



FALL 2023

# ONTEORA

## CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



Chris Sandy, guest speaker and author of *“Enduring Regret: Chris Sandy’s Life After Causing Death,”* shares a powerful story and message with Onteora High School students about making choices.

## High School Students Examine Life Choices and Their Effects with a Special Guest Speaker

Onteora’s Grade 11 and 12 students had the opportunity to “get real” about choices when a special guest speaker—Chris Sandy, author of *Enduring Regret: Chris Sandy’s Life After Causing Death*, shared a very personal story with them. It was quiet enough to hear a pin drop as the speaker held the students rapt, beginning his tale with the 22-year-old Sandy anxious to get to a party, and ending with a disastrous drunk driving accident in which two people were killed.

“I would do anything in the world to change what I did that night,” said Sandy, who served a 13-year prison sentence for his actions. “But I can’t. And I never want you to have to go through that. That is why I share my story with you.”

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Senior Noah Stern tries “walking the line” while wearing alcohol-impairment simulation goggles, while other students look on. The students were all shocked to learn just how much alcohol could affect one’s abilities.



## Message from the Superintendent

School has been in session for a couple of months, and I’d like to share with you that school districts across the country are noticing that attendance has become an issue following the pandemic. We know that consistent school attendance is critical to the success of our students, and we value our partnerships with our families in ensuring our students receive all of the benefits of regular school attendance.

With that in mind, we encourage you to schedule appointments and plan vacations during school breaks whenever possible to minimize disruptions to your child’s learning. As parents and guardians, you can play an invaluable role in supporting and partnering with the school, and we kindly request your help in making sure that your child is in school every day, unless they are genuinely unwell. Please communicate with us if you encounter any challenges that affect your child’s attendance, so that we can work together to find solutions.

Another topic of discussion that usually coincides with this time of year is inclement weather and snow days. We have seven snow days included in our school calendar for this year. Although the New York State Education Department has continued to allow remote learning days, we plan to follow our traditional snow day practices. After reviewing the effectiveness of remote learning days from our experience last year, our instructional administrative team determined that they are not as effective when they are not used consistently.

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# BENNETT ELEMENTARY PTA BUSY CONTINUING–AND CREATING–MEMORABLE TRADITIONS



Onteora student Finn Ashmore enjoys a ride on the shoulders of his father, Will Ashmore, as they take a stroll through the Haunted Nature Trail during Bennett Elementary School's Fall Festival, held on October 27.

**THE BENNETT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PTA** has been busy this year maintaining old traditions, creating new ones, and keeping all programming affordable and culturally diverse.

"We want to have events where any family can come and enjoy a great couple of hours together," said PTA President Jenny Jared. "In addition, we would like to bring more cultural diversity to each event."

One such tradition offered the perfect opportunity to begin doing just that—Bennett's annual Fall Festival—and it was a big hit with the community!

On the evening of the Fall Festival, a huge turnout of families, friends, staff, and community members enjoyed the unusually warm evening and the many activities and concession stands that the PTA had set up.

Students participated in craft-making, creating "dragon eyes" with clay, stringing beads to make Halloween-themed jewelry, and constructing a type of colorful Mexican folk art called a "nicho," in celebration of the upcoming Day of the Dead, which honors ancestors who have passed away. In addition, a community member was on hand to tell ghost stories, and as a special treat, local musicians (and heads of the Ashokan Center) Jay Ungar and Molly Mason and their band members got people up and dancing to American roots music. "There was really a little something for everyone," Mrs. Jared said.

Thanks to the Olive Fire Department, there was even an impressive bonfire, which was in keeping with a tradition begun by the ancient Celts as part of their Samhain (Halloween) revelry.

Plus, to the delight of all, there were some very strange creatures lurking in the woods. Screams could be heard coming from the Haunted Nature Trail, which promised ghoulish fun. Those who dared to enter the woods encountered a number of ghostly beings—a mad



scientist, three witchy women playing eerie music, strange figures hiding amongst the trees, and even a very, very old Onteora student!

A very, very old Onteora student "greet" travelers on the Haunted Nature Trail during Bennett Elementary School's Fall Festival, held on October 27.

## Message from the Superintendent

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Given the fact that our area still does not have universal internet access, as well as the fact that power outages caused by inclement weather are often accompanied by internet service interruptions, we have decided to move into this school year with the understanding that if we exceed our allotted snow days, we will utilize the "snow day make-up days" that are included in our school calendar.

