



We are: Taking a Break

■ Page 2: Valley Elementary now offers a range of spaces for students who are looking to recharge.



We are: Shopping!

■ Page 4: The school store at Valley Middle/Transitional High School now has its own designated space.



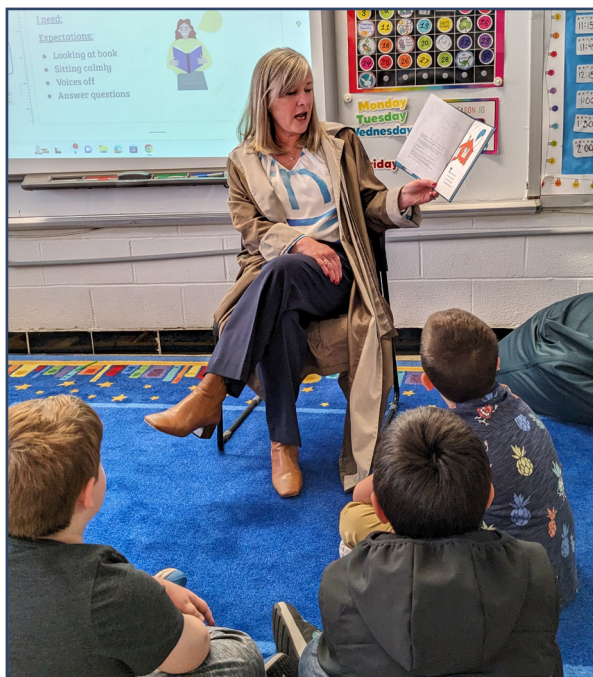
We are: Feeding the Birds

■ Page 6: The arrival of spring means the return of highly anticipated volunteering opportunities for Individuals in Valley's Adult Program.

VALLEY COLLABORATIVE

Volume 12, Issue 3 News for the extended Valley Collaborative community Spring 2024

Spring Has Sprung at Valley Collaborative!



DR. CHRIS A. SCOTT, VALLEY COLLABORATIVE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, READS TO STUDENTS IN MS. CHANELLE'S CLASS AS PART OF READ ACROSS AMERICA. THE ANNUAL EVENT TO PROMOTE LITERACY IS HELD ACROSS THE COUNTRY ON THE BIRTHDAY OF BELOVED CHILDREN'S AUTHOR DR. SEUSS. DR. SCOTT WAS ONE OF SEVERAL GUEST READERS WHO VISITED VALLEY ELEMENTARY TO JOIN IN THE READING FUN.

Dear Valley Community:

Spring has sprung! Like all of you, we are enjoying this season of renewal and growth here at Valley. Outside, the grass is greening and trees are budding while inside we welcome a new energy and excitement for learning with our students and staff alike. Of course, new growth and learning is not limited to spring here in our schools and programs. We see it each and every day as our teachers, therapists, assistants, support staff and administrators work together to provide the best possible social/emotional and academic learning experiences for all of our students.

That is the Valley way of bringing to life our mission statement: *Building a community that empowers children and adults to find their own way.* What better way to do that than by cultivating a culture of continuous learning for everyone at Valley?

Throughout this school year we have had a renewed focus on professional learning (a/k/a professional development) for all staff. While students are enjoying time with family and friends on our early release Wednesdays, their teachers, assistants and administrators are focusing on their own professional learning.

»continued on back page

Valley Elementary: Space to Thrive

On a recent morning, Valley Elementary's newest student-centered space was a scene of quiet industry. As Gabe 'chilled' in a hammock swing, Zac dropped by the Sensory Room to burn off a little extra energy in between classes with the help of a mini basketball and hoop. While students have all kinds of reasons for visiting the space, they all agree that they love it. "The swing is my favorite part," says Nate Skorik. Lucas Harrington couldn't narrow down his favorite part of space, which in addition to the swing features a treadmill and tents for students who need a quiet retreat. "I like everything!" said Lucas.

