

# PMSD CONNECT POCONO

*Our Mission: To Prepare All Students for Tomorrow's Challenges and Opportunities* 2025-26: Issue 2

## America 250PA has arrived at Pocono Mountain SD

Pocono Mountain School District (PMSD) students and staff are embarking on a journey of discovery to explore and honor the historical milestones of Monroe County and its municipalities as the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 2026, commemorated through America250PA and America250PA Monroe County.

Amy Buffington, the district's Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Social Studies and Humanities, represents PMSD on the America250PA Monroe County committee. She has been collaborating with district schools and content-area teachers since last school year to inspire student research and deeper understanding of national, state, and local historical events that contributed to the nation's founding.



**Pocono Mountain School District elementary and intermediate schools and the PMSD Cyber program partnered with Pocono Township on creating Plows for Patriotism. Pictured here is the plow painted by Swiftwater Intermediate School.**

Several PMSD commemorative events have already taken place, including visits by Miss Pennsylvania to district elementary centers, where she read excerpts from "K is for Keystone" to students, and a partnership with Pocono Township on Plows for Patriotism, where students from Clear Run Elementary Center, Clear Run Intermediate School, the

PMSD Cyber Program, Swiftwater Elementary Center, Swiftwater Intermediate School, and Tobyhanna Elementary Center painted patriotic themes on snow plow blades.

Additional learning opportunities currently underway include historical milestone readings, patriotic songs performed at school band and chorus concerts, essay contests, and the

Keystone Creation projects.

The Keystone Creation projects represent a significant undertaking, as East High School art students first research a few select local townships and then design and paint Keystone signs featuring items, animals, and/or plants that represent the municipalities within the district. The Keystones will be on display within the municipalities.

Upcoming events will include America250 add your voice entries, local community contest entries commemorating the anniversary, multicultural night featuring artwork and songs highlighting America250PA, the PA250 Mobile Unit, and many more activities as the district continues its commemorative journey toward the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

## District's science education undergoes major transformation

**By Amy Catalano,**

*Director of Curriculum, Instruction for Mathematics & Science*

**Heather Auliso,**

*Elementary Science Department Head & Tobyhanna Elementary Center 5th Grade Teacher*

**Corinne Long,**

*Secondary Science Department Head & West High School Science Teacher*

Science education across Pennsylvania is undergoing a major transformation, and Pocono Mountain School District (PMSD) is proud to be part of this exciting change. With the statewide adoption of the Science, Technology & Engineering, Environmental Literacy, and Sustainability (STEELS) Standards, students from kindergarten through high school are engaging with science in deeper, more meaningful ways than ever before in science classes and across curricular areas.

STEELS standards replace Pennsylvania's former 2002 science benchmarks and introduce a modern, research-based framework that emphasizes problem-solving, inquiry, and real-

world application. Rather than memorizing facts, students are now encouraged to think, question, and participate actively in scientific discovery. These skills are essential for thriving in an increasingly complex world.

Over the past two years, PMSD has been steadily integrating the STEELS Standards into science classrooms districtwide. The transition marks a major shift as students are no longer just learning about science, they are figuring out science!

At the heart of STEELS is three-dimensional learning, which weaves together:

- Disciplinary Core Ideas (DCIs): Key scientific concepts
- Science & Engineering Practices (SEPs): Hands-on work that mirrors the tasks of scientists and engineers
- Crosscutting Concepts (CCCs): Ideas that connect scientific principles across different fields and content areas

Classrooms emphasize hands-on exploration, modeling, scientific discourse, and problem-solving. To support this shift, PMSD teachers have participated in professional development with the Da Vinci Science Center, IU 20, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Teachers



**Students in Ms. Heather Auliso's science class at Tobyhanna Elementary Center create a water conservation model using the Engineering Design Process.**

From the Superintendent's Desk:

# 2026 brings changes to attendance & parent communication

Dear Families and Community Members,

January 20th marked the halfway point of the 2025-2026 school year. With the start of the second half of our school year, we have some new state legislation going into effect that impacts our schools.

**Student Attendance**

Pennsylvania adopted Act 47 of 2025 in November, which emphasizes the importance of student attendance at school. The act includes more accountability measures on how attendance is tracked by schools and how unexcused absences are communicated to parents.

After the third unexcused absence, parents or guardians will receive a letter from the district informing them that their child is by law considered truant.

If the student receives any additional unexcused absences at this point, a Student Attendance Improvement Conference will be held with the parents. During this meeting, a Student Attendance Improvement Plan will be developed to address any issues contributing to the child's truancy and improve future attendance.

A new attendance requirement in Act 47 went into effect on December 12, 2025, that prevents students who are habitually truant from transferring to a cyber charter school during the school year.

Habitually truant is defined in the PA School Code as a student who has incurred six or more unexcused absences. This means students with less than six unexcused absences are not prohibited from transferring to a cyber charter school. However, students with six or more absences are now prohibited from transferring to a cyber charter school unless a judge determines it is in the best interest of the student to attend a cyber charter school.

While this new rule does not apply to the PMSD Cyber Program, a district team will meet to review the academic and attendance records of students enrolling in the district's in-house cyber program.

I can't stress enough the importance of good attendance at school. Good attendance is key to student learning and success at school. "Missing school means missing valuable instructional time and poses serious implications for students' overall academic success and wellbeing. Research suggests that



*Dr. Robison congratulates the Pocono Mountain East High School Show Choir on their amazing performance at the PSBA Leadership Conference in October 2025 at Kalahari Resorts and Conventions in the Poconos. The Show Choir was selected to perform at the Student Showcase and School Leaders Dinner. School leaders from across Pennsylvania attended the conference.*

children who are chronically absent for multiple years between preschool and second grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade," according to the Department of Education.

The correlation between attendance and student proficiency in reading, English, Math and Science is something that we have seen firsthand and matches what researchers have been telling us for years. Chronic absenteeism – defined as missing 10% or more of a school year – can lead to learning gaps, lower grades, increased anxiety, and ultimately a higher risk of students falling behind or even dropping out of school.

**School Safety Incidents**

Another change for the second half of the school year is in how schools communicate with parents regarding school safety-related matters. Act 44 went into effect on January 5, and requires schools to notify parents and employees within 24 hours of an incident at their school, on school grounds, or on district transportation involving certain types of weapons, even if the school's threat assessment determined there was no real threat to the school, other students or staff. For our district, since we have schools that share campuses, we would notify all parents, guardians and employees assigned to any of the schools located on the shared campus if there is a weapons incident at one of the schools on that campus.

For the purposes of Act 44, weapons are described as including "any knife, cutting instrument, cutting tool, nun-chuck stick, firearm, shotgun,

rifle, and any other tool, instrument or implement capable of inflicting serious bodily harm," according to the new PA Basic Education Circular (BEC) provided to school districts on January 7, 2026, outlining the requirements of this new law.