As we enter the season of inclement weather, please make sure that you are set up to receive calls or texts through our automated messaging system, if that is how you would like to be notified of a school closing, delay, or early dismissal. If you would like to sign up to receive calls or texts, or to confirm how you are currently set up to receive notifications, please contact Sharon Wood at [swood@onteora.k12.ny.us](mailto:swood@onteora.k12.ny.us).

Please keep in mind that we will bring students into school whenever possible to provide instruction and to ensure that they are able to access school meals. This will sometimes result in an early dismissal so that our buses are able to deliver students home before a later afternoon or early evening weather event. I understand that this schedule is sometimes challenging for families, and I apologize for the inconvenience, but our priority is to provide students with all of the resources available.

In another matter, last year, the Board of Education voted to close Phoenicia Elementary School, and to move sixth grade into the Middle School in September of 2024. We are working hard to make these transitions a smooth and positive experience for our students, staff, families, and community. There is a lot of work to do as we progress toward these changes, and we are providing updates during Board meetings as we move through the year. We will also be sharing our progress on a dedicated webpage.

Lastly, we often receive calls from community members wondering how they can support our students. We have created a list of clubs and organizations to which community members can donate. The list can be found on our website on the "Community Resources" tab, under "Donation Opportunities."

I hope everyone has a warm and wonderful holiday season!

**Victoria McLaren**  
**SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS**



# Phoenicia Students Get to Know the People in Their Neighborhood

This fall, Grade 2 students in Allison Mitchell’s class at Phoenicia Elementary School engaged in a Social Studies inquiry about the communities we live in, exploring the very idea of “community” itself. Appropriately enough, they started with their own neighborhood!

Students first examined a map of the hamlet of Phoenicia. Using Google Earth, the curious investigators first looked there, then at other places around the country, and then at other places around the world. They thought critically about the various characteristics that make Phoenicia different from other types of places, and applied their skills in geography to determine if each location was urban, suburban, or rural.

During a walking field trip on October 24, the students enjoyed an informative stroll into downtown Phoenicia, where they were able to meet and interview several different types of community members and develop questions about the area. “This is the best way to really get an idea of our community,” said Ms. Mitchell. “The people in a community are what makes it work, and meeting and talking with them is to understand that.” It was the perfect time to explore Phoenicia since it was decked out for Halloween, and according to Ms. Mitchell, “the scarecrows were a big hit!”

The first stop was the Phoenicia Post Office. Students had already harkened back to the older days of “snail mail” by writing a letter to either a friend or family member from locations as close as Phoenicia, to farther away in California and Oklahoma, and even as far away as Scotland!

“It was fun putting the letter in the slot at the post office,” remembered Bryce Rabuffo. “But I think I may have pushed the letter too hard!”

While speaking with the postal director, students learned about how postal workers sort mail and what a post office does. This includes sorting all the mail that comes in and delivering it to either a residence or post office (PO) box. They also asked about some of the weirdest, biggest, and smallest packages that the postal workers have ever encountered, and were surprised to learn the answer—the largest package ever was a prosthetic leg, and the smallest was a potato! The community-explorers left the post office with a special coloring book and headed to their next destination—Ulster Savings Bank.

Here, the students learned some very exciting and adult-like skills. From the manager of the Phoenicia branch of Ulster Savings Bank, Samantha Awand-Gortel, they learned about what it means to deposit and withdraw money, and even did some “money math” while they were there. As a bonus, students also got to take a peek into the money vault, and were given a bag filled with pens, flashlights, coin purses, and other fun things to take home.

“I learned that there is a hundred dollar bill,” said Vivian Swinehart of the experience. Will Lynch commented, “I liked the bank best because it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You don’t get to see inside a vault very often!”

The final stop was the Phoenicia Library, where Director Liz Potter entertained students with some fun read-alouds of books with some characters from *The New LiBEARian* by Alison Donald and *The Library Mouse* by Daniel Kirk. Afterwards, the excited youngsters visited the Children’s Section, where they played “I-Spy” and learned more about the books in this area. In addition, they visited the upstairs room that features local fly-fishing maps, artifacts, and gear. Again, the community explorers left with plenty of swag—this time getting bags filled with books, a small, stuffed reading buddy, and other fun items.

