



Capital Education

Winter 2022

 albanyschools.org

  @albanyschools



Middle school feeder changes planned for fall

The City School District of Albany's Feeder Alignment Committee is moving ahead this winter with research into new enrollment patterns for the district's three middle schools.

The committee is comprised of district parents, staff and three members of the Board of Education. The group has been working since July – board members joined the work in December – to determine equitable enrollment patterns for North Albany Middle School, Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School, and William S. Hackett Middle School.

The primary goal is to ensure that all three middle schools have similar academic profiles and total enrollment (approximately 600 students per school when the new feeder patterns are fully implemented).

The phase-in will begin next school year with students currently in fifth grade who will be moving to sixth grade for 2022-23. Students currently in grades 6-7 at Hackett, Myers and North Albany will remain at their schools until they move on to high school.

The feeder committee's work represents the final phase of a multi-year process to provide equitable elementary and middle school experiences for all students.

The district shifted to prekindergarten-grade 5 enrollment for all 12 elementary schools this year, with all students in sixth grade attending middle school for the first time. The district had not previously had enough space at the middle level for all sixth-graders, leading to inequities in programming and opportunities.

The construction project currently in progress at North Albany will expand that school to include facilities on par with those at Hackett and Myers.

The committee made its first recommendation to the board Feb. 10. Following opportunities for input that included virtual meetings for every elementary school, two in-person community meetings and a district-wide survey, the board is working to select a final enrollment pattern in March.

You can use our contact form – albanyschools.org/contact – to provide input as well. More information, including video of all of the feeder committee's meetings, is available at albanyschools.org/committee.

Student Achievement: Pyae Sone Hmine

Passion drives valedictorian's success

Meet Pyae Sone Hmine: Inventor, gifted artist and former math-hater.

The Albany High School senior is valedictorian of the Class of 2022. He achieved a perfect score on the SAT math test and in January accepted a full scholarship to attend MIT.

Hmine arrived in the United States in May 2020 from Myanmar. The COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing. He wasn't excited to be in Albany at first, but that changed not long after his junior year started at Albany High.

"It's the best education I've ever gotten," Hmine said. "There are no limits. You can be the best you can ever be."

Back in Myanmar, he attended an English-speaking nursery school and then a prestigious international school. Being at the top of his class is not new to him; he excelled in all subjects. But having caring teachers and a variety of after-school clubs was a novelty.

"Being able to get help from all your teachers should be the norm like it is here," Hmine said. "But that's not the way it is in Myanmar. Students can explore their passions here. It's a great

way for a school to be."

Hmine took time during his primarily online junior year at Albany High to improve his English and get involved in after-school clubs, including the Robotics Team.

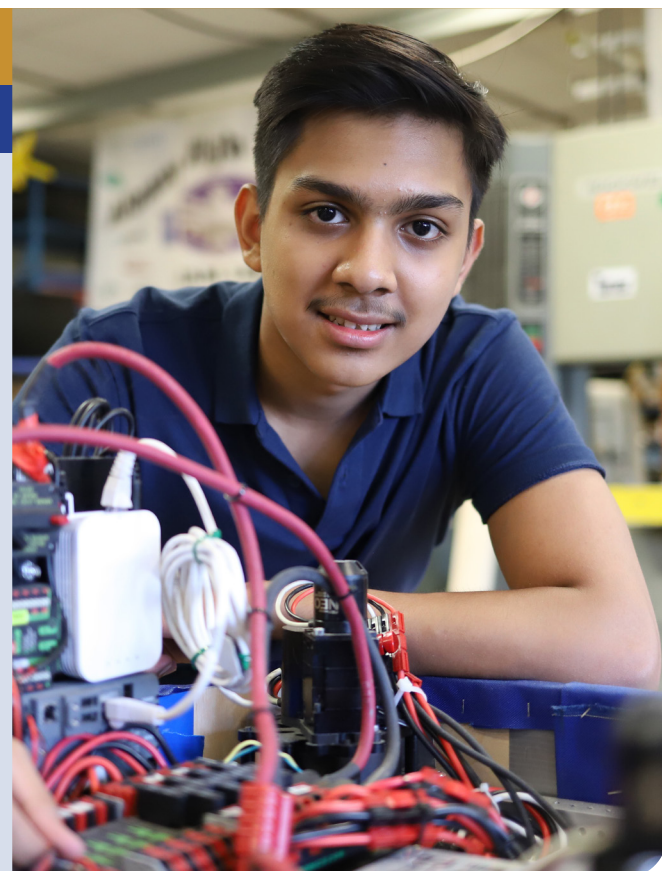
"Back in Myanmar, I would break every piece of machinery in my home and put it back together again," he said. Taking part in Albany High robotics, he said, is a privilege.