The idea for the space came from a popular gym called We Rock the Spectrum in Westford. With its mission of inclusion and learning through sensory play has made the gym a natural destination for Elementary School field trips. Staff members were inspired to try to adapt We Rock the Spectrum's emphasis on positive social, emotional and physical development back at Valley. Before long, a former classroom had been reinvented as a space for sensory breaks complete with stations. "The students are taking full advantage of our amazingly unique Sensory room, participating in balance, deep pressure, visual and tactile experiences supporting their self-regulation and attention in the classroom and beyond!" says Occupational Therapist Madison Pesa.

The Sensory Room is just one of a whole suite of spaces available for students, whether they need a movement break, a quick reset between classes, or some quiet time. And whether that visit is just a few minutes or a bit longer, there is a space available for almost any student need. The gross motor room features a slide, a cargo

net, and full rock wall for students to climb, with crash mats for them to land on safely.

Students in need of some downtime can also visit Chillville, a peaceful enclave outfitted with bean bags and caves and featuring soothing images and quiet music. A Zen Den welcomes students who need a quiet spot to work on class materials, while another movement room is now available behind the stage in the auditorium. "We are very lucky to have these great spaces and all the wonderful resources within them," says PE Teacher Rosa DeMauro.

Assistant Principal Bryan Thomas says that with warming temperatures, the school's many outdoor spaces will become available as well, meaning that there will be even more opportunities for students to find a space that is just right for them. "We're focused on finding what kids need from a sensory, motivation and regulation point of view and giving them the space to do that." ■



TOP: SECOND GRADER LUCAS HARRINGTON IN THE SENSORY ROOM; ABOVE: FIRST GRADER PRESTON BITTENCOURT RELAXES IN THE SENSORY ROOM SWING; LEFT: FOURTH GRADER OLIVIA BUONOMANO WITH SLP JILLIAN WENDLER.

Valley Elementary Celebrates Reading

Ordinarily the site of emergency vehicles in the Valley Elementary parking lot would have been cause for alarm. But the recent visit by firefighters and paramedics was nothing to worry about. Instead, members of the Tyngsboro Fire Department and a full complement of emergency professionals were on hand to be guest readers—part of Valley Elementary’s week of reading-related activities in coordination with Read Across America. In addition to Fire Chief Wes Russell and several firefighters and EMTs, the Valley guest readers included parent members of the Parent Advisory Group, Dr. Chris Scott, Valley’s Executive Director, along with members of her leadership team, and School Resource Officer Chris Gustafson. The week-long celebration of all things reading also featured “buddy reading” in which students from older classrooms read to their younger peers. “It was an all around amazing week of reading,” says Assistant Principal Bryan Thomas. Congrats to Special Education Teacher and Wilson Dyslexia Practitioner Meghan Waters, and Jillian Wendler, Speech-Language Pathologist, for coordinating these great events! ■



ABOVE: FOURTH GRADER MADELINE CLARK READS TO SECOND GRADER ETHAN BARRY; TOP RIGHT: A LIST OF READ ACROSS AMERICA EVENTS AT VALLEY ELEMENTARY; RIGHT: VALLEY SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER CHRIS GUSTAFSON READS TO STUDENTS.



Read Across America Week

On the Places You'll Go Monday - March 4th

- Wear Valley or other school spirit shirts

Pajama Tuesday - March 5th

- Wear your coziest set of pajamas

Read My Shirt Wednesday - March 6th

- Wear a shirt with words

Reading is Relaxing Thursday - March 7th

- Dress in vacation clothes
ex. Hawaiian shirts/hats/sunglasses

Green Eggs and Ham Friday - March 8th

- Wear green in honor of one of Dr. Seuss's well-known books






Good Things In Store for Valley Middle/Transitional High School Program

The new improved school store at Valley Transitional High School has been years in the making. The concept, which began as a program for middle school students, was simple: kids would amass points for the kinds of positive behaviors that Valley tries to cultivate—everything from internal and emotional regulation to meeting community norms and expectations. Every Friday, students would make their way to a temporary shop set up in the second floor kitchen and cash in the points they'd earned for items they'd ordered and that Assistant Principal Brian Mihalek had purchased. But COVID put in-store shopping on hold. Like the rest of the Valley school experience during the pandemic, the store moved online, with Valley staff delivering items to students. Now, the store is open for business once again, and finally has its own designated space.

