Education News

October 2025

a publication of the Little Falls School District

School improvements coming

District moves forward with plan to upgrade facilities, add space

- Replacement of old roofs and outdated infrastructure
- Added room to solve the space shortage and address the enrollment growth
- More educational opportunities
- Better security
- Improved energy efficiency

IT'S an exciting time for Little Falls. The district is moving forward with an improvement plan that addresses its current facilities and space needs, and prepares for the foreseeable future. Work will begin this summer. During the next several months, the architectural drawings will be finalized, timeline set, and bid specifications prepared. When school ends in June, the construction and renovation immediately kicks into gear. **(See page 2 for details on the plan.)**

The board of education voted in August to fund the $44.9 million improvement project through the Passaic County Improvement Authority. Through a new law approved in late 2024, the PCIA can now help school districts finance important projects at low interest rates.

Little Falls is the first district in Passaic County to take advantage of this new, low-cost funding pathway. (To calculate the estimated cost to your home, go to the district improvement plan link on the district home page www.lfschools.org, or scan the QR code at right with your phone or tablet.)

Examining the need

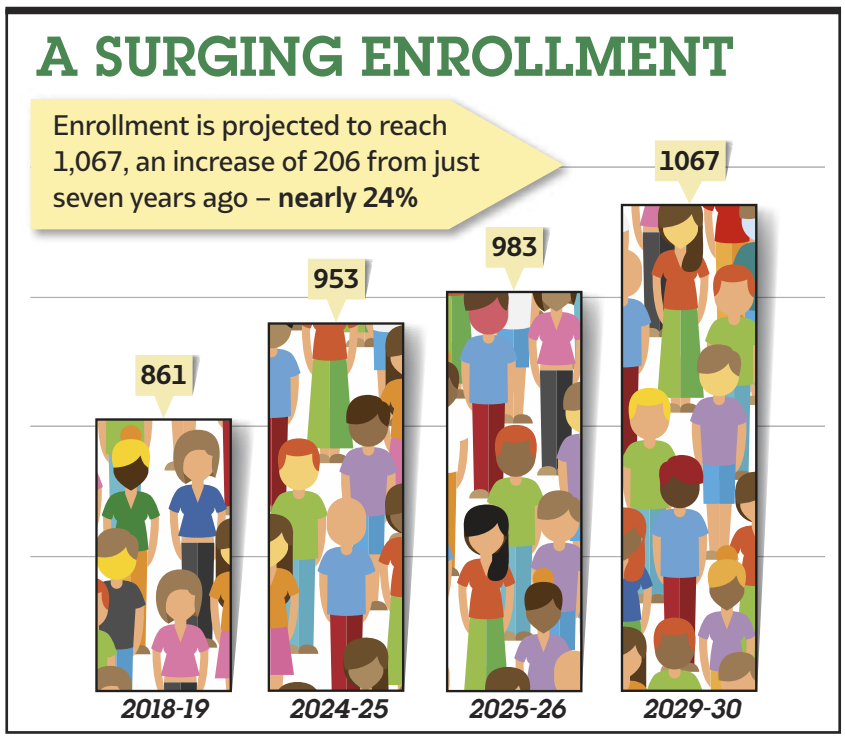
Over the past three years, the district has invested in key facilities upgrades through the annual operating budget. The focus has been on improvements that directly benefit students across all three buildings. Highlights include new flooring; new student desks, tables, and chairs; and new intruder-resistant classroom doors – many replacing originals dating back to the schools' construction.

In addition, thanks to a grant that administrators secured from PSE&G, the district replaced aging boilers and heating/ventilation units, improving energy efficiency and reducing the cost of utilities.

While these projects mark important progress, more work remains to keep our schools in good condition. A major priority is the replacement of roofs at all three schools. Funding such major projects through the sale of bonds allows the district to maximize state aid; little or no money is received for projects funded through the annual budget.

The most pressing driver of this improvement plan is rising enrollment (see graph above). Since 2020-21, average class size has increased by **42.5%** due to limited space. Two of our three schools are already operating **over their functional capacity,** underscoring the need for more room.

Projections suggest that the enrollment increase will continue. The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority estimates that by 2050, the town's population will be **25% higher** than it was in 2020.



