



63 SUCCESS

WINTER 2026 • EAST MAINE DISTRICT 63

Safer. Healthier. Stronger. *District Focuses on Facilities Planning*



On a frigid January evening, more than 40 parents, current and former Board members, staff, business owners, and District residents—as well as representatives of local Chambers of Commerce, government entities, and Maine Township School District 207—gathered at Apollo Elementary to hear from D63 leaders, architects, and experts about District facility needs, finances, and enrollment projections.

Representing a cross-section of the community, this Citizen Task Force came together to learn more about the improvements needed at D63's older schools and to provide feedback on proposed solutions, helping ensure that any plan meets the needs of both our students and the wider community.

Maintaining Our Learning Spaces

Learning spaces have a profound impact on student success, and as times change, so does the need to modernize classrooms and schools. In addition, every building has a “life expectancy.” Over time, equipment, masonry, carpeting, bathrooms, and other essential systems must be updated or replaced.

The District has worked hard to maintain its facilities while living within its means. Each year, approximately **\$1 million** is invested in essential facility repairs and maintenance, and bonds are issued within the District's debt capacity (with no tax increase) to fund smaller capital improvements. **However, many D63 schools have reached the point where major capital improvements are necessary, as parts of their infrastructure are at the end of their useful life.**

As a first step toward a more comprehensive facilities strategy, the District initiated facility and health life safety assessments in 2023, working with architects and engineers to conduct a full facilities audit, identify the highest-priority needs, and develop potential solutions. The findings were reflected in the District's 2024 Strategic Plan. D63 then developed a Facilities Master Plan: a long-term roadmap that further assesses school buildings, aligns facilities with educational goals, and guides future investments to ensure safe, modern, and effective learning environments.

Key Facilities Challenges

Most of the District's schools are between 56 to 70 years old, and in many cases, updates have simply focused on keeping students and staff warm, safe, and dry. These aging buildings now face substantial challenges.

- **Overcrowding and space constraints.** Most schools are overcrowded and lack the necessary space to support current instructional requirements. Some existing classrooms are too small or not designed for today's learning needs.
- **Aging infrastructure.** Critical systems, including plumbing, electrical, and



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FROM PRESIDENT TOM SIMMONS

Community Voices

As winter settles in, I want to take a moment to wish our students, families, staff, and community members a season filled with warmth, rest, and connection. The winter months offer a natural pause—a chance to reflect on how far we've come together this school year and to look ahead with care and intention.

Looking to the future, in this issue we are pleased to share an important new initiative focused on the long-term strength of our District. As noted on page 1 (and continued on this page), this winter we turned the spotlight on our facilities needs—and to kick things off we convened a Citizens Task Force made up of a wide variety of community members.

I hope you'll take a minute to read through the article about the Task Force and some of the facilities challenges this District is facing. The goal of this group has been to work collaboratively to study our buildings and help guide planning for the future.

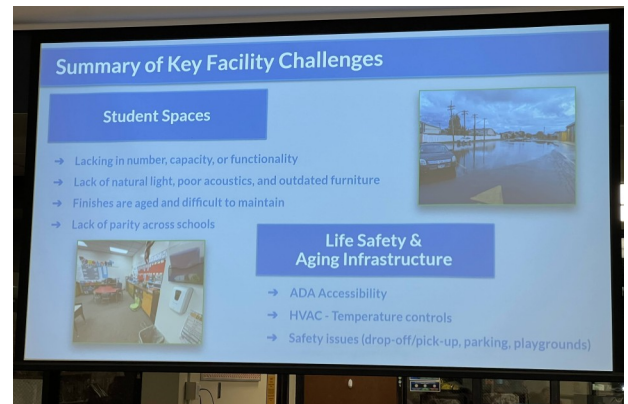
In January and February, the Task Force will serve as a great sounding board for our plans, reviewing enrollment trends, building conditions, educational needs, and fiscal considerations to ensure our schools continue to support safe, modern, and effective learning environments for generations of students.

Our process—now and moving forward—will be rooted in transparency and community voice. By bringing together diverse perspectives, we aim to make thoughtful, well-informed decisions that reflect our shared values and long-term priorities.

We are grateful for the continued partnership of our communities and look forward to keeping you informed as this work moves forward. Thank you for your ongoing support of our schools and the students we serve.

Wishing you a peaceful winter season and a happy, healthy 2026.

Focus on Facilities Planning . . . *continued*



heating/cooling/air quality, have reached the end of their useful life. Much of this equipment is now more than 50 years old.

