



SOUTHINGTON

THE OBSERVER

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FREE



Rogers named Apple Harvest Festival Grand Marshall, Page 3

Everything you need to know about the Apple Harvest Festival, Page 17

School sports schedules released, Pages 22-26

First day back.



TAMMI KNAPIK

Ella Carmody, left, goes over some schoolwork with her first-grade teacher Amy Stino. Southington students returned to school on Monday, August 31.

School board nervous about class sizes

By ROB GLIDDEN STAFF WRITER

The start of a new school year brought concerns about class size to the Board of Education, particularly in regard to kindergarten.

Presented with a list of expected class sizes for all grades in all of Southington's elementary schools, the officials were troubled by the numbers at Thalberg and Strong. Between the two schools, there are five classes with

over 20 kindergarteners. This was viewed as far too full for an age during which individual attention is heavily emphasized.

"The numbers have been creeping up over the last three years and we're still not comfortable with it," said Chairman Brian Goralski. "Now we're seeing this in kindergarten."

School administrators attempted to mitigate this by offering parents a chance to transfer their kindergartener from Strong,

Derynoski or Thalberg to one of the less crowded schools, provided they could arrange their own transportation.

However, Superintendent Dr. Joseph Erardi reported that this initiative had only brought out about a dozen inquiries and only two actual transfers.

In less difficult financial times, the solution to this problem might have

See CLASS SIZE, page 16

STEPS receives \$125,000 grant

Only one of 5 groups in state to get federal money

By ROB GLIDDEN STAFF WRITER

The Southington Town-Wide Effort to Promote Success (STEPS) has received a \$125,000 grant from the Office of National Drug Control Policy. The group will receive these federal funds each year for the next five years, for a grand total of \$625,000.

"We were really hoping this would work out," said STEPS Coordinator Kelly Berkmoes. "It will do so much for our initiative."

Southington was one of 161 communities nationwide to be awarded these funds, only five of which are in Connecticut. There were a total of 460 applicants.

STEPS began its efforts to improve the lives of Southington kids last year,

and the group has been a consistently visible presence since. In tough financial times, the group's leaders knew that this grant was the best chance they had at expanding their initiative and sought help from several other groups, like United Way and the Community Foundation for Greater New Britain, in the process of applying for it.

The grant also required towns to match the amount of the grant, and officials said this was accomplished through indirect costs like existing salaries and "in-kind" volunteer work.

Youth Services Director Sue Saucier outlined how the grant money would be used during the first year. The group will focus on three facets of the commu-

nity - local businesses, the media, and parents.

STEPS hopes to introduce kids to nearby businesses which could provide opportunities for them, and Berkmoes read a list of dozens who had already expressed interest in participating.

The group also plans to hire an advertising firm to assist them in using local media outlets to increase the community's awareness of their work.

Saucier admitted parents can be difficult to reach, and the group plans on attending events like PTO meetings in an effort to get more of them on board.

The group has already

See STEPS, page 16

Getting ready for a new school year

By ROB GLIDDEN STAFF WRITER

As another year of school officially began, hundreds of teachers, administrators and other school staff members gathered in the Southington High School auditorium for the annual "convocation" event.

"I'm sure this will be a year full of great success for students and families in Southington," said Assistant Superintendent Howard Thiery.

The gathering is an opportunity for the district's leaders to honor their

employees in various ways. Teachers with more than 30 years of service are spotlighted and awarded, new teachers are introduced with a slideshow presentation, and everyone in between is thanked profusely for their service.

"You are the reason Southington schools are great," said Board of Education Chairman Brian Goralski during his remarks.

It was also a chance to formally honor Southington's Teacher of the Year. This time, that distinction goes to SHS art

teacher Sara Levinthal-O'Farrell.

Levinthal-O'Farrell used her time at the podium to tell a detailed story that she felt was instructive to her fellow educators. She recalled her experiences with a particularly difficult student with no interest in learning and little chance of graduating.

