

# Tusker Nation

SOMERS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT NEWS  
FOR SCSD FAMILIES

## Welcome Back, Tuskers!



*The members of the Somers High School Class of 2022 celebrate the start of their senior year with a Senior Sunrise.*

The first days of school are always an early start. For Somers High School seniors, Friday, September 3, started earlier than most—at 6:00 am—for Senior Sunrise on the high school’s football field.

This was the first of many celebrations for Somers seniors this year. “So many activities were shut down when these students were sophomores,” explained senior class advisor Kristy Castaldo. “We want to make this year special.”

It was still dark when approximately 100 students pulled into the Somers High School parking lot, most holding blankets and wearing hoodies. If you looked closely, you could even spot a few seniors in PJs.

They spread out in small groups on the turf field. Within minutes, a golden rim appeared on the horizon. Everyone turned to watch the dark sky turn to robin egg blue.

“I thought the sunrise was very special,” said senior Emma Grace Murphy. “Being able to gather with the people I grew up with during the first hours of the (almost) first day of school was heartwarming for me.”

Senior Sunrise was a shining success thanks to the combined efforts of class advisors, parents, senior class officers and others. Parents set up the balloons and banner, and provided the festive breakfast of bagels, egg and cheese on rolls, fruit and donut holes displayed in the shape of 2022. Class advisors Castaldo and Mia Sinanaj joined custodian Alex Meshaj before dawn to run the electric cords to the shoulder high ‘SHS 22’ display complete with lights, made by technology teacher Ed Amato.

While the students enjoyed breakfast, parents distributed SHS 22 lanyards—a gift from the Class of 2022 Parents—and advisors Castaldo and Sinanaj passed out paper and pens. The seniors were asked to write letters about their hopes and dreams for the year. They’ll get them back ... you guessed it ... at Senior Sunset, just before graduation.

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## Easing the Way Back to Class for Formerly Fully

## Remote Students



***Students participate in activities that help them acclimate to a new school building and get used to being back in school full time.***

“My backpack is really heavy!” said Tyler, a seventh grader at Somers Middle School, who hasn’t attended in-person classes since March 2020. Rubbing his sore shoulder for emphasis, he explained that being a fully remote student for such a long time meant that he wasn’t used to carrying all of his books around.

Tyler isn’t the only formerly remote student returning to the middle school with unique concerns. Students who have spent the past year and a half attending classes via home computer worry about finding their classrooms, navigating lockers, and readjusting to the structure of an in-person school day.

“I was definitely excited to come back and see my friends and teachers, but I was also stressed about things like locating my locker and finding my way around,” said Smera, a seventh grader.

Wanting to address the concerns of students like Smera and Tyler, Somers Middle School social worker Kristen Rigaglia and school counselor Ellen Bieber created a special orientation program just for those students whose families had opted for fully remote learning last year.

“We realized it was going to be difficult for kids to be gone so long and then come back,” said Rigaglia.

In late August, Rigaglia and Bieber invited all of the formerly remote students to a special orientation at the school, featuring fun icebreaker activities and plenty of time for asking questions and sharing concerns. Games like Find-a-Friend Bingo and a school-wide scavenger hunt were designed to make the students feel more comfortable by the time the district opened its doors to full in-person learning on September 1.



## Even at a Distance, Mentoring Program Fosters Warm Connections



*Mentors and mentees from the TEAM Tuskers mentoring program get together at the first home football game of the 2021 season.*

Somers Middle School sixth grader Allison Giron says that an hour spent with Janet Parke feels like five minutes.

Somers High School senior Derek Donnelly says that playing games and chatting with Barbara Silvestri is one of his favorite things.

Both students are part of TEAM Tuskers, a mentoring program that pairs Somers students in grades three through 12 with older community members; Parke and Silvestri are two of the program's mentors. The program, in its ninth year, is designed to support the social and emotional growth of students through the development of friendships between the mentors and students.

Prior to the implementation of COVID restrictions, students and their mentors would meet in person, for an hour each week, to share fun activities like board games and art projects, or simply to chat.

Last year the program transitioned to virtual meet-ups, and the same will hold true for the 2021-22 school year. Executive Director Phyllis Morrison said there have been some advantages to the program going virtual.

"One upside is that there are more people who can participate in the program, due to the flexibility of FaceTime, Zoom, email or phone calls," she said. "Also, the mentors and mentees aren't limited by specific days and times anymore. Most of them meet for shorter periods, but they connect much more frequently."

"I tell her about my life, and she tells me what's going on in hers," said Allison of her relationship with Parke. "When we were able to meet in person, we would go to the playground or shoot baskets at the gym. Now we meet virtually, which is fine because I want her to be safe."

Mentors are quick to acknowledge that they benefit from the connections as much as the mentees.

"Allison has taught me a lot about digital activities, such as screen sharing or playing games on Roblox," said Parke. "She's actually helping to make me cooler!" Parke noted that Allison enjoys drawing and often uses screen sharing to display her latest work.

