ON MARCH 22, the school district united its two weekly cohorts and welcomed all in-person learners for full-day instruction. For the majority of the district’s students, it marked the end of remote instruction. (All-remote instruction is still offered to students whose parents have requested it.)

During arrival, elementary schools celebrated this latest step in the district’s gradual return to normal. At Chester M. Stephens Elementary School, the festivities included music, balloons, and visits from the district’s marauder mascot and Superintendent Robert Zywicki, Ed.D.

With the end of weekly split sessions, Mount Olive became one of the largest districts in the state to return to regular instructional hours for all in-person learners. As an added health precaution with the increased number of students in the buildings, the district used federal COVID relief funds to purchase more than 5,000 plexiglass dividers for desks and lunch tables. Though the state’s distancing guidelines have been rolled back to three feet, Mount Olive intends to keep six feet between students whenever practical.

The unification of the split cohorts comes a year and one week after the district shut down because of the pandemic and began full-time remote instruction for all students.

“I’m thrilled that students are together and back in person where they can connect best with their peers and their teachers.”

Dr. Robert Zywicki
Superintendent

Theater is back!

The lights have gone up in the performing arts center at Mount Olive High School, 13 months after darkening due to pandemic restrictions.

In mid-April, the drama club performed its version of the Tony-nominated “Bright Star,” a musical by comedian Steve Martin and Edie Brickell. The show was professionally video recorded by theater arts specialists and can be streamed April 30 at 7 p.m. See the district’s home page for details: www.motsd.org. After ordering, you will be emailed a link and pass code.

Set in the 1920s and 1940s, “Bright Star” tells the tale of a magazine editor who meets a young writer and discovers that their pasts are intertwined.

In-person performances were limited to just two that were held for the families of the cast and crew.
Students recognize Pi Day

MOUNTAIN View Elementary School fifth-graders love pi. They celebrated national Pi Day on March 14, the numerical date of 3/14 which corresponds to the first three digits of the world’s most popular irrational number (3.14...). Students participated in a variety of activities designed by teachers to excite students about math.

The fifth-graders used string to measure the circumference and diameter of circular objects such as the tops of cans and jars, then calculated the value of pi themselves. (Just in case you forgot, pi = circumference/diameter). They also made pi headbands, created Pi Day T-shirt designs, and graphed the digits of pi.

Thanks to the “Pi Song” (https://youtu.be/3HRkKznJoZA, sung to the classical music earworm “In the Hall of the Mountain King”), the most popular activity was the competition to memorize the most digits of pi. Fifth grade classes held their own competitions and the top three students from each room competed in the finals. The winner, Ryan Walsh, memorized 239 digits of pi. “How many math holidays are there?” asked teacher Deborah Siipola. “Pi Day is a fun way to excite kids about math and show them that numbers are all around us.”

Not to be confused with Pie Day (January 23), Pi Day was founded by a San Francisco physicist and first celebrated in 1988.

A holiday across the world

SECOND- and third-graders learned about the Chinese New Year then created artwork that incorporated imagery associated with the holiday and season.

Art teacher Denise Palmisano regularly takes students around the world with her lessons, showing how cultural traditions and symbols are reflected in the art of different regions. Before the Chinese New Year project, she showed the second-and third-graders a multimedia presentation of the significance of the Chinese New Year and screened a short Disney video about the holiday. She also showed students a paper lantern of the same type that is used in the lantern festivals that mark the end of the holiday’s celebration.

The students then were free to create their own interpretations of drawings that honored the new year, incorporating cherry blossom flowers, lanterns, and fireworks. The students used markers and colored pencils to bring their images to life.

Anabelle Lyon works on a drawing of Chinese lanterns

Sandshore counselor honored

Elena Melekos rocks. Sandshore Elementary School’s counselor was honored in the Teachers Who Rock program, sponsored by the New Jersey Education Association, St. Elizabeth University, and radio station WDHA-FM. Her nomination letter, written by first grade teacher Tracy Church, was read on the air.

