



Making a Splash

■ Page 2: Valley Elementary students are developing skills and confidence in the water.



A Culture of Reading

■ Page 3: Thanks to a new book club and an extra emphasis on literacy, reading is all the rage in the Transitional Programming at Valley Middle/High School.



Giving Back

■ Page 5: The holidays are a chance for the adults served by Valley Collaborative to give back to the community.

A Positive Year, A Promising Future



VALLEY ELEMENTARY ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL BRYAN THOMAS AND FIFTH GRADER BRIAN BOLCOME BRINGING PUMPKINS AND CIDER DONUTS TO THE DISTRICT STAFF: KARI MORRIN, DIRECTOR OF HR TITLE IX AND 504 COORDINATOR; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHRIS SCOTT; AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR JOIA MERCURIO.

Hello Valley families:

It has been an honor to work with Valley's committed staff to offer high quality special education services in the most fiscally responsible manner. Our collective work and dedication to Valley's mission has resulted in positive outcomes for students in our K-12 programs as well as participants in our DDS & MRC programs. I would like to thank Valley's Board Chair, Dr. Jay Lang, and the Board of Directors for their effective oversight, governance and generous support of this most important work. Valley is proudly owned and

operated by nine member school districts. The Board of Directors and the school districts they represent are comprised of:

- **Dr. Jay Lang**, Chairman of the Board, Executive Committee Member, Superintendent - Chelmsford Public Schools
- **Dr. Kerry Clery**, Superintendent - Billerica Public Schools
- **Mr. Steven Stone**, Superintendent - Dracut Public Schools
- **Dr. Geoff Bruno**, Superintendent - Groton Dunstable Regional School District

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Elementary School: Making a Splash

Safety and inclusion are at the heart of everything we do at Valley Elementary School. School nurse Kathryn Richard and classroom teacher Becca Valcanas launched a special initiative this year to provide adaptive swim lessons for students with autism and developmental disabilities. The decision was driven by a sobering statistic: children with these diagnoses are up to 160 percent more likely to die from drowning than the general population.

Over the past 12 weeks, our students have participated in Swim Angelfish lessons, and the progress has been nothing short of amazing! Students have learned essential water safety skills, including:

- Safely entering and exiting the pool
- Floating on their backs and bellies
- Practicing different swim techniques
- Holding onto a rescue tube

Beyond safety, the water provides valuable sensory input, helping students regulate and remain calm—even after leaving the pool. Staff have noticed that swim days often lead to improved emotional regulation, with many students feeling more relaxed for the rest of the week. Here's what several staff members had to say about the swimming field trips:

"It has been amazing to see the progress these students have made week by week. Students who once feared water are now comfortable in it. Those with no safety awareness are learning to ask permission before entering. These transformations are possible thanks to the dedication of Valley staff, who join students in the water and guide them every step of the way."

— Crystal Chan, M.S.

CCC-SLP, Speech-Language Pathologist



BECCA VALCANAS' ADAPTIVE SWIM CLASS IN ACTION. EACH WEEK, STUDENTS LEARN ESSENTIAL WATER SKILLS THROUGH THE ANGEL SWIM PROGRAM.

"This has been a great experience for students and staff alike. Watching students overcome fear and hesitation to fully participate has been inspiring. One student who wouldn't step foot in the water on the first day now lifts his feet off the ground and engages in lessons with confidence!"

— Kathryn Richard, RN, BSN,
Elementary School Nurse

"My Classroom staff wanted it to highlight the students who have overcome fear and hesitation and are now fully participating in the lesson! One student for instance would not even step foot in the water the first time, and is now fully in the water, lifting his feet up off the ground, and letting staff teach him."

— Becca Valcanas, Classroom Teacher

We are proud of our students' courage and growth, and grateful to our staff for their unwavering support. These lessons are more than just swimming—they are life-saving skills and confidence-building experiences that will stay with our students for years to come. ■

The Giving Spirit

Valley Elementary's annual Thanksgiving event was another great success. Dozens of families came and shared a meal with our whole school community. Families, students, and staff all came together to talk, eat, share stories, and connect. "It's a great event that really captures the spirit of the school," says Bryan Thomas, assistant principal and special education administrator.

