



Danbury Digest

District News & Highlights

FALL 2021

Superintendent's Message

Dear DPS community,

It gives me such enormous pride to walk into any of our schools and see our students back in the classroom. They truly look happy to be in school, not only learning academics, but also being once again fully engaged in our wonderful school community with their friends and teachers. Everyone is to be commended for getting our students back on track: students are socializing with friends, participating in clubs and playing on sports teams.

As you will see in the articles that follow, several athletic coaches have recently been recognized for their accomplishments in supporting our students, two new deans have been appointed at the high-school level to assure that students are receiving the support they need, and our district was named one of the 2021 Best Communities for Music Education. Two of Danbury's elementary schools recently ranked in the top 100 best schools statewide while many of our schools were mentioned for their success in student test scores. You will also see that some of our administrators and staff have taken on new roles, and that we have welcomed some new faces to our school community.

We have weathered quite a storm, but these successes further demonstrate our strength and resilience. Thank you all for the wonderful work you continue to do in our schools.

In partnership,
kW

Kevin Walston, Superintendent

Shelter Rock fifth-grade choir hits a high note: a chance to sing at the Rockefeller tree lighting



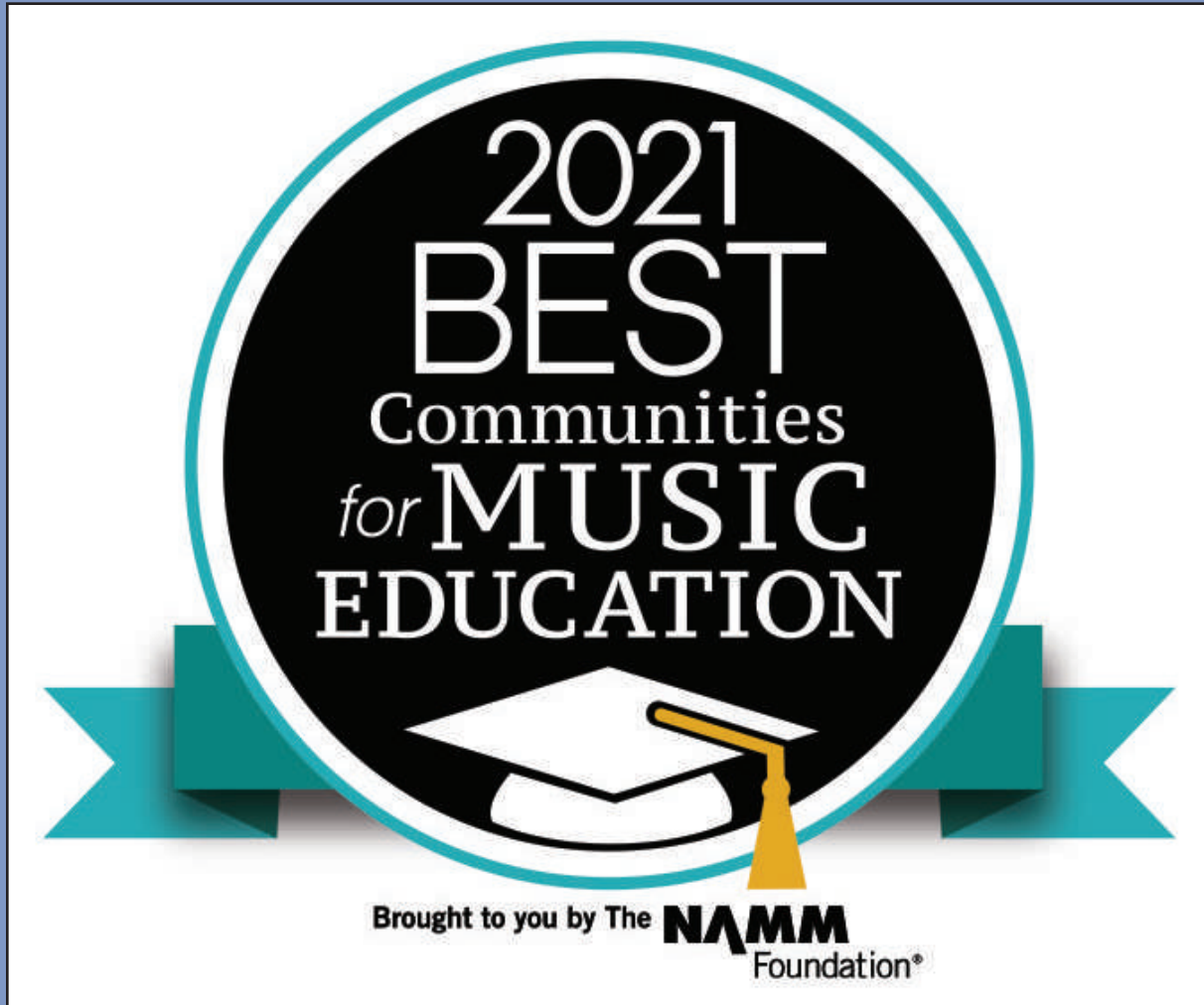
The Shelter Rock School fifth-grade choir has made it to the final round of the "Channel NBC 4 Star Choir Competition." Winner of the contest will be announced on the "Kelly Clarkson Show" at the end of November and will sing for the taping of the annual lighting of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center television special December 1.