Teacher Allan Landman met Hmine two years ago when he taught him Python coding basics in a computer science essentials course.

"A year later he comes back after doing a summer program at MIT, showing me a security system he built and programmed from scratch to send him alerts when his younger brother got home from school and teaching me how to program drones using facial recognition," Landman said.

"These innovations speak volumes about his determination and thirst for knowledge."

(Continued on page 6)



From the Superintendent Social-emotional learning is key

This year has brought to the forefront the true value and importance of social-emotional teaching and learning, and the heightened focus on mental health care within our school system and throughout society.

The City School District of Albany has recognized the value of, and invested in, these supports for many years. We increased our social-emotional staffing levels further this school year, understanding that the added stress the pandemic has placed on all of us, and most especially on young people, will continue to be a challenge.

School districts throughout our region, state and country are experiencing these challenges. In our school district, the security incident Feb. 17 at Albany High School that left a student and a member of our security team hospitalized underlined the critical need for the intense focus that we have placed on social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning refers to the process of helping students develop the self-awareness, self-control and interpersonal skills they need to succeed in school and life beyond school. Social-emotional skills can range from effective problem-solving to self-discipline, and from controlling impulses to managing emotions.

At Albany High, as an example of this work in our district, teachers are receiving ongoing training from Yale University's Center for Emotional Intelligence. Our faculty and staff are receiving National Educators for Restorative Practices training to help them build relationships and a sense of community in their classroom to proactively address issues before they escalate into conflicts.

Similar efforts are happening at all levels of our organization.

An example of the positive impact of this work is the 82% graduation rate for Albany High's Class of 2021, the school's highest rate since the state started tracking that data through its current measures in 2005.



The Class of 2021 also continued to close the achievement gap between our African-American and White student subgroups, from 9 percentage points to 4. The 83% graduation rate for our African-American students also exceeded the state average by 3 percentage points.

That is a tremendous achievement for all of our students, and for all administrators, faculty and staff throughout our organization. It also is an example of the benefits of social-emotional learning.

An integral part of social-emotional learning is building caring relationships between students and their teachers, administrators and support staff. When these relationships exist, every challenge is more manageable for all involved.

I am proud of our students and grateful to our staff, faculty, families and community for their ongoing support. We will continue to emphasize this collaborative approach, and the critical importance of building supportive relationships, as we work collaboratively as an organization and as a community partner to improve opportunities and outcomes for all of our students.

Yours in education,

Kaweeda G. Adams
Superintendent



Voices

Q: If you could invent anything to make your life better, what would you create and why?



“ I would invent a robot that makes mac and cheese for me. I don't enjoy making mac and cheese because it's boring. Cooking literally anything else is fun and exciting! It's just that when you make mac and cheese you don't really do much. It's mostly just waiting for things to boil, cook and drain. ”

— **Anaand Buddeau**
Albany School of Humanities (ASH)
Fifth grade



“ During these last two years, a lot of changes have happened. Obviously, this takes a toll on people and their mental health. I would create a meditation app that would help others feel at peace with themselves and come to terms with the reality we live in. ”

— **Schinelle Gibson**
Albany High School
Junior



“ I would invent a multiplier. The multiplier could multiply and make anything you want. If you are at the grocery store and don't have enough bags, pull out your multiplier! It would give you all the bags that you need! That would make life much easier. ”

— **Elizabeth Cross**
Montessori Magnet School
First Grade



“ I would create a gadget that would train my brain to help me maintain focus. I lose sight of focus a lot with my short attention span, so this invention would help me stay on track of all my tasks. It would also help me a lot in school by making sure I do not zone out, and by staying on top of my health and providing time for friends and family. ”