This year, for the first time Valley Elementary also opened a small food pantry. The idea came from the Parent Advisory Group, and it has been a great way to support our community. Staff and parents have generously contributed to keep the pantry stocked, while social workers have worked with families to identify needs and facilitate distribution. ■

In the Transitional Programming at Valley Middle/High School, Reading is all the Rage

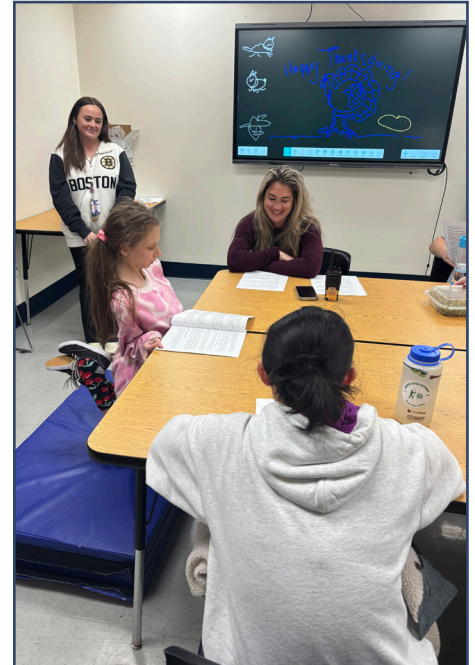
At a recent meeting of Valley's new book club, students were abuzz about reading. Started this fall, the new program at Valley's Transitional Middle and High School has serious academic goals, including building confidence in readers. For club members, the attraction of the group might be summed up with a simple motto: 'reading is fun.'

The book club was started by reading specialist Shana Cheevers. Shana, who started in that position this year after spending ten years as a classroom teacher at Valley, wanted to tap into the enthusiasm that some students have about reading and channel it throughout the school. "We have some kids who love to read, so this year I thought we could get everyone together and all share books that we like," says Shana.

The inaugural meeting of the new group featured a 'book tasting' in which each student brought a book they loved or were simply interested in reading. Members assessed the books and their genre—fiction turns out to be the most popular. Since

then, book club has been a weekly event. Around Halloween, students read a scary book—*The Nightmare Before Christmas*—taking turns reading aloud. Other recent highlights include an AI book generated by a middle school student. Whatever students choose to read, their excitement about the group is palpable, says Shana. "Students look forward to it all week, and turnout has been really good."

The new book group is just one element of a larger focus on reading at the Transitional Middle and High School this year. Notable changes this year include a new program for diagnostic assessments as well as a structured literacy program designed to help build foundational reading skills. Students are provided with reading lessons that develop literacy essentials including phonics, vocabulary, and fluency, while teachers are provided with data so that they know how each student is doing. Writing is also a major focus this year, says Shana. A new curriculum is aimed at helping students become stronger



TEACHER KALI ROWE WITH STUDENT IVY LEFEBVRE AND READING SPECIALIST SHANA CHEEVERS.

writers. "The goal is to help close some gaps and add to the students' toolbox of strategies for reading and writing."

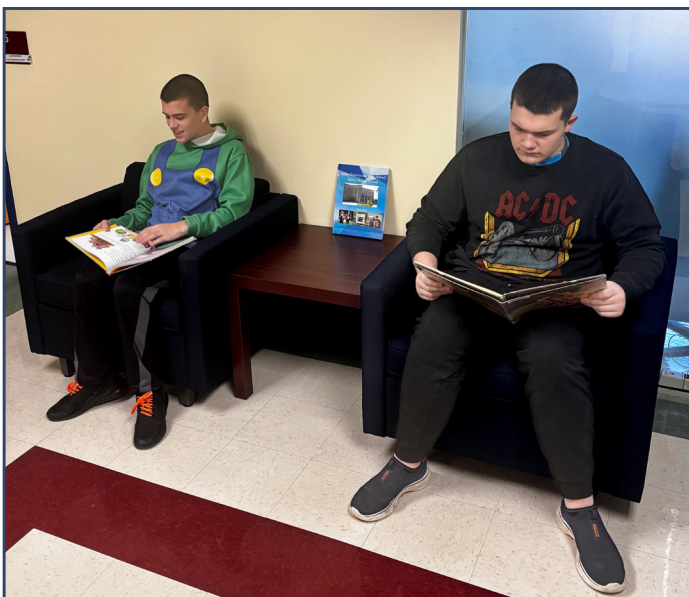
Meanwhile, students say they are counting the days till the next book club. Here's what a few of them had to say.

Jack M: "I used to love listening to audio books. When Shana hung up fliers for her book club, I couldn't say no to it. Books are a favorite thing of mine. GO READING!!!!!" Jack M.

Rose: "I enjoy book club because it makes me happy!"

Leah: "I'm looking forward to reading about Helen Keller! I like to read with everyone about my interests."

Jack G: "I enjoy our stories and how we get together and spend time reading as a group" ■



JACK MURPHY AND JACK GREGOIRE READ DURING BOOK CLUB. THE WEEKLY GROUP, STARTED BY READING SPECIALIST SHANA CHEEVERS, HAS BEEN A HIT WITH STUDENTS.

In the Alternative Programming at Valley Middle/High School, A Recipe for Success

Something especially delicious is being cooked up in Valley's kitchen these days. A sampling of some recent lunch specials include chicken marsala, creamy chorizo pasta, and handmade chicken sandwiches with a school favorite, hot honey sauce.

