



VALLEY COLLABORATIVE

BUILDING A COMMUNITY THAT EMPOWERS CHILDREN AND ADULTS TO FIND THEIR OWN WAY

Volume 13, Issue 3 News for the extended Valley Collaborative community Spring 2025

Spring is in the Air at Valley Collaborative!



We are: Reading

■ Page 2: Students at the Elementary School have been celebrating all things reading.



We are: Adventurous

■ Page 3: The Middle School Outdoor Education Club is taking adventurous students to new heights, helping them overcome challenges and learn new skills.



We are: Going Places

■ Page 8 The Adult Programs are expanding. But as a recent audit found, the quality of our services is as high as ever.



ELEMENTARY STUDENTS (FROM LEFT) KURTIS LEDOUX, NICO MAGLIOCCHETTI, LINDSEY LAVANGA, DYLAN CARMICHAEL, ETHAN BARRY AND HUNTER HOLMES; (BACK) PRINCIPAL HEATHER MACKAY; (FRONT) DR. CHRIS SCOTT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Valley Community:

As you will read in the coming pages of this newsletter, all of us at Valley have been busy with six programmatic, financial, and governance audits this year. These audit reports document all of the exemplary work Valley staff does every day so that we can offer the highest quality programming for those we serve in the most cost effective manner.

A large contributing factor to Valley's exemplary performance is our commitment to continuous improvement. In keeping with this philosophy, Valley prioritizes high quality professional learning for all staff.

Professional Learning (PL) for the adults who work with our students and DDS clients. Allocating time and resources for PL nourishes our culture of continuous learning for all at Valley. We believe that high quality professional learning ultimately enhances student learning and helps sustain our engaging learning environments. It is an important component of our "Planning for Success" and District Improvement Plan that are promoted by the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education.

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Elementary School: Celebrating Reading and the Arrival of Spring

We kicked off spring with our annual Read Across America week. We celebrated reading all through the week of March 3rd with a reading-themed spirit week. The school participated in a book-themed door decorating contest. Throughout the week classrooms hosted guest readers including parents, the Tyngsboro Fire Department, School Resource Officer Christopher Gustafson, and Executive Director Dr. Chris Scott. The week was capped off with a book reading by Detective Bethany Bonzcar and her service dog George. She read their autobiographical children's book *Curious About George* and held

a meet-and-greet with students. The event was organized by Literacy Curriculum Lead Meghan Waters and Speech Language Pathologist Jillian Wendler.



In early spring several students scaled the icy slopes of Mt. Wachusett. Valley Collaborative Elementary School was awarded a MOOR Grant from the Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Education for winter hiking gear.

With the grant, we were able to obtain winter gloves, hats, boots, base-layers, snowshoes, and micro-spikes for hiking on ice. It was a new and exciting experience for the students. Student Brian Bolcome said it was the most challenging thing he had ever done. When he reached the summit he felt incredibly proud of himself! Student Zachary Rotberg started asking about and planning the next trip before the hike was even finished. A big thanks to teacher Matthew McCarthy, who applied for the grant and organized the trip.

Now that the snow has melted, students are getting back out on the playground daily and enjoying sunny outdoor recess once again! They are looking forward to all that spring at Valley Elementary has to offer. When asked what they are most excited for this spring, here is what they had to say!



IN EARLY SPRING, SEVERAL VALLEY ELEMENTARY STUDENTS SCALED MT. WACHUSETTS, AN ADVENTURE THEY FOUND CHALLENGING AND PERSONALLY REWARDING. AFTER MAKING THEIR WAY BACK DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, THE STUDENTS HAD ONE QUESTION: "WHEN'S OUR NEXT TRIP?"



DURING READ ACROSS AMERICA WEEK, DETECTIVE BETHANY BONZCAR AND HER SERVICE DOG GEORGE VISITED VALLEY ELEMENTARY TO READ THEIR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CHILDREN'S BOOK *CURIOUS ABOUT GEORGE*.

Douglas Boyton, 2nd grader, "Fun!"

Henry Gould, 4th grader, "Riding bikes and finally getting outside!"

Matthew Tobin, 2nd grader, "Soccer Outside!"

Kaleb Koval, 3rd grader, "Field Trips!"

Dionisio Quadros, 3rd grader, "Going outside and just feeling the wind!"

Benjamin Cross, 5th grader, "Geocaching!"