With this new law now in effect, I ask parents to please talk to their

children about the seriousness and danger of bringing a weapon on a school bus, to school or to a school-sponsored event, even if it is done unintentionally. As a reminder, look alike and toy weapons are also not allowed on school buses or at school. I also ask parents to please make sure any firearms in the home are securely stored at all times to prevent children from accessing them. Please verify frequently that firearms are secure, especially if your child is feeling stressed, anxious, angry, bullied, suicidal or depressed.

Act 44 reinforces what we have always try to do in an emergency in the district, which is communicate with parents as quickly as possible, after we have taken the necessary steps to immediately ensure the life and safety of our students and employees.

As we receive more clarification on the various provisions of the new Act 47 and Act 44 laws, we will keep parents informed of any anticipated impact to them and their children.

Warmest regards,

**Dr. Elizabeth Robison**  
*Superintendent of Schools*



**Recognizing an officer's life-saving actions**

Dr. Robison recognized Pocono Mountain Regional Police Department Officer Daniel Campagna at the School Board Meeting on January 14, 2026.

In November, when Officer Campagna was filling in as the School Resource Officer at Clear Run Intermediate School, he was notified that a student was choking. Officer Campagna ran to assist the nurse with his department issued LifeVac device in hand. He placed the student on his back and used the LifeVac device to clear the child's airway, allowing him to breathe again. On behalf of the entire Pocono Mountain School District Administration and School Board, Dr. Robison thanked Officer Campagna for his quick thinking and steady actions.

# PMSD welcomes new School Board director, thanks outgoing director

The November 2025 primary election brought a change to the Pocono Mountain School District Board of Education.

The district welcomed Elyse Nehring, who was sworn in as a new Region 2 School Board Director on December 3, 2025, and said goodbye and thank you to Albert “Bert” Rinehimer, who represented Region 2 for a four-year term.

The following School Board Directors were reelected to serve another four-year term:

Region 1 – Christina Grape-Garvey and Nathan Strunk (Board Vice-President)

Region 2 – Marion Pyzik (Board President)

Region 3 – Anna Lopez

Stephen Watto, Region 1; Patricia Rinehimer, Region 2; and Ronnie Byrd and Michael Stern, Region 3, continue to serve four-year terms, which will expire in 2027.

“I want to welcome Elyse Nehring to the School Board,” said Dr. Elizabeth Robison, Superintendent of Schools. “We look forward to your insight and are excited to work with you to improve student outcomes. I also want to congratulate our returning School Board Directors. On behalf of our administrative team and the entire district, I want to thank Bert Rinehimer for his four years of service on the Pocono Mountain Board of Education. Mr. Rinehimer worked tirelessly on behalf of the students, employees and taxpayers of the district. He brought his passion for sports to the board and continues to strongly support athletic opportunities for our students.”

Upcoming School Board Meetings

- February 18, 2026
- March 4, 2026
- March 11, 2026
- April 1, 2026
- April 15, 2026
- May 6, 2026
- May 20, 2026
- June 3, 2026
- June 17, 2026
- July 15, 2026
- August 12, 2026



**Region 1  
Christina  
Grape-Garvey**



**Region 1  
Nathan Strunk  
Vice President**



**Region 1  
Stephen  
Watto**



**Region 2  
Elyse  
Nehring**



**Region 2  
Marion Pyzik  
President**



**Region 2  
Patricia (Patty)  
Rinehimer**



**Region 3  
Ronnie  
Byrd**



**Region 3  
Anna  
Lopez**



**Region 3  
Michael  
Stern**

## Let's keep spectator behavior positive

As superintendent, I am incredibly proud of our student-athletes and the dedication they show every day—in practice, in competition, and in the classroom. School sporting events are an extension of our educational mission. They are opportunities for students to learn teamwork, resilience, and sportsmanship, and they are opportunities for our community to come together in support of that growth. The way we, as adults and spectators, behave at these events sends a powerful message to our students about our values.

Positive spectator behavior matters. Our words, actions, and reactions in the stands model what respect looks like under pressure. Cheering enthusiastically for great effort, applauding good sportsmanship, and showing courtesy toward officials and opposing teams all reinforce the lessons we want our students to learn. Conversely, negative comments, inappropriate conduct, or unsportsmanlike behavior can undermine the very character traits we strive to instill. Every game is a learning environment, not just for players, but for everyone present.

It is also essential that we remember to support all of our student-athletes, regardless of the outcome of a game or their role on the team. Not every student will score the winning point or get significant playing time, but every student contributes through effort, commitment, and teamwork. Our encouragement should recognize hard work, improvement, and perseverance, not just wins and losses. When students feel supported, they are more likely to grow in confidence and continue participating in activities that enrich their school experience.

Our student-athletes represent our schools and our community. How they compete is important, but how they are supported is equally critical. By creating a positive, welcoming atmosphere at athletic events, we help ensure that students feel safe, valued, and proud to represent their school. We also show visiting teams and families that our community is one built on respect, integrity, and kindness.

**Dr. Elizabeth Robison  
Superintendent of Schools**



**Monroe County Court of Common Pleas President Judge Jonathan Mark swears in Pocono Mountain School Board Directors (left to right) Christina Grape-Garvey (Region 1), Anna Lopez (Region 3), Elyse Nehring (Region 2), Marion Pyzik (Region 2), and Nathan Strunk (Region 1) at the School Board meeting on December 3, 2025. The School Board Directors were elected in November to serve 4-year terms on the Pocono Mountain Board of Education.**

## America 250PA Keystone Creations



Pocono Mountain East High School art students and Jody Singer (right), a prominent local artist and arts advocate who designed the Monroe County Keystone for America 250PA, work together on the Keystone Creation project to design and paint unique Keystone signs for each municipality in the district.



The Pocono Mountain School District Board of Education and Administration dedicated the new Pocono Mountain West Wellness Building on August 20, 2025. The new West Wellness facility offers a concession area for the multi-purpose Panther Stadium, a dedicated space for athletic trainers to provide support and services for student athletes and a multi-purpose gym, which will expand the athletic and intramural opportunities offered to West students.

## PMSD phases in new STEELS standards for science

(Continued from Page 1)

attend conferences and participate in collaborative professional learning communities to further their knowledge, understanding and teaching strategies with the STEELS standards.

For our youngest learners at the elementary and intermediate schools, the STEELS Standards are supported through the McGraw Hill Inspire Science program. The Inspire Science program was piloted 2 years ago by the grades K-5 elementary and intermediate curriculum teams. It was implemented during the 2024-2025 school year in grades K-5 after teachers collaborated with pilot teachers and received professional development on the new program.