The new emphasis on scratch cooking comes courtesy of culinary vocational instructor Craig Ouellet, who started in the position at the start of the school year, and quickly set about overhauling the culinary program. Craig and an alternating team of three students approach each day much like a professional restaurant staff would, coming up with a dish, shopping for the necessary ingredients, then working their magic in the kitchen. These alternative lunches, offered in addition to the traditional Valley lunch, can be requested by staff. Students, who've earned points for academic progress and good behavior, can use a culinary voucher for one of the special meals.

"You learn an incredible amount working in a kitchen," says Craig. "Our students are learning how to make meals for themselves at home, how to work as a team, how to work alongside the other staff, and how to manage time. These are all skills that they'll be able to use in the future."

Like many of the students he engages with today, Craig once had little concept of homemade healthy meals. Then his mom got sick and he became her caregiver. "That's how I grew my passion for cooking," recalls Craig. As his skills improved, he realized that he could make a living doing something he enjoyed. Over

the years, Craig has cooked in all kinds of kitchens, working for restaurants and as an in-



CULINARY VOCATIONAL INSTRUCTOR CRAIG OUELLET PREPARING A LUNCH SPECIAL.

dependent contractor. When an old friend told him that Valley needed help in its kitchen, Craig leaped at the opportunity. "My good friend is the kitchen manager. I'd heard so many great things about Valley, I had to come and see for myself," says Craig.

Craig's obvious rapport with students soon led to other opportunities. When a teaching position opened up last fall, Craig was asked to step in. Spending half of the day in the kitchen, the other half in the classroom, he had a realization: he loved teaching as much as cooking.

He is currently working towards earning his vocational teaching credential.

Feedback from students and staff who've been enjoying the new menu items has been incredibly positive, says Craig. "The students are excited about trying new ideas and seeing what's possible with food creation."

"It has been fun and educational learning a variety of meals that are different from what I usually eat at home," says James Straffin. "Craig lets us experiment with our out-of-the-box ideas like the eggnog cheesecake that turned out to be topshef delicious," says Nate Goodwin.

Overall, Valley is happy to be offering this culinary experience that can jump start career paths for motivated students. It has been very rewarding for teachers and staff to see the smiles on the students' faces as they proudly serve the meals they've taken pride in creating. With a goal of creating better people with learned job skills, the Alternative High School Culinary Program is on the right track. ■



CHICKEN MARSALA, A RECENT SPECIAL PREPARED BY VALLEY'S CULINARY TEAM.

Adult Services: Positive Culture, Shining Bright

As we approach the holiday season, the adults served by Valley Collaborative enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to give back to the community that shows them so much support throughout the year. The individuals eagerly participate in both a toy and food drive as a way to provide fellow community members with much needed support during the holidays. Every year the holiday season acts as a reminder of how lucky we all are to be part of the Valley Community, and how powerful we can be when we come together for a worthy cause. We are once again partnering with the Billerica Fire Department to run our toy drive as part of the Toys for Tots charity. It is truly amazing to see the participation from our individuals and their families. Our toy donation box always fills up multiple times over, and it takes a full crew to



THE ADULT PROGRAM ONCE AGAIN PARTNERED WITH THE BILLERICA FIRE DEPARTMENT TO RUN OUR TOY DRIVE AS PART OF THE TOYS FOR TOTS CHARITY. FROM LEFT: ADAM GUILD, ERIK REGO, MATT BOOTH, MARK FITTS, JASON DOYLE, JACK SABA, MARYALICE JACKSON AND JUSTIN SUTHERLAND.

deliver all the gifts to the Fire Station. This year was no different and served as a reminder of how thoughtful the Valley community is.

Our food drive is run in accordance with the Merrimack Valley Food Bank and generates hundreds of pounds of food to be donated and dispersed to people in need. With the rising cost of groceries and general financial uncertainty, this food drive is essential for many community members in need. As always, our individuals and their families step up time and time again to ensure their community is supported. The adults collect so many donations that it requires multiple trips to the food bank to drop it all off. Our partnership with the Merrimack Valley Food Bank is an essential aspect of programming, and the positive connection is never as clear as during the holiday season.

In addition to the charitable donations collected during the holiday season, the Adult Program also hosts the individuals for a holiday brunch the Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

This is the one day of the year that we close all of our work and volunteer sites and come together to share a meal. Staff bring in homemade dishes that have meaning within their own cultures and families, and we use this opportunity to express our gratitude to one another while feasting as a giant family. Our Thanksgiving Brunch is one of the best days of the year as everyone involved cherishes the time spent, and the relationships made, through their connection to Valley.