While the store may look more like a real retail space than in previous incarnations, Brian says that the concept has remained the same since he first came up with the idea two decades ago. "It's all about a fun experience for kids that connects to the Valley mission: be safe, responsible and respectful," says Brian. "It builds our culture but most importantly, kids love it."

In its post-pandemic incarnation, the store has ascended to a whole new level thanks to the hands-on oversight of BCBA Mackenzie Bemis, who describes the store as her 'baby.' Mackenzie has carefully stocked the store with a wide range of items for students to purchase using the points they've accumulated. With each point worth a quarter, students can cash in a small number of points for ring pops or Hershey's kisses or



FROM LEFT: TAEJON VILELA-MARTINEZ, STUDENT; DANA WILLIAMS, SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT COUNSELOR; MACKENZIE BEMIS, BCBA; JOHN SHEA, CLASSROOM TEACHER AND COREY ERICKSON, STUDENT, SHOW OFF THE NEW SCHOOL STORE.

save up their points over weeks or even months and cash them in for a big ticket item. The costliest items include a Lego set and a set of Xbox headphones.

Mackenzie says that her decisions on what to stock are based on student interest. "I really try to gauge what our students are interested in."

By the time the store opens each Friday a long line of students has formed outside. "The store is really motivating for them," Mackenzie says. "They can't wait for it to open." And these Valley Transitional High School students agree.

"At Valley, we get a lot of incentives, but the school store is by far my favorite," says Corey. "I like the Legos and the happy place," says Gabby. "My favorite part about the school store is seeing Mackenzie," says Con-

nor. "I like the school store because it has candy," says Vanessa. "I think of the school store when I'm having a difficult time during the week," says Taejon. "I know if I work hard to be successful that I will get Dojo points and be able to get something cool like a basketball at the school store on Fridays." "My favorite thing about the school store is requesting my own items," says Andrew.

For Brian, the realization of his vision of having a real school store after so many years is immensely satisfying. "It's not just that we've got a dedicated space, but that the store is part of a very solid behavior system that rewards good behavior and increases self advocacy among our students," says Brian. "The store and its success is a visible symbol of all that we've accomplished here." ■

All About Hands on Learning at Transitional High School Alternative Programming

Need a birdhouse? Or how about a planter bearing the Valley logo? These crafts, made with love and attention to detail by Valley students are now available to purchase from the Valley Craft Shop. Even better, these handmade crafts, perfect for Mother's Day, Father's Day or an any-day gift, are available at the incredibly affordable price of \$5. You read that right—just \$5 for a handmade craft that would cost five or even ten times as much at a retail store.

The new Valley Craft Shop is the latest spin on the Valley vocational experience. When temperatures drop, students who are part of the Landscaping Shop head inside for indoor gardening and light woodworking, including developing hands-on skills in woodworking, carpentry and assembly. They're also applying knowledge they've been learning in the classroom. "Measurement, area, perimeter, geometry, basic algebra—making these small crafts lets students see how all of the things they're learning in math class has a practical application," explains teacher Jeff Keefe, who is overseeing the project. Jeff says that the new approach has been a hit with students. "They recognize that if you put in the time, not only can you make these cool items but you can sell them," says Jeff. "We've had students take a lot of initiative, not just with using tools in the shop, but with leadership."

The Craft Shop is just one of the new vocational opportunities for Valley students. Also in the works: an expanded landscaping program that includes an indoor garden. Jeff, who is a serious landscaper, says that the

about the life cycle of a plant in a classroom, we're growing different kinds of vegetables and flowers," says Jeff, who has been at Valley on and off for the past eight years. "We're learning about biology, weather and sustainable living. The vegetables we grow will then go to our culinary program." On the menu so far: green beans, kale and lettuce. But that's just the beginning, says Jeff, who is also working with the Elementary School to refurbish their greenhouse. "As the weather gets better, we're going to keep expanding what we grow. It's going to be very wide ranging." ■



AUSTIN MCHUGH BEAULIEU AT WORK ON A PROJECT IN THE VALLEY CRAFT SHOP.