The newly developed science curriculum for grades K-5 is built around a 5-E model where students Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate science. The program encourages curiosity and active discovery.

Lessons begin with captivating, phenomenon-based video clips that spark students' interest. Children then dive into investigations, simulations, and hands-on activities that allow them to build their own understanding before turning to reading, discussion, and digital resources like Actively Learn. Students explore physical science, life science, earth and space science, and technology and engineering concepts with increasing depth, building a strong foundation for later grades.

At the Intermediate and Junior High School levels, STEELS implementation began by reviewing programs aligned to the new standards. During the 2024-2025 school year, sixth-grade and junior high science teachers piloted materials, reviewed resources, and ultimately selected the McGraw Hill Inspire Science series for grades 6-8. This choice provides continuity with the K-5 program and ensures a seamless transition from elementary to secondary science instruction.

At the high school level, STEELS-aligned work has focused on Environmental Science and Biology,



Pocono Mountain hosts 2025 Night of Stem sponsored by the West and East High School Science Honor Societies, the West and East High School Math Honor Societies and the Math and Science Department. Pictured here are students conducting and making Elephant's Toothpaste, which is a decomposition of hydrogen peroxide.

and TRAINED for the Future have been added to the PMSD Program of Studies for high school students. TRAINED for the Future is a cross-curricular elective for Business, Math and Science. The course integrates Technology, Robotics, AI, Information Technology, Networking, Engineering, and Drones.

with ongoing efforts to align Chemistry, Physics, and Earth Science throughout the upcoming school years. In STEELS classrooms, each unit begins with a real-world scientific phenomenon. Students then engage in the practices of scientists and engineers modeling concepts, testing ideas, analyzing data, and participating in meaningful scientific discussions.

Teachers across elementary and intermediate, junior high, and high school levels also work collaboratively to align content, vocabulary, and instructional practices so that student learning builds intentionally from grade to grade across science courses.

To further support STEELS implementation and broaden student access to STEM pathways, the district has added two new elective courses for high school students. AP Environmental Science

and TRAINED for the Future have been added to the PMSD Program of Studies for high school students. TRAINED for the Future is a cross-curricular elective for Business, Math and Science. The course integrates Technology, Robotics, AI, Information Technology, Networking, Engineering, and Drones.

The TRAINED for the Future course blends business, math, and science, reflecting the STEELS focus on interdisciplinary learning and preparing students for emerging fields.

STEELS implementation aligns naturally with PMSD's expanding STEM initiatives. Students participate in cross-curricular activities, clubs, and competitions that blend science, technology, engineering and mathematics with the other core content and elective classes offered at PMSD. The district and buildings at PMSD host an annual District Night of STEM, along with additional building-level family STEM night experiences throughout the year. These experiences offer students multiple avenues to deepen their skills and explore their interests.

As PMSD continues its multi-year rollout of the STEELS Standards, the district remains committed to preparing students for success in a rapidly evolving world. With updated curricula, new learning materials, ongoing staff development, and expanded STEM opportunities, Pocono Mountain students are gaining the knowledge, curiosity, and confidence they need to become the next generation of thinkers, innovators, and problem-solvers.

**Mark Your Calendar**  
**PMSD Night of Stem**  
**April 13, 2026**  
**5 to 8 p.m.**  
**West High School**  
**Free & Open to the Public/**  
**Students in Grades K to 12**

## Empowering Every Reader: Pocono Mountain leads the way in PA's literacy initiative

By Dr. Bethann McCain  
Director of English Language Arts and Reading

Pennsylvania is entering a transformative era for education with the passage of Act 47. As a cornerstone of the 2025-26 state budget, this legislation marks a historic commitment to ensuring every child in the Commonwealth becomes a proficient, confident reader.

### A Research-Backed Foundation for Success

Act 47 works in harmony with Act 135 to bring the Science of Reading (SoR) to the forefront of Pennsylvania schools, leveraging a vast body of research spanning neuroscience, linguistics, and cognitive science. The findings are clear: for students to succeed, they need intentional instruction in foundational skills like phonemic awareness and phonics, paired with rich vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

To ensure these high standards are met, the state is requiring the following:

- **Universal Screening:** All students in grades K-3 will be screened for reading competency three times a year.



- **Evidence-Based Curricula:** Schools will utilize state-approved materials specifically designed to align with SoR principles.
- **Professional Development:** Continuous training for educators to master the nuances of Structured Literacy.

### Leading the Charge: Pocono Mountain School District

While these mandates set a new statewide standard, Pocono Mountain School District (PMSD) is proud to be ahead of the curve. Recognizing the importance of these shifts early on, we have already integrated Science of Reading programs across Kindergarten through 6th grade.

Our students are already benefiting from world-class, research-aligned tools:

- **Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA):**

Building deep knowledge and literacy skills in grades K-5.

- **Amplify ELA:** Challenging and engaging our 6th-grade students with high-quality texts.
- **Boost Reading:** Providing personalized, technology-based support for K-6.
- **Targeted Interventions:** For students needing additional support PMSD specialists utilize mClass, Wilson, and the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) to provide extra support where it's needed most.

### Investing in Our Educators

At PMSD, we know that the best tools are most effective in the hands of well-trained experts. That is why all K-12 teachers have received professional development on the tenets of SoR. For our K-6 teachers, this learning is ongoing, with specialized training sessions held multiple times a year to refine their instructional techniques.

### Looking Ahead

As we continue to grow and adapt to the latest research in student development, our mission remains the same: to empower every student with the gift of literacy. Through the support of Act 47 and our district's proactive initiatives, the future of reading in Pocono Mountain is brighter than ever.

## Tobyhanna Elementary Center: A model of excellence, community & heart

By Dr. John Kevra, Principal  
& Ms. Jessica Grebb,  
Assistant Principal  
Tobyhanna Elementary Center

Tobyhanna Elementary Center stands as a shining example of what an exceptional school community can be.

More than just a place of learning, it is a vibrant, supportive environment where students grow academically, socially, and creatively—with a staff dedicated to making each child feel seen, valued, capable of greatness, and prepared for future challenges.

### A Commitment to Every Student

What sets TEC apart is its unwavering commitment to meeting the needs of every student as an individual and not just part of a group.

Teachers and staff go above and beyond to tailor learning experiences to different learning styles, ensuring that lessons are engaging, accessible, and meaningful. Furthermore, the lessons are designed to be relevant and rigorous. Whether a student excels in reading, loves hands-on science, or thrives through art and creativity, the school provides opportunities for every child to shine. These opportunities are reflected in areas such as our school play, new reading program (Amplify), instrumental band lessons, and numerous academic support services.