“They were so excited to get books that, as soon as we returned to the classroom, they sat right down and began reading them,” remarked an impressed Ms. Mitchell. “And some were writing stories to send to the library. All on their own!”



Grade 2 student Bailey Bachor mails a letter at the Phoenicia Post Office, as part of a class field trip exploring communities.



Ms. Mitchell’s Grade 2 class brought letters they wrote to friends and family to the Phoenicia Post Office for delivery.



Ms. Mitchell’s Grade 2 students are eager to read and do some writing after a field trip to the Phoenicia Library. Pictured (from left to right) are Vivian Swinehart, Liam Golgoski, Allyson Cabrera Lopez, and Cavin Turck.



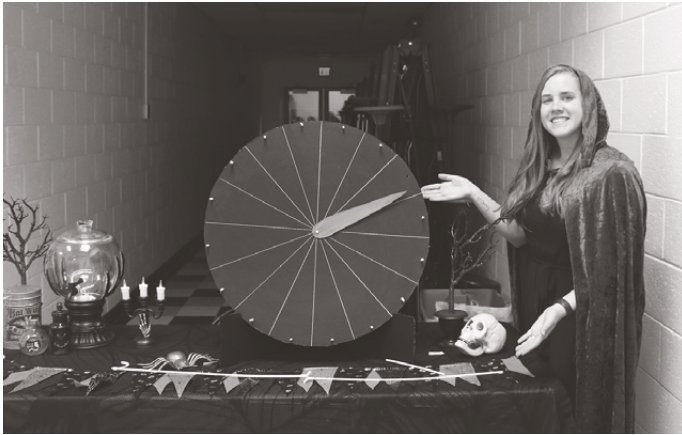
# Middle School Halloween Dance is a Smash!

Onteora Middle School’s Yearbook Club presented its annual Halloween dance on October 20, and despite it being a rainy evening, the “Graveyard Smash” was well attended, with plenty of ghosts and ghouls to go around.

The Yearbook Club had been hard at work throughout September and October preparing for the event, and working on plans to transform the cafeteria into a suitably spooky venue—and the results were truly amazing! Revelers were treated to a DJ who spun everyone’s Halloween favorites, a photo booth, concessions, and even fortune telling!



Grade 7 students (from left to right) Alice Slips, Angely Lemus, and Kira Jule enjoy dancing at the “Graveyard Smash,” a Halloween dance held at the Middle School on October 20 to benefit those who are purchasing a yearbook this year.



Middle School/High School Building Secretary Courtney Hill invites students at the annual Halloween dance, held on October 20, to join her in playing a fun and spooky game.

The highlight of the evening came when the winners of the costume contest were announced, and it was revealed who would be getting the coveted prize of a free ice cream from the cafeteria. The lucky winners were: Caleb Warren (Grade 8) for “Scariest,” Haley Schmidt (Grade 7) for “Most Elaborate,” and Lilah Signore (Grade 8) for “Funniest.” A great time was had by all!

The event was also a win-win for those purchasing a yearbook this year. All proceeds will go towards the Middle School Yearbook Fund, which helps keep the costs of yearbooks down!

## HOMEcoming: A Celebration of Sports, Community, and School Spirit

**DESPITE SOME RAINY SKIES HERE AND THERE,** Onteora athletes and spectators did nothing but shine at the Homecoming Game and celebration!

Held on September 29 and 30, the festivities officially began with a spirited pep rally on Friday afternoon, followed by a Tailgate Party in the cafeteria. On Saturday, members of the Varsity Cross Country team, Junior Varsity and Varsity Volleyball teams, and Varsity Field Hockey team took to the courts, track, and fields in the earlier morning hours.

Then, at noon, the Parade of Athletes officially began. In the spotlight were all the fall athletic teams, including Varsity Golf, Varsity Girls Swimming, Varsity Girls Tennis, Varsity Girls Soccer, Varsity Boys Soccer, Varsity Cross Country, Varsity Volleyball, Junior Varsity Volleyball, Varsity Field Hockey, Junior Varsity Boys Soccer, and Varsity Football. Teams paraded along the High School/Middle School track as friends, families, staff members, and community members cheered in the grandstands. Afterward, senior athletes and their parents—and sometimes their siblings, friends, and coaches—proudly posed for photos under a Homecoming arch made of red and white balloons.