"I'm so proud of our students and our staff," said principal Anna Machial. "We can do great things in uncertain times."

The Shelter Rock choir sang "Up on the Housetop," one of the three qualifying songs. The contest was limited to schools in the tri-state area.

[Click here for Shelter Rock School choir's "Up on the Housetop"](#)

DPS among 'Best Communities for Music Education'



For a third year in a row, Danbury Public Schools has been recognized as a 2021 “Best Communities for Music Education School District” for its commitment to and support of music education.

The National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) recently released a list of 686 school districts nationwide, recognized as 2021 Best Communities for Music Education. Danbury was one of 23 districts in Connecticut to receive this distinction.

“Music education is part of a well-rounded learning experience, and it is also one of the first programs to suffer from budget cuts. We are fortunate that we have community partners whose generosity will continue to improve our students’ lives for years to come,” said Superintendent Kevin Walston. “Jill Russell-Benner, the DPS K-8 music department head, has made it her mission to ensure that music education remains a significant part of the curriculum.”

Danbury schools rank in the top 100 statewide for test scores

Two elementary schools in the Danbury Public Schools district were recognized in U.S. News & World Report in October as being among the top in Connecticut elementary and middle schools based on test scoring. Western Connecticut Academy of International Studies (AIS) was listed as 58, while Great Plain School came in at 70.

In addition to two schools in the top 100, Westside Middle School Academy placed 107 and King Street Intermediate School came in at 116.

U.S. News & World Report reports annually on schools with a directory ranking more than 102,000 preschools, elementary, middle and high schools and searchable by state, district and city. In Connecticut, 848 K-8 schools were ranked: 560 elementary and 288 middle schools. According to the report's website, the new rankings focus on two areas: math and reading proficiency or how well students perform on state assessments and performance. The state assessment data used in the ranking are from the 2018-19 school year.