### Innovative Learning in a Supportive Space

The classrooms at TEC are more than four walls—they're imaginative learning hubs. Educators embrace innovative teaching methods, integrate technology thoughtfully, and encourage critical thinking from the earliest grades. Students are not only learning facts; they're developing curiosity, problem-solving skills, and a lifelong love of learning. As every parent knows Chromebooks and iPads have become an integral part of the school environment. However, they are not a replacement for the connections they feel when interacting with teachers, peers, and school counselors.

### A Culture Built on Respect and Belonging

One of the school's greatest strengths is its strong sense of community. From the moment you walk through the doors, you'll find a warm, inclusive atmosphere rooted in respect and kindness. The staff takes pride in building positive relationships with students, fostering a sense of belonging that helps young learners feel confident and supported.

Family involvement is also a cornerstone of the school's culture. Through family nights, community events, and open communication, parents and caregivers are invited to be active partners in their children's



**Tobyhanna Elementary Center (TEC) third grade students from Ms. Fiorani's class work on Lego projects at Clymer Library. TEC students visit the library frequently. Clymer Library offers many programs throughout the year for young children and TEC students.**

education.

### Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom

At TEC, our creative and stimulating environment extends beyond the traditional classroom setting. We continue to offer enriching extracurricular activities such as Girls on the Run, Book Club, Future Teachers of America, and Drama Club. These activities are designed to enhance the learning environment, build self-esteem, and inspire non-participants to become

part of an activity they connect with. Each program provides students with opportunities to explore new interests, develop leadership skills, and discover their unique strengths.

### The Essential Role of Parents

The most influential part of any child's elementary education is the parents. Sending your child to school ready to learn helps them become the best student they can be. Many parents ask what they can do in their supportive—but still critical—role,

See TEC...Page 6



*PM West Junior High School 7th grade students (left to right) Allison Gutierrez and Amani Heard were selected by Dialed Action Sports to answer questions about preventing bullying during their anti-bullying BMX assembly. Allison and Amani received autographed posters for answering all of the questions correctly.*

### **BMX combines excitement with anti-bullying**

**By Dr. Ann Marie Vaughn,  
Principal  
PM West Junior High School**

On Friday, October 31, West Junior High School students and staff had the chance to take part in a Dialed Action Sports BMX Assembly. The Dialed Action Sports BMX Anti-Bullying Assembly is a unique and captivating event that brings excitement and important lessons to schools. Professional BMX riders showcase incredible stunts and tricks that instantly grab students' attention. The high-energy performances create an electric atmosphere, making it easy for the audience to stay engaged throughout the assembly.

Beyond the thrilling BMX demonstrations, the riders share powerful personal stories about bullying and its impact. They talk openly about the importance of kindness, respect, and standing up for others. They reminded students that when it comes to bullying situations they should - Recognize, Refuse, React. By connecting with students through their experiences, the riders inspire them to think about how their



*A Dialed Action Sports BMX athlete does a stunt during their anti-bullying assembly.*

actions affect those around them and encourage a culture of empathy and inclusion.

This assembly leaves a lasting impression, blending sports entertainment with a vital message. Students walk away motivated to create a positive, bully-free environment in their schools. The Dialed Action Sports BMX Anti-Bullying Assembly proves that thrilling performances and meaningful lessons can come together to make a real difference in the fight against bullying.



*TEC students and staff enjoy the activities available at the school's fall festival.*

### **TEC enriches student learning experience**

(Continued from Page 5)

and the answers are wonderfully simple.

Ensuring your child gets a good night's sleep every school night establishes a strong foundation for success. A sensible after-school routine should include consistent times for homework, bedtime, and waking up each morning. Time-saving habits—such as packing backpacks the night before and placing them by the door, or laying out clothes “from head to toe” in advance—help reduce morning stress. Involving children in these routines teaches them organizational and time-management skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Parents should also remember that breakfast and lunch is free for all students everyday this school year. Knowing your child will receive a nutritious morning and mid-day meal is also a timesaver as you do not need to prepare breakfast or pack lunch unless you chose to.

Teachers and staff at TEC also emphasize the importance of ongoing communication between parents and TEC. Staying connected helps prevent small concerns from becoming larger issues. Consequently, please read your emails and ClassDojo messages from the school, and respond in a timely manner with any questions or comments you may have. Working together ensures that every child receives the support they need to thrive.

#### **Dedicated Staff Who Make the Difference**

Behind every great school is



*The TEC Parent-Teacher Organization supports the school and students, offering wonderful activities for students and families throughout the school year*

an incredible team, and TEC is no exception. Teachers, aides, counselors, and administrators work tirelessly to create a safe and enriching environment. Their passion for education and genuine care for students radiates in everything they do—from personalized instruction to the everyday encouragements that brighten a child's day.

#### **Building Foundations for the Future**

The impact of TEC reaches far beyond the elementary years. Students leave with strong academic foundations, confidence in their abilities, and the character values needed to succeed in the next stages of their education and beyond.

#### **A True Community Gem**

TEC isn't just fantastic—it's a model of what an elementary school should be: nurturing, inspiring, and deeply committed to every student who walks through its doors. Its success reflects the dedication of its staff, the support of its families, and the joyful spirit of its students.

# SEC 3rd graders perform at holiday Tree Lighting Ceremony

By Dr. Krislin Ofalt, Principal  
& Dr. Karen Doughton, Principal  
*Swiftwater Elementary Center*

Swiftwater Elementary Center's (SEC) third grade students and staff helped usher in the magic of the holiday season on November 21, 2025, at the Pocono Premium Outlets in Tannersville, PA. The evening marked the very first Annual Tree Lighting Ceremony, a joyful celebration made possible through the collaboration of SEC music teachers Ms. Bethany Pisanchyn and Mrs. Jennifer Rice, Mrs. Donna Denninger (SEC Administrative Assistant), and the Pocono Premium Outlets Public Relations team.

This special partnership took root during the summer of 2025, when the Outlets' PR team reached out to SEC with a dream: to create a cozy "little library" and reading nook at the heart of the outlet center. Under the leadership of Mrs. Donna Denninger, that idea blossomed into an ongoing partnership filled with purposeful and meaningful projects.

The partnership's first milestone, the PMSD "little library" ribbon-cutting ceremony on September 5, 2025 set the stage for what's to come. Attendees included members of the Pocono Premium Outlets PR team, Dr. Elizabeth Robison (PMSD Superintendent), Dr. Catherine Sweeney (Assistant Superintendent), Dr. Karen Doughton and Dr. Krislin Ofalt (SEC Principals), and Mrs. Denninger. A gleaming gold plaque dedicates the little library to the Pocono Mountain School District, inviting children to borrow and enjoy books each time they visit the outlets.

