



WINTER 2025

ONTEORA

CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



Onteora High School student Kalki Adelman attempts to "drive" in a vehicle that simulates alcohol impairment during a hands-on lesson on the dangers of being under the influence.

High School Students Reflect on Dangers of "Driving While Under the Influence"

Before Thanksgiving Break, students at Onteora High School participated in a hands-on, down-to-earth lesson about the dangers and realities of drunk driving. With the help of the Ulster County Probation Department, Probation Supervisor Mark Pisano, and Onteora School Resource Officer Tom Sharon, the students were able to get behind the wheel of an actual moving vehicle and experience what it would be like to try to drive while impaired by alcohol or other substances.

The eye-opening experience took place during Physical Education class with teachers Andrew Occhi, Eric Pezzello, and Brandon Harkin. Like last school year, the students were able to try on goggles that simulated the experiences of a person who is "under the influence" and attempt to "drive" using a video game-like simulation mechanism. They also tried to pick up their car keys from the floor and "walk the line." All of these activities elicited responses of "This is so weird," "Do I get another try?", and "Whoa, this is crazy!"



Onteora High School student Dustin Smith experiences what it's like to drive under the influence by wearing alcohol impairment simulation goggles and attempting to navigate on a "winding road."

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Message from the Superintendent

Although we are still in winter, I'm hopeful that spring will be here soon! After using two snow days in December, we made it through January without using any! Hopefully, February and March will be manageable.

Our annual Community Night was on January 17th and was incredibly well attended. We are so grateful for all of the support and partnership that this community provides, and for the hard work that the Booster Club and the Athletic Council put in to help highlight and enhance how special Onteora really is.

BUDGET

We have again begun the annual budget process, and we will share information in as many ways as possible. All budget presentations can be found on the School Board page of our website, and can also be accessed directly from the home page. We will be providing links to our budget presentations on Facebook as well. We are encouraged by the Governor's proposed budget which included a 2% increase to Foundation Aid. I am hopeful that this means the recommendations of the Rockefeller Institute will be analyzed and implemented thoughtfully. The Governor's proposal last year was alarming because we were not aware that reductions to Foundation Aid were even being considered, but we are grateful to our elected representatives and our community members who all fought the Governor's proposal last year.

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Congratulations are Due to a Very Special Person in the Onteora Community!

Christina Signore, PTA member and Onteora Booster Club treasurer, was this year's recipient of the Ulster County School Boards Association's Distinguished Friends of Education Award. She was officially honored during an awards ceremony held on November 21 at the Kingston Best Western.

The Onteora Board of Education chose Mrs. Signore for her collaborative and inspirational leadership. During her time on the Phoenicia Elementary School PTA, she was dedicated to providing students with fun, engaging, student-centered, and community-spirited experiences that went well beyond the excellent instructional program offered by our teachers and staff.

Over the years, Mrs. Signore helped organize countless square dances, talent shows, Valentine's Day parties, and so much more—including the unforgettable "Phoenicia Farewell" event held last June. Now a part of the Bennett Elementary School PTA, she helped spearhead the efforts to build the beautiful community garden there, so that students could enjoy the experience of planting and harvesting from their own school vegetable garden—much as Phoenicia students had done in their former school.

Board of Education trustee Sarah Hemingway-Lynch, who is also a PTA and Onteora Booster Club member, paid tribute to Mrs. Signore in a speech that was read in full at the December Board meeting. She described Mrs. Signore as "a beautiful bright light," who "made every kid feel special."

"Christina considered every detail when planning," said Mrs. Hemingway-Lynch, noting that Mrs. Signore made plans for such "extras" as light shows, photo booths, and amazing snacks like cake pops. "She was, of course, supported by a diehard team of parents, but it was her vision and her ability to elevate every event to make our beloved little school as sweet and fun for the kids as it could be," Mrs. Hemingway-Lynch explained.

Mrs. Hemingway-Lynch fondly recounted the time when Mrs. Signore created a pumpkin patch for the



Christina Signore

school's Fall Festival. By reaching out to a local business, Mrs. Signore was able to secure a donation of 142 pumpkins, which she placed in the side yard of the school, so every student could have the experience of picking out pumpkins in October.

