



the Bulletin

Oct./Nov. 2006

Ensuring opportunities for learning, personal growth & social responsibility

District website grows & grows

Easy to use & easy to remember: www.bhbl.org

A record 800 people per day visited the Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake website in September. There were a total of 24,000 visits by 6,192 unique visitors for the month. That's nearly double the number of visits in September 2005 and evidence that district residents are making use of the

latest technology to stay abreast of what's going in the school district.

Although the district has had a website for many years, its design was inconvenient and awkward to use until a brand new site was launched at www.bhbl.org in January 2006. Since then, staff have been working to add even more features and content to help folks get the information they need about BH-BL programs and services.

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Is my child safe at school?

A Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake School Safety Update

National statistics continue to show that children are much more likely to be victims of violence in their own home or neighborhood than in school. But when shootings or other violent episodes do occur in schools around the country, parents can't help but wonder "is my school doing enough to protect kids?"

And the truth is that BH-BL staff ask themselves the same question all the time: Are we doing enough? Have we hit the right balance between having schools that are open, friendly places to learn and having schools that are safe?

More than ever before, safety is an underlying theme in everything schools do. The past decade has seen a number of new state

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Middle school pupils Natalie Moore (left), Amy Zukas, Charlotte Munday & Thomas Monaghan show new library books purchased to honor veteran Board of Education member Bob Speck (center), library construction manager Tom Quinn & architect Michael Fanning at the dedication of the Robert S. Speck Library Media Center on September 12.

Construction update: Year 3 New Speck Library Media Center opens at Middle School

This summer was year number three in the five-year, \$16 million construction and renovation campaign that district voters approved in 2003. BH-BL construction managers and administrators knew it was going to be a very tough three months, and it was. This summer was the time when several of the biggest, most disruptive

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BH-BL celebrates some outstanding test scores

5th out of 85 regional school districts in Business Review survey

New York State keeps raising the bar on student achievement, but BH-BL pupils continue to be among the top performing youngsters in the entire Capital Region. Here are some recent testing highlights based on available data. (Note: NY State School Report Cards issued in May 2006 contain statewide comparative data for the 2004-05 school year. More recent test scores from the 2005-06 school year also began to be released in October.)

Independent regional ranking

BH-BL placed fifth among 85 Greater Capital Region school districts in the 2006 analysis of student achievement conducted by the *Business Review* weekly newspaper in Albany. "We've been among the top 10 districts in the *Business Review* survey for many years," says Assistant Superintendent for Instruction Rick Evans. "But it was a pleasant surprise to be ranked as high as fifth this year." The newspaper's analysis is based on state test scores in English, math, social studies and science plus graduation data. In a separate analysis of just math test scores, BH-BL ranked third out of 85 districts.

Rising to the challenge of tougher diplomas

The BH-BL Regents diploma rate jumped from 72% in 2004 to 94% for the Class of 2005 — the highest rate in Schenectady County and tied for the highest in Saratoga County. This kind of high performance continued with the Class of 2006's Regents diploma rate of 93%.

Equally impressive is the fact that more than half of the BH-BL student body is not content with the Regents diploma or even the state's new Advanced Regents diploma. The majority of our students take the additional courses and pass the additional Regents exams to earn a BH-BL Merit Seal on their diploma as well.

New and old testing challenges

The 2005-06 school year saw the introduction of many additional tests. State math and