“I have been fortunate to have met two wonderful students through the program,” said Silvestri, who mentored another student prior to connecting with Derek. “My time with Derek is rewarding and special, whether we are texting one another or FaceTiming to share news,” she said. “He recently texted me when he got his learner’s permit.”

At the first Somers High School varsity football home game on September 24, some of the mentors and mentees were able to meet in person.

"There were so many smiles and so much laughter," says Morrison. "Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, in-person meetings within the school buildings are not yet allowed. This outdoor event provided an opportunity for everyone to meet in-person in a safe and fun setting."

More outdoor events are planned for the future.

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## **What’s the Scoop? Ask a Primrose Student!**



***Students in Joe Mahoney’s second grade class work on reading and writing while lounging in scoop chairs.***

Wobble stools. Floor desks. Scoop chairs.

Before COVID-19 changed everything, Joe Mahoney’s second grade classroom at Primrose Elementary School was filled with innovative, flexible seating that allowed his students to move around as they did their work.

“Flexible seating meets the needs of many different students,” said Mahoney. “Some children just need a little movement while they work.” The furniture had been made possible through the generosity of the district’s SEPTA and Primrose PTA.

Unfortunately, by its very nature, flexible seating doesn’t always lend itself to social distancing. When students returned to school last year, with most of the flexible seating in storage, Primrose classrooms looked like so many others during the pandemic: rows of desks, meticulously spaced apart.

Recently, a generous grant from the Somers Education Foundation (SEF) has allowed the scoop chairs to make a comeback -- in Mahoney’s classroom and beyond. The grant provides every classroom in the school with six of the colorful scoop-shaped seats.

"We were very pleased to award a grant to Primrose Elementary School for the purchase of scoop chairs," said SEF President Glenn Hintze. "These comfortable and portable chairs can accommodate small group instruction and



offer alternatives to students being seated at their desks.”

Scoop chairs have a lot going for them. They are small and light, and students can carry them to a spot in the classroom that’s safely distanced from others. The plastic surface is easily sanitized, and, with only six per class, learning to take turns becomes part of the process as well.

Mahoney noted that the chairs are actually very supportive and provide a cradling effect, something that can help students focus. He said that his students frequently use the chairs to read or do work on their iPads while still maintaining social distancing.

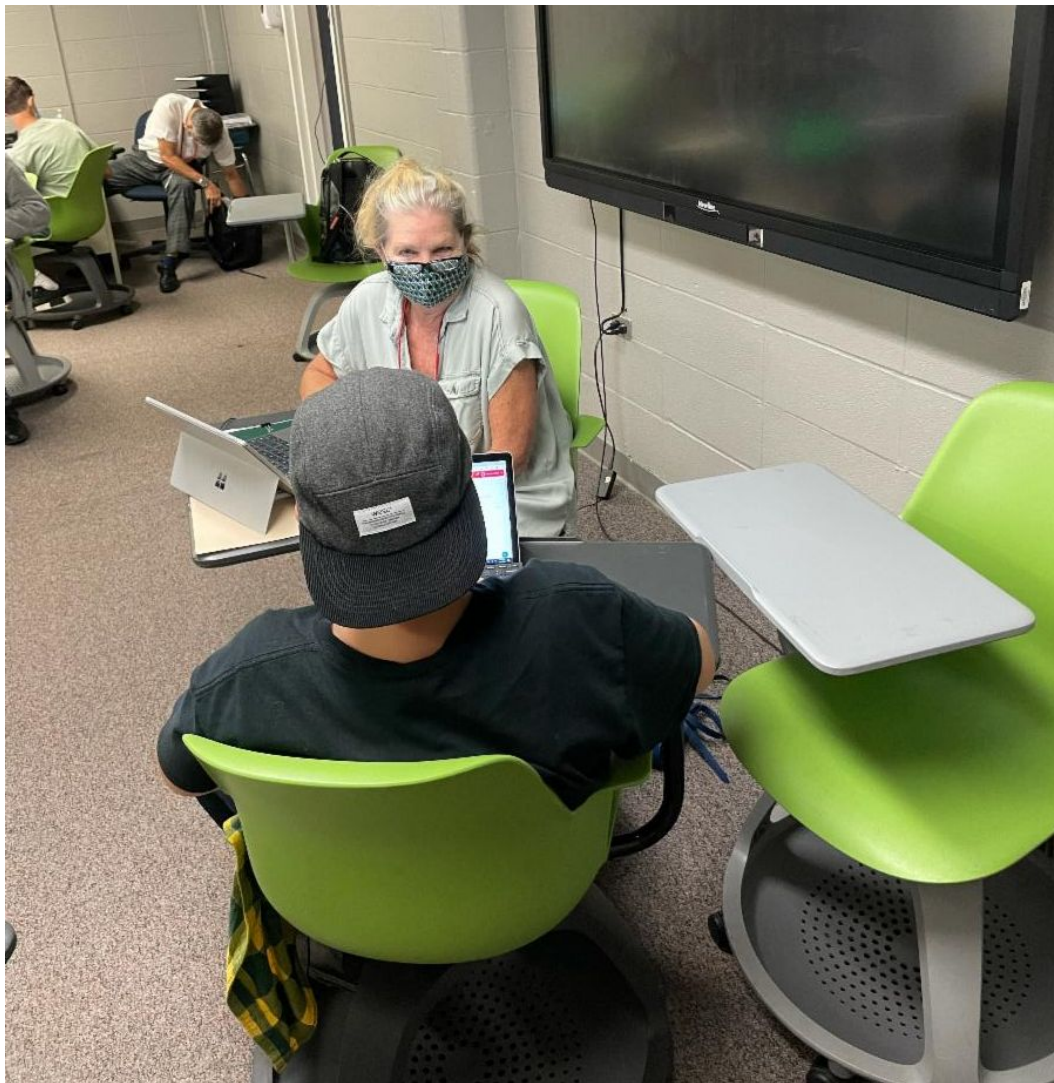
“I like that it rocks!” said one student. Another chimed in that she liked leaning back in the chairs, while another said spinning was the most fun.