As the holidays approached, excitement grew. The Outlets' PR team extended a heartfelt invitation for SEC to help bring their inaugural tree lighting celebration to life. Ms. Pisanchyn and Mrs. Rice



*The Swiftwater Elementary Center Grade 3 Choral Ensemble directed by Mrs. Rice and Ms. Pisanchyn perform holiday songs at the Annual Tree Lighting Ceremony at Pocono Premium Outlets in Tannersville.*



*Ms. Bethany Pisanchyn, Mrs. Donna Denninger and Mrs. Jennifer Rice coordinate SEC events to increase community involvement and support of the school and its students.*

eagerly gathered a talented ensemble of third grade students who rehearsed weekly, preparing festive songs to share with the community.

The holiday celebration was packed with wonder from a Pocono Fire Department truck delivering Santa Claus himself, to a cheerful visit from Elvis



*(Left to right) Drs. Krislin Ofalt and Karen Doughton, SEC Principals; Dr. Cathy Sweeney, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction; and Dr. Elizabeth Robison, Superintendent of Schools, help dedicate the new PMSD Little Library at Pocono Premium Outlet Stores.*

the Elf, to a lively finale featuring performers from the Shawnee Playhouse.

Our third-grade choral ensemble shined brilliantly, filling the courtyard with uplifting holiday melodies that delighted the large crowd. SEC families, students, and staff gathered together, cheering joyfully as everyone counted down to the moment the magnificent holiday tree burst into light.

The night sparkled with music, laughter, and community pride.

This heartwarming event would not have been possible without the dedication of our amazing third grade students and their families, the guidance of Ms. Pisanchyn, Mrs. Rice, and Mrs. Denninger, and the enthusiastic support of the Pocono Premium Outlets team. Together, they created a celebration that will continue to grow brighter each year.

## "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" showcases East Jr High's talents

By Jamie Snyder,  
Assistant Principal  
*PM East Junior High School*

East Junior High School (EJHS) recently hosted a successful drama production of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, presented by the EJHS Drama Club under the direction of Jacqueline Albrecht. The production brought the classic story to life for families and community members, showcasing themes of courage, loyalty, and the power of good over evil. Students demonstrated tremendous commitment and creativity both on stage and behind the scenes, highlighting the strength of EJHS's performing arts program.

The cast included Alyssa Lantigua (Professor), Ava Law (Miss Tumnus), Annalise Steinmetz (White Witch), Molly Smith (Paula), Harmony Carroll (Witch's Guard), Renesmee Cruz (Susan), Uriah, Gill (Fenris Ulf/Wolf), Lilian Philip (Mrs. Beaver), Savannah VanAuken (Lucy), Zola Marshall (Aslan), Abby Rivera (Mary Christmas), Nickolas Wilson (Mr. Beaver), Jonathan Garcia (Edmund), and Jeanema Antenor (Mrs. MacReady). Students portraying members of the Army included



*Congratulations to the cast of the East Junior High School's drama production of "The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe" on an excellent performance.*

Emmalyn Frias, Samantha VanBuskirk, Malica Mujovic, Nahiomy Burt, Alice Eby, and Adelyn Hessek. Penelope Hecht served as Stage Manager, while Hunter Hopson (Artist), Danny Remel, Isabella Dias-Lewicki, Imani Francis, Neylan Cox, Anaia Washington, and Melody Camacho supported

the production as Stage Crew.

The performances were well attended and reflected months of preparation, teamwork, and dedication. EJHS is proud of the students and staff who worked together to make this production a meaningful and memorable experience for our school community.



The Panther Pounce fundraiser at CREC in October was an energetic celebration of caring and community support. The school raised \$2,458.67 for the United Way.

## CREC students jump into giving with Panther Pounce success

The CREC community has once again shown what can happen when teamwork, generosity, and school spirit come together. The Panther Pounce fundraiser at CREC in October was an energetic celebration of caring and community support.

Students from every grade level took part in the event - running, jumping, and dancing with our panther mascot. There was a goal set to raise \$1,000 for the United Way but the enthusiasm of the students and families far exceeded expectations. By the end of the event, the total reached an impressive \$2,206.87.

Teachers then joined in the effort by participating in a dress down day, adding another \$251.80 to the total. Together, the school raised a remarkable \$2,458.67 for the United Way.

Co-principals Dr. Loverdi and Mrs. Donohue shared their appreciation for everyone involved, noting how proud they were of the students' enthusiasm and commitment to helping others. Prizes and incentives organized for students helped build excitement and inspired friendly competition, but the true reward was the sense of pride that came from making a difference.



Coolbaugh Township Magistrate, Judge Travagline, read "The Worn-Out Flag" to Mrs. Cassidy's second grade class at Clear Run Elementary Center on Veterans Day.

## History, symbols, service & a 2nd grader's dream

By Heidi Donohue, Principal  
& Dr. Jessica Loverdi, Principal  
Clear Run Elementary Center

On July 4, 2026, the United States will commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. To deepen their understanding of the United States, second graders in Mrs. Cassidy's class at Clear Run Elementary Center have been exploring a special My America Adventure project that weaves in America's 250th anniversary themes, including symbols, cultures, heroes, and traditions.

On November 11, Mrs. Cassidy's class welcomed a distinguished guest reader for Veterans Day: the local magistrate for Coolbaugh Township, Judge Travagline. During her visit, she read "The Worn-Out Flag" by Karen Bowen and Olha Tkachenko, a story that highlights the history and symbolism of the American flag. After the reading, Judge Travagline joined students in a discussion about the importance of Veterans Day and answered questions about her journey to becoming a judge and the responsibilities of her position.

The week following Judge Travagline's visit, Deyra Peralta-Chavez was selected as the star student. When asked what she hopes to be when she grows up, Deyra



Judge Travagline gifted CREC second grader Deyra Peralta-Chavez the book "I am Sonia Sotomayor," after she heard Deyra wants to be a judge. The Judge included a personalized message encouraging Deyra to be a bright light in the world, noting, "You are a girl that I know will do great things."

shared that she wants to become a judge, a reflection of the impression Judge Travagline had made on her. This aspiration was shared with Judge Travagline, who then went a step further by gifting Deyra the book "I Am Sonia Sotomayor," by Brad Meltzer. She included a personalized message encouraging Deyra to be a bright light in the world, noting, "You are a girl that I know will do great things."

Deyra and her classmates now look forward to visiting Judge Travagline at her office in the new year, eager to continue learning from her example and experiences.



Congratulations to Dr. Cathy Sweeney (center), the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, who received the 2025 Paving the Way Award on October 15, 2025. The Paving the Way Award recognizes Dr. Sweeney's dedication to providing emotional stability for Pocono Mountain School District children and youth experiencing homelessness and youth experiencing foster care. Dr. Sweeney was recognized by colleagues across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

# Swiftwater Intermediate School welcomes recess for all grades

By Kristine Kunsman, Principal  
Swiftwater Intermediate School

Starting in the 2025-2026 school year, Swiftwater Intermediate School has scheduled recess for all students in grades 4 through 6 everyday for 20 minutes. Teachers are excited to begin seeing the benefits of how daily recess will help their students grow. Daily recess will benefit SIS students physically, cognitively, and socially. Physical benefits include improved cardiovascular health as well as building stronger bones and muscles. Cognitive benefits include better attention, memory, and concentration, which lead to improved classroom behavior and academic performance. Socially, recess will help build crucial skills such as communication, cooperation, sharing, and conflict resolution. Recess will also provide an outlet to help relieve student stress, which can help improve the student's overall mood.