Jeremiah Alicea, 4th grader, "Football Club!" ■

Valley Middle School: Meet the Outdoor Adventurers

Middle School Aide Aidan Butze, can still remember his favorite outdoor adventure during his time as a student at Valley. For three days, he and the other members of the Outdoor Education Club, hiked the Presidential Traverse, a New Hampshire mountain range that's home to some of the state's highest peaks. "That was one of the coolest trips we did," recalls Aidan. "The whole experience of being in the Outdoor Education Club was really beneficial for me."

These days, Aidan is still involved with the club but as a Valley staff member. He and Experiential Physical Education Teacher Peter Loring plan ambitious adventures, including skiing, rock climbing and mountain hikes, aimed at getting students outside and moving. But while the trips pack a heavy emphasis on fun, there is something more serious at work here.

"For our middle school, this has been a great way for us to build a sense of community," explains

Assistant Principal Brian Mihalek. "Students are working together to achieve goals while having a great time. It's been amazing to watch it come together."

Peter came to Valley in 2018 to help coordinate the Outdoor Education program, but he quickly revealed a talent for working with kids in a range of capacities. Over the years he's taught history, math and English, and filled in wherever needed. This year, Peter has been able to return to the program that brought him to Valley in the first place.

"We've really been able to take the Outdoor Education Club to a new level this year," says Peter. "We've got a core group of students who come back each week and are eager to go on some sort of a trip. Along the way, they're developing new skills and bonding with each other and with the staff."



VALLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS LOGAN STURGIS AND COLTON KNOWLTON ON A WINTER HIKE.

Every Friday, a small group of students from the middle school has been joining Aidan, Peter and other staff members for an outdoor-based field trip. The adventures expose students to places and challenges they've never experienced before, helping them build confidence and develop a range of survival skills, from how to navigate mountain ice to selecting the correct gear to wear and foods to eat. These ambitious hikes and climbs also require students to step out of their comfort zones, while teaching them about the importance of teamwork, communication and problem solving.

"They're learning that they are capable of doing hard things and doing things they don't think they can do," says Peter. "They're breaking the mindset of, 'I can't do this.'"



AIDAN BUTZE (RIGHT) WITH STUDENTS KYLEIGH THIBEAULT, LOGAN STURGIS AND COLTON KNOWLTON.

Full STEAM Ahead at Valley Transitional High School

Spring is full STEAM ahead in the Transitional High School where students have been working on projects in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math. In Meaghan Norris' School & Vocational Training (SVT) classroom, students tested Isaac Newton's first law of motion with a classic experiment, the egg drop. Students designed and created protective structures for their eggs to see whose egg could withstand a second story drop. Some students focused on cushioning and impact, using a variety of materials such as mini marshmallows and tissues to absorb the hard landing. Other students focused on gravity by making their structures light and adding parachutes to counter the acceleration that occurs during the drop. Students followed the scientific process and documented their observations in order to determine if their hypothesis was correct. Ultimately, it was the eggs that were well cushioned in a light structure that parachuted safely to the ground below.

Just down the hall in Meghan Gervais' School and Life Skills (SLS) classroom, students explored the physics concepts of thrust, lift, and drag with a paper airplane experiment. Students were challenged to apply their knowledge of weight and gravity to construct a paper airplane that would outsoar their classmates' planes. Students quickly learned that the length of time each plane was airborne depended upon the amount of thrust during lift off. After starting out with a short but swift nose dive, Meghan provided hand-over-hand modeling to students to demonstrate a smooth take off. The angle of the planes and the amount of force varied from student to student with

some doubling their time and distance upon their second and third attempts.

In conjunction with their vocational training, students in Tina Carraba's School and Life Skills-Intensive Special Needs (SLS-INSN) classroom are learning about tools and manufacturing and the qualitative effect of choosing the proper tools for various projects, a real life lesson in cause and effect. The assignment required students to select the proper tool for each project and describe why it was used and how it would make the design better. This assignment was particularly tricky as all of the tools would work but only one tool would actually improve the overall quality.

In the School to Work (STW) classroom, teacher Lori Escolas is preparing her seniors for metamorphosis, both figuratively and literally. Students will create a reflection project of their own personal growth for this school year in tandem with a science project where they will observe the life cycle of a butterfly. In a netted enclosure in their classroom, students will have the opportunity to feed and observe caterpillars as they morph into butterflies. As they record the day to day changes in the caterpillars they will also reflect on their own changes and successes. Past projects have included time lapse videos of the metamorphosis as well as visual timelines of the



TEACHER MEAGHAN NORRIS HOLDS THE PARACHUTE OF AN EGG READY FOR THE DROP.

students' own life cycles featuring photos from birth to present day.