The Valley Collaborative Adult Program operates all year round. It is so important that we take time to pause and step back to be able to recognize how important the connections we make with one another really are. The holiday season continues to provide the perfect opportunity to do just that, and the relationships we share with each other are stronger because of it. Never does the positive culture of the Valley Collaborative Adult Program shine as bright as it does during the holiday season. ■



THIS YEAR'S THANKSGIVING BRUNCH RECEIVED A BIG 'THUMBS UP' FROM ADAM AND BRIAN IN THE ADULT PROGRAM.

Celebrating the Incredible Dedication of Valley Collaborative's Staff

Valley Collaborative is fortunate to have incredibly dedicated staff who are devoted to helping those we serve realize the best possible outcomes. This season, we are pleased to recognize our outstanding staff who've been part of the Valley community for five, ten, and fifteen or more years. Thank you for all you do to make Valley such a special place.

Fifteen or more years of service

Blackburn, Karen
Bond, Joanna
Casey, Janette
Cronin, Joseph
Davidson, Kristen
Donato, Susan
Gamache, Sandra
Glow Tessier, Jennifer
Gounaris, Nikki
Mercurio, Joia
Metrakas, Chrystalia
Mihalek, Brian
Morin, Scott
Morrin, Kari
Murphy, Amy
Noska, Nicole
Rowe, Karen
Stuart, Denise
Thomas, Bryan
Tryder-Carbone, Cristen
Venskus, Joseph
Winch, Katlyn

Ten to fourteen years of service

Aprile, Amanda
Carrabba, Tina
Chamberlin, Angela
Clauson, Victoria
Collins, James
Curran, Maggie
Davis, Stephanie
Ebert, Libby
Fisette, Angela
Gentile, Matthew

Hynes, Brittany
Kenney, Brenda
Landry, Robert
LeClair, Nicholas
MacKay, Heather
Marcotte, Jessica
Nutile, Kathryn
Ouellet, David
Quirbach, Chanelle
Scott, Chris
Stoicescu, Vlad
Tanguay, Elizabeth
Waters, Meghan
Watford, Dana

Five to nine years of service

Ahern, Ashley
Ayers, Leslie
Bazzinotti, Joanna
Belouafi, Wafaa
Borsh, Harrison
Bragan, Dale
Cain, April
Campbell, April
Carlson, Melissa
Chapman, Kristen
Clegg, Richard
Cymbura, Deneen
DeMauro, Rosa
Diaz, Kathleen
Driscoll, Donna
Escolas, Lori
Fitts, Kelly
Flynn, Jacob
Frazier, Erin
Gervais, Meghan

Gioumbakis, Elias
Goulakos, Stephen
Gray, Zachary
Horn, Sokkhunna
Hynes, Scott
Illg, David
Joslin, Christine
Kim, Shawn
Koles, Nicole
Lacroix, Mackenzie
Lavoie, Brian
Loring, Peter
MacAulay, Ian
McCarthy, Matthew
McGaunn, Paul
McNulty, Pamela
Morency, Sandra
Newman, Ryan
O'Brien, Susan
Pedreira, William
Perkins, Robert
Pincott, Rebecca
Plunkett, Joshua
Ramos, Elis
Richard, Kathryn
Sicard, Patricia
Silva, Renato
Smith, Jake
Spampinato, Nicole
Squeglia, Jaclyn
Taylor, Jonathan
Tourabi, Mayra
Waldron, Mariah
Wendler, Jillian
Workman, Michael
Yutkins, Richard

A Positive Year, A Promising Future

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- **Dr. Denise Pigeon**, Executive Committee Member, Superintendent - Nashoba Valley Technical School District
- **Mr. Brad Morgan**, Superintendent - North Middlesex Regional School District
- **Ms. Brenda Theriault-Regan**, Executive Committee Member, Superintendent - Tewksbury Public Schools
- **Dr. Michael Flanagan**, Executive Committee Member, Superintendent - Tyngsborough Public Schools
- **Dr. Christopher Chew**, Superintendent - Westford Public Schools

Valley's Tuition Rates continue to be extremely competitive and the lowest in the region. The table below offers comparisons between Valley's tuition rates and the averages across the state for two fiscal years. Valley's low tuition rates are the result of over a decade and a half of financial decisions that have resulted in an extremely strong balance sheet – the healthiest of all collaboratives in the state. Valley's OPEB trust is fully funded (\$9M),

capital reserve fund is fully funded (\$1.5M), consistently invests \$1M annually in infrastructure updates, is fully staffed, 50% of its enrollment comes from non-member districts who pay a 25% premium to attend Valley's exemplary programming at a tuition rate that is still lower than most member district tuition rates at other Collaboratives (see table below). The financial stewardship on behalf of the Board of Directors and Valley administration results in Valley being able to offer tuition rates consistently below the circuit breaker threshold. Many of Valley's member districts are able to pay or receive a significant reduction in tuition rates each year because of Valley's surplus that is required to be returned to its member districts. This year the return was a total of \$1.2M, which again will offset already low tuition rates in FY26.