— **Chance Rodriguez Brown**
North Albany Middle School
Eighth grade



“ If there was one thing I could invent to make life better, it would be a robotic organizer that would make my life easier. Imagine having one! It would have organizers for different things: homework, food and more. This is what I would invent to make my life better. ”

— **Aaliyah Douglas**
Philip J. Schuyler Achievement Academy
Fifth grade



Capital Education is published by the City School District of Albany. Please direct comments about the newsletter, story ideas and questions to either:

Ron Lesko
(518) 475-6065 | rlesko@albany.k12.ny.us

Lisa Angerame
(518) 475-6066 | langerame@albany.k12.ny.us



Music technology program thrives

It's hard to know who's more excited about the music production program at Albany High School – teacher Kyle Albano or his students.

Well before school starts, students are poking their heads into Albano's classroom, a fully functioning high-tech recording studio. Some spend their lunches and free periods there; others are part of the after-school Music Industry Club. There's plenty to be excited about.

In his four years as an Albany High teacher, Albano has built the school's music technology pathway from the ground up. And it's still growing.

In his classes, students write and compose music. Using the school's state-of-the-art studio, Albano teaches them how to record instruments and vocals.

In more advanced classes, they use digital audio software like Soundtrap by Spotify or Logic Pro to record samples. They learn Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI), a way to connect a variety of electronic instruments, computers and audio devices for playing, editing and recording.

With support from Albano, a handful of students have recorded songs that have been released on Apple Music and Spotify.

"It's crazy to think that this happened in four years," he said. Rewind to 2016.

Before Albano was a teacher in the district, he ran an after-school music and sound recording club at Albany High out of an empty room in the old music wing. Student interest was through the roof.

In the next two years, Albano refined and collected data on the program. He was hired as a building substitute teacher at William S. Hackett Middle School in 2017 and ran to Albany High at dismissal to continue the after-school program there.

At Hackett, Albano met veteran teacher Ed Newell, then in charge of district music programs, who directed him to a closet at Albany High.

"Ed literally put the keys in my hand and said, 'do what you can do with this stuff,'" Albano said.

Albany High hired Albano as a full-time teacher in 2018, where he revitalized the introductory Music in Our Lives class by introducing keyboards.

(Continued on page 6)



Magnet & pre-K applications open through March 18

Families city-wide can apply through March 18 for our magnet and 4-year-old prekindergarten lotteries.

Both lotteries will be held April 13. The magnet lottery is for grades K-5 in our four magnet programs, which focus on unique themes:

Albany School of Humanities (ASH):

Embeds art, theater and music

The Dual Language Program:

Offers English/Spanish bilingual education

Montessori Magnet School:

Uses the Montessori method to guide learning

Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science and Technology (TOAST):

Focuses on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math)

Prekindergarten

The April pre-K lottery is for the 4-year-old programs at all of our elementary schools – including our magnet programs – as well as community locations city-wide.

Children must turn 4 by Dec. 1 to be eligible for the April lottery (the lottery for our 3-year-old pre-K programs will be held in June).

For more information on the lotteries, and to learn more about the programs, eligibility and magnet open houses, please visit albanschools.org/lottery.



(Above) New York's rich Native American history is inspiring future engineers and architects. On Jan. 28, **Ariana Pryor** (left), **Mohammed Nagi** (right) and their classmates in Michelle Chiappone's fourth-grade at Pine Hills Elementary School designed and built Iroquois longhouses. The models, made mostly of popsicle sticks, were built to reflect the Iroquois style of communal living.

(Above left) **Ruth Knoderbane** was one of Stephanie Siciliano's kindergarteners at Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science and Technology (TOAST) who got some hands-on and practical winter knowledge Jan. 21 while learning about the phases of matter after applying salt to large chunks of ice.

(At left) Albany School of Humanities (ASH) raised more than \$180 on Jan. 21 for Heavenly Hats, a charity that provides head coverings to those who have lost their hair due to medical treatments. Students like third-grader **Aubrey Lonon** donated \$1 to wear a hat of their choosing to school to support a great cause!