The Valley Craft Shop is Open!
Purchase our amazing crafts, hand-
made by Valley students,
for just \$5.

To place your order, follow the QR
code



Meet the Latest Valley Club: Jiu Jitsu

The word “jiu jitsu” derives from the Japanese “Jū” meaning “gentle” and “Jutsu” meaning “art.” But for a growing number of students in Valley’s Transitional High School Alternative Programming, the more accurate translation might be “fun”.

Valley’s new Jiu Jitsu Club was born when two staff members, Eli Gioubakis and DJ MacDonald, noticed that a number of students were interested in Mixed Martial Arts or MMA. Eli happened to have a friend who now runs Team Flo, a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu gym in Tyngsboro, and a partnership was formed. Twice a week DJ and Eli transport students to the gym to train. Tuesdays are devoted to Jiu Jitsu, a ground-based martial art that uses the principles of leverage, angles, pressure and timing. Thursdays, students step into the ring to work on boxing, including playing different boxing games and learning basic defense skills.

While the lessons start slow, the pace quickly picks up, says DJ. “Jiu Jitsu is all about grappling and submission. The students are learning how to use their body and how to move around.” For high schoolers, this ancient practice turns out to be a great way to burn off extra energy. DJ

says that almost as soon as the trips to the gym began he noticed a transformation in these budding martial artists. “We’ve seen a tremendous growth in the maturity of the students who participate. The self confidence boost has also been tremendous,” says DJ.

According to Team Flo, which offers classes and other training opportunities to kids of all ages, the skills learned apply beyond the mat. Classes for kids teach “the correlations between hard work and dedication to payoff and reward. We see our young grapplers build confidence through their training that carries over to school and home.”

For DJ, the Jiu Jitsu club is yet another example of Valley meeting students where they are. Students would often show up at school on Monday excited to talk about the Mixed Martial Arts fights they’d



TOP: JOSH SENCABAUGH WORKS ON HIS BOXING SKILLS. BELOW: TAVERNIER HARRIS, GRAYSON ALAJAJIAN AND RICKY MARQUES PRACTICE THEIR GRAPPLING MOVES ON THE MAT.

watched on TV over the weekend. “These fighters are real athletes,” says DJ. “So we started thinking about how to translate that interest from just watching sports to actually getting active.” While the club started with three students it has grown rapidly, something DJ expects to continue as word of the training sessions gets out.

The success of the new club is also confirmation for DJ that his decision to return to Valley after a two year hiatus in which he worked construction was the right one. A special education assistant who provides individual student support as well as whole group support in history, DJ is now returning to school to earn his certification in special education with a focus on mild to moderate disabilities. Says DJ: “Valley is a really special place.” ■



Adult Services: New Volunteering Opportunities are In Bloom

As we head into the spring season, Valley's Adult Program is excited by the ability to expand programming with the changing of the weather. Valley's community partners operate in many different settings and in varied environments. Some of the sites are more available and accessible based on the weather, and as Spring approaches, so do expanded opportunities for the individuals we serve.

Two prominent volunteer sites will be available for programming as the temperature continues to rise.

Drumlin Farm is a wildlife sanctuary located in Lincoln, MA which is also part of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Drumlin is home to a number of native species of animals living in their natural habitat. In addition to providing a place for these native animals to live, the farm is comprised of a number of different walking trails, a nature center/mu-

seum and multiple farms harvesting a variety of crops. Our individuals have shown a great appreciation for the opportunity to lend their volunteer services to helping keep the grounds tidy, feeding the birds and other wildlife, and assisting in the early season harvesting of crops that begins in the greenhouses on the grounds of the farm.