“Ms. Melekos ensures that students have an excellent academic experience by providing essential social and emotional support in addition to academic support,” Church wrote. “She collaborates with students, teachers, parents, and administrators to identify and nurture specific strengths, needs, and interests, and develops plans for achieving goals.

This is an important role, but now more than ever this role has proved to be of the utmost importance during the pandemic when students are really struggling with their emotions and virtual learning.”

Melekos joined the district as Sandshore’s school counselor in 2018.

Senior recognized as top scholar

Mount Olive High School senior Nicholas Tarallo was named a finalist in the 2021 National Merit Scholarship Program.

Nicholas earned the honor based on his score on the Preliminary SAT, an exam that measures language and math skills important for success in college and beyond. He scored in the top 0.4% of the 3.8 million students who took the exam.

Art students win big in competition

Mount Olive High School art students won $550,000 in scholarships at the ArtROX Invitational, a virtual art competition hosted by Roxbury High School.

Angelina Dorry, Libby Kercher, Brianna Lischy, Kendra Mobley, and Connor Nelson were awarded scholarships to the University of Hartford. Brianna was also awarded a scholarship to the Montserrat College of Art in Massachusetts and Angelina also received a scholarship offer to William Paterson.

Connor and Christi Gronemann were both awarded money to the Maine College of Art.

At the competition, Angelina also won the prestigious Best in Show award.
**Exploring big ideas**

ERIN RILEY-LEPO doesn’t shy away from big ideas. The veteran English language arts teacher at Mount Olive High School believes part of her role as an educator is to help students “become more socially and culturally aware, encourage them to think critically, and question the world around them.”

In a recent unit for her two AP Language and Composition classes, Riley-Lepo asked students to explore the depiction of race, class, and gender in works from various mediums. This included literature, podcasts, movies, and visual depictions in photographs or videos, many of which the students selected themselves. Students wrote individual analyses on the various pieces and worked collaboratively in small groups on final presentations that examined how race, class, and gender are connected in the source material they reviewed.

These assignments were designed to hone the higher order cognitive skills and communications skills that are assessed in the AP Language and Composition exam. They asked students to employ sophisticated techniques to analyze, synthesize, make evidence-based arguments, compare texts, express their own opinions, and describe the points of view of the authors.

The unit, which Riley-Lepo originally developed with ELA teacher Lori Tatum, introduced students to diverse voices and different perspectives from the past and present. Among the works examined were a satirical essay on class by 18th century humorist Jonathan Swift and a speech by Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became a prominent abolitionist. More contemporary pieces included the essay “The Myth of the Latin Woman” by Puerto Rican American author Judith Ortiz Cofer and the article “How to Restore the American Dream” by Fareed Zakaria, a well-known broadcaster and editorialist.

Students added their own examples to the discussions too, culling from sources as wide as the 2018 hit film “Crazy Rich Asians” and an interview with members of BTS, a Korean pop band.

**Making the connections**

The real-world relevance of the subject matter helped students relate to the texts in a way that made them stand up and take note. Issues involving race, gender, and class make front page headlines every day because these are universal themes affecting people around the globe. Yet, social and cultural issues aren’t typical topics in American schools because of the perceived sensitivity surrounding them.

“In a school environment or even outside when just talking to your friends, you kind of avoid topics such as class and race and gender just because you don’t want to get into a situation where you may not agree with each other,” said eleventh-grader Amulya Kuntamukkala. “But this [unit] made us really think about these topics and look at our own viewpoints, and gave us the reason to talk about them.

By its universal nature, the unit compelled the students to look inward. That was the unit’s true power. In their workgroups and in their classes, students opened up to each other and shared occasions when they have seen or felt race, class, and gender differences in their own lives.

“I’m Asian and I’m a female, so that’s two factors that add up to give me a really complex feeling of ‘differentness’ in certain situations,” said HenitaSharon Lawrence. “It’s a feeling of isolation, but at the same time, I would say that it also gives me motivation. When I see someone who has succeeded despite facing issues of race or gender, it just makes me push harder because I understand that they overcame so much and I feel I can, too.

