

Winter 2011



Guilderland Central School District



“Soft skills” in the classroom...

A lesson in the three “C’s”

When it comes to education, we’ve all heard of the three “R’s” but have you ever heard of the three “C’s”? In a recent article featured in U.S. News & World Report, internationally renowned author and Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman cited the ability to communicate, collaborate, and create—the three “C’s”—as exactly what today’s students will need to be successful in a competitive global economy.

In the workplace, these skills are often referred to as “soft skills”; yet in the field of education they are gaining strength as tools that are just as essential for children to learn as reading, writing and arithmetic.

Skills in action

At GCSGD, students at all levels have been developing and showcasing their communication, collaboration, and creativity skills since long before the phrase “soft skills” became a media buzzword. As you’ll see in the examples below, the three C’s are an integral part of a Guilderland education.

At Westmere Elementary School

Trying to incorporate technology into a classroom full of six-year-olds can be a challenge, but fourth-grade teacher Lisa O’Brien has found a way to

help—by partnering her students with their younger, first-



grade counterparts for a program called Computer Companions. “Children often learn best from their peers,” said O’Brien, “especially when they are discovering a new hands-on tool.”

Throughout the school year, the fourth graders work with their first-grade buddies to show them everything from how to use the school’s mobile laptop cart (i.e., turning the machine on, logging in, accessing educational Web sites, etc.) to creating a PowerPoint presentation.

“Children often learn best from their peers.”

—Lisa O’Brien,
WES teacher

The students also work together on special assignments, including a non-fiction research project where the first graders write about their favorite animal and the fourth graders help them find supporting pictures via Google images.

At Farnsworth Middle School

Earlier this fall, more than 100 seventh graders from Tawasentha House organized an anti-bullying flash mob with the help of FMS teacher Heather Bryer. Students were looking for a way to make a big statement after reading the novel *Stargirl*, which tells the tale of the collective, not-always-pretty emotions of a secondary school.

“Students need to stand up for and with each other to advocate for the kind of school environment they want,” Bryer said. “Creating the flash mob gave students an opportunity to not only tell other kids that we need to accept people for who they are, but it allowed them to show other kids exactly what they believe in a creative and memorable way.”

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At left, FMS students perform during a recent anti-bullying flash mob. Watch a video of the event at www.guilderlandschools.org!

www.guilderlandschools.org

A lesson in the three “C’s” at GCSD
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Students were inspired by similar videos created at other schools and decided to make their own statement using the song “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga. The lyrics celebrate acceptance and tolerance, and helped convey the message that diversity is a strength.

At Guilderland High School

Students in Vivian Donnelly’s high school pre-calculus classroom are learning about how math plays an integral role in reconstructing the scene of a car crash. Donnelly worked with the Town of Colonie Police Department’s traffic safety unit to identify four unique case studies. “Children always ask, ‘When are we ever going to use this?’ and so I wanted to give them some high-impact examples of how what they are learning in math class can be applied in the real world,” said Donnelly.

During the two-day project, students review details of actual police reports and investigate how officers measure and calculate at the scene of a crash to determine factors such as cause, speed, and direction. They discuss and practice concepts such as trigonometry, arithmetic, order of operations, and work together to measure coefficients of friction based on road conditions. Students even learn how police officers use math to determine whether or not a driver ran a stop sign or violated another traffic safety law.

“Since all four car crashes were caused by distracted drivers, this lesson also provides a great opportunity to remind the students to not talk or text while behind the wheel,” said Donnelly.

“The students will now become the teachers.”

—Kim Harmon,
PBES Library
Media Specialist

“Hopefully this lesson helps the children see not only math, but also their duty to be responsible drivers, in a different way.”

A fourth C?

From volunteering and community partnerships to school programs on bullying and tolerance, character education could easily be considered the fourth “C” at Guilderland. As evidenced in the examples above, the district also makes it a priority to incorporate social and community responsibility into its educational programming.

At Pine Bush Elementary School, students, parents and staff recently created a School Success Team to present and reflect on character education activities that take place throughout the building. One of their first planned projects was to display inspirational posters around the school showcasing positive character traits in action. Yet instead of buying generic posters, the team decided to work with students to create unique character education artwork by having the students take the photos for the posters themselves.

In preparation for the project, library media specialist and School Success Team member Kim Harmon met with select students in grades three through five for a series of after-school visual literacy workshops to teach them how to “read” and “write” with photos.

The School Success Team, with the support of the Pine Bush PTA, also invited local author and photographer Ellen B. Senisi to prepare an assembly presentation for all students covering visual literacy and good character traits.



Above, local author/photographer Ellen B. Senisi works with students at PBES to create unique character education posters.

Senisi later worked with students as they captured their own photos illustrating good character traits such as citizenship, compassion, fairness, honesty, and perseverance. Finished posters are expected to be ready for display later this winter.

“Our main goal with this project is to promote positive character traits throughout the building,” said Harmon. “Yet students are also learning how to effectively plan, create, edit, and evaluate through the picture-taking process. They are learning about digital citizenship—how to use technology appropriately and responsibly,” she added.

Perhaps most exciting is that the students selected to attend the after-school workshops earlier this fall will now be responsible for passing along the knowledge and skills they learned to their classmates.

