the students could use AI as a study buddy, asking it to generate practice questions for an upcoming test or ask for suggestions to improve an essay.

She also introduced the “green light, yellow light, red light” approach to educational AI use. A green light indicates when AI can be used for inspiration or foundational research, a yellow light encourages caution for more intensive AI involvement, and a red light indicates when AI is prohibited. Those limitations and guidelines will

✓ **This is human text** 👍👎

help students learn how to use AI to their benefit without losing the opportunity for hands-on, minds-on learning.

Apps that can detect and quantify how much of a student’s work has been generated by AI was also a topic, helping teachers maintain academic integrity.

Empowering teachers

AI’s potential to assist humans in their professions is just beginning to be explored. For teachers, the possibilities are vast. AI can pull together online research in seconds.

During the first training session, Sprague showed how AI can help teachers refine lesson plans, generate ideas (e.g. asking for hands-on ways to teach students how to develop characters for their short stories), create test questions, list projects to help students learn about a historical event, and come up with fresh, new science labs.

Sprague also showcased how AI can be used to generate modifications for students who need extra support. From personalized reading comprehension exercises to adaptive math problems, AI allows educators to tailor learning experiences to meet diverse needs.

In a future session, the multimedia applications of AI will be introduced, highlighting its use for creating digital art, presentations, and video.

“AI is a new frontier, and there’s so much to explore,” Sprague said. “I want our school to be a place where both teachers and students feel prepared for and empowered by AI, not intimidated.” By encouraging a culture of exploration, Sprague is helping her staff move from uncertainty to curiosity and engagement, equipping both teachers and students with the knowledge to use AI as a tool for growth, creativity, and productivity.

Sprague was inspired to teach the educational use of AI after attending The Future-Focused Schools Conference. The summer event tackled a range of topics at the forefront of modern education.

Test scores eclipse NJ averages

TEST scores recently released by the state education department show that Little Falls students continue to score higher than the state averages on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments. The NJSLAs are annual exams administered to grades 3–8 in English language arts and math. The chart at right shows the percentages of students in New Jersey and the district rated as proficient in the subjects.

The district has focused extensively over the past two years on improving achievement. Just this year, new math curriculums at both the middle school and elementary levels were put into place, and a new reading curriculum was introduced in grade 2.

Last year, the district made teacher professional development a priority in both math and ELA. School No. 3 also introduced a new program to help third- and fourth-graders develop important life skills that improve learning such as planning and organization, time management, focus, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and goal-setting.

NJSLA English Proficiency		NJSLA Math Proficiency	
State Avg.	Little Falls	State Avg.	Little Falls
Gr. 3 Gr. 4 Gr. 5 Gr. 6 Gr. 7 Gr. 8	43%	62%	48%
	51%	72%	44%
	52%	68%	40%
	53%	79%	36%
	54%	77%	37%
	53%	84%	20%
		54%	56%

Goal-setting motivates students

A new initiative is motivating students to learn and grow, and is strengthening communication and collaboration with families. Through a new online data portal, students and parents at School No. 1 and School No. 3 can now access scores from state tests and internal benchmark exams in English, math, and science. The benchmarks, administered three times per year for students in grades 3–8, measure progress toward meeting year-end state standards.

For students, this new access to test scores empowers them to work with their teachers

in setting personal goals and creating action plans for improvement.

The power of goal-setting

Research shows that students who set clear, achievable goals tend to be more motivated and engaged in their learning. When students take an active role in setting academic goals, they demonstrate higher levels of performance and a greater belief in their own abilities. Goal-setting gives students a sense of control and responsibility over their learning, encouraging them to take ownership of their progress.

In grade 3, for example, students track their overall benchmark scores and reflect on their performance. They graph their scores then set specific goals for the next assessment. In grade 4, students dive deeper into the benchmark results and examine their knowledge of major skills (e.g. word problems, adding and subtracting fractions). They reflect on their strengths and areas for

growth, set improvement targets, and work with their teachers to list steps they can take to meet their goals.

“This helps give them some autonomy and ownership on their learning,” said Shirley Cutruzzula, fourth grade teacher. “At this age we talk about responsibility, and this helps give them a way to show it.”

Each fourth-grade class also sets collective goals for their benchmark exams. These class goals are tracked on posters displayed in the classrooms, helping foster a team approach to growth and achievement.

Parent communication and involvement

At the start of the school year, the district emailed usernames and passwords to parents, along with instructions for accessing the data portal. Parents are encouraged to discuss benchmark results with their children, help them reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement, and support them in their progress.

Many parents have already reached out to teachers to discuss specific strategies and resources to help their children succeed. This partnership between parents and teachers enhances the support students receive.

Last year, the district provided online access to student grades. This year’s introduction of the data portal expands the access, further nurturing an environment of collaboration and growth.



Heather Schaechinger helps third-grader Reina Cepeda Britini set goals for her next benchmark exam. (Reina knocked it out of the park on the first one!)

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