When we started, I would say I had a good gauge of these topics and how they impacted society, but I see now how they all work together.”

HenitaSharon Lawrence
MOHS junior

When we started, I would say I had a good gauge of these topics and how they impacted society, but I see now how they all work together.”

Students examine race, class, and gender

Students were really able to bring the discussions outside of the classroom. We were able to look at the different pieces that we read and take the overall messages and apply them to things that were happening in the country. It just shows how real this unit is.”

**Equity and inclusion instruction**

In 2021-22, assignments such as the one Riley-Lepo presented to her students will be seen more frequently in Mount Olive and throughout New Jersey.

In March, Governor Phil Murphy signed a state law requiring schools to provide lessons in grades K-12 that highlight and promote “economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance.” Character education, with its emphasis on respect and inclusion, has been a hallmark of New Jersey education for years; however, in specifically defining that diversity, inclusion, and equality be taught in the classroom, the state has joined a handful of others across the U.S. to mandate such instruction.

Mount Olive High School has long been a state leader in offering courses that explore contemporary issues and highlight the contributions of marginalized populations. For example, MOHS has specific courses that explore the immigrant experience, LGBTQ literature, women in literature, gender studies, human rights, human acceptance (i.e., the depiction of people with disabilities in literature and non-fiction texts), and African American literature.
Students find inspiration during pandemic

EIGHTH-GRADERS in Innovation & Design classes at Mount Olive Middle School have been tasked this year to design products that would make pandemic life a little easier. Working individually and in teams, the students applied their ingenuity and their knowledge of the engineering design process to develop products that have real-world uses in the COVID era. Some of the products were even prototyped using the 3D printers in the school’s makerspace.

The students designed items such as mask hangers, hands-free door openers, phone cases that can hold cleaning wipes, an app that will alert the user if someone is within six feet, and a temperature sensor that can be attached to a smart phone for easy readings and tracking.

The COVID design project is a twist on assignments traditionally done in I&D classes. Students are typically challenged to develop products that would solve problems experienced by specific demographic groups such as toddlers or senior citizens. This year, the students happen to be in the target demographic.

The personal experience of living in a world in which health concerns profoundly impact daily existence has provided students with a first-hand perspective. They were being asked to identify and solve problems that they were experiencing themselves. The project not only empowered them to ease the disruption in their own lives but also consider the larger population affected by the pandemic.

“The students are living through an unprecedented time and can truly feel the impact of social distancing, mask-wearing, and a hybrid learning environment,” said teacher Rebecca Kreider, Ed.D. “They can see the need for new products and are far more in touch with the design process.”

The three days of cephalopods

THE three days of cephalopods might not be as festive (or as lyrical) as the 12 days of Christmas, but they were certainly informative and perhaps just as fun.

Fourth-graders taught by Caralynn Ferrara at Mountain View Elementary School recently spent three days examining and dissecting cephalopods – squid, to be more exact. Day 1 was dedicated to learning the rules and tools of dissection, and feeling the outside of the squid. On Day 2, students examined the external structures and their functions, including tentacles, eyes, beak, fin, chromatophores, and suckers. Day 3 was devoted to internal structures. Wearing protective goggles, students cut into their squid to examine the heart, gills, ink sac, and stomach.

In past years, the students worked collaboratively in small groups; this year, because of COVID protocols, each student had his or her own work area, set of tools, and squid. Last year because of the pandemic closure, fourth-graders could only watch an internet video of a dissection instead of participating.

“I’m so glad all my students were attending in person for this,” said Ferrara. “A virtual dissection isn’t nearly as memorable as one where you can touch, smell, and feel.”

Some students chose not to touch or dissect the squid; they looked on and learned with a partner.

Exploring the internal and external structures of plants and animals is a major unit of the fourth grade science curriculum. As part of the unit, students study how those structures are used to aid growth, reproduction, and survival. Before going hands on, the students learned about the anatomy of cephalopods through non-fiction texts and instructional videos.