The crowning highlight of the day’s festivities took place during halftime of the football game against Ellenville, when the Homecoming Court—Griffin Alterio, Jonimaya Huber, Jake DeRuvo, Iris Koester, James Lynch, Ava Lamb, Tyson Meade, Chloe Maloney, Jaxon Paynter, Sophia Odato, Noah Stern, and Maxine Sprague—was introduced and Griffin Alterio and Chloe Maloney were officially pronounced “Homecoming Royalty.”

Thank you to all the organizers of the event, and to the many staff, students, and community members who operated concession stands, and fed (and clothed with Onteora swag!) the hungry crowds.

It was a great day to be an Onteora Eagle!





High School Students Examine Life Choices and Their Effects with a Special Guest Speaker

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“Making Choices,” a riveting slideshow display of personal photographs and anecdotes, is not your average student assembly. It got students thinking about how their everyday choices matter. “It was really impactful to hear how one single bad choice could affect his and others’ entire lives,” said senior Oscar Espinoza.

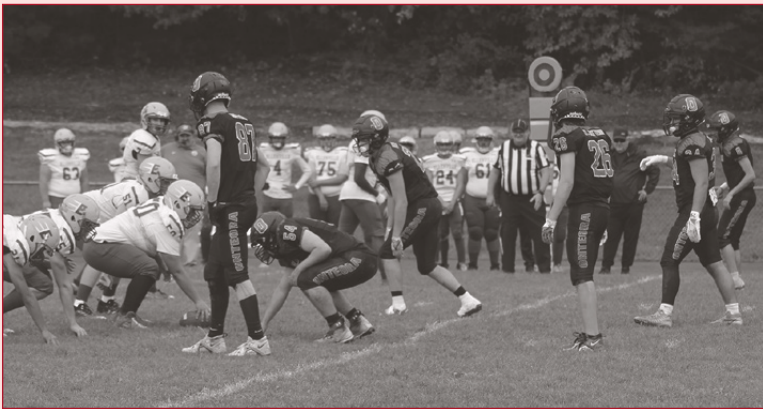
“Chris’s story was really heartfelt,” said senior Tyson Meade, who is a member of S.A.D.D. (Students Against Destructive Decisions). “The part that really got me was when he described how difficult it was to tell his kids about what he had done.”

Following the emotional presentation, students were invited to try “walking the line” and driving while wearing alcohol-impairment simulation goggles. Students were shocked to learn just how much alcohol could affect their abilities. “I couldn’t believe how hard it was,” said sophomore Thomas Shields when he attempted the walk-and-turn sobriety test. “The line literally kept moving. It just shows how bad drinking and driving can be.”

The “Choices Matter” initiative is funded by the New York State Governor’s Traffic Safety Committee. By securing a grant and enlisting the assistance of Student Resource Officer Tom Sharon and the Ulster County Stop DWI program, High School Principal Lance Edelman was able to bring this inspiring program to students. “After watching the presentation, observing the interactive activities, and speaking with students, it was evident that this program was very meaningful and beneficial to our students,” said Mr. Edelman. “Not only did students experience the effects of alcohol on their coordination and driving abilities, but they also learned how the choices that they make could have unintended consequences and impact their lives, their families, and others.”



Senior Logan Storey experiences the difficulty of driving under the influence with a simulation program students were able to try out during an assembly on “Making Choices,” hosted by guest speaker Chris Sandy. Looking on are seniors (from left to right) Rafael Solis, Che Spiotta, Hudson Bennett, and Riley Hegeman.



# SAFETY IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE AT ONTEORA

AT ONTEORA, STUDENT AND STAFF SAFETY AND WELL-BEING ARE ALWAYS OUR TOP PRIORITY. We do our best to anticipate and prevent any incidents. However, when they do happen, we are committed to transparent, honest, and timely communication with our families.

Every school district in New York State, including Onteora, has five emergency procedures they follow:

- Shelter-in-Place** - Used to shelter students and staff inside the building.  
*For example, if a tornado were to occur outside the school, we would call a shelter-in-place.*
- Hold-in-Place** - Used to limit the movement of students and staff while dealing with short-term emergencies.  
*For example, if a student were having a medical issue in the hallway and emergency services needed to get through, we would call a hold-in-place to avoid unnecessary commotion in the hallway.*
- Evacuate** - Used to evacuate students and staff from the building.  
*For example, if a pipe were to burst in the school, we would evacuate everyone to a predetermined off-site location.*
- Lockout** - Used to secure school buildings and grounds during incidents that pose an imminent concern outside of the school.  
*For example, if police were looking for a suspect in the area, the schools would go into a lockout.*
- Lockdown** - Used to secure school buildings and grounds during incidents that pose an immediate threat of violence in or around the school.  
*For example, if a person has a weapon on school grounds, we would call a lockdown.*