Perhaps most notably, Mrs. Hemingway-Lynch pointed out, Mrs. Signore took on the challenge of making the 2023-2024 school year one that was filled with festivity and love, even as the District and community faced the closure of Phoenicia Elementary School. Heartbroken but undeterred, Mrs. Signore organized a sub-

committee of PTA members and teachers to ensure that the transition was not only appropriately mourned, but also "wildly celebrated."

First, every student received a T-shirt that read, "Phoenicia School, Proud to be a Part of it!" emblazoned with a logo designed by Mrs. Signore. Then, she and the PTA successfully advocated bringing three artists to the school to support the students in processing the transition to a new school through theater and dance. To top it off, on June 8, Mrs. Signore and the PTA pulled off a legendary farewell event complete with circus performers, face painting, a DJ, food trucks, live music, and tons of fun.

Some of Phoenicia's first graduating class were in attendance, along with teachers and friends from the school's 60-year history. Mrs. Signore even helped to turn the cafeteria into a museum of photos from over the years, celebrating all that the community had gained from this small, but important school.

"Her dedication to the children of our District is unwavering," said Mrs. Hemingway-Lynch. "Her standard for what every child deserves, her ability to include everyone and reach beyond ingrained circles in our community, her commitment to tradition, and her understanding that kids need to love school to thrive at school are what make her this year's recipient of the award."

"We are so grateful for her time, energy, and love for Onteora and all of our children," she added.

kindergarten
– REGISTRATION NOW OPEN! –

IT'S TIME TO REGISTER YOUR CHILD FOR KINDERGARTEN. The District's online Kindergarten registration system is now open. Children who turn five on or before December 1, 2025 are eligible to attend Kindergarten beginning in September 2025.

To register online, parents or guardians should go to www.onteora.k12.ny.us and click on "Registration & Displaced Families." The link for online registration is in the middle of the page. Please be sure to choose the 2025-2026 school year. Current Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) parents will be mailed information and do not need to complete the online form again.

Once your child is completely registered, you will be contacted with an appointment for Kindergarten screening. If you have any questions, you may contact Sharon Wood, Onteora's District Registrar, by calling 845-657-6383, ext. 1023 or emailing swood@onteora.k12.ny.us.

High School Students Reflect on Dangers of "Driving While Under the Influence"

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Unlike last year, the students were also able to experience what it's like to try navigating a real (non-simulated) vehicle through an obstacle course while being "under the influence."

"This was a really good learning experience," said Grade 10 student Riley Peer. Sophia Citron, also a Grade 10 student, agreed. "The goggles made me feel cross-eyed and felt blurry. It seemed like there were too many cones," she said.



"In the future, I think it would also be good to discuss the peer pressure that leads to these situations," Sophia added.

Later in the school year, seniors will take part in more extensive activities and discussions about the dangers of driving while under the influence.

Onteora High School student Miex Mayer-Bruderman attempts walking while wearing goggles simulating alcohol impairment, while fellow students look on, during a lesson on the dangers of driving under the influence.

ONTEORA SPANISH CLUB MEMBERS SHARE THE JOY OF COOKING TOGETHER

BEFORE WINTER BREAK, STUDENTS IN THE MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL'S SPANISH CLUB had an especially productive (and delicious!) visit from Onteora parent Jesús Lovera-Rosas, who shared with them the art of making tamales!

Mr. Lovera-Rosas, along with his daughters Ailin and Sharlynn (who is a member of the Spanish Club), immediately put everyone to work producing these tasty delights. Each student had a chance to cut jalapeños, knead dough, and assemble the tamales in corn husks. The kitchen was filled with laughter and smiles—just like it was in the book the students had read together, *¡Qué montón de Tamales! (Too many Tamales!)* by Gary Soto and Ed Martinez!

Student members of the Spanish Club discover the joys of cooking together, under the guidance of parent visitor Jesús Lovera-Rosas, who taught them how to make tamales.

Message from the Superintendent

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Their efforts ensured that we were able to maintain consistent funding and avoid making drastic cuts to our educational program.