(Below) Albany High School's Junior ROTC program welcomed 27 Albany Police Department recruits Jan. 25 for a breakfast forum at school. It was the first in a series of conversations planned between the school and police in the coming months through the Time to Talk: Community and Cops Collaborating program, or T3C3. The goal? To overcome bias and preconceived notions police might have about Albany High students, and vice versa.





(Above) Ruijuan Fan's Chinese language class at Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School rang in the Year of the Tiger with a Lunar New Year party Feb. 1. The students, like **Anthony Gabriel Solomon**, practiced reading and writing Chinese characters and sayings. They also played traditional games and sampled foods that are typical of the celebration.

(Above right) Lauren Ferguson's first grade at Philip J. Schuyler Achievement Academy – including **Jo'Ziah Lewis** – spent the morning of Jan. 28 studying place value, using dimes and pennies as real-world representations of tens and ones.

(At right) Led by coach **Sean Brown** (center), the Albany High School boys' basketball team has had an excellent season. The Falcons finished the regular season 14-6 overall, winning their first Suburban Council Gray Division title with an 11-3 league record. Albany High features one of the area's top players in senior guard Isaiah Austin, who averaged 24 points a game during the regular season. The Falcons were on a mission to return to the Section 2 Class AA final for the first time since 2006.



(At left) **Ariah Robilotti**, **Miley Murphy** and **Ariell Torres** took a "brain break" Jan. 25 at Sheridan Preparatory Academy. The kindergartners in Melissa Hunt's class got their bodies moving, which is intended to improve focus as they transitioned from one academic lesson to another.

(Below left) **Sudais Salar Zay** (left) and **Will Miguel-Pouty** contemplated the strength of magnetic materials during a Jan. 19 lesson on magnetic attraction in Christina Zontini's fourth grade at Albany International Center.

(Below) Feb. 2 – that's 2/2/22 – was Twin Day at New Scotland Elementary School. And with 12 sets of twins, there was plenty to celebrate. One of the dozen pairs includes second-graders **Leah** and **Joseph Ching**. You didn't have to be a twin to get in on the fun; students and teachers also had the chance to dress alike and be twins for a day.



Hmine *(continued from page 1)*

After taking part in the MIT summer program last June, the Awesome Math Summer Program in July and the American Math Competition in November, Hmine decided to start a Math Club at Albany High, completing an about face for the kid who hated math until he took Algebra in eighth grade.

His talents exceed the sphere of math and programming.

He is an accomplished artist and painter whose work is influenced by his grandfather and noted artists from Myanmar. He is president of the Albany High Art Club, where he set up a system for members to

easily share their artwork online. He's also a writer for *The Nest*, Albany High's student newspaper.

For Hmine, it's all about passion: for art, for computer programming, for math. For learning.

"Finding passion has made me able to do all this stuff," he said. Landman agrees.

"His passion for everything he does shines through his work, and I have no doubt he will continue to impress at MIT and beyond," Landman said.

State tests on the horizon

MAR 14 to JUN 10

New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA)*: these tests in ELA, math, science and social studies measure the progress of students with disabilities in grades 3-12

MAR 29 & MAR 30

New York State English Language Arts (ELA) exam, grades 3-8

APR 11 to MAY 20

New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT)*: window for speaking portion of the exam. These tests measure the progress of English-language learners in K-12.

APR 26 & APR 27

New York State Math exam: grades 3-8

MAY 9 to MAY 20

NYSESLAT exam*: window for listening, reading and writing parts of the exam

MAY 24 to JUN 3

New York State Science exam*: window for the performance part of the exam for grades 4 and 8

JUN 6

New York State Science exam: written part of the exam for grades 4 and 8

JUN 1 & JUN 15-24

Regents exams*: high school exams that measure ability in English, math, science, social studies and foreign language, grades 8-12



Dates for these exams vary from school to school within the provided window; families will receive communications indicating specific dates



Music *(continued from page 3)*

That morphed into Piano I, which remains an extremely popular class (he teaches four sections of it now, as well as Piano II and intro and intermediate classes on digital audio software).

Albano High completed a brand new music and art classroom building in January 2021, and Albano moved into his new space that contained a MIDI lab. All the music rooms are connected, so Albano and his students can, in real time, record from any classroom or practice room.