In celebration of Earth Day, the Student Council has challenged each class to produce a tip for reducing, reusing and recycling to share with the school. Each class is challenged to creatively post their tip on their classroom doors using only found or recycled items for materials. Each spring the Town of Billerica holds a "Clean Up Green Up Day" where volunteers come together to clean up fields, parks, and open spaces around town. Since the official day falls on a Saturday, the Student Council will participate in its own version of "Clean Up, Green Up" during the month of April by cleaning up debris around the school grounds and the Linnell Circle neighborhood. ■

Valley Collaborative Fiscal Year 2025: Six Stellar Audits

Fiscal year 2025 has been extremely busy in the business office as the Collaborative has gone through a total of six very successful audits, conducted by two state agencies, one state commission, and an independent financial audit. Below is the summary of results from this body of work.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Financial & Governance Review

Overall Rating: Exemplary

As you are aware, Valley Collaborative underwent, as one of their “beta sites”, a DESE Collaborative Financial (and Governance”) Review performed by MARCUM Accounting for DESE back in May 2024. MARCUM presented at MOEC’s general membership meeting on October 7, 2024 and Valley was the case study/exemplar. Valley received a draft report in January and we provided feedback on both the financial and governance portions of the review. Valley is still waiting to hear back from DESE with regards to the final report for the finance and governance review audit.

At this point and according to the auditors, I surmise Valley has received a 100% on the financial portion of the audit. There may be a couple of governance criteria dating back prior to 2022-2023 that will be “partially met” (but have since been addressed in the last year and a half through the quarterly school committee packets). We are still waiting to see. Furthermore, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education continues to work through some technical matters regarding

how certain DESE guidance and regulations are being interpreted by both Collaboratives across the Commonwealth and DESE with regards to the 25% Surplus Calculation. At this time, Valley has been instructed not to change how it has calculated the 25% surplus. Valley is proud to be a thought partner and the pilot site for this new financial and governance review process that all Collaboratives will undergo every six years.

Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services Targeted Review Report

Overall Rating: Exemplary/full compliance

Valley Collaborative received a finding free DDS Audit. Valley is also in full compliance with DDS’s programmatic and licensure criteria. This DDS audit is the bookend to our exemplary audit year. As Jennifer Conley-Sevier, DDS Quality Enhancement Specialist noted: “The agency met the indicators as follows:

- Licensing: 100%
- Certification: 100%

On behalf of the entire OQE team, I would like to extend our gratitude for the professionalism you and your team have displayed throughout this survey process; it was a pleasure working with everyone at Valley Collaborative.”

FY’24 Independent Audit completed by Fritz DeGuglielmo LLC

Overall Rating: Exemplary/no findings

Valley Collaborative received yet another finding free financial audit from our Independent Auditors Fritz DeGuglielmo LLC.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Mid Cycle Review - No findings/Full Approval

Overall Rating: Exemplary/no findings

- Valley underwent its Mid-Cycle Review with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education this past Fall. We are in receipt of the final report and are proud to share that Valley received no findings. In addition to a finding free MCR report, below are the various points made by the DESE Office of Approved Special Education Schools (OASES) team during our exit interview.
- Students were engaged in rigorous curriculum/programming.
- Valley’s staff was observed interacting with students in a manner that was caring and compassionate.
- Our systems throughout the Collaborative were consistent and followed with fidelity.

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VALLEY COLLABORATIVE



MASSACHUSETTS ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL COLLABORATIVES (MOEC) VISITED VALLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO LEARN ABOUT "BEST PRACTICES" AFTER IT RECEIVED AN A+ ON ITS PROGRAMMATIC DESE COORDINATED PROGRAM REVIEW. MIDDLE: DR. CHRIS SCOTT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR; ON HER RIGHT SIDE: BRYAN THOMAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ASST. PRINCIPAL/SPECIAL ED. ADMINISTRATOR AND NEXT TO HIM IS AMANDA APRILE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, STEM CURRICULUM LEAD, MATH AND CONTENT AREAS ON HER LEFT SIDE IS AMY MURPHY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ASST. PRINCIPAL/ SPECIAL ED. ADMINISTRATOR AND MEGHAN WATERS VALLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LITERACY CURRICULUM LEAD

Valley Collaborative Fiscal Year 2025: Six Stellar Audits

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- Staff were well trained including but not limited to top tier therapeutic teams, educators who deliver high quality programs consistent with the state standards, and highly trained Special Education Assistants. (Valley's successful efforts to put into place the Academy for Special Education Assistants is noteworthy.)
- DESE protocols and procedures were followed with fidelity.
- Staff were committed and devoted to the mission of Valley.
- Administrative teams had an impressively long tenure. (This is significant because we are in a field where it is typical for key positions to be vacant and/or hard to fill. Fortunately,

when people come to Valley, they fall in love with our mission and vision and stay for a very long time.)