Valley was inundated with audits this past year. Our small but mighty team excels under pressure and tight timelines. Here's an overview:

DESE Coordinated Program Review – Mid-Cycle Review:

Valley has concluded its Mid-Cycle Review and the feedback from the DESE Office of Approved Special Education Schools (OASES) included, below.

Results: A+/Exemplary

- 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.)
- Students were engaged in rigorous curriculum/programming.
- They observed Valley's staff interacting with students in a caring and compassionate manner.
- Our systems throughout the Collaborative were consistent and followed with fidelity.
- 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.
- They wished that Valley could train other Collaboratives on how to do the exceptional work they witnessed.

DESE Collaborative Financial Review:

Valley Collaborative received the results from the DESE Collaborative Financial Review performed by MARCUM Accounting for DESE in June 2025.

Tuition Rate Comparisons

\$53,431	FY 26 Circuit Breaker Threshold
\$44,935	FY 26 Valley's Average Member District Tuition
\$57,224	FY 26 Valley's Average Non Member District Tuition
\$63,382	FY 26 Average MA Collaborative Member Tuition
\$99,067	FY 26 MAAPS (Private Schools) Average
\$49,320	FY 27 Valley's Average Member District Tuition
\$62,775	FY 27 Valley's Average Non Member District Tuition

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A Positive Year, A Promising Future

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I am pleased to report that Valley received an ‘exemplary’ score. MARCUM presented at MOEC’s general membership meeting on October 7, 2024 and Valley was the case study/exemplar.

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. Valley has been instructed not to change how it has calculated the 25% surplus. Valley was proud to be a thought partner and one of the pilot sites for this new financial/governance review process that all Collaboratives will undergo every six years.

Results: A+/Exemplary

FY’25 Independent Financial Audit: Valley’s FY’25 Independent Financial Audit, performed by Fritz DeGuglielmo, LLC, has been completed. Daniel Schaffner, CPA, and his team. Valley is proud to say that the audit was again this year finding-free and demonstrates Valley’s commitment to sound, competent, financial management/oversight. The Board of Directors and Valley’s Administration team take very seriously its responsibility to be good stewards of public funds. Valley had another financially successful year in FY’25, ending the year with \$1.2M being returned to Member School Districts. Our systems and processes have never been more effective. Daniel Schaffner, CPA reported out to the Board at the November 20, 2025 Board of Directors meeting.

Results: A+/Exemplary

DDS CORI Audit:

For the first time, on September 24, 2024 DDS performed a CORI audit to ensure Valley Collaborative was in full compliance with all procedures and protocols.

Results: A+/Exemplary

DDS DPPC Audit:

To ensure compliance with Nicky’s Law, the Disabled Persons Protection Commission (DPPC) is authorized to conduct periodic compliance reviews of DDS and agencies defined as Employers (Valley Collaborative). Valley 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.

Results: A+/Exemplary

District Improvement Planning

The Valley Collaborative district planning process continued in the 2024-25 school year, as the team completed Valley’s five-year district plan and began the process of action planning strategic initiatives they selected for implementation next year.

The Leadership Team launched its planning work in the fall with extensive community outreach, presenting the draft district plan and gathering feedback from parents, students and adults, staff, and some community partners across all schools and the adult program. Using shared materials designed to support consistency in messaging and process, team members presented the plan and posed the following questions for discussion and feedback:

- Do you think the current set of initiatives represents the work required for that objective?
- What questions, if any, do you have?
- What, if anything, do you believe is missing?

In December, the leaders who had facilitated these feedback sessions presented results to the entire Leadership Team. After discussing these community responses in depth and developing a new collaborative-wide perspective of the plan, the team then revised and finalized the plan’s strategic initiatives.

The final element of the district plan that remained for development were the outcome measures—what success will look like and how Valley will know if it has achieved the plan’s objectives. The Executive Team met in February to begin outcome development, proposing an initial set of measures for consideration by the Leadership Team in early April. At that meeting, the team reviewed and revised the proposed outcomes, completing the district plan—and also began the work of prioritizing strategic initiatives to action plan for implementation in 2025-26.

The team then identified five leaders to serve as district plan project leaders, one responsible for each of the five initiatives selected for implementation. These leaders strategically selected individuals across the collaborative for their teams, ensuring that people with the necessary expertise and a collaborative-wide perspective were at the table. The leaders participated in training to prepare them for facilitating development and oversight of action plans and facilitated the first round of action planning in May. Action plan teams will continue development of these plans in the fall. The five initiatives selected for implementation are listed on the next page.