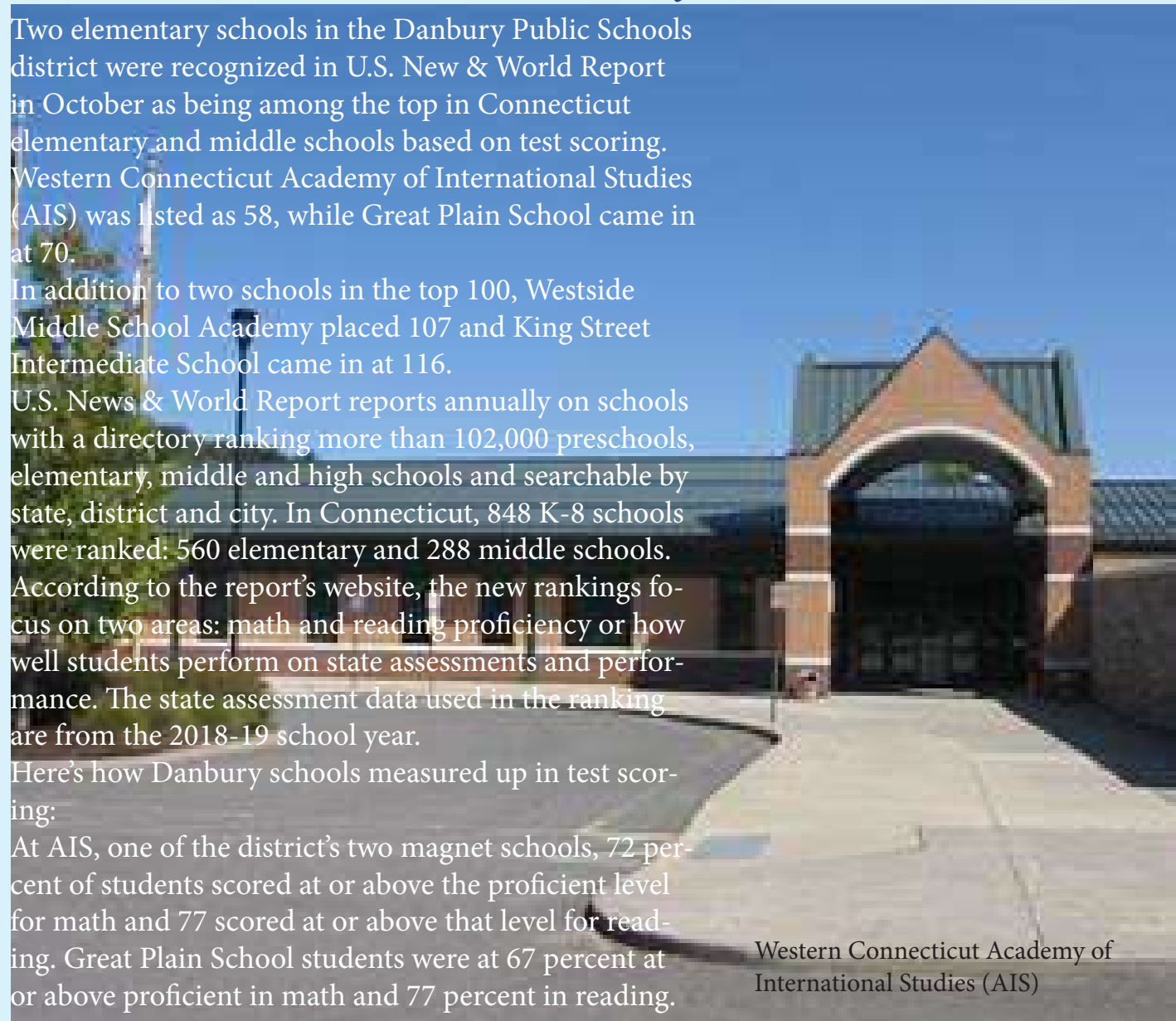
Here's how Danbury schools measured up in test scoring:

At AIS, one of the district's two magnet schools, 72 percent of students scored at or above the proficient level for math and 77 scored at or above that level for reading. Great Plain School students were at 67 percent at or above proficient in math and 77 percent in reading.

on the list is above 50 percent.

At Westside Middle School Academy, 43 percent of students scored at or above the proficient level for math, and 58 percent scored at or above that level for reading. At King Street Intermediate School, 42 percent of students scored at or above the proficient level for math, and 50 percent scored at or above that level for reading.

"Our district has been steadily increasing in student enrollment, and clearly the result has been that it has made us more proficient in meeting the challenges of this growth," said Superintendent Kevin Walston. "I'm proud of all of our schools and our dedicated faculty and staff, and it is rewarding to have our students' progress recognized at this level."



Western Connecticut Academy of International Studies (AIS)

Second Gold Key award ‘like the Hall of Fame’ for DHS coach



Photo credit: Noah Havasi

Danbury High School wrestling coach Ricky Shook has racked up almost as many awards as wins, both as a coach and a wrestler. In September, Shook was awarded this year’s Gold Key by the Connecticut Sports Writers Alliance (CSWA). The prestigious award is given to five coaches every year. This is Shook’s second Gold Key. To get one key is an accomplishment, but to receive two is something extraordinary.

