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## **AFTER HOURS LEARNING**

MIDDLETOWN, R.I. (DECEMBER 14, 2021) – It's 3:15 p.m. and Forest Avenue School was dismissed half an hour ago, but you wouldn't know it.

In one classroom, several students were taking part in an art lesson with Kristen Ramsey while a group across the hall was learning the intricacies of the fast-paced card game Uno with teacher Caitlyn Miller.

Throughout the elementary school, kindergarteners to third graders are hard at work reading and learning long after the last bell rang, with similar efforts happening through the "Beyond The Bell" program at the district's other four schools.

Part of a continued effort to keep students engaged and excited about education, organizers said often "Beyond The Bell" was not as much about the activity itself, but learning the skills around it.

"Yes, they're having fun playing Uno and the math and quick thinking that goes with it," said Jen Pesare, a Forest Avenue first grade teacher and K-3 Intervention Coordinator who serves as the Forest Avenue coordinator for "Beyond The Bell."

"But there are the unseen things they're not even thinking about. How to lose, how to win, how to play a game with other children and get along with them while you're doing it. These are the skills that they're learning and growing right now that will serve them as they get older."

Teachers like Pesare said the demand for "Beyond The Bell" services is greater this year than ever before. Currently, there are about 60 students enrolled in the program every Tuesday and Thursday across eight classrooms at Forest Avenue School. That number is expected to jump to nine classrooms after the start of the year.

At the end of school on "Beyond The Bell" days, students gather in the cafeteria, fully masked and ready to go.

Each was offered a snack as Pesare directed traffic, announcing instructions to students through a battery powered microphone system. Without it and the protective mask required for COVID-19 protocols, it might be tough for all the 60 plus students to hear her.

But with the microphone, Pesare comes through loud and clear as she swapped out a squished granola bar for one student and got students where they belonged, calling each by their first name.

“This is all about the kids,” Pesare said. “Every one of the teachers here could be doing something else right now, preparing for tomorrow, spending time with their families and friends, but we’re here, trying to give our students the necessary supports they need.”

This is especially true for all students now, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The third graders here, they haven’t had a ‘normal’ school year since kindergarten,” Pesare said. “There’s no doubt there are gaps and we’re all working hard to fill them.”

Across Town, Brittney Nelson serves as the coordinator for “Beyond The Bell” at Aquidneck School. That job belongs to Laurie Oliveira at Gaudet Learning Academy, Casey Wright at Gaudet Middle School and Linda Leonard at Middletown High.

The latest counts show close to 300 students take part in “Beyond The Bell.” At the lower grade levels, students are invited by their teachers to take part in “Beyond The Bell” activities. At the higher levels, some offerings are by choice.

As the program progresses in grade level, the assistance gets even more focused. At the grade four and five Learning Academy, students get help with math or reading. At Gaudet Middle School, that expands to also include social studies and the sciences.

For grades nine through 12 at Middletown High, it’s almost everything on the school’s curriculum. There are also classes for students on everything from credit recovery and English Language Learning supports to SAT and Advanced Placement prep, driver’s education and CPR training, among others.

Superintendent Rosemarie K. Kraeger said without the hard work and dedication of Middletown teachers, none of the program would be possible. She said the effort was part of the district’s campaign to help the “entire student,” not just with academics in the classroom.

“If you look at what’s happening in each of these sessions, it’s real learning,” Kraeger said. “It’s not just a place to go and hang out for an hour. We have such driven and professional teachers who work for us and they genuinely care about the students. You can see it in each and every one of these sessions.”

Assistant Superintendent Michelle Fonseca agreed, saying “Beyond The Bell” helped grow successful students.

“We have been expanding the ‘Beyond The Bell’ opportunities for students over the last two years,” Fonseca said. “It is essential for us to provide academic and enrichment programming for our students beyond the school day.

“The Beyond The Bell mission is to engage our students in academic and enrichment opportunities that foster self-confidence and boost academic achievement with programs that are motivational, engaging and support the academic, social and emotional needs of our learner. We work to create programs that build on our Middletown Public Schools Core Competencies of communication, collaboration, success, innovation and development of global citizenship.”

Down the line, Fonseca said the goal was to add even more services to “Beyond The Bell.” Among those targeted include college and career readiness programs as well as additional help and services for those youths who need it.

“We are here to help every student,” Fonseca said. “Enrichment Opportunities are typically offered to all students. Intervention opportunities are targeted, students are invited by need.”

Back at Forest Avenue School, third graders Tucker Perry and King Neal took a time out from teacher Jen Holubsko to chat about “Beyond The Bell.”

“It’s fun and it helps me out,” Tucker said.

“I like coming here,” King added. “Reading is the best. I like all kinds of books.”

Listening in, Pesare said that’s what “Beyond The Bell” is all about, whether it’s at Forest Avenue or across the district.

“This program lets us build on everything that’s happening in the classroom,” Pesare said. “It also allows for time for more focused, one-on-one instruction that helps our students get where they want to be. To see the growth that happens here is amazing.”

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