“The students will now become the teachers, helping their peers become better at sharing messages and telling stories through photographs,” said Harmon. “It’s an amazing way to build community and to see the character traits of courage, respect, and responsibility in action.” ♦

Community Conversation set for Tuesday, Jan. 17

In late October, more than 40 school community members came together to learn about many of the economic, regulatory, and political issues currently facing our school district and to discuss how to improve student learning despite these challenges as part of the district's first Community Conversation of the school year. The feedback district leaders received during the event was incredibly useful; yet there is still much more to be discussed as budget planning for the 2012-13 school year continues. As the district struggles with the difficult and important choices ahead, we need to hear from you!

Please plan to join us on Tuesday, January 17, 2012 for the next Community Conversation. The event, which is open to all district residents and school community members, will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. in the Guilderland High School LGI and will feature a brief presentation on the current state of the district followed by small group work sessions.

Participants will have the opportunity to discuss several essential questions related to possible areas of change and innovation in the year(s) ahead, including:

- Scheduling and the use of time;
- Technology; and
- Data-driven budgeting.

We hope that you will be able to join us and would request that you kindly R.S.V.P. by Jan. 13 either via phone, 456-6200, ext. 3102, or by visiting www.guilderlandschools.org, if you are interested in attending the event.

Did you know?...

Ten fast facts about New York's new Property Tax Levy Cap

By now, you've probably heard about New York's new tax levy cap legislation. Many have referred to it as a "2 percent tax cap" but this is a misnomer.

10 facts about the cap:

1. The "2 percent tax cap" does not actually limit a tax levy increase to 2 percent. It does, however, mean that any increase above a certain amount will require 60 percent of voters to approve the school budget. That certain amount is called the "tax levy limit" and will vary by school district.
2. The tax levy limit is determined by a complex, eight-step formula that includes factors such as the growth in the local tax base (if there is any), the previous year's tax levy, and the current and future years' payments in lieu of taxes.
3. The rate of inflation or 2 percent (whichever is lower) is just one part of the "tax levy limit" calculation. That is where the phrase "2 percent tax cap" comes from.
4. After a school district calculates its "tax levy limit," it then adds exemptions into that amount. These exemptions allow the district to propose a tax levy greater than the amount set by the "limit" without requiring 60 percent of the voters to pass the budget.
5. These exemptions—or factors that "don't count" against the cap—include voter-approved local capital expenditures; increases in the state-mandated employer contribution rates for teacher and employee pensions that exceed two percentage points; and court orders/judgments resulting in any amount that exceeds 5 percent of a district's current levy.
6. Residents will vote on the budget on Tuesday, May 15, 2012.
7. If Guilderland's proposed budget meets or stays below the "tax levy limit" (before exemptions), more than 50 percent of voters (a simple majority) need to vote "yes" for the budget to be approved.
8. If Guilderland proposes a budget that includes a tax levy above its "tax levy limit," 60 percent of voters need to vote "yes" to approve the budget.
9. If the proposed budget is not approved, the district may submit the same budget proposal or a revised budget proposal for another vote, or go directly to a contingency budget. If a second vote is not approved, the district must adopt a contingency budget. However, under the new law, a district that adopts a contingency budget cannot increase its tax levy from that of the prior year by any amount—a zero percent increase.
10. The new law applies to the tax levy, not to tax rates or individual tax bills. What will happen to your tax bill—how much it may go up or down—cannot be predicted until a number of other factors are determined later in the year. ♦

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Kindergarten registration set for Jan. 25 & 26

All Guilderland Central School District elementary schools will be holding kindergarten registration on either January 25 or 26, 2012. Children who will be five on or before December 1, 2012 are eligible to begin kindergarten in September 2012. Registration days, times, and procedures vary by school building. Please visit your child's elementary school home page for additional information.

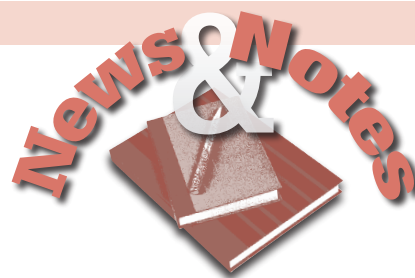
Kindergarten Information Night

Want to learn more about GCSD's kindergarten program? Parents of all students who will be attending kindergarten in September 2012 are invited to attend an information session at the school in their elementary zone on Monday, January 9, 2012 beginning at 7 p.m. (Snow date: 01/23/12) At the kindergarten information session, parents will hear a brief presentation about the instructional program, visit the kindergarten classrooms, and meet the kindergarten teachers. Not sure which elementary school zone you live in? Visit www.guilderlandschools.org and click on the "Kindergarten Information Night" news story.

A special "thank you" to the Class of 1961

Thank you to the Class of 1961, who recently donated \$2,500 worth of equipment to the Guilderland High School art and music programs.

Funds were collected for the equipment as part of the class' 50th reunion festivities. At left, GHS Principal Tom Lutsic joins members of the class as they present various digital cameras, cases, and other recording devices to be used by district students for many years to come.



Program Report on the use of time and scheduling at GCSD

On Dec. 13, the district leadership team presented a program report on the use of time and scheduling to the Board of Education. The report, available on the district Web site under the "Program Reports" link on the Board of Education Web page, outlines several areas of potential change for the upcoming school year at all three educational levels. The leadership team began working on the report last December, exploring any and all structures to maximize the impact of instructional time on student learning in this time of diminishing resources. School leaders are currently reviewing the instructional and financial implications of the models presented to the Board of Education.

www.guilderlandschools.org