“It feels like having a gold key to the state. It’s like the Hall of Fame,” said Shook. Among his many coaching awards – a number that tops 40 – include State Class LL Head Coach 14 times, most recently in 2020; FCIAC Hall of Fame inductee in 2018; Connecticut High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame Inductee 2016; New England Wrestling Hall of Fame inductee 2018; National Wrestling Coaches Association CT Head Coach of the Year

four times, most recently in 2020; and induction into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, Connecticut Chapter 2013.

“It’s lots of wins, lots of work,” he said of his most recent award.

This past year, Shook and the team have not been able to compete because of the pandemic, but he is looking forward to a normal schedule beginning in late November with five placers from last season.



Danbury High’s Rob Murray named national ‘Cross-Country Coach of the Year’

Rob Murray, coach of the Danbury High School boys’ cross-country team and running coach for 21 years, earned a national title last week for his success and dedication in consistently taking the Hatters to state and regional championships.

Murray was named the “2021 National Boys’ Cross Country Coach of the Year” at the National Coaches Convention of the National High School Athletic Coaches Association (NHSACA) on July 29 in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was initially one of eight coaches nominated for the title from across the country. The title was based on criteria that included win/loss record, championship years and tenure as head coach.

“Rob’s leadership and coaching have been essential to our student-athletes, especially during a very tough year,” said Interim Superintendent Kevin Walston. “Rob’s positivity, enthusiasm, patience and focus have helped his students not just succeed in their sport but have provided them with the tools to move forward confidently in all endeavors.”

Murray’s long track record of accomplishments includes being inducted into the Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference (FCIAC) Hall of Fame in 2017; he has held the title of FCIAC Coach of the Year 13 times.

New field of distinction behind DHS

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Top-of-the-line track facility rivals those at top colleges

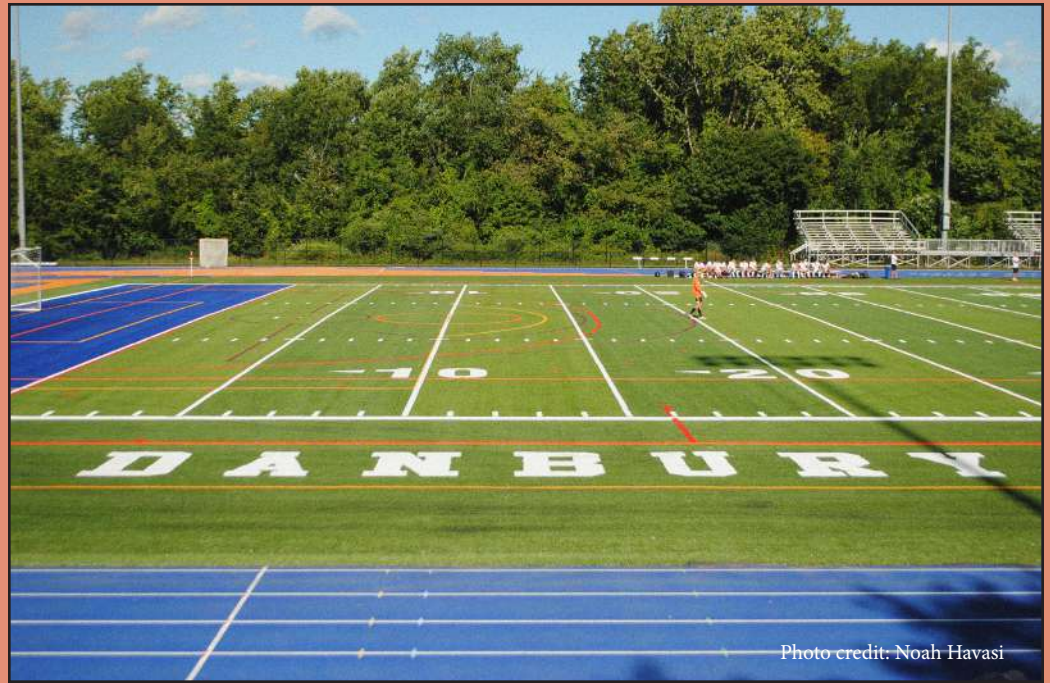


Photo credit: Noah Havasi

The brand-new athletic track and field facility at Danbury High School rivals those at some top universities.