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A Positive Year, A Promising Future

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1. Continue to develop and implement new programming to meet Individual Education Plan, Individual Support Plan, and Life Plan goals and objectives of Valley's K-12 students and adult services participants through: community life skills opportunities; expanded academic opportunities through technology; transitional opportunities; and community-based day supports activities.
2. Implement a professional learning and evaluation management system that will assist Valley in leveraging data to plan, manage, track, and evaluate employees and their training and professional learning activities.
3. Strengthen outreach and communication between staff, students/ DDS and MRC individuals, and families in order to foster a sense of belonging.
4. Redevelop Valley's informational materials to reflect the mission & vision and assist in educating community members about Valley's program offerings, through updated materials including Valley's website.
5. Work with stakeholders—including families, districts, DDS and MRC individuals, and community partners—to expand vocational placements for students in order to support their development as contributing members of their communities

Please reach out if I can ever be of assistance. We are here to serve. My door is always open.

My best to you always,



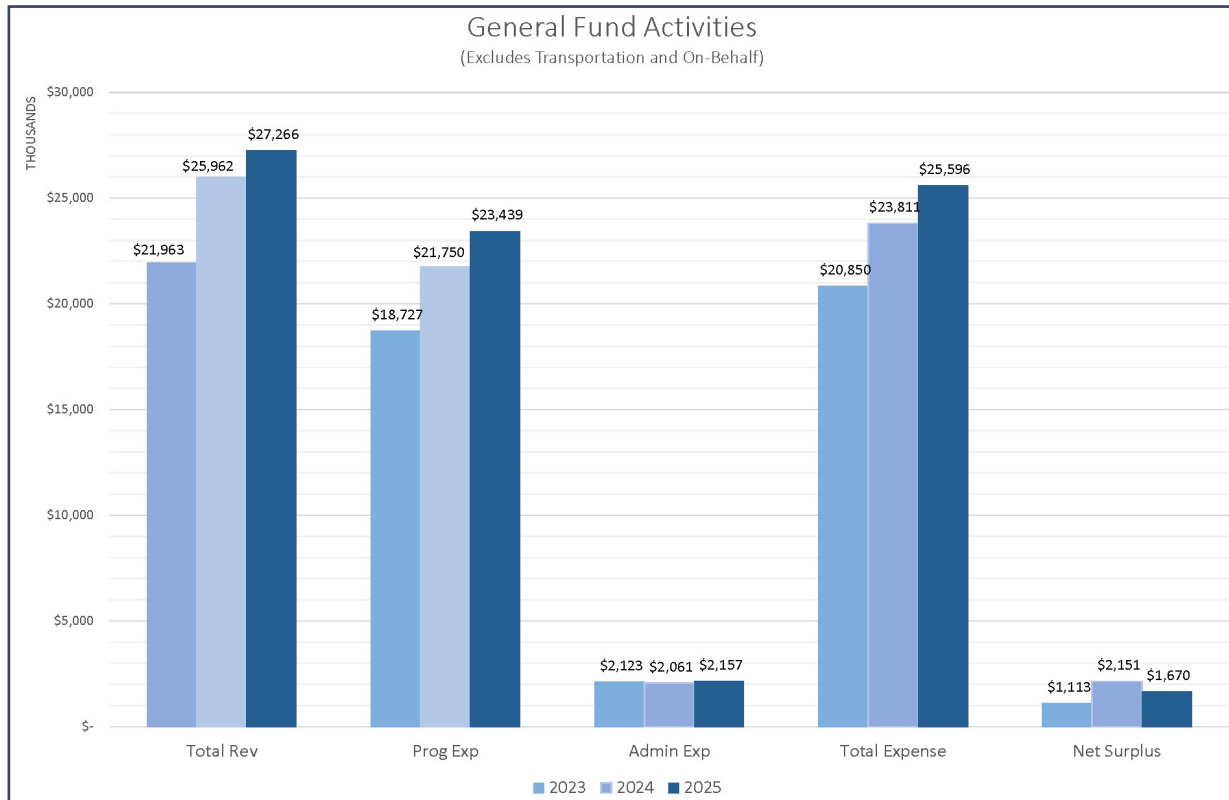
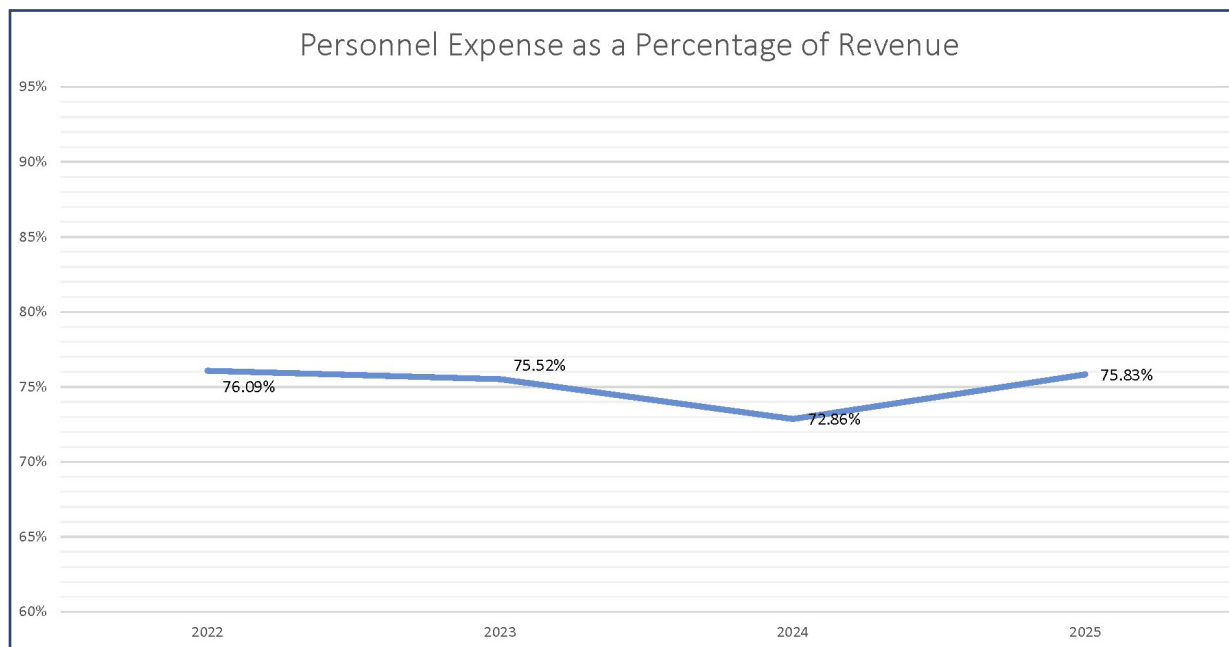
Chris A. Scott
Executive Director
Valley Collaborative