Determining what types of incidents within the school community are at a level where a district-wide notification should occur holds an element of subjectivity. Some parents prefer to receive comprehensive updates, including notifications of unsubstantiated reports or incidents confined to a small number of students. The prevalence of social media and the ability for students to text “in the moment” means that information, although often not accurate, is shared immediately. Knowing this, here is our commitment to you:

- We will communicate **District-wide** if there is an incident that is **deemed an actual threat to safety/well-being**. *Example: a critical lockdown event, a building goes on lockout because there is police activity in the area, or there is a bus accident with injuries.*
- We will communicate **school-wide** if there is a specific incident that we believe would cause parents of that building to be concerned for their child’s safety/well-being or may cause a child to have questions or concerns about their safety/wellbeing, **even if no actual threat was present**. *Example: a building-specific anonymous threat is reported, including threats on social media, which are quickly deemed non-credible.*
- We will communicate as quickly as possible, but **we always prioritize** ensuring the safety/well-being of our students and staff and providing accurate details. In a true emergency, we will communicate multiple messages, sharing information as it becomes available. In situations where there is no actual threat, we will communicate as soon as possible, which includes having accurate and complete information to share.
- We will **treat any reported threat seriously** and deem it an actual threat until we have information to determine it is not. Please encourage your child to always report concerns to a trusted adult or for incidents involving the Middle School or High School, use our anonymous reporting system, found on the Middle School webpage or the High School webpage, or at <https://tips.anonymousalerts.com/onteoracsd/>.

Although we are committed to transparency, please understand that we cannot share disciplinary details for the individuals involved, as we are still obligated to protect the legal rights and privacy of our students and staff. **Not sharing this information does not mean discipline was not administered.** Also, if there is an active police investigation, we must be mindful of what information is shared.

Please also remember that first responder presence at a building does not indicate an emergency. Our first responders visit our schools regularly for drills, training, classroom visits, and more.





**The Onteora Central School District is an ever-evolving educational institution. Every day and every month of every year, we move with our students into the future. Here are some of the important topics the Board of Education has been talking about lately.**

## **District Finance**

The burden of taxes affects us all, but equalization rates assigned by New York State (NYS) hit some communities in the District harder than others. Changes in tax rates ranged from a low of -5.80% (Olive) to a high of 11.9% (Woodstock). View our School Tax Property Discussion presentation at [bit.ly/3M5JeNG](https://bit.ly/3M5JeNG).

## **Electric Vehicles (EV) Buses**

A New York State mandate requires the Onteora Central School District (OCSD) to begin migrating our bus fleet to zero-emission vehicles by 2027, with all transportation being electric by 2035. Accordingly (and enthusiastically), the District applied for and won a \$8 million Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) vehicle grant to begin this huge transition. However, the unknown costs for the infrastructure needed to support EV buses became apparent after the grant was awarded. The Board ultimately voted to rescind the grant at the present time, based on the lack of specific guidance from NYS and the upcoming bid of a new OCSD transportation contract. However, the Board continues to work diligently with consultants and local and State government to apply for extensions and plans to reapply for the grant.

## **Regents Examinations and Their Impact on Grade Point Averages (GPAs)**

New York State is one of only seven states that require passing the Regents for graduation. Supporters claim that they uphold a certain standard in education. Detractors argue that there are better ways of demonstrating proficiency in core classes. But how do Regents support the Onteora student body at large? High School Principal Lance Edelman and his building team have been looking closely at the issue of whether the score on a Regents exam should be included in the GPA for the last year. To view their findings, visit [bit.ly/3rZ43Uk](https://bit.ly/3rZ43Uk).

## **Soaring to New Heights**

A lot of great things are happening in our District. If you would like to receive updates from the Board, please visit <https://www.onteora.k12.ny.us/about/optimizing-onteora>.

## **ONTEORA HIGH NOTES**

### **THE BOARD WELCOMES**

senior Sophia Odato in her new role as Student Representative!

### **THANK YOU TO THE MEMBERS OF OUR COMMUNITY**

who helped make the donation of a memorial bench for the late Paul Wereszynski possible! He was a beloved faculty and community member.