OPTIMIZING ONTEORA UPDATE

Thank you to all of the community members who have been able to participate in our Community Forums this year. We have been able to share ideas and draft designs that incorporate the vision that was created with the community last spring. We have revised our initial designs based on the feedback and input from students, faculty and staff, and community members. This is a fluid process, and the constant exchange of ideas has allowed us to reimagine the campus through multiple iterations. This collaboration is so valuable to us, and I believe we will end up with the best possible result because of the many voices that have been represented throughout the process. We are always stronger together!

If you are interested in seeing more information, please visit the Optimizing Onteora webpage.

COMMUNITY NEWS

It is time to register for Kindergarten in September! This is the time of year when we can start to plan for our incoming cohort of students, and we are excited to welcome them and their families into our schools. If you or anyone you know in the District has an incoming kindergartener, please encourage them to register for the 2025-2026 school year!

Our community members are also always invited to attend Board meetings, and are welcome to speak at the "Public Be Heard" section of the agenda. In addition, Board meetings are also live-streamed and recorded for those that may want to watch from their home and for those that may not be able to watch in real time, but would like to see the work of the Board.

Victoria McLaren
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

ONTEORA'S YOUNGEST LEARNERS HONING BOTH SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC SKILLS

OUR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE UNIVERSAL PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM AT FIRST STEPS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTER have had a busy and productive school year so far!

During December, the young learners explored many different traditions and ways of celebrating the holidays. Since September, they've been exploring the use of all of their senses and practicing important skills like cutting, gluing, writing, and drawing by participating in many different themed activities.

"We've seen so much progress in how they're writing their names since the start of the school year, as well as overall growth!" enthused Director Alexis Bell.

AT WOODLAND PLAYHOUSE, the students have been bustling with activity—including plenty of sensory exploration and handwriting and signature practice. They have also been honing their gross and fine motor skills.

In "The Polar Bear Class," the young learners expressed their curiosity about the natural world and applied their learning to get concrete answers.

The budding scientists noticed tracks in the snow on one of their walks, and they immediately



Onteora Pre-K students enrolled at Woodland Playhouse examine and hypothesize about animal tracks in the snow.



Onteora's Pre-K students at First Steps Early Childhood Education Center show that snowflake-making is a fun and creative way to practice fine motor skills.

wanted to know who (or what) had made them. The students then utilized a classroom book on animal tracks and went back outside to find out. The investigators hypothesized about the tracks they had seen. Did the tracks belong to a dog, they wondered? A coyote? Or perhaps a wolf? After consulting the book, they confirmed that the tracks in question had, in fact, been made by some kind of canine!

After continuing to examine all kinds of animal tracks, the students made several more positive identifications, including "bird" and "rabbit," and joy ensued. They even brainstormed about animal footprints they did not find, and why.

Alisha Olive, an educator in the classroom, said, "Tracking has been a big part of us going outside. We say 'let's go tracking!' and find prints in the snow for all sorts of birds. This led to conversations about how they [the tracks] appeared from nowhere and then disappeared, so it had to be an animal with flight."

How inspirational!

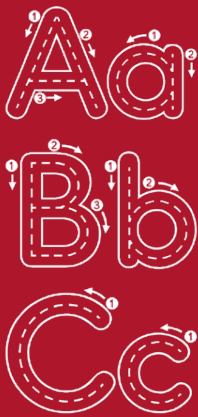
Universal Pre-Kindergarten Registration is Open!

IT'S TIME TO REGISTER YOUR CHILD FOR UNIVERSAL PRE-KINDERGARTEN (UPK)! In order to be eligible for the program, children must be four years of age on or before December 1, 2025.

The District's online UPK registration system is now open. To register online, parents or guardians should go to www.onteora.k12.ny.us and click on "Registration & Displaced Families." The link for online registration is in the middle of the page. Please be sure to choose the 2025-2026 school year.

Once your child is completely registered, their name will be placed in the lottery, which will be held in May.

If you have any questions, you may contact Margaret Harkin, Secretary to the Director of Pupil Personnel Services, at mharkin@onteora.k12.ny.us.



Bennett Elementary School Welcomes Local Veterans

On the Friday before Veterans Day, Grade 4 students at Bennett Elementary School hosted some very gracious local veterans, who took the time to share their reflections about what it was like to be in the military.

The assembly began with the veterans and students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance together. Veteran Tom Planz led a group of eight other veterans, who told stories about their time in the service. The students, who came prepared with questions, were absolutely riveted as each one was answered. The questions, which ranged from “How long were you in the service?” to “Where were you stationed?” to “What was your job in the military?” just kept coming!