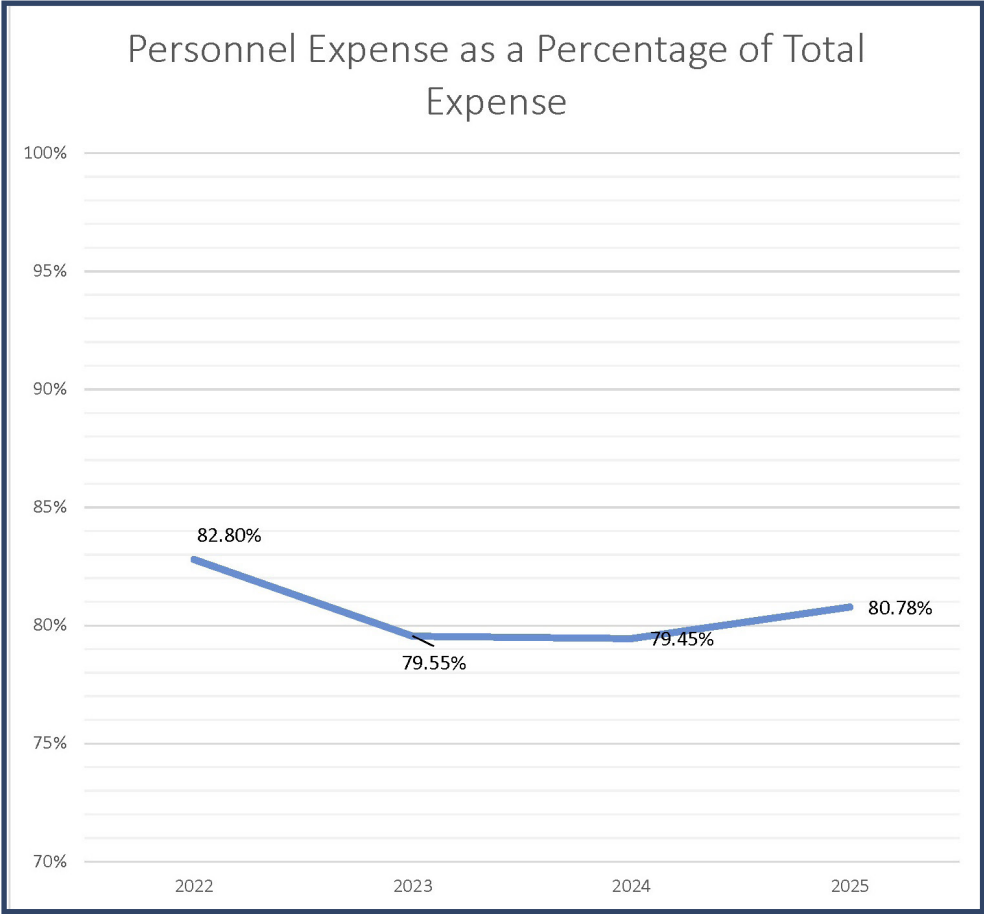
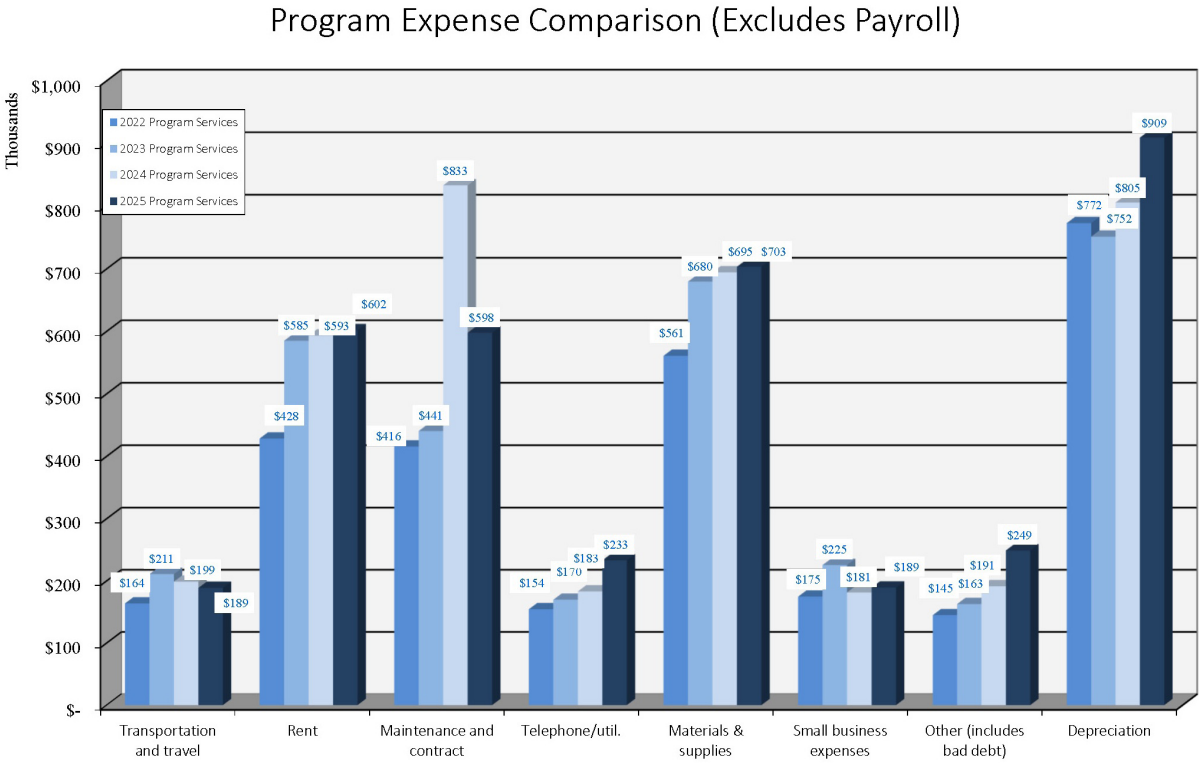
Giving Thanks at Valley Collaborative