Albano initially focused on making hip hop music in the studio, and as student interest

has grown, so has the scope of music.

Last summer, Albany High began offering summer courses that students could take for credit. Albano's course, Recording Studio Techniques, was such a hit that it was incorporated into the evolving Music Technology pathway. Students will be able to take it for the first time this fall, and the course is already filled.

Albano has tapped into something big, and it keeps growing.

"Even during lunch periods, this place is packed," he said.

Important special education reminders

Parents and guardians have the right to request a referral and evaluation of a child for the purposes of special education services or programs.

If you believe your child has a disability that requires special education or special accommodations, contact your child's building principal. You also can call Assistant Director of Special Education Christina Lebrecht at (518) 475-6150 to discuss whether your child should be referred to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) or the "504 Team" for a full evaluation.

For more information, please visit albanschools.org/specialed to download a copy of *Special Education in New York State for Children Ages 3-21: A Parent's Guide*.

If your child attends a non-public school in Albany, you may request an evaluation to determine eligibility and need for special education by writing to the Committee on Special Education, 75 Watervliet Ave., Albany, NY 12206.

For a student found eligible before April 1, a parent or guardian may request services to

begin within 30 days of the determination.

If you plan to enroll your child in a non-public school in Albany in 2022-23, you must provide a written request for services to the CSE by June 1. We urge you to provide your request as early as possible so the committee can develop an Individual Education Service Plan (IESP) for your student.

Please note that there is an April 1 deadline for requesting transportation if your child will attend a non-public school in Albany (*see related story at left*).

If your child will attend a non-public school outside Albany in 2022-23 and you want services, you need to request the services in writing from the public school district where the school is located by June 1.

The district does not provide services to non-public-school students found eligible for accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Please contact Christina Lebrecht or the Special Education Department at (518) 475-6150 if you have questions.



Non-public school transportation deadline

State law requires Albany parents and guardians whose children will attend a non-public school in 2022-23 to submit a written request for transportation to the City School District of Albany by April 1.

The purpose of this deadline is to enable districts to budget funds and make necessary arrangements to provide reasonable and economical transportation. This applies to students who will attend private, parochial and charter schools.

The district transports all eligible elementary students (grades K-5) via yellow buses operated by First Student.

Eligible non-public secondary students (grades 6-12) are transported via CDTA buses unless their Individual Education Service Plan (IESP) requires specialized transportation, which First Student provides.

For non-public school students who move into the city after the April 1 deadline, parents and guardians must submit a written request for transportation within 30 days after establishing residency.

In order to qualify for transportation, students must meet the requirements under the district's Transportation Policy, available at albanschools.org/transportation.

Requests should be mailed to:

Durett Miles
Director of Transportation
City School District of Albany
75 Watervliet Avenue
Albany, NY 12206

For more information, contact the Transportation Department at (518) 475-6170.

Awards & Achievements

JROTC advances in national competition

Congratulations to the Academic and Leadership teams of Albany High School's Henry Johnson Battalion Junior ROTC! Both teams made it to the second round of national Army JROTC competitions.

In the Academic Bowl, Albany High's team was the only Capital Region JROTC program to advance to Level 2 (CBA and LaSalle also competed). In the Leadership Bowl, Albany High and LaSalle advanced to the second round.

The Level 2 competitions were scheduled in February, with a chance to advance to Level 3, the final stage in the competitions.

Academic Team members (pictured at right, L-R) include juniors **Ariana Lovett-Blackman**, **Keziah Espina** and team captain **Kevin Kam**, and sophomores **Ananta Saha** and **Snay Maung**.

Leadership Team members are sophomore **Dominic Hung Tun** and juniors **Jaheim Gittens**, **Ungwa Mnyomoelwa** and **Chika Uzoeshi**.

Hackett science out of this world

An experiment proposed by a team of eighth-grade scientists at William S. Hackett Middle School is heading for the final frontier.