Music program one of the best in US

The district has been named as one of the best communities in the nation for music education. The award comes from the National Association of Music Merchants Foundation in association with the University of Kansas. This is the fifth consecutive year that the district has been honored by NAMM.

The award recognizes the efforts of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community leaders who have made music an integral part of the district’s educational program.
District celebrates

**WOMEN’S HISTORY MONTH**

THE district recognized Women’s History Month in March by honoring women who have made significant contributions to the world and who have become leaders in their respective fields.

On March 19, a virtual learning day was held for all grades.

**Secondary students**
Students in grades 6-12 heard video presentations from numerous Mount Olive alumnae who have gone on to successful careers in their chosen fields. The speakers included Rear Adm. Patricia Wolfe, one of the highest ranking women in the U.S. Navy, Lisa Anselmo, an author and magazine publisher, and Melissa Held, M.D., an associate dean at the University of Connecticut’s school of medicine. In addition, Kimberly Markus, Mount Olive’s executive director of innovation and personnel, spoke about her career in education. Markus was only the second woman to serve as the commissioner of education at the New Jersey Department of Education.

**Elementary students**
Elementary students were provided with choice boards (i.e., menus of assignments) for their unique grade levels and each student selected four to complete over the course of the day. Students were offered opportunities to learn about the notable achievements of women past and present, and to celebrate influential women in their own lives.

Kindergartners, for example, had choices that included learning about women in sports (e.g., Wilma Rudolph, Venus and Serena Williams) and learning about several inspirational women (e.g. Sonia Sotomayor, Jane Goodall, computer scientist Katherine Johnson). Fourth-graders had choices such as learning about artist Georgia O’Keefe and Vice President Kamala Harris. On the following school day, the elementary students shared with their classmates what they learned and the activities they completed.

The instructional supervisors from each elementary school worked together as a team to develop the choice boards for the district’s elementary students.

**Classroom activities**
Many classes had their own activities to celebrate Women’s History Month. For example, in Laura Iacampo’s second grade class at Tinc Road Elementary School, students watched a YouTube reading of the book “She Persisted.” From it, they learned about 13 women who broke new ground, triumphed over adversity, or helped make the world a better place.

To culminate the month, students turned their focus toward themselves. Each student interviewed a woman in their own lives who they admire and created a Google Slides presentation that they shared with their peers. The presentations listed proudest achievements, greatest challenges, and ways the chosen women serve as role models.

**Students set their visions**

**IFTH-GRADERS** at Chester M. Stephens Elementary School know what they want in life – at least right now. Vision boards were recently created by students in Michele Dressel and Karen Killen’s class, as well as in Karrie Blomquist’s class. The boards illustrated and described the students’ goals, dreams, and aspirations for the future, both short term and long term. They provide daily inspiration, reminding students of what they are working toward.

The boards also serve another important purpose. During the changes and challenges brought on by COVID-19’s seemingly never-ending presence, it’s sometimes difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. This project helped ground students and showed them the shining light in front of them.

“I wanted the kids to look beyond this pandemic,” said Killen, who led the project. “I wanted them to remember that they have their whole future ahead of them and that so many wonderful things are going to happen in their lives. Our thoughts are a powerful force. If we believe in ourselves and work hard, we can achieve almost anything.”
The district’s elementary schools celebrated reading and everything Dr. Seuss as they participated in Read Across America Day—a nationwide campaign designed to motivate kids to read. Sponsored by the National Education Association, Read Across America is held annually on the birthday of the legendary children’s author.

RAA is normally a week-long celebration in the district. But with in-person instruction split into two alternating cohorts, the RAA festivities and focus on reading lasted for two weeks. Spirit days were repeated, giving students at home and in person two opportunities to wear fun outfits such as their favorite Seuss hats.

The schools put their own unique twists on the festivities. Sandshore Elementary School had different projects for each grade level including a “Horton Hears a Who” STEAM activity. At Mountain View Elementary School, both students and staff members dressed as words or phrases. Some chose words that described themselves while others went with their personal favorites or words that would make fun costumes.