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A head start on school

NEW Jersey distributes more than $1 billion each year to support districts that offer universal pre-K, giving about 80,000 students aged 3 and 4 access to **free** preschool. Governor Phil Murphy has made early childhood education a cornerstone of his time in office, with the goal of eventually providing state-funded pre-K for every child. In July, he signed legislation expanding the number of districts that receive pre-K aid.

For Little Falls, eligibility depends on having enough classroom space. As part of the district's school improvement project, eight classrooms will be added at School No. 2. Once construction and renovations are complete, the district will be able to apply for the state aid.

The funding would bring back to Little Falls some of the tax dollars residents already send to Trenton, allowing more money to directly benefit the town's children. Districts all around the county receive pre-K money, including Bloomingdale, Clifton, Haledon, Passaic, Paterson, Prospect Park, and Woodland Park.

Research shows lasting benefit

Pre-K gives children a head start, helping them begin kindergarten with early skills in reading, writing, and math.

One of the most reliable studies on pre-K, conducted over 20 years, shows the value and lasting impact of pre-school. The landmark 2022 study from Georgetown University's Center for Research on Children in the United States concluded that while some early gains may fade, long-term benefit is strong.

Kids who attend pre-K are:

- More likely to enroll in college
- More likely to take rigorous AP or International Baccalaureate courses
- More likely to graduate high school on time
- Stronger in cognitive and social/emotional abilities
- Less likely to fail courses
- Less likely to be chronically absent

The state distributes more than $1 billion each year to support universal pre-K

For Little Falls, adding instructional space opens the door to providing a stronger foundation to our youngest learners, while residents see more of their state tax dollars used right here in their own community.

Improvement plan summary

Infrastructure improvements to replace aging systems and improve energy efficiency. This includes **full roof replacement** at all 3 schools; **mechanical, electrical, lighting, and plumbing** upgrades; renovated **rest rooms**; and **sitework** (parking lot repavement, new sidewalks, drainage upgrades).

1

School #1

New multipurpose room

Existing multipurpose room converted to a cafeteria

Conversion of existing cafeteria to 2 classrooms

Renovation of 1 classroom into a tech classroom

Fire alarm upgrade

2

School #2

8 new pre-K classrooms

Housing 2 current pre-K classrooms in the new pre-K addition frees up those rooms for other use, including 1 for an art room (no more art on a cart)

Relocation of food serving area

3

School #3

3 new classrooms (one is a STEAM/digital media classroom)