Despite being initially discouraged, she went the extra mile to reach out to this student, even introducing herself to death metal music and reading a biog-

See SCHOOLS, page 16

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# Schools: teachers and administrators prepare

From page 1

-raphy of infamous performer Marilyn Manson to try and understand this student's interests.

As it turned out, the

gap between their two tastes became a source of humor for both of them. The initial connection changed everything.

"The wall between us was now a pile of rubble,"

she said. "He never missed another assignment again."

Superintendent Dr. Joseph Erardi expanded on one of the primary goals he has pursued since taking

over as leader of the schools - building more partnerships with the rest of Southington's community.

The schools already work closely with the

YMCA, the library, STEPS, United Way, Relay for Life, and the newly-formed Southington Education Foundation, but Erardi said he hoped for even more collaboration.

"We can't do this in isolation," Erardi said. "I encourage everyone here to go out and make partnerships. We're all in this together and it is going to be an exceptional year."

# Class size: officials worried as numbers start to rise

From page 1

been to hire an additional kindergarten teacher. Erardi suggested an option which he saw as more fiscally responsible - hiring a handful of additional paraprofessionals to assist kindergarten teachers with especially crowded classrooms.

"Any [kindergarten] class with more than 20 students would have an additional adult in the room," Erardi said.

He estimated this would cost about \$19,000. Ultimately, the board approved this suggestion.

"I'm comfortable with that idea, given the caliber of paras we have," said

Vice-Chair Rosemarie Fischer. "It's also economically sound."

Fellow board member Jill Notar-Francesco said she was more comfortable with an additional teacher, and voted against the suggestion.

"21 is just too much for a kindergarten group, even with para support,"

she said. "The curriculum is just too strict and too rigorous for that many kids."

Assistant Superintendent Howard Thiery also reminded the board that kindergarten numbers are chronically unreliable, and it is common to have a last minute downturn in their numbers

during the first week of school.

Though it may have caused the most concern, kindergarten was not the only grade which had some large class sizes. Fourth and fifth grade classes at Kelley, Derynoski and Strong have individual class populations in the mid-20s.

"I understand that in those grades, children are taking on more responsibilities, but there are 25 kids in some of those classes," said board member Patricia Johnson. "I don't know how the teachers are going to get through the day, given all the paperwork that will be necessary."

# STEPS: group looks to increase presence with grant money

From page 1

held two acclaimed community summit events, and plans to use the funding to arrange more.

"Those events have proven to be venues which expose new people to STEPS," Saucier said. "Everyone who attends is

energized and excited. We feel really privileged to be able to do this."

Some money will also be given to the police department. This will be part of an effort to communicate with alcohol vendors about the importance of making sure these drinks are not sold to minors.

Sergeant Lowell DePalma, a consistent advocate for STEPS, said he hoped this was an opportunity for the police officers to connect with the community in a positive way.

"It's sad that many times in our job, we only see kids at the worst of times," DePalma said.

"We're hoping to reduce that."

The grant will also help with staffing for the program. Berkmoes will now be able to commit to STEPS full-time, after working part-time for the program since last year. An additional part-time position is also planned.

The first major event for the group is the upcoming "STEPS Week." From September 14 to 20, the initiative will work to highlight the STEPS message within the Southington schools.

The week will culminate with a summit at Camp Sloper which will feature numerous events,

including a Battle of the Bands.

"We think this is the best news of 2009 for Southington," said YMCA Executive Director John Myers. "It's overwhelming that our vision has come to this, and now we are in a position to make a major impact."



## First day back

Southington students returned to school on Monday, August 31.

Above left, Tracy Carmichall (taking photo) and Karen Barry welcome their children Braydon and Emily back from kindergarten.



Above right, parents say goodbye to their kids at Kelley School.

Right, Tyler Lombardo hugs his Dad Jeff after his first day at Kelley.



Photos by Tammi Knapik

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