Tinc Road Elementary School’s RAA program had a distinctly local theme: pirates—a nod to the district mascot. Each day, students were digitally sent a treasure map which they could access at home or in school if directed by teachers. On each map were book landmarks; clicking on a book brought up a video pop-up window of a teacher or member of the school community reading the chosen book aloud. In past years, guest readers visited the schools to personally read to students.

Since 2021 is the 150th anniversary of the township of Mount Olive, historical information about the town and school district was also included on the treasure maps each day. By clicking on a marauder icon, students would see slide show presentations and photos about Mount Olive, then and now.

You’re never too old, too wacky, too wild, to pick up a book and read to a child.”

—Dr. Seuss

Schools celebrate reading and Seussian classics
Sandshore Elementary School collected more than 500 pounds of canned and non-perishable goods during its March food drive. The food was donated to local food pantries in the Mount Olive area and also distributed directly to families in the community.

The school’s kindness ambassadors, a group of students who are dedicated to community service projects and spreading kindness, helped with the sorting and publicity.

The school also holds an annual Thanksgiving food drive as well as a holiday winter wear collection.

ATH lovers enjoy the challenge of solving problems by using their knowledge and creativity; they relish the thrill of those magical “aha” moments when it all comes together.

But for Evan Matyskiel, a seventh-grader at Mount Olive Middle School, there was a greater challenge than just arriving at the correct answers in his Dynamic Math class: Could he build a better mousetrap? Could he use his new Java skills to code the various equations needed to solve his math problems and then use his Chromebook to crunch the numbers?

This winter, Evan participated in Java workshops that were remotely run by students in Mount Olive High School’s robotics club. The training sessions, held once per week for five weeks, provided Evan and the other interested MOMS students with a functional foundation to the popular programming language, and gave them hands-on practice.

Dynamic Math, when he was learning to calculate the area of polygons, the idea came to him to use his nascent Java skills to solve the problems faster and easier than by hand. He coded the formula to do the heavy lifting for him.

“All I wanted to do was enter the numbers and press enter,” Evan said. “I got the correct answers faster than using my calculator.”

After that, he was hooked. He coded the functions and processes for everything he was learning in Dynamic Math. How to find the hypotenuse of a right triangle? Easy. How to calculate loan payments with compounded interest over a period of time? Done. Figuring out net income after federal and state taxes? Depressing, but done. In total, Evan coded more than a dozen formulas for class.

When students harness the information and skills they’ve learned in one subject and apply it in another, teachers ring bells and set off academic fireworks. That’s the type of higher-order thinking they try to cultivate in all their students.

Add in the fact that Evan’s Java forays were self-directed, then you truly have something to write home about – or call home about as Dynamic Math teacher Steve Leonard did.

“I spoke with his mom and told her I thought it was amazing that Evan was taking his Java knowledge and building code to replicate the math he was learning in class,” said Leonard. “Prior to my career as a teacher, I spent 17 years in the IT industry as both a computer programmer and an IT systems manager, so I was excited to see his coding work. Evan really enjoyed walking me through how he coded the different formulas.”

The Dynamic Math course of the second trimester recently wrapped; however, the end of the course has given him cause to broaden his vision and use his coding skills in other ways. Tasked with developing a game in his gifted & talented class, Evan used Java to create a digital vocabulary game that would help students learn new words. In social studies after learning the cost of a first-class ticket aboard the Titanic, Evan wanted to know the price tag in today’s dollars. Yup, he coded the formula for that too.

“It worked out to be about $100,000,” he said. “I was just curious. I like figuring things out. That’s who I am.”

Food drive benefits community families

Sandshore Elementary School collected more than 500 pounds of canned and non-perishable goods during its March food drive. The food was donated to local food pantries in the Mount Olive area and also distributed directly to families in the community.

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EVERY THURSDAY UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

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Performing Arts Center Lobby
18 Corey Road
Flanders, New Jersey

3–7 p.m.

Photo ID required.
Bring insurance card, if available.

Electronic Registration only:
labq/covid-form

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April 2021