Astronauts on the space station will perform "Microgravity's Effect on the Germination of Basil Seeds Using Hydroponics" later this spring. The Hackett team of **Aimee Ayoub Arias**, **Sage Volmer**, **Alina Gasanova**, **Kaylee Garcia Ramirez** and **Jasmine Suarez** (pictured at right, L-R, with science teacher **Craig Ascher**) developed the experiment in the fall as part of the Student Spaceflight Experiment Program.

Students from all three district middle schools participated. The students worked in teams to design an experiment that tests the effects of microgravity – weightlessness – on a particular scientific variable.

A group of teachers and administrators judged the experiments and forwarded the top three to the spaceflight program. The program then selected the Hackett project along with a selection of others from schools nationwide.

Two of 13 area 'Top Teachers' from district

WNYT/Ch. 13 has named two veteran district employees as 2022 Top Teachers.

Ava Holt, a social worker at William S. Hackett Middle School, and **Kimberly DeHart**, a family and consumer sciences teacher at Albany High School (pictured at right), were nominated by their colleagues and students. They were selected among this year's 13 honorees from a pool of more than 400 educators nominated throughout the Capital Region.

WNYT profiled both in early February. You can watch the stories by visiting the News section on each school's page at albanschools.org.

Artists work makes regional show

Five pieces created by Albany High student-artists were chosen for display in February's Art in Three Dimensions show. The student-artists and their pieces are:

- **LeiLeona Dowdell**, grade 10: *The Unknown*; glazed earthenware
- **Lydia Green**, grade 12: *Soft Spoken, But Not*; basket weaving
- **Katherine Myers**, grade 10: *The Maximalist's Stuffed Animal*; soft sculpture
- **Sydney Speanburg**, grade 12: *Two Untitled*; painted clay/glazed earthenware pieces

The 2022 Art in Three Dimensions show featured 19 participating high schools. There were 221 pieces submitted and 79 selected.

The juried exhibition, organized by the Capital Area Art Supervisors, ran through Feb. 28 at the W.B. Haessig Art Gallery at Mohonason High School in Rotterdam.

Albany High's students were supported by teachers **Thea Resila** and **Ashleigh Johns**.

Albany High juniors tapped for conference

The Albany County League of Women Voters has selected juniors **Tova Gordon** and **Leah John** to attend a statewide "Students Inside Albany" conference at the Capitol in May.

Gordon and John will represent Albany County at the four-day event, which brings in 60 students from around the state for hands-on learning about how state government works, including the state budget process, the role of lobbyists, citizens' rights to access government information, the role of the media in politics and the move to reform state government.

Albany High athletics superlatives

Two Albany High senior student-athletes (pictured at right) achieved noteworthy achievements during the winter season.

Isaiah Austin, the leading scorer on the Falcons' resurgent boys' basketball team, set a school record with eight 3-pointers on his way to a season-high 39 points in a 62-60 loss to Newburgh Free Academy on Jan. 25. He finished the regular season averaging 24 points per game, third-best in the Capital Region, to lead the Falcons (14-6) to their first-ever Suburban Council Gray Division title.

Austin averaged 30 points over a seven-game stretch in January, and WNYT/Ch. 13 featured him in February among the boys' all-stars for the season.

Ilan Kligerman won the 110-pound weight class at the Section 2 Class A championships Feb. 6. Kligerman is the first Albany High wrestler to win a Class A title since Shawn Berman (96 pounds) in 2011.

Kligerman advanced to the Section 2 Division I meet Feb. 12, where he reached the semifinals and finished fifth overall.



Albany High's JROTC Academic Team



Hackett's team of eighth-grade scientists



"Top Teachers" Ava Holt (L) and Kimberly DeHart (R)

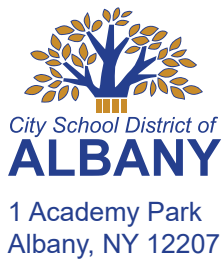


Student-athletes Isaiah Austin (L) and Ilan Kligerman (R)

Board of Education

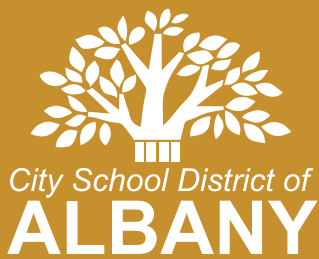
Anne Savage, *President*
Vickie Smith, *Vice President*
Sridar Chittur, Ph.D., *Secretary*
Hassan I. Elminyawi
Ellen Krejci
Damarise Mann
Tabetha Wilson

Kaweeda G. Adams
Superintendent



Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 149
Albany, NY

You can access all the information
in this newsletter and more at:
albanschools.org



Our guiding principles

Our vision

The City School District of Albany will be a district of excellence with caring relationships and engaging learning experiences that provide equitable opportunities for all students to reach their potential.