Swiftwater Intermediate's Physical Education department has helped make recess a success from day one. They have helped to create recess bags for each team. From footballs to jump ropes and everything in between, our recess bags have something for everyone to promote some physical activity. Physical Education teachers have also taught mini-lessons throughout the year to help support non-physical play at recess. Flag-football has been a hit among our students, which provides a non-physical way to play the game of football.

When the weather will be snowy and cold recess will find itself taking place indoors. SIS and our SIS PTO have donated different classroom games to our homeroom teachers. Although students won't be running around, indoor recess will focus on building cognitive and social skills in our students. From board games to cards, our students will be engaged while indoors.

How can parents help make recess a success? Help your child dress for recess success. Students will be outside for recess each day, unless it is too cold or wet out. Students will not go outside if the temperature is below freezing.

Here are some helpful tips for parents:

1. Please make sure that your child is coming to school with appropriate recess attire. A warm coat, extra sweatshirt, hats



SSG Higgins breaks down the contents of an MRE (Meal, Ready-to-Eat) for students during the Veterans Day activities at SIS.

## SIS celebrates Veterans Day

This school year saw an unusual approach to celebrating Veterans Day and recognizing our community's military veterans. Students at the Swiftwater Intermediate School rotated through stations to be informed as well as experience some aspects of being a member of the military. Students spent approximately twenty minutes at four of these stations and walked away with a better understanding of life in uniform.

SGM Kevin Bittenbender led students through a physical training session and what this might look like at basic training. Although not on a sand lot at Fort Benning, Ga., in the early morning hours, students understood the importance of unity and rhythm while exercising together. The workout ended with a group tug of war before moving onto the next station.

SSG Patrick Gardner presented the many different occupations which are available in the various branches of the military. His explanation of how additional schooling is needed beyond basic training left a better understanding

of how different jobs which soldiers do leads to the larger units being able to carry out the mission. He provided time to answer many of the student's questions.

Mr. Miles Orfanella, 5th grade band director, led the next station by displaying the history of Veterans Day and how music plays a part in military functions. His video presentations kept students' attention with a performance by Army Blues, the military jazz band, as well as the SIS Chirping Cardinals.

The final station had SSG Higgins, Assistant Principal Dan Higgins, presenting the many types of foods which soldiers eat, depending on the training environment. The discussion included a breakdown of the contents of an MRE, field feeding operations and food prepared in a dining facility. Teachers had the opportunity to taste test several of the menu items and provided feedback to the groups of students.

The Veterans Day Committee will be back to work soon starting to develop ideas for next year's event.

and gloves will help make recess warm and enjoyable for your child during the colder months.

2. Talk to your child about good sportsmanship. There are no trophies or awards given for winning a game during recess.
3. Help your child's teacher by reinforcing positive recess behavior such as using school

appropriate language, using non-violent problem solving strategies, following non-contact rules and including others within their games.

We all play a part in building a successful recess environment.

**SIS Daily SEL Student Check-Ins: How They Help Your Child Thrive**

In January, at Swiftwater

Intermediate School we started school-wide daily Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) check-ins for students — short, intentional moments each morning when students reflect on how they're feeling and set a positive tone for the day. Here's what these check-ins are, why they matter, and how you can support them at home.

**What a daily SEL check-in looks like**

- A brief (1–5 minute) routine that happens at the start of class or the school day.
- Students use simple prompts or tools (e.g., emoji) to identify their current feelings.
- Teachers and counselors acknowledge responses, make minor adjustments to the day if needed, and provide quick supports or check-outs for students who need more help.

**Why daily check-ins matter**

- Promotes emotional awareness: Students learn to name their feelings and understand that emotions are normal and manageable.
- Builds classroom safety: Regular sharing creates predictable routines and shows students their feelings matter.
- Supports learning readiness: Students who name and regulate emotions are better able to focus and engage academically.
- Early supports: Teachers can identify students who may need additional social or mental health supports sooner.
- Strengthens relationships: Short check-ins increase teacher empathy and peer understanding.

**How you can support SEL check-ins at home**

- Ask simple questions each morning or evening: "How are you feeling?" or "What would make today easier?"
- Model naming emotions and healthy coping: "I'm feeling tired, so I'll take a short walk at lunch."
- Reinforce routines: Encourage your child to use a calming strategy they learn at school (deep breaths, a 2-minute stretch, a gratitude thought).
- Share success: Praise your child when they try to identify or manage emotions.
- Communicate with teachers: If something at home might affect your child's check-ins, let the teacher know so they can provide consistent support.

## “SEC is the Place To Be” club added at Swiftwater Elementary Center

By Kay Fenn,  
Reading Support Teacher  
Swiftwater Elementary Center

Swiftwater Elementary Center is excited to highlight the launch of a new student organization for the 2025–2026 school year: the “SEC Is The Place To Be” Club, created and led by Mrs. Kay Fenn, Reading Support Teacher. Inspired by this year’s school-wide theme, “SEC Building Community Starts with ME,” the club was designed to give second and third grade students opportunities to strengthen and celebrate the positive, caring culture that defines SEC. The mission is simple yet powerful: to help students recognize, model, and spread the belief that SEC truly is the place to be.

The club welcomed 18 dedicated members who meet twice each week to focus on spreading kindness, showing appreciation, and learning about the many individuals who support the school community. Many of the club’s early projects honored familiar faces that included professional and support staff members, school counselors, school psychologists and school bus drivers.

On November 5, 2025, several members of the club were invited to present at the PMSD School Board Meeting, an honor that allowed them to share their accomplishments and demonstrate confidence as young leaders. Presenters included Miriam

Abuolba, Rowan Anthony, Aria Cyril, Hunter Gupko, Maxine Luppi, Madelyn Parfomak, and Kelsei Stewart. They detailed the club’s initiatives, including colorful signs and heartfelt appreciation cards created for custodial staff, paraprofessionals, PTO members, substitute teachers, and various support teams.

The students also prepared a thoughtful surprise for the Pocono Mountain School Board. To acknowledge the Board’s service and dedication to the district, club members created a banner, individual cards, and an alphabet-themed appreciation book filled with “A to Z” messages and original illustrations. They presented them with individual gifts and a heartfelt banner for the group after asking them to rise for an applause from the audience members both attending live and virtually. A memory was made to last a lifetime.