- They wished that Valley could train other Collaboratives on how to do the exceptional work they witnessed.

Disabled Persons Protection Commission (DPPC) Review Overall Rating: Exemplary

Valley has just completed its first compliance review on September 6, 2024. This review included DDS staff hired after July 1, 2023, along with their signed DPPC Consent Form and Valley's internal policies and procedures to adhere to M.G.L. c. 19C § 15.

Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services CORI Audit

Overall Rating: Exemplary

On September 24, 2024, DDS performed a first-time CORI audit to ensure Valley Collaborative is in compliance with all procedures and protocols.

At Valley, we are always striving towards excellence. If you have any questions or suggestions, please do not hesitate to reach out. My door is always open.

My best to you,
Chris A. Scott

Valley Transitional High School: On the Air!



If it's a Monday morning then it must be time to tune into the Valley Collaborative News. That's the weekly show that a team of students in the multi-media class put together for the entire school with the aid of music teacher and tech wizard Vlad Stoicescu.

Putting each newscast together begins the week before when students settle on topics and decide who at Valley they want to interview. "We talk about the news and what's going on. Maybe a little drama, some fun stuff," explains Madison Murray, who hosts the show. The news team also does original reporting, fan-ning out around the school to talk to students, teachers and staff in each classroom.

Madison says that students are eager to share the latest news, which might include the results of a basketball game, a pingpong tournament, or a report from an outdoor adventure or fieldtrip. The news team also has plenty of questions for staff members. During one recent interview segment

they turned the cameras on social worker Brittany Hynes, asking her why she decided to become a social worker, what career she might have chosen had she not become a social worker, and how social worker has helped make her the person that she is.

When the students are ready to put the show together, they head across the street to #40 Linnell Circle, home to the broadcast studio. The final product is assembled with editing help from Vlad and another student who is passionate about video editing and animation.

The recorded footage is then assembled into a 15-20 minute weekly news bulletin that the entire school can tune into. Madison, who serves as the official face of the broadcast, says that that's the most nerve wracking part. "If I mess up then everyone in the entire school can see it."

The idea for the news show came from Vlad, who has been building Valley's multi-media program for the last several years. "This was some-

VALLEY COLLABORATIVE NEWS TEAM
(FROM LEFT): MADISON MURRAY, GUNNAR
BEAULIEU, DULCE PEGUERO.

thing that the students really wanted to do, and I'm not someone who can ever say no," says Vlad. Now that the broadcast has become a regular feature of Valley life, Vlad says that he's thrilled by the idea's success. "It's fun to watch and it keeps everyone entertained," says Vlad. "That's really cool. And it makes everyone feel included, both the viewers and the students who do it."

For Madison, the opportunity to appear on camera each week represents the realization of a dream she's had since childhood. "Ever since I was a little kid I would pretend to be a newsperson. Now every week I get to say 'Hey everybody, welcome back to the Valley Collaborative News.'" ■

Adult Services: Continuously Improving to Meet the Needs of Our Community

As the season changes and we move toward the Spring, the Valley Collaborative Adult Program continues to expand services to meet the needs of our community members. After celebrating a number of individuals moving into the next phase of life and retiring from the Valley employment program, new individuals have begun to fill the voids left by our retirees. With several additions to the program, the enrollment in the Adult Program is back over 130 individuals. As our enrollment continues to rise, it's always so important to recognize that the increasing size of the program should not come at any sort of cost in terms of the level of programming offered.