In September, the eight-lane DHS track earned the title of “distinguished facility” by the American Sports Builders Association. The ASBA will name an “Outdoor Track Facility of the Year,” among its other awards, in December.

“The DHS Stadium is an exceptional multi-purpose facility that sets the bar for not only our athletic programming and for FCACI and CIAC championship events, but also enhanced physical education class instruction, regional band competitions, graduations and spectator viewing. Our new track and turf are together a beautifully finished product put together by many and we are all appreciative of a job well done,” said DHS Athletic Director Chip Salvestrini.

This is the school’s third field since 2001. Fields last an average of eight to 12 years.

“Between the track and the field, the DHS complex is up to the standards of any university of the Northeast. We had the track certified by the NCAA. It is a college-certified track,” said Tom Hughes, Danbury’s superintendent of construction services. “We anticipate this field lasting 12 to 14 years before needing to be replaced,” Hughes said, adding that the field cost \$985,000. “Danbury’s fields get extremely used. There are a lot of sports and the band uses it.”

The specialized top-of-the-line turf has filament that’s shaped like a lightning bolt and is much stronger than average turf. The field also boasts alternating shades of green, like a professional football field. The track is multiple layers of different gels that shed water and ice.

“It’s sort of cushioned,” Hughes said of the track. “You’re protecting children from shin splints. They – the student-athletes and coaches – were hesitant of the track and when they started using it, they loved it.”

Hughes and his staff, including Public Works Director Antonio and construction managers Rob Barone and Dan Reisert, “put our heart and soul into the facility and we are very proud of it.”

Hughes added lastly that the running surface on the track is the same as the track surface at UPenn, the same track where the Penn Relay is held every April for 20,000 runners.

“It’s a larger event than the Olympics, and we have the same running surface,” Hughes said. “This is top shelf.”

Helping Students at DHS Make the Grade

New deans focus on new challenges



Photo credit: Noah Havasi

Transitioning from middle school to high school isn't easy, but after spending the past year and a half in remote online learning, it's been even harder, say Danbury High School Deans Angelo Marrero and Andrew Lambo.

The two former DHS teachers started the fall semester as Deans, managing dozens of students in danger of failing freshman year. The new three-year positions were created through federal grants designed to address issues intensified by the pandemic.

Marrero and Lambo agree that, despite everyone's hard work and dedication, some students got off track during the pandemic. Sitting at home trying to learn school material remotely may have worked for some

students, but for others that loss of connection with the school community affected their academic performance.

"Finding a connection to the school is a big thing," said Marrero, who taught social studies at DHS for 12 years. He works with eight teams of freshmen, which amounts to approximately 60 students, who are failing four or more classes. The teams include five teachers of varying disciplines who meet with deans weekly to discuss strategies and interventions. The dean is responsible for developing relationships with students, faculty and families, in addition to providing different supports and dealing with discipline referrals.

Since the beginning of this school year, Marrero said he's successfully removed 20 students from his teams and back into the mainstream, but he's also added 15 new ones.

"We have to face reality," Marrero said, adding that the most important part of his job is reaching out to students and letting him know that he's there to help. "They haven't been in a classroom for a year and a half. They haven't been held accountable. Academically, they are behind and they are discouraged."

Sometimes, Marrero said helping them includes taking them out of class so they can focus on studying or so the team can intervene with a potential issue.

Lambo, who works with students who need to repeat freshman year, said the program is invaluable for what it instills emotionally, socially and academically.

"They haven't held a pencil in almost two years," Lambo said. "Now we see huge strides in their ability to effectively communicate and advocate for themselves."

Lambo said without the program and he and Marrero, the teachers are spread too thin and many students would end up repeating freshman year, a consequences that is costly to the district. Statistically, high school students struggle most in grades 9 and 10.

"If we can help get them on track then, it's easier for them," Lambo said. "If you're struggling freshman year, you're setting yourself up to struggle throughout high school."