TOP LEFT: FREDDY ABREU SHARING HIS THANKFUL TURKEY; TOP RIGHT: SIXTH GRADER EVAN CIACCIO AND FAMILY AT VALLEY ELEMENTARY'S ANNUAL THANKSGIVING GATHERING; MIDDLE LEFT: STUDENTS JOEL RATHBUN AND DJ REARDON TALK TO TEACHER JOSH PLUNKETT AFTER THE STAFF VS. STUDENTS CAPTURE THE FOOTBALL GAME; MIDDLE RIGHT: CADENCE BERTHET SHARING ON THE THANKFUL TREE; BOTTOM LEFT: TEACHER TAMARA MELNICK AND IEP COORDINATOR LISA HAYES ON THANKSGIVING; BOTTOM RIGHT: INDIVIDUALS IN VALLEY'S ADULT PROGRAMS ENJOY A THANKSGIVING BRUNCH.

An Impressive Summary of Financial Activity for the year ended June 30, 2025





Valley Collaborative Leadership Team



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Chairman of the Board,
Executive Committee
Member

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Chelmsford Public Schools



Dr. Kerry Clery

Superintendent
Billerica Public Schools



Mr. Steven Stone

Superintendent
Dracut Public Schools



Dr. Geoff Bruno

Superintendent
Groton-Dunstable
Regional School District



Dr. Denise Pigeon

Executive Committee
Member

Superintendent
Nashoba Valley
Technical School District



Mr. Brad Morgan

Superintendent
North Middlesex
Regional School District



**Ms. Brenda
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Executive Committee
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**Dr. Michael
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**Dr. Christopher
Chew**

Superintendent
Westford Public Schools