One safe guard in place to ensure Valley's Adult programming remains top tier is a program review conducted by the Office of Quality Enhancement. While Valley does not conduct

the review, we are regularly focused on continuous program improvement to ensure that we are fully prepared when it is time for the biennial program review. This review cycle, Valley was eligible to conduct a targeted review based on our last review scoring high enough within a certain range. The Valley Collaborative Adult Program administration team meets regularly to ensure the procedures and protocols in place are meeting the specific parameters dictated by the state and the Department of Developmental Services. This planning and coordination lead to the day to day operations of the program, and ultimately acts as a road map for how the Adult Program operates on a daily basis. The ultimate goal through the oversight of the Department of Developmental Services is to create meaningful programming that will help the individuals served continue their personal growth through employment and social learning opportunities.

Our most recent review took place starting on February 24th and ran through February 27th. During this time, four state assigned auditors (or reviewers) were on site at Valley Collaborative checking on our programmatic practices, environmental safety measures, and overall support offered to the individuals we serve. While any review can certainly be a stressful process, the Valley Collaborative staff and individuals did an amazing job of going about their standard programming and allowing for the auditors to view the program in its organic form. The auditors supplemented their review of files and practices with individual



(LEFT TO RIGHT): ALANA CONNELL AND KAREN DOLAN, VALLEY COLLABORATIVE DDS AND MASSABILITY SERVICES



(LEFT TO RIGHT): MIKE KOCZAN AND RENEE BOYDEN, CHELMSFORD HIGH SCHOOL.

and staff interviews and observation as they scored Valley on over 200 different indicators broken into a Certification and Licensure section.

Valley is proud to report that we received a score of 100% on Certification Indicators as well as a 100% on Licensure Indicators! While the Valley Adult Program is proud to highlight the perfect review score, we also recognize how important it is to continue our programming with a constant eye toward improvement. We will continue to adjust the current programmatic set up while developing new aspects of programming that can further provide opportunities for personal growth for the individuals we serve. ■

Meet the Middle School Outdoor Adventurers

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An appreciation for nature is also a key focus of the Outdoor Education Program. In addition to being out in the wild, students are also learning about the ecosystems they're interacting with, and becoming more aware of their impact on the world around them.

It's a mission that Aidan takes personally. His participation in outdoor adventures while a student at Valley inspired a passion for nature. In addition to mastering rock climbing he's now working on learning wilderness first aid training.

"As a kid, I loved being outside and going hiking and going skiing and going canoeing and all this stuff. And to be able to share that and for other kids to experience that, I think is really great," says Aidan.

Both Peter and Aidan have high hopes for the program's continued growth over the summer and into next year, especially as more students hear about the sorts of adventures that club members are enjoying.

"Our next goal is to expand the weekly outings beyond the middle school so that we have different groups of kids working together," says Peter. Students can also look forward to some more ambitious outings in the months ahead. "If we can think of a trip that's a good experience for the kids and beneficial to their growth, then we're going to figure out how to make it happen. ■



STUDENTS COLTON KNOWLTON AND HAYLIE HAMILTON EXPLORING

Spring is in the Air at Valley Collaborative!

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In order to not only meet the PL needs of our staff but also provide options, we have expanded our offerings throughout the year. On early release days, we have continued to provide PL for our Special Education Assistants (SEAs) through Academy modules that are taught by our very own in-house experts - our therapists and specialists.

Teachers have had the opportunity to attend a variety of sessions. Topics have included, but not limited to, how to implement the new IEP forms, best practices for teaching multilingual learners, interpreting data to improve instruction, creating SMART goals, effective co-teaching and executive functioning strategies. Health and safety offerings have included CPR/First Aid training, in school safety/intruder training and self- wellness and

mindfulness.

Beyond acquiring skills and knowledge on these topics, PL opportunities build a sense of community and collaboration among adults as they learn and grow together. Research has shown that the more professional learning educators participate in, the more likely their students are to succeed. Therefore, we are proud that we have offered more opportunities to our teachers and support staff. In order to facilitate the record keeping of our expanding program, Valley has implemented a Vector Solutions software program that helps to manage offerings and track participation. This is yet another way that Valley continues to strive to increase our effectiveness and efficiency. All of the above is further evidence that we are continuing to live our mission of building a community that empowers the individuals we serve to become self-

actualized members of society who contribute in a responsible manner. Please enjoy the updates in this Spring newsletter. If you have any questions or suggestions, please do not hesitate to reach out – my door is always open.

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**Dr. Christopher
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Superintendent, Westford Public
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Valley Collaborative partners with families, districts, and the community to provide innovative programming that empowers all students and adults to discover their diverse individual strengths, interests, and abilities. In doing so, those we serve become self-actualized members of society who contribute in a responsible manner.