As the school year continues, the club will keep developing new projects aimed at spreading kindness, building community, and recognizing the efforts of those who support SEC students each day.

In alignment with these goals, the club is also contributing to SEC’s long-standing School Wide Positive Behavior Plan, which has been in place since 2008. The “SEC Is The Place To Be” Club is off to a strong and inspiring start. As the club grows in the coming years, its impact on the SEC community is sure to grow right along with it.

## Paws-itively Wonderful! Clear Run Intermediate celebrates reading with "Fenway and Hattie"

By Amy Haynes, Principal  
Clear Run Intermediate School

Clear Run Intermediate School (CRIS) recently wrapped up a truly exciting and successful One School One Book program, bringing our entire community together through the adventures in "Fenway and Hattie," by Victoria J. Coe.

This book turned our school into a shared reading community, sparking conversations and fun around every corner.

Our students were thrilled to have guest readers join them, including members from The Family/Reading Literacy Committee, Clear Run Intermediate School Administration, and Pocono Mountain School District Central Administration. Students also enjoyed a special short video message from the author, Victoria J. Coe, providing unique insights into the book.

Each week, students were engaged in trivia questions and a school-wide contest encouraged creative expression by asking students to submit fan art, comics, or a short story inspired by the book. The submissions from CRIS students were truly excellent and showcased incredible talent.

The program culminated in a spectacular Family Reading Night, the perfect way to celebrate our



Riley supports students at Clear Run Intermediate School read the book "Fenway and Hattie" for the school's One School One Book project.

shared reading journey. Families and students enjoyed an evening packed with engaging stations. Families enjoyed the special Reading with Riley session, alongside creative stations like making take-home bird feeders and engaging in various craft activities, all while enjoying some snacks and refreshments.

The event also featured the local library providing community resources, a contest entry display showcasing the students' excellent fan art and stories, and some yard games for family fun. The event was a huge success.

Thank you to our entire school community - students, staff, administrators, and families for making our One School One Book program a memorable success. We look forward to our next shared reading adventure!

## East HS off to a strong start for 2025-26 school year

By Tamala Toleno, Principal  
PM East High School

Pocono Mountain East High School has a lot to brag about for the first half of the 2025-26 school year.

**Old Oaken Bucket:** The Pocono Mountain East Varsity Football team traveled to Pleasant Valley on Friday, October 10th to compete in the battle for the Old Oaken Bucket. With a 28-0 victory over the Bears, the Bucket remains with Pocono Mountain! Congratulations to the 2025 Pocono Mountain East Football Team.

**Pocono Mountain East Marching Band:** The Pocono Mountain East Marching Band competed in the Ludwig Musser Classic US Bands Competition on October 18th at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

**Pocono Mountain East Show Choir:** The PME Show Choir had the honor of performing for the Pennsylvania School Board Association Conference at Kalahari on October 19th.

**Pride of the Mountain:** On October 24th, the



**The Cardinals bring home the Bucket.**

PM East Football team defeated the PM West Panthers 35-14 to gain control of the Pride of the Mountain Trophy! The win also secured the title of co-champions in the EPC North Division. Congratulations to the PM East Football Team for their winning season and record-breaking statistics.

**PMEA District X Chorus:** This year, over 700 Choral students across Berks, Carbon, Lehigh, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, and Schuylkill counties competed for a spot in their section, in which they only accepted the top 27 students in each section. Congratulations to Declan Angulo, Laila Peña, Julian Rivera, and Alexander Williams on their acceptance into the District X Chorus Festival.

**3D Helicopters at East High School:** Pocono



**Congratulations to Declan Angulo, Laila Peña, Julian Rivera, and Alexander Williams on their acceptance into the District X Chorus Festival**

Mountain East High School General Physical Science students had a blast testing out these 3D-printed helicopter flyers as we learned about Newton’s Laws of Motion! The activity was a rip-roaring success and an awesome hands-on way to explore forces and torque.

**No Hate Tour:** Pocono Mountain East students

See EHS..Page 11

# PMSD Cyber: Elevating academic integrity with Proctorio & AristotleK12

By Nora Wandalowski, Director  
PMSD Cyber Program

The rise of sophisticated AI tools and easily accessible online resources presents a unique challenge to academic integrity, especially within remote learning environments like the PMSD Cyber Program, which utilizes the Imagine Edgenuity learning management system. To maintain the integrity of our instruction and ensure the validity of student assessments, the PMSD Cyber Program is implementing two comprehensive digital management and proctoring solutions: Proctorio and AristotleK12. These online solutions are in addition to the CopyLeaks AI and Plagiarism Detection tools already included with Imagine Edgenuity. The following article outlines the strategies and technologies being adopted to address the concern of unauthorized student AI usage.

A primary concern in the digital learning space is how to accurately identify when students are utilizing AI bots, scripts, or external online resources during assessments and assignments. While there are various anecdotal examples of suspicious behavior, a systematic, data-driven, individual student approach is necessary.

The solutions selected—Proctorio and AristotleK12—work together to provide educators with both real-time monitoring capabilities and forensic data to detect and deter academic misconduct. To address the concern of student AI usage, Imagine Edgenuity paired with Proctorio to monitor student online activity while completing quizzes, tests or exams in the learning management system; likewise, PMSD utilizes a Google Chrome



extension called AristotleK12 to allow teachers real time monitoring of student use of district Chromebooks.

Both Imagine Edgenuity and PMSD Cyber Program chose to utilize Proctorio to enhance assessment integrity. Proctorio is an automated remote proctoring service that integrates directly with a school's Learning Management System (LMS), specifically Imagine Edgenuity for PMSD Cyber Program, and utilizes the Google Chrome browser and extension. It is designed to secure online tests and ensure that exams are proctored fairly and impartially. Crucially, Proctorio offers a specific extension designed to work with Imagine Edgenuity, preventing students from bypassing security measures.

Proctorio was selected because the extension provides a flexible, multi-layered security approach to testing. The system secures online assessments by locking down the browser to prevent students from opening new tabs, windows, or running unauthorized extensions and scripts. Proctorio is only utilized to monitor on-screen Google

Chrome browser usage. The system flags suspicious behaviors—such as opening additional browser tabs or selecting to run additional browser extensions. It generates an automated suspicion score and incident log to highlight attempts requiring review. Students are informed immediately, through a popup on the screen, that they have violated the testing protocols, will be given 0% on the assessment and direct the student to contact their teacher for further directions. Key features include recording the screen and web traffic during the exam; however, there are additional options for monitoring that PMSD does not utilize such as recording video or audio.