Toward the end of the presentation, veteran Gina Kothe offered the idea of having the students make a line in front of the veteran they wanted to speak with personally. The students, who leapt at the chance to have one-on-one time, came up with even MORE questions they wanted answers to! In addition, piled high next to the veterans was a table overflowing with thank-you cards the students had made, with each one stating how appreciative they are of our veterans. These cards were so impactful that Olive Town Supervisor Jim Sofranko called Principal Gabriel Buono to personally thank the Bennett students for all the beautiful cards and messages—wow!

It was a wonderful experience for students and a rare opportunity to bridge the generation gap. Thank you, veterans. You are much loved and appreciated here at Bennett and at Onteora!



Local veteran Tom Planz speaks to eager students during a visit with several other local veterans on November 8.

Woodstock Elementary School Has Special Visit With Local Veteran

Grade 4 students at Woodstock Elementary School welcomed a very special local veteran, who took the time to share his reflections about what it was like to be in the military.

Students in Erika McLean’s and Elizabeth Lefferts’ classes were excited to welcome Terry Breitenstein, an Onteora alumnus and Army veteran, for a pre-Veterans Day visit on November 8.

Mr. Breitenstein, who was drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in the Vietnam War, served from 1968-1971. He began his talk by explaining that Veterans Day is a chance to thank veterans for their service, and Memorial Day is a chance to commemorate those who died while serving. He also discussed the different branches of the military, and painted a picture of what basic training was like.

The students, who eagerly absorbed each story that Mr. Breitenstein told, had come prepared with some very thoughtful questions—including “What did you like most about the service?”, “How did you

communicate with your family back home?”, “What kind of qualities does a person need to be a good soldier?”

When asked about what “job” he did while serving, Mr. Breitenstein explained that he had been an infantryman, adding that every job in the military is important. During his time in the military, he said

that he “really grew up,” as he had been quite young when he began. “I made many friends, and we learned to rely on each other,” he recalled. “We learned about teamwork and the value of responsibility. I became much more independent!”

“Is it just about fighting?” asked one student, to which Mr. Breitenstein replied that being in the service can involve learning new languages and cultures. For

example, while he was stationed in Japan, he enjoyed learning about Japanese life.

He also mentioned how, to almost everyone he knew in his platoon, writing to their mothers was very important.



Terry Breitenstein, an Onteora alumnus and Army veteran, speaks to a rapt audience of students at Woodstock Elementary School during a visit on November 8.

A Message from the Onteora Booster Club

The Onteora Booster Club runs similarly to a PTA, but is geared for our Middle and High School students. We strive to create and support meaningful, fun, and spirit-filled activities that enhance and enrich the student experience for each and every student here.

So far this year, we have planned and organized several fun-filled activities. In September, we held an alumni tailgate and a special reception honoring the Class of 1974, as well as a free tailgate party for students to kick off Homecoming Weekend. In addition, we worked hard to support all aspects of Homecoming festivities, which culminated in the High School Homecoming Dance. At the end of October, we worked collaboratively with Middle School staff to plan and support the Zombie Prom, which brought together students in Grades 6-8 for their first dance.

In November, we supported the Junior and Senior Powderpuff game, and in December, we were present at both the Middle and High School Winter Concerts, and organized and hosted the Middle School's Ice Cream Social and Spirit Rally.

We hosted another fantastic Community Night event on January 17th, are also very excited to host our first Trivia Night on March 7th, and we plan to support a Music in Our Schools event that will be held in March.

This spring, expect to see us at the Middle/High School musical production, as well as both spring concerts. We will once again provide a faculty and staff appreciation breakfast, and a luncheon for the Buildings and Grounds staff. And of course, we always look forward to the ever-popular War of the Classes at the end of the school year!

At many of these events, we sell Onteora merchandise, which acts as a fundraiser to allow us to continue to do all that we do. This year, with your support, we were able to purchase senior banners for our athletes, and hope to do so for our musicians and artists as well.

We are so very grateful for our generous community members and businesses, who continue to donate financially and/or with goods and services. We could not continue to provide and support all of the previously mentioned events without the generosity of so many.