### **CONGRATULATIONS AND WELCOME**

to our new Board President Cindy Bishop, and Vice President Valerie Storey! Read their biographies on the Board's page of the District website:

<https://www.onteora.k12.ny.us/board-of-education>.



**BOARD OF EDUCATION**


Cindy Bishop, President  
Valerie Storey, Vice President  
Meghann Reimondo, Trustee  
Sarah Hemingway-Lynch, Trustee  
Clark Goodrich, Trustee  
Emily Mitchell-Marell, Trustee  
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**SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS**

Victoria McLaren

**NEWSLETTER EDITING & DESIGN**

Ulster BOCES Community Relations

 This publication was printed on recycled paper

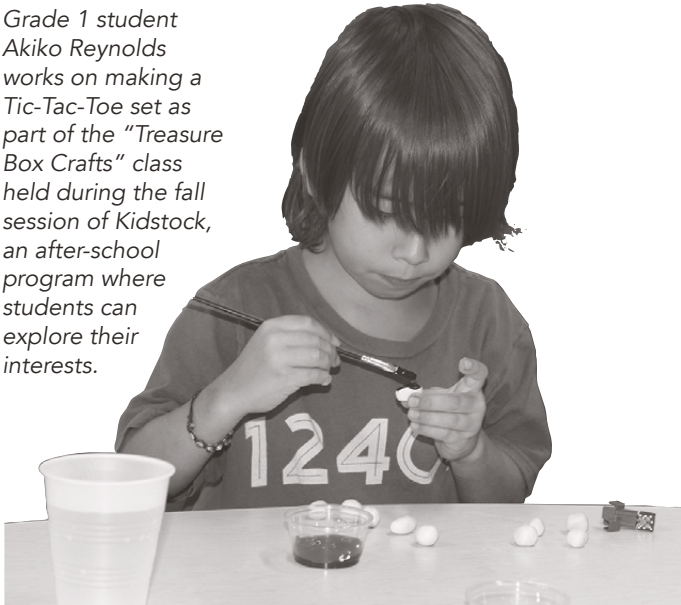
**To Postal Customer**

**Kidstock Returns for Another Fun-filled Session of Learning**

This fall, Kidstock—a fun after-school program at Woodstock Elementary School where students can explore a number of extracurricular activities they are interested in—was back again, and students enjoyed another great session of programming. During this season’s four-week session, there were 11 classes offered, including Basketball Club, songwriting, karate, paper mache sculpture making, garden crafting, and more.

Popular favorites also included LEGO Club, the “Magical Gong Space Journey” and “Mindfulness and Movement,” “Cosmic Art,” and “Collage

Grade 1 student Akiko Reynolds works on making a Tic-Tac-Toe set as part of the “Treasure Box Crafts” class held during the fall session of Kidstock, an after-school program where students can explore their interests.



Grade 3 student Maximus Umanov works on creating a paper mache sculpture during the fall session of Kidstock, an after-school program where students can explore their interests.

Treasure Box” making. What a great combination of learning and fun!

“I love checking in on each class while they are in session and seeing the smiles on the kids’ faces,” said Terianne Neden, who is a PTA member and one of the organizers of Kidstock. “The students are so engaged and proud of what they have accomplished.”

“Our community is so vibrant in arts and culture that we are able to offer the students experiences that they might not find as easily in other places,” she added.

**USEFUL DISTRICT INFORMATION**

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845-657-6383  
[www.onteorak12.ny.us](http://www.onteorak12.ny.us)

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**Assistant Superintendent for Business**

Monica LaClair ..... 845-657-8499

**Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services**

Amanda Allison ..... 845-657-3320

**District Clerk**

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Jannah O'Donnell ..... 845-657-2373

**Director of Transportation**

Nicole Sommer..... 845-657-2537

**Director of Food Service**

Christine Downs .. 845-657-6383 x2181

**Director of Facilities**

Kyle Harjes..... 845-657-6384

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Asst. Principal, Dieter Schimmelpfennig

**MIDDLE SCHOOL • 845-657-2373**

Principal, James DiDonna

**BENNETT ELEMENTARY • 845-657-2354**

Principal, Gabriel Buono

**PHOENICIA ELEMENTARY • 845-688-5580**

Principal, Elizabeth Fallo

**WOODSTOCK ELEMENTARY • 845-679-2316**

Principal, Scott Richards