In addition to utilizing Proctorio, PMSD utilizes the comprehensive digital management system AristotleK12. AristotleK12 is presented as an all-in-one EdTech solution designed to simplify the management of student technology. It is compatible with a variety of device types, including Chromebooks, Windows, and Macs. PMSD selected AristotleK12 because the program offers tools for educators and administrators that extend beyond the test-taking environment, fostering digital citizenship and productivity across the entire program. Educators can maintain student focus by limiting web pages, using a "test mode," and even blanking student screens for lecturing. AristotleK12 provides granular, CIPA-compliant web filtering that can be customized for specific student groups, grades, or class subjects.

By implementing Proctorio for online assessments and AristotleK12 for daily monitoring, filtering, and behavioral analytics, the PMSD Cyber Program is building a robust framework to promote academic integrity and ensure a safe, productive, and accountable learning environment.

## EHS highlights mid-year successes

(Continued from Page 10)

enjoyed the action-packed No Hate Tour on October 20th. "The No Hate High School Tour, now in its 25th year, is an incredibly impactful educational program that uses the energy and excitement of action sports to deliver critical bullying prevention tools, techniques, and information to students in a relatable, peer-to-peer manner. The program features top BMX stars that teens admire performing high-energy action sports shows on campus while speaking to the students about their own experiences with bullying, overcoming obstacles, being an ally, inclusion, kindness, surrounding yourself with positive influences, problem-solving, mental health awareness, and other important subjects that really resonate with teens."

**Julianna and Wayne Bolt Art Contest – Celebrating Student Excellence!**

Pocono Mountain East High

School is proud to recognize the outstanding achievements of our students in the Julianna and Wayne Bolt Art Contest, open to Monroe County students in grades 9–12. Each artwork reflects aspects of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and his enduring messages of non-violence, peace, justice, and equality. The theme of the 29th Annual 2026 contest was "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

We are excited to announce the accomplishments of two of our East High School artists:

First Place: Payton Hoop, 11th Grade, Art Teacher Dawn Hallenbeck

Third Place: Guinevere Neils, 11th Grade, Art Teacher Dawn Hallenbeck

Please join us in congratulating Payton and Guinevere on this exceptional accomplishment and in celebrating the artistic excellence within our East High School community!

## CRIS Pancakes with the Principals celebrates student Positive Behavior

Students who were chosen for "Student of the Month" for the months of September and October at Clear Run Intermediate School were all smiles as they gathered in the APR for a special event called "Pancakes With the Principals!"



The celebration re-recognized students who demonstrated outstanding positive behavior throughout the months of September and October, highlighting the school's commitment to creating a respectful, responsible, and welcoming learning environment. The event is part of the school's Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) initiative, which encourages students to model kindness, cooperation, and good decision-making.

Teachers nominate students based on criteria such as showing respect for peers, staying on task, helping others, and contributing to a positive classroom atmosphere.

Mrs. Amy Haynes (Principal), Ms. Meghan Hallick (Assistant Principal- Grades 3 & 5) and Mr. Paul Fedorczyk (Assistant Principal- Grades

4 & 6) flipped and served pancakes to the honorees, using the opportunity to congratulate them personally.

Students enjoyed warm pancakes with various toppings, juice, and water while chatting with friends and the CRIS Administration. Students described this event as a fun break from their morning routine and a motivating way for students to continue making good choices throughout the school setting.

The PRIDE committee plans to continue hosting similar events each quarter to recognize even more students who demonstrate leadership and positive character.

Our next quarterly event for the "Students of the Month" for the months of November and December was held on January 13th and 14th, 2026.

# West HS: Starting a conversation about vaping

By Michael Jones, Principal  
PM West High School

As we continue to celebrate the accomplishments of the school year and recognize the many successes of our students, it is also important to have a conversation about a growing concern among middle and high school age students.

Over the past few years, vaping, especially the use of e-cigarettes, has surged among middle and high school students. While vaping is often marketed as a safer alternative to smoking, vaping is anything but safe for our young people.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over 2.1 million U.S. middle and high school students reported using e-cigarettes in 2023, with flavored products being the most commonly used.

Within our school age population, vaping use has increased. Below are some items for consideration:

## Why Is Vaping Concerning?

**Nicotine Addiction:** Many e-cigarettes contain high levels of nicotine, which is highly addictive. The brain continues to grow and develop through adolescence and into your early 20's; the use of any drugs during this time can harm brain development, particularly in areas that control attention, learning, and impulse control.

**Lung and Heart Health:** Chemicals found in vape aerosol can damage lung tissue and increase the risk of heart disease. Some young users have suffered severe lung injury, known as EVALI (e-cigarette or vaping product use-associated lung injury).

**Gateway to Other Substances:** Studies show that teens who vape are more likely to try cigarettes or other drugs in the future.



## Why May Teens Start Vaping?

Understanding why teens are drawn to vaping can help parents and guardians start more effective conversations and being aware of these influences can help you approach your teen with empathy and guide them toward healthier decisions.

**Peer Influence:** Friends or classmates who vape can pressure others to try it to “fit in” or appear more mature.

**Flavors and Marketing:** Sweet, fruity, or mint flavors are particularly attractive to young people. Social

media and advertising often portray vaping as fun and harmless.

**Stress and Anxiety:** Some teens turn to vaping as a way to cope with academic stress, social challenges, or mental health issues.

**Curiosity and Misinformation:** Many teens believe vaping is safer than smoking or think they are just “trying it once,” not realizing how quickly addiction can take hold.

## What Can Parents Do?

Start an open and honest conversation with your teen. Ask what

they know about vaping and how they feel about it. Avoiding judgment and listening is key.

Our school is committed to providing a safe and supportive learning environment. We've increased awareness about vaping through health classes and will be offering assemblies to students this school year. In November, we held an Escape the Vape Awareness Week, where we engaged in a spirit week that connected students with information for teenagers on the dangers of vaping and e-cigarette use. We will also continue to offer counseling options for students who may be struggling with substance use or peer pressure. Each of the days was aligned with health facts from the American Lung Association and recent news stories about the harmful effects of vaping on teens. In addition to trying to prevent student use of vaping, there are also consequences for students that are found to be using a vaping product or in possession of a vaping product during school. These students are issued a disciplinary consequence and also referred to our school-based drug and alcohol counselor.

If you suspect your child is vaping or need help starting the conversation, please don't hesitate to reach out to a school counselor or a nurse. We're here to support you and your child every step of the way. Parents looking for information can reference many websites, including *Tobacco Free Youth* (<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org>), the *American Lung Association* (<https://www.lung.org/quit-smoking/e-cigarettes-vaping/what-you-should-know>), and the *US Food and Drug Administration* ([https://digitalmedia.hhs.gov/tobacco/educator\\_hub/about/for\\_parents](https://digitalmedia.hhs.gov/tobacco/educator_hub/about/for_parents)).

Together, we can keep our kids safer and more informed.