We hope that you will consider becoming a Booster Club supporter! To learn more, visit our website at www.onteoraboosterclub.com or email us at onteoraboosterclub@gmail.com. You can also find us on Facebook @Onteora Booster Club and Instagram @onteoraboosterclub.

ONTEORA TEACHERS RECOGNIZED

DID YOU KNOW

that Onteora High School English teacher Denise Maltese is also a published writer?

Ms. Maltese recently published an article in the anthology, *The Legacy of James Moffett: His Shaping Influence on Writing Studies, English Education, and the Teaching of English*. Her article, titled "Moffett, Yoga Philosophy and Pedagogy: Teaching for Embodied Learning,"

encapsulates Ms. Maltese's unique way of broadening her students' perspectives on what writing is and can be. Ms. Maltese is a longtime student of Moffett's writings and has been a fellow of the local Hudson Valley Writing Project since 2001.

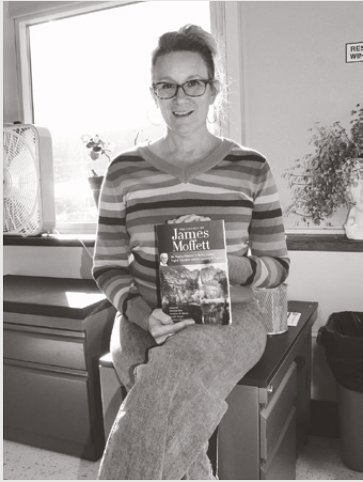
Kudos are also due to Bennett Elementary School Reading Specialists Kristina Countryman and Amanda Kovac, and Middle School Reading Specialist Julie McCarthy, who recently gave a presentation at the New York State Reading Association's annual conference in Albany, entitled "Forward Together: New Paths in Literacy Learning and Teaching."



Onteora Reading Specialists (from left to right) Julie McCarthy, Kristina Countryman, and Amanda Kovac at the New York State Reading Association's annual conference in Albany.

Ms. Kovac also received the association's 2023-2024 Literature Based MiniGrant for her extraordinary not-for-profit website, www.joycabulary.com, which offers free vocabulary lessons and tips for both educators and caregivers.

Congratulations to all of these wonderful Onteora teachers!



Onteora High School English teacher Denise Maltese shows an anthology which contains an essay she wrote.

Although their presentation, "Word Widgets: Let's Play with Phonics," was geared towards teachers of Intermediate and Middle School students, they used research and data on the science of reading to demonstrate the urgency for phonics instruction in all age groups. The teachers presented several ways for students to "play" with phonics as they strive towards comprehension and becoming lifelong readers!

RE-IMAGINING ONTEORA: Community Voices Helping to Shape the Future of an Optimized Onteora

The voices of the Onteora community are at the heart of a transformative vision for our District, and as such, each of our Community Forums have been vital in moving from vision to reality. We have had two dynamic community forums so far this school year, and will have our final gathering on February 25th. These forums have brought together parents, students, staff, and neighbors, and have nurtured a productive environment where honest and open discussions have taken place. They have sparked innovative ideas, and helped to shape and refine plans for a Capital Project, which will be presented to the public for a vote on May 20th.

At the latest forum held on January 15th, attendees reviewed the architect’s updated designs, which reflected thoughtful feedback gathered during the December 3rd session. Some of the revisions included improvements in traffic flow and parking, and improved utilization of shared campus resources.

Many resources from these meetings, such as visual distillations of the discussions, facilitator summaries, and architectural designs are available on the “Optimizing Onteora” webpage at www.onteora.k12.ny.us/optimize.

Breaking Down School Construction and Financing Options

Planning for the District’s Capital Project continues to move forward, with transparency and fiscal responsibility at its core. At the December Board meeting, Monica LaClair, Assistant Superintendent for Business, shared several key updates on the project’s financing strategy.

Highlights included:

- Potential State Aid
- Leveraging funds available in the District’s Capital Reserves
- Insights into favorable interest rates
- Projected annual budget savings
- A review of funding scenarios, which show how to minimize the tax levy increase and structure the potential borrowing to best maximize the amount of capital work that can be completed while remaining fiscally responsible

You can learn more about the funding of this project with a helpful analysis at www.shorturl.at/8uREm or watch the December 17th Board Meeting on YouTube @OnteoraCSD.