New auxiliary cafeteria that can also serve as a music area

Relocation of main entrance

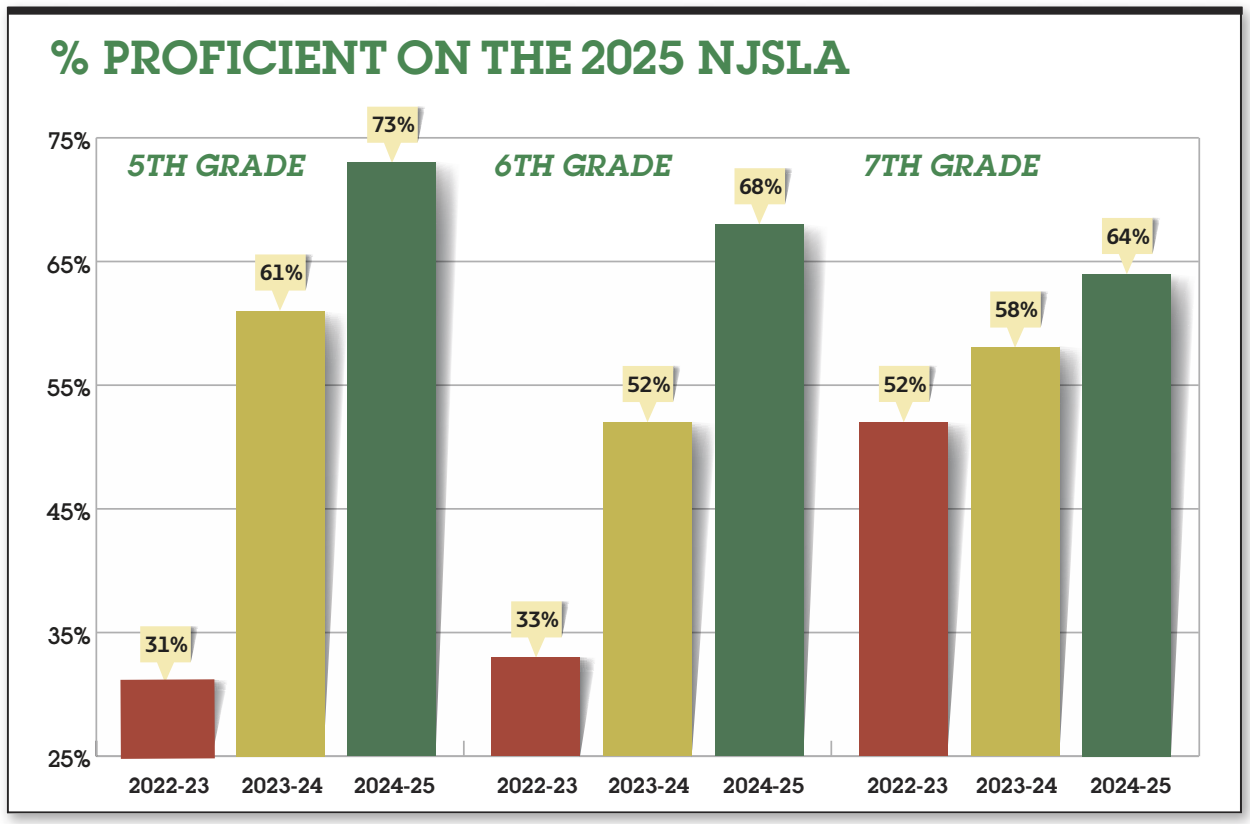
Renovation of 3rd grade math/science room

Middle school math scores soar

MATH scores on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments, the annual spring state tests, skyrocketed in grades 5–7 (School No. 1.) From 2023–2025, the percentage of students proficient in math (met or exceeded grade level expectations) more than doubled in grades 5 & 6 – up 235% in fifth grade, 206% in sixth grade – and is up 23% in seventh grade.

These extraordinary gains reflect an intensive two-year focus to boost student achievement in math.

"The hard work of our teachers and students really shows," said Superintendent Tracey Marinelli. "Congratulations to everyone. I am so proud to see that focus and effort turn into such incredible results."



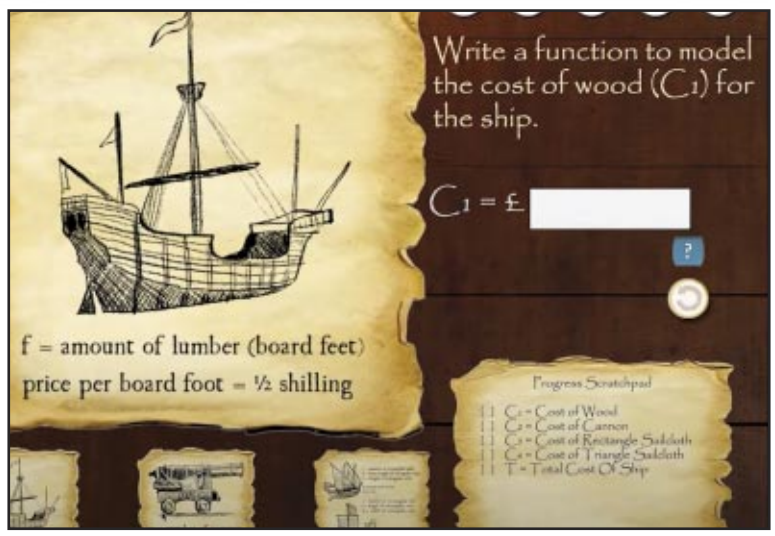
How it was done

In the wake of a lingering post-pandemic statewide dip in math performance, Little Falls educators took decisive action. Teachers received training in instructional strategies that emphasize engagement and visuals – an effort that continues this year. A math coach was also brought aboard to help students in the middle grades.

In addition, School No. 1 implemented a new math curriculum, becoming one of the first New Jersey school systems to use MidSchool Math. Designed specifically for grades 5–8, MidSchool Math is a proven and innovative curriculum that answers a student's most common question about higher math: What use is this?