“Kids need to move,” said the school’s occupational therapist, Deanne Chin. “Studies show that giving students these kind of seating choices increases their productivity.”

According to Assistant Principal Meg Benedetto, the hope is that once the pandemic is over, all of the stored flexible furniture will again fill Mahoney’s second-grade classroom. “Looking ahead, we hope to bring dynamic, flexible seating to every classroom in the building,” she said.

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## High School Adds Support for All Students



***The high school's Academic Support Center is open to all students at any time during the school day. Teachers offer help in a variety of subjects, as well as organizational and writing skills.***

Pairs of desks and chairs facing each other dot a room along an upstairs hallway at Somers High School. A teacher and students occupy each pod in quiet conversation. This is the Academic Support Center (ASC), restructured this year to meet the needs of high school students who may have experienced learning losses during the pandemic.

“We have made adjustments this year by having more teachers staff the Center throughout the day,” says ASC coordinator Lindsay Cannone. “This opens up more availability for students to work with teachers in a variety of subjects. We've also

expanded our supports in the building to include freshmen courses for Algebra and reading reinforcement.”

The Writing Center has also been added to the support organization and expanded to provide help of any kind related to English classes. One student who visits the ASC regularly says he uses the Center for more than just academic support.

“It provides a variety of teachers there to help in all subjects,” says the high school senior. “In addition, it is a great place for you to go get help in organizing your materials and keeping up to date on assignments.”

The district’s Learning Office spent much of the summer working with building leaders to restructure academic support in all four school buildings in Somers to address academic, organizational, or social-emotional hardship. One targeted group was rising freshman.

“When the high school created schedules for this school year, we proactively assigned ninth graders who demonstrated a need for additional support to a class period in the Center,” says Kevin Guidotti, the district’s director of learning. “Our building- and district-level teams continue to monitor students and assign them to a regular period in the Center as we assess current abilities.”

The ASC is staffed by teachers in math, science, social studies, English, world language and special education as well as a teaching assistant. The door is always open, and any student at the high school can drop in for extra help during free periods or lunch.

“I highly suggest taking a chance to check it out right before you have to hand in a big assignment,” says the senior.

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## **Especially Nice to be Back in Specials Rooms**



***Click image to see students hard at work and having fun in the Somers Intermediate School's designated specials rooms.***

“I got you!” shouts a fifth-grade student as he knocks down a bowling pin with a bouncy yellow ball.

Specials are back in business in their designated rooms and spaces at the intermediate school. After being converted to classrooms last year to accommodate the one-class, two-room model for social distancing, there is once again exercise and fun in the gym, reading and research in the library, and creative design in the art room.

“It feels so good to be back in this space where the kids can run and move around. It’s controlled chaos and they love it,” says physical education teacher, Cheryl Rinaldi.

Last year the gym was divided in half to provide classroom space for two different classes. The art room and the library were also used as classrooms.

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# Somers PTA Welcomes Back Students and Staff



The Primrose PTA hosted the Kindergarten Meet & Greet at Reis Park on August 29. Incoming kindergartners and their families were able to meet in a safe and fun way before the school year began. The students were also able to board a school bus and learn about bus safety from Transportation Director Nate Spence.

Somers PTA welcomed staff at the district breakfast on August 30. SHS PTSA Class of 2022 parents hosted the Senior Back to School breakfast on September 3. This was combined with the first-ever Senior Sunrise event by Student Council.

Somers PTA looks forward to re-imagining events to safely connect with families.



Somers Central School District  
250 Route 202  
Somers, New York 10589  
914.277.2400  
[www.somersschools.org](http://www.somersschools.org)