- **Accessibility limitations.** Many areas across the District do not meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.
- **Outdated learning environments.** Many classrooms lack natural light, have poor acoustics, and have outdated furniture - factors that can hinder student engagement.
- **Inconsistent learning conditions across schools.** Significant differences exist from one building to the next, with some students benefiting from updated classrooms and others without access to the same quality of space or resources.
- **Safety and traffic concerns:** Some drop-off/pick-up areas and parking lots present safety challenges that require improvement.
- **Projected enrollment growth:** Based on 2023 estimates, by 20233 District enrollment is projected to increase by almost five percent, or about 200 students, placing additional pressure on already constrained facilities.

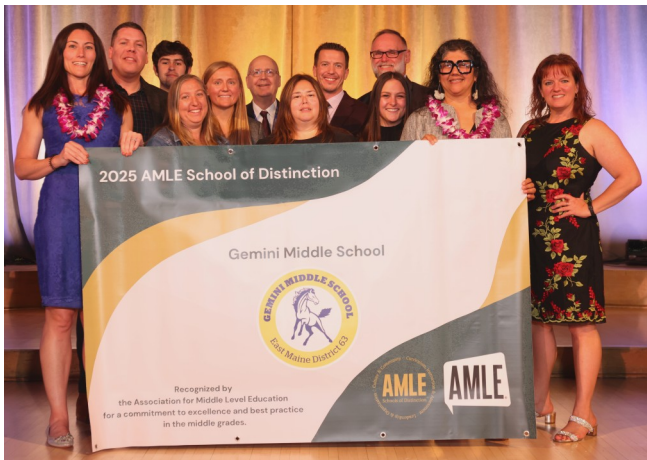
Hearing from the Task Force

That January evening, Task Force members had a firsthand look at some of these challenges during an in-depth tour of Apollo. Built in 1970 as a junior high, it now serves more than 530 kindergarten through 5th grade students. The building is in dire need of updates that reflect modern elementary-level programming.



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GEMINI NAMED SCHOOL OF DISTINCTION



*Gemini & District leaders celebrated at the November AMLE Awards Dinner. L-R: AMLE representative; **Dr. Aaron Roberson**, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching & Learning; **Nick Goss**, Gemini Math Teacher; Gemini Assistant Principal **Wendy Brutt**; **Dr. Alexandra Oreluk**, Gemini Principal; Board President **Tom Simmons**; Gemini Assistant Principal **Erica Perelgut**; former Gemini Principal **Lewis Roberts**; **Dr. Shawn Schleizer**, Superintendent; **Kate Toscano**, Gemini Language Arts Teacher; AMLE representative; **Katie Newton**, Gemini Science & STEAM Teacher.*

In August, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) announced that **Gemini would be recognized as a 2025 School of Distinction.**

There are 14,677 middle and junior high schools in the U.S. **Only 24 of them - including Gemini - earned the award this year.** Since the program's inception three years ago, only 64 schools have earned this prestigious honor.

The AMLE Schools of Distinction program honors schools that exemplify best practices in middle level education while guiding them through a strategic vision-setting process to drive continuous improvement.

Gemini earned this award through a rigorous review process, including a comprehensive school-wide assessment, continuous improvement planning, and stakeholder interviews with staff, students, and families. The evaluation highlighted the school's **Advisory classes** – small groups that meet daily under the guidance of an adult educator to foster positive relationships and a sense of belonging – and its **Gem Guides Program** – which helps 8th graders foster leadership skills as they mentor 6th graders.

“AMLE’s recognition underscores Gemini’s exceptional leadership and the talented educators who go above and beyond - putting their heart and soul into ensuring that every one of our middle schoolers feels supported, valued, and empowered,” noted **Dr. Shawn Schleizer, District 63 Superintendent.** “Their dedication is the driving force that ensures our students are equipped to thrive today – and to succeed in a changing world.”

"We are incredibly proud to be recognized as a School of Distinction," added **Dr. Alexandra Oreluk, Gemini Principal.** "It reflects our ongoing commitment to equity, belonging, and academic excellence—and is a wonderful opportunity to share our story and learn from others who are equally dedicated to ensuring student success." View Gemini's AMLE Profile and learn more about the Schools of Distinction program at amle.org/sod.



Focus on Facilities Planning. . . continued




Moving Forward
“Pay-as-you-go” and emergency repairs are costly and disruptive, especially given rising

construction costs. Effective long-range planning for facility repairs and improvements helps save money and ensure smooth school days for students and staff.

D63’s Citizen Task Force will convene once more in February to provide additional feedback and weigh in on how best to share any plans districtwide. D63 will consider these insights as it develops one or more facility improvement proposals.

Residents can expect to see more information—including a community survey, outreach meetings, a dedicated website page, and other communication tools—in the coming months.