Each lesson or unit begins with a lively, often humorous scripted video that poses a real-world problem. Students might need to calculate whether a Roman guard can afford his vacation, determine the number of yaks needed for a climb up Mount Everest, or graph the perceived heat of different hot sauces. By connecting math to practical situations, the videos spark curiosity and kick off lessons with fun and emotion.

Interactive games are also used to immerse students. For example, Fate & Fortune puts students in the role of seafaring spice traders in the 1600s and asks them to complete activities, such as build ships on a budget.



A screen capture from Fate & Fortune, an algebra game from MidSchool Math

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 annual New Jersey Student Learning Assessments. The chart at right shows the percentages of students in New Jersey and the district rated as proficient in English language arts and math (meeting or exceeding grade level expectations).

Improving students' knowledge and skills is always a focus. Several important initiatives have been started in the past several years. New math curriculums were put into place at both the middle school and elementary levels – MidSchool Math and Eureka Math², respectively. (See story above.) In addition, a new reading curriculum was introduced in grade 2.

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 ELA Proficiency		NJSLA Math Proficiency	
	State Avg.	**Little Falls**	State Avg.	**Little Falls**
Gr. 3	45%	50%	50%	54%
Gr. 4	54%	71%	47%	55%
Gr. 5	52%	70%	44%	73%
Gr. 6	56%	76%	40%	68%
Gr. 7	57%	81%	39%	64%
Gr. 8	57%	76%	21%	42%

2025 NICHE BEST SCHOOLS

A+
#1 BEST TEACHERS IN PASSAIC COUNTY
Little Falls School No. 1

A–
#2 BEST PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN PASSAIC COUNTY
Little Falls School No. 1

A–
#5 BEST PUBLIC ELEM SCHOOLS IN PASSAIC COUNTY
Little Falls School No. 3

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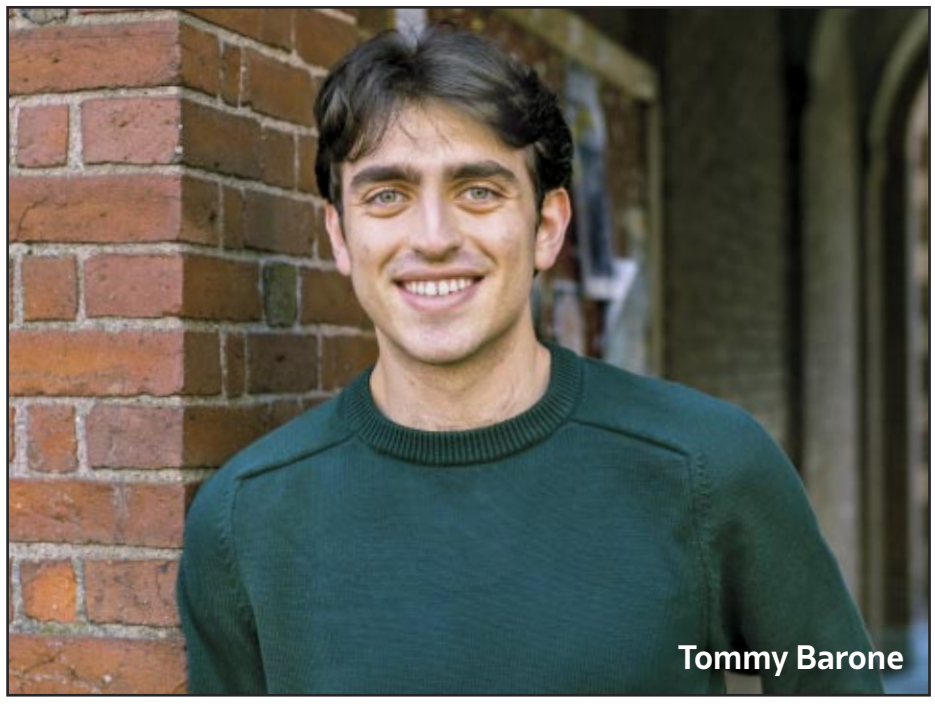
Graduate named Rhodes Scholar

TOMMY Barone, a 2017 eighth grade graduate, has been named a Rhodes Scholar, one of only 32 Americans to earn the honor. He is now studying history at the University of Oxford on a full scholarship.