Our mission

The mission of the City School District of Albany is to work in partnership with our diverse community to engage every learner in a robust educational program designed to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for success.

Our goals

Increase student achievement; Enhance the delivery of quality instruction; Build our leadership capacity and increase accountability; Empower families; Partner with our diverse community

Leading the Way: Nicole Reddix

School Resource Officer



Even though she's based at William S. Hackett Middle School, you could say Albany Police Officer Nicole Reddix's beat includes the whole city. The 2006 Albany High School grad serves as a school resource officer district-wide, with duties ranging from classroom teaching to providing police assistance and mediating disputes.

Q: What's a school resource officer (SRO)?

An SRO is a mentor, counselor and teacher. We are selected by the police department through a review board process and specifically trained to operate within the schools. We are a resource for all school staff, faculty, students and their families. Our duties include, but are not limited to, maintaining a visible presence throughout the day, developing and maintaining positive relationships with students, families, faculty and staff, acting as a liaison between the police department and the school district, delivering prevention programs and assisting with school safety.

Q: How do your lifelong ties to Albany and our schools help you do your job?

They've allowed me to maintain and continue to develop relationships that I've had since I was young. A lot of the people that I communicate or work with on a daily basis are those that I went to school with or played sports with. Also, my lifelong ties allow me to relate to the students. Students are normally surprised when they first hear that I am a product of our schools. It creates a connection.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges facing our students?

Students have faced understandable inconsistencies and have faced a world of unknown since COVID-19. They have been on a rollercoaster ride with virtual learning and the adaptations it required. Students had to adapt to not attending school and learning in their home environment day in and day out. When school buildings reopened fully, students had to re-learn the structure of being in school again. With the assistance of the community, families and the district, our students have been resilient.

Q: What do you like best about your job?

It's not a matter of like, because I love being a school resource officer! However, if I had to choose, it would be the relationships with school district staff, students and families. I love hearing that knock on my office door and looking up to see a student on the threshold, looking to just say hello and chat about their day or asking for assistance.



Alumni Achievement

Barbara Ritz '83

As a nurse, 1983 Albany High School graduate Barbara Ritz could have found work anywhere – that's one of the reasons she chose the career.

But the job that called her was working as a public health nurse at the Albany County Department of Health, a position she's held since 1988.

"I believe everyone deserves quality healthcare no matter what their socioeconomic status is," Ritz said.

That is true now more than ever amid a relentless worldwide public health crisis.

Before March 2020, Ritz spent her days providing support to expecting and new mothers. It was work she loved, caring for the community where she grew up. Plus, helping new parents raise healthy children is a reward unto itself.

Now, nearly two years into the pandemic, all of Ritz's duties are related to COVID-19.

She and her healthcare colleagues have worked weekends, holidays and countless hours running mass immunization sites, conducting contact tracing, answering unending questions, and educating the public about precautions and vaccine importance.

"We had to be flexible in keeping abreast of updated information," she said. "It has been very challenging to work in healthcare during COVID-19 as it seems to never stop."

Ritz credits Albany High for teaching her hard work and perseverance.

Attending college would not have been possible without the scholarships, loans and work-study positions she was introduced to her senior year. In addition to her schoolwork, she also volunteered at Albany Memorial Hospital, was a member of the cross country, swimming and track teams, and had an after-school job.

"I worked hard to get to where I am," she said.

Like their peers nationwide, the members of Albany High's Class of 2022 haven't experienced a typical full school year since ninth grade. Ritz urges them to follow their dreams, trust themselves and never give up.

"You can and will make a difference," she said.

Ritz does, after all. Every single day.

"It has been rewarding to work in healthcare during COVID-19," she said. "I am helping to protect our community from this virus."