D63 BOARD APPROVES 2025-2026 BUDGET



EAST MAINE SCHOOL DISTRICT 63

Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Budget

*Adopted on September 4, 2025
By the
East Maine School District 63 Board of Education*

Dr. Shawn Schleizer
Superintendent
Tom Simmons
Board of Education President

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Empowering all students to succeed in a changing world.

At its meeting on September 4, the District 63 Board of Education unanimously passed the District's 2025-2026 budget.

The budget includes operating revenues of \$66.9 million and operating expenses of \$67.6 million. This reflects the Board's decision to draw down \$729,000 in reserves to

fund a range of expenses—**\$300,000 of which is the result of a sudden and unexpected reduction in federal funding.**

The District has a strong level of reserves, allowing us to fund our educational programs, including, among other things, its free Band, Orchestra, and Athletics programs - making them more accessible to all students.

You can find the full budget at emsd63.org/about-us/business-services



FROM SUPERINTENDENT DR. SHAWN SCHLEIZER

Community Connections

“**E**mpowering all students to succeed in a changing world.” It’s our mission statement—and it guides our work every day as we serve 3,700 students with a commitment to educational excellence.

But as a public school district, our role extends beyond the classroom. Public schools are tightly woven into the fabric of the community, and we share a responsibility for its future. That means helping students grow into capable, engaged citizens with the skills and values to contribute meaningfully to society.

We take this responsibility seriously, actively connecting students to the broader community. Just as importantly, we ensure that residents, leaders, businesses, and service organizations feel connected to our District.

This issue highlights two examples of that work: our **Citizen Task Force**, featured in the lead article, and the **District 63 Educational Foundation**, profiled on page 5.

Often working behind the scenes, the Foundation has quietly made a powerful impact for many years. It raises critical funds that subsidize Expanded Learning programs for children whose families could not otherwise afford before- or after-school care, summer and school-break camps, and open gym.

Foundation support also sustains our Marketplace, which provides food, school supplies, and household essentials to families in need.

Not all heroes wear capes, and our Foundation Board members are proof. They are dedicated volunteers: parents, community members, and even supporters from outside the District, all united by a desire to make a difference.

We’re eager to grow the Board and expand this important work. If you’re interested, I encourage you to learn more, visit our website, and consider applying.

NEW PRINCIPALS APPOINTED FOR MARK TWAIN & MELZER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS



SARAH EZZAT, MARK TWAIN SCHOOL • Ms. Ezzat has served as Assistant Principal for Nelson School since 2022. Before joining District 63, she served with Baltimore City Public Schools, where she worked as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, and assistant principal. Ezzat holds a B.A. in communications/social influence from the University of Maryland and an M.S. in education, administration, and supervision from Johns Hopkins University. She is currently working toward earning an Ed.D. in educational leadership from National Louis University.



BRIAN GARITI, MELZER SCHOOL • Mr. Gariti joined the District in 2018 as Assistant Principal for Gemini Middle School and is currently Assistant Principal for Apollo School. Before joining District 63 he taught 5th grade at River Trails School District 26's Euclid Elementary School. Past professional teaching experience also includes working as both a reading instructional and a special education aide. Gariti holds a B.S. in English from Northern Illinois University and two M.A. degrees: one in teaching from Concordia University and a second in leadership from Northeastern Illinois University.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE: JOIN THE DISTRICT 63 FOUNDATION BOARD



Looking for a way to make a difference? The **East Maine School District 63 Foundation is seeking new members!** The Foundation supports initiatives that directly impact our youth and families, including:

- **Financial assistance for out-of-school-time programming**, such as Expanded Learning before- and after-school care, school break camps, and early dismissal day activities.
- **The Family Resource Center Marketplace**, D63's food pantry and closet for families in need.
- **Open Gym drop-in program** - offering teens and tweens a safe place to gather, socialize, and be active.

Our Foundation is powered by dedicated volunteers, generous donors, and a community committed to giving back - and we need you!

Visit frc.emsd63.org to learn more and submit an application. Deadline March 15.

CONGRATS TO OUR WINTER CARD CONTEST WINNER



Melzer 1st grader **Miriam Fratila's** whimsical polar bear adorned the front of the 2025 District 63 winter card. More than **90 students** from every school contributed entries. Miriam was recognized at the December 4 Board of Education meeting; she's pictured here with her family and Board President **Tom Simmons** (right).

All of our Best in Grade winners were honored with a special video—and all entries were displayed at the Niles-Maine District Library.

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KATIE ANDERSON
VICE-PRESIDENT
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DR. JAINI MODY
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10150 Dee Road
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2026-2027 Registration Opens March 16

... for new & returning students
entering grades K-8 & returning
preschoolers.

Visit emsd63.org for information.