"Tommy is the most brilliant student I've ever come across in my career," said Superintendent Tracey Marinelli. "He's witty, mature beyond his years, and has a sense of curiosity he showed even as a young student. I know he'll make a meaningful impact on the world."

> ***He's witty, mature beyond his years, and has a sense of curiosity he showed even as a young student."***
>
> **Tracey Marinelli**
> *Superintendent*

Barone graduated this spring magna cum laude from Harvard University with a bachelor's in social studies. There he served as editorial chair of The Harvard Crimson, where he won first place for editorial writing in the Society of Professional Journalists' Mark of Excellence Awards. He also interned on the national politics desk at ABC News and made an appearance on MSNBC.


Tommy Barone

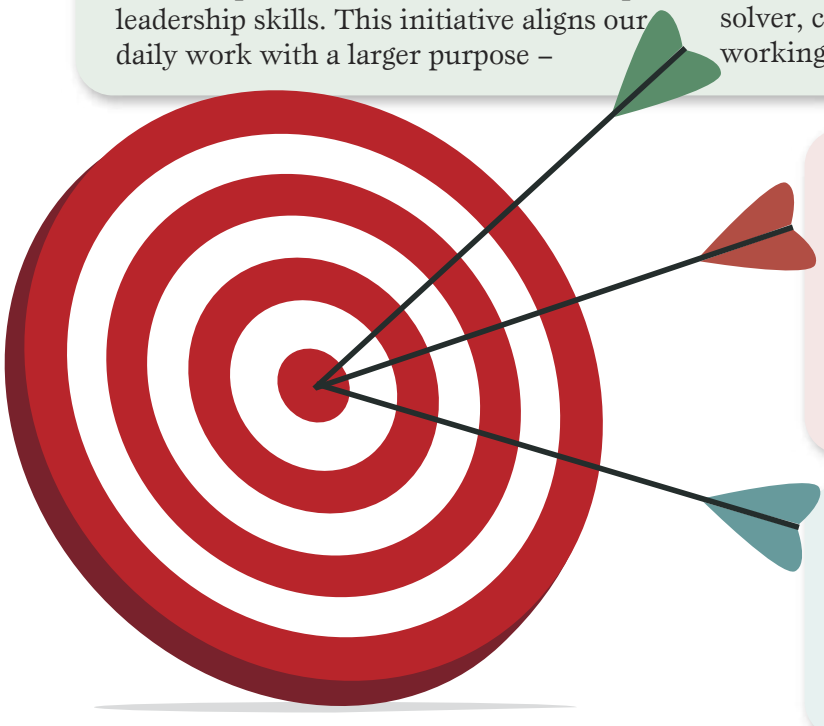
In August, a guest essay he co-authored with fellow Crimson editorial chair Jacob M. Miller was published in The New York Times opinion section. His senior thesis received the Hoopes Prize, Harvard's premier award for undergraduate research, presented each year to only about 70 graduating seniors.

A 2021 graduate of Regis High School, Barone plans on pursuing a career in journalism.

District goals are set for 2025-26

Portrait of a Hornet

Continue the implementation of the Portrait of a Hornet, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to grow in character, take ownership of their behavior, and develop leadership skills. This initiative aligns our daily work with a larger purpose – preparing students to leave our district as confident, capable, and community-minded individuals who live out the values of the Hornet every day (leader, empathetic, responsible, active participant, problem solver, communicator, considerate, hard working, resilient, inclusive).



MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports)

Fully implement MTSS to meet the instructional and social-emotional needs of students. The residual effects of the pandemic – including learning loss, trauma, anxiety, and disengagement – require us to move beyond traditional models of instruction and discipline. MTSS provides a systematic framework for identifying and addressing both learning gaps and emotional needs in real time through data-informed strategies and tiered interventions.

District Connections

Enhance relationships across schools to maximize student achievement and foster staff collaboration. Initiatives include vertical articulation, Hornet Walks, student mentoring programs, and student reading partnerships, all aimed at building a stronger, more connected school community.

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