BUDGETING FOR SUCCESS: Planning for 2025-2026

Budget season is underway, and the District is committed to balancing excellence in education with fiscal responsibility. At the January 14th meeting, Assistant Superintendent for Business Monica LaClair provided an overview of the planning process, which included budget development and enrollment projections for the 2025-2026 school year.

The next stage of development was the February 4th presentation of the "rollover budget," which offers a preliminary look at the costs of maintaining current programs and services. From there, the budget will go through multiple refinements before Superintendent Victoria McLaren presents a formal recommendation to the Board on April 1st, with final adoption planned for April 22nd. Some critical information for planning the budget is still missing, including the impact of any possible changes to the State Aid formula recommended by the Rockefeller Institute’s study and Governor Hochul’s State Budget, which is supposed to be adopted by April 1st. The Governor’s preliminary state Aid projections include a slight increase in aid for Onteora, which is a much more positive place to start than her projections last year!

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It’s Not too Late to Get Involved

Please join us at the final **Community Forum on February 25th from 6-8 PM at the Middle/High School Cafeteria**. This session will be a pivotal moment to:

- Explore funding pathways for the project
- Finalize design plans with community input
- Participate in a Q&A session with district leaders

Don’t miss your chance to be part of this important conversation. To learn more and RSVP, visit shorturl.at/rasLa or scan the QR code!



Capital Project Dates to Remember

February 25: Final Community Forum (Middle/High School Cafeteria 6 PM)

March 4: Final Capital Project presentation to the Board of Education (Bennett Elementary School, 6 PM)

May 20: Community vote on the project (Bennett and Woodstock Elementary Schools, 2-9 PM)

Anticipated Project Timeline (if approved)

July 2025 – June 2026:
Design completion

July 2026 – January 2027:
SED review and approval

February/March 2027:
Bid issuance and awards

July 2027 – August 2028: Construction

September 2028:
Completion and grand opening

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Members of our community who do not have students currently enrolled—we want to keep in touch with you!



Scan the QR Code

SIGN UP TODAY!

www.onteora.k12.ny.us/maillinglist

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SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

Victoria McLaren

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Ulster BOCES Community Relations

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Board Corner

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Regular budget discussions will be part of Board meeting agendas leading up to the May 20th public vote. Visit the Budget tab on our website at www.onteora.k12.ny.us/budget to view presentations, a calendar of budget meetings, and more. And don't forget that all Board meetings are recorded and available on our YouTube channel, @OnteoraCSD.

Keep in Touch!

There are many ways to connect with us and keep up to date on what has been happening in the Onteora Central School District.

- Watch live or recorded Board of Education meetings on our YouTube channel, @OnteoraCSD.
- Email your questions or comments to us at OnteoraBOE@onteora.k12.ny.us.
- Sign up for our monthly Board Briefs, which are shared with faculty, staff, families, and those community members who have signed up. If you know community members who want to stay informed, they can sign up for Board Briefs at www.onteora.k12.ny.us/maillinglist.

You can also follow the District on social media!



Facebook
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MIDDLE SCHOOL ENJOYS ITS FIRST DANCE TOGETHER



STUDENTS AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL ENJOYED THEIR FIRST DANCE AS A GRADE 6-8 SCHOOL. The "Zombie Prom and Halloween," held in late October, brought more than 140 students together. Thanks to the Junior Honor Society and Student Government, which organized the festivities, and the Onteora Booster Club, whose members helped with snacks and decorations, a great time was had by all. Principal James DiDonna, the disc jockey for the evening, took note of the stellar behavior of the students—and said how impressed he was by how many of them actually danced! Events like these help create a strong sense of community and belonging among our students, and we would like to thank everyone who helped make the dance happen!

USEFUL
DISTRICT
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Director of Transportation
Nicole Sommer 845-657-2537

Director of Food Services
Christine Downs.... 845-657-6383 x2181

Director of Facilities
Kyle Harjes..... 845-657-6384

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Asst. Principal, Dieter Schimmelpfennig

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Principal, James DiDonna

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Principal, Gabriel Buono

WOODSTOCK ELEMENTARY
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Principal, Scott Richards