Strongwater Farm, a therapeutic equestrian center located in Tewksbury, MA., is another site where our individuals are eager to offer their services. Strongwater specializes in providing life-changing equine-assisted services to individuals with mental, physical, cognitive, and behavioral disabilities. While these therapeutic services are not being rendered to our individuals while they volunteer,

Valley initially connected with Strongwater Farm based on positive feedback we received from some of our individuals who do receive services from the farm outside of program hours. Any time our individuals get the opportunity to volunteer in a setting that has personally benefited themselves or someone they know, they are often eager to rise to the challenge. Individuals ensure the Farm is well taken care of, including aiding in keeping the horses fed while their living areas are clean and comfortable.

The majority of the Valley Collaborative Adult Program



BOTTOM: MATT GEOFFROY REPLENISHES THE BIRDSEED AT DRUMLIN FARM IN LINCOLN, MA. TOP: GREG MILNER, MATT GEOFFROY, STACY FRANCIS AND JASON DOYLE ON ONE OF THE FIRST TRIPS TO DRUMLIN FARM OF THE SEASON, SOMETHING THEY'VE BEEN LOOKING FORWARD TO ALL WINTER.



work and volunteer sites run year round, but with some of them being based outdoors, the arrival of the spring season is a time of great excitement for the individuals as they are afforded these very specific volunteer opportunities.

"I like helping the animals out when we go to Drumlin Farm," says Jason Doyle. "They can't speak for themselves so it feels good to give them something we know they need like food." ■

Valley Collaborative Leadership Team



Chris A. Scott, PhD

Executive Director,
Finance and Operations
cscott@valleycollaborative.org



Heather Mackay

Principal, Valley
Elementary School
hmackay@valleycollaborative.org



James George

Business Manager/Accountant
jgeorge@valleycollaborative.org



Nicole Noska

Principal
Valley Middle School,
Valley Transitional High School
Transitional Programming
nnoska@valleycollaborative.org



Joia Mercurio

Deputy Director
jmercurio@valleycollaborative.org



Nick LeClair

Principal
Valley Transitional High School
Alternative Programming
nieclair@valleycollaborative.org



Kari Morrin

Director of HR, Title IX and
504 Coordinator
kmorrin@valleycollaborative.org



Matthew Gentile

Director of DDS Services
mgentile@valleycollaborative.org



Jessica Scalzi

Lead Nurse
jscalzi@valleycollaborative.org

Valley Collaborative Board

Chair: Dr. Jay Lang

Superintendent, Chelmsford Public Schools

Dr. Kerry Clery

Superintendent, Billerica Public Schools

Mr. Steven Stone

Superintendent, Dracut Public Schools

Dr. Laura Chesson

Superintendent, Groton-Dunstable Regional School District

Dr. Denise Pigeon

Superintendent, Nashoba Valley Technical School District

Mr. Brad Morgan

Superintendent, North Middlesex Regional School District

Ms. Brenda Theriault-Regan

Superintendent, Tewksbury Public Schools

Dr. Michael Flanagan

Superintendent, Tyngsborough Public Schools

Dr. Christopher Chew

Superintendent, Westford Public Schools

Spring Has Sprung at Valley Collaborative!

**continued from cover*

We have dubbed them Wicked Smaaht Wednesdays because we all end those Wednesdays feeling smaahta than when we began them!

Just as we tailor instruction for the individualized needs of our students, we have done the same for our adults with different topics for staff members with different roles and in different programs. These professional learning groups help build a sense of community and collaboration among adults as they learn and grow together. Research has shown that the more professional learning that educators participate in,

the more likely their students are to succeed. So our students become smaahta as their teachers become smaahta. We know that builds confidence in themselves as learners and, going back to our mission statement, empowers them to find their way.

Our thoughts about the importance of professional learning at Valley are expressed by the words of an influential American poet and writer, Maya Angelou, who said, *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."* Great words of advice that we follow every day at Valley, especially on our Professional Learning Days!

Happy Spring to all. We wish for you the same growth, learning and optimism that we see all around us here at Valley!

Chris A. Scott, Ph. D.
Executive Director