Marrero, who is also coaches the Hatters JV basketball, is a 2002 DHS graduate. He has a history degree from Central Connecticut State University. He earned his master's degree at University of Bridgeport and a sixth-year certificate from the University of New England. Lambo, who has taught special education at Danbury Public Schools for eight years, has an education degree from Western Connecticut State University, a special education master's from St. Joseph's University, and a sixth-year certificate from Southern Connecticut State University.

"Working with the students, families, staff, and organizations of Danbury has been a truly rewarding experience," Lambo said. "We have a great thing going here in Danbury. Introducing deans as an added layer of support for our students is already proving beneficial and effective. I am excited and optimistic about what the future holds."

Robotics team places third, fifth in third competition of season



The Danbury High School robotics team competed in its third competition of the season on Nov. 13, with two of its four robots placing third and fifth of 42 competing area teams.

The robotic teams 5150 consist of a handful of students who are given control of the process of creating the robots. The learning style allows them to learn from each other as they are encouraged to help one another without a lot of input from advisors. They are given the opportunity to develop the robots by themselves and dedicate their time to perfecting the robots. For almost 10 years, the DHS Robotics Team, an afterschool program led by Team Advisor Erik Savoyski, has successfully qualified robots for the VEX Robotics world championships, which culminate the season every spring.

At the Nov. 13 competition at Ridgefield High, DHS Team 5150D finished third, H team placed fifth and teams E and

J finished 14 and 34, respectively. Team D was defeated in the final match and took home the tournament finalist award. The Team D robot was also awarded the Design award for the best engineering notebook for an unprecedented third time in a row.

Teams D, H and J currently hold fourth, seventh and 11th places, respectively in robot and programming skills in Southern New England, a separate competition for the most points scored in one minute on an open playing field.

Danbury students celebrate being first



**I'M
FIRST!**

Danbury High School Class of 2013 graduate Darrion Sprueill (pictured left, above) attended the “I’m First” celebration at Western Connecticut State University on Nov. 8. The Center for First-Generation Student Success, an initiative of the non-profit organization National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Suder Foundation, sponsored the event that was held on campuses across the country for the fourth year since 2017. The program works with first-generation college students to help them succeed. The program reaches students who anticipate being the first in their families to attend college. Danbury Public Schools, in collaboration with WestConn’s Pre-Collegiate and Access Department, works with students as early as middle school and into high school with the Excel and Upward Bound programs led by program Director Rob Pote and Assistant Director Jessica Coronel. Students participate in activities and course work to prepare them for the rigors of college prep courses and beyond. More than 300 students attended the four-hour open event held outside of Higgins Hall on the university’s Midtown campus where students shared their stories in hopes of inspiring and encouraging newcomers, as well as express their gratitude for the program.

Sprueill said the EXCEL program helped him see college as a reality. By the time he reached high school, Sprueill was in Upward Bound, setting goals and working on the college application process. The honors student became the first college graduate in his family after earning a bachelor’s degree in Social Science from WestConn. He is currently in a master’s degree program studying Educational Policy Leadership at American University.

“Being that Danbury is no diverse, this event celebrates one diversity that can unite different racial diversities,” said Coronel. “When you are the ‘first,’ you are the ‘First for Life.’ The first to graduate college and even think about a master’s and doctorate. We want students to celebrate that.”



Photo credit: Noah Havasi

Danbury native, DHS grad appointed Assistant Director of Special Education

Working at Danbury Public Schools for 20 years isn't the only thing Crystal Taft has to celebrate. Taft, a Danbury High School graduate, was recently appointed the district's Assistant Director of Special Education.

After earning a Bachelor's degree in speech and a Master of Arts in learning disabilities from Northwestern University, the Danbury native started as a special education teacher at Great Plain School working in a self-contained program for students with emotional disturbances and behavioral challenges. She was then promoted to Special Services Facilitator, facilitating PPTs and coaching staff before moving up to Special Education Supervisor for the district's middle schools. Responsibilities in her newest position include supporting the director in overseeing the department districtwide.

"In this capacity, I will be able to support administration, staff and students at all levels to do what is in the best interest of our students," she said.

For Taft, who also earned an Administrative Certification from Sacred Heart University, special education is defined as specially designed instruction that meets unique learning needs of students identified with disabilities, allowing them to perform to their fullest potential. Approximately 15 percent of the student population is identified as having special needs.

"Our enrollment for children with special needs has increased significantly over the past four years, as well as the complexity of their needs," Taft said. "These needs include, but are not limited to significant cognitive, physical and medical impairments. Danbury has done a really good job of providing tailored programs to meet the needs of an array of disabilities and abilities. We have a continuum of services that are implemented in our most restrictive, self-contained programs, to our least restrictive environment, servicing students in the general education population for the majority of their day."

Taft said the job of educators since the pandemic hit in 2020 is to focus on student engagement, a particular challenge for students with special needs. The special education teams from each school work with each other to problem solve and develop strategies that will support student engagement and learning.

"Even though we are back in school full time five days a week, we still are transitioning students into an environment they haven't been in in 18 months," Taft said. "We have strong emphasis on meeting the social and emotional needs of our students, and by stabilizing this component, students will be more engaged and available for learning. Our staff is committed to supporting this work, always keeping the students' best interest in the forefront."



CFO, Deputy Director join DPS Finance Department

Danbury Public Schools appointed two new members in September to head its Finance Department: John Spang is the district's Chief Financial Officer while Eduardo Miranda leads as Deputy Director.

Spang is the former Director of Finance and School Business Operations for the Town of Preston and Preston Public Schools. He earned a Master of Business Administration from Indiana University and a Master of Science from the Division of Administration, Policy and Urban Education from Fordham Graduate School of Education. He holds dual Bachelor of Science degrees in economics and marketing from Boston College.

“John has hands-on experience in many areas, including payroll, educational financial operations, transportation, grants and food services,” said Superintendent Kevin Walston. “As a seasoned veteran, he will immediately bring stability, planning and a steady hand to our district.”

Miranda, a former Associate Dean of Campus Administration at Capital Community College in Hartford, has spent the last decade working in higher education. His previous experience includes managing and overseeing finance operations at the high school level. He has a master's in business administration from the University of Phoenix and a bachelor's degree in science from Central Connecticut State University. He has been accepted into the Doctorate in Education Leadership program at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

“Eduardo will make a great addition to our cabinet not only for his expertise and experience, but also his clear communication style, and his passion and zeal for this position,” said Walston.

Photo credit: Noah Havasi

Hatters girls' basketball coach honored at awards banquet with Eli Manning DiNardo, Manning recognized by Franciscan Life Center



Photo credit: Noah Havasi

After leading the Hatters for more than 30 seasons and reaching 500 career wins last winter, Danbury High School girls' basketball coach Jackie DiNardo has once again been recognized -- this time as the St. Clare Award winner by the Franciscan Life Center in Meriden.

DiNardo received her award Monday, Oct. 18, at the 35th Annual Franciscan Sports Banquet and Silent Auction at the Aqua Turf along with retired New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning, recipient of the 2020 St. Francis Award. The award was given in 2020, but the banquet was postponed until now because of Covid restrictions.

"Jackie is very deserving of the St. Clare Award," said DHS Director of Athletics Chip Salvestrini. "This award represents giving back and helping others, and these are things Jackie has done all her life. Jackie's goal, as a coach and as an

administrator, is to give young people avenues to make the right choices in their lives. Jackie has an unrelenting work ethic with a heart to match. This award is a wonderful acknowledgement of her work throughout her career." DiNardo's long career of accomplishments include being named a National High School Coaches Association finalist. She led the Hatters when they won the FCIAC Tournament Championship in 2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14, becoming one of three teams to win a triple championship. In 2015, DiNardo was inducted into the Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference Hall of Fame.

The administrator of the district's REACH and Endeavor programs, an alternative program for at-risk students, DiNardo played basketball at the University of Texas and earned recognition as an All-American player. She also played for the U.S. on the Pan Am Team for Pat Summitt where the team won three gold medals and one silver. In 2005, DiNardo was inducted into the Texas Hall of Fame and into the Connecticut Basketball Hall of Fame in 2012.

Danbury Board of Education

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For questions or additions to the next newsletter, contact Robin Provey at prover@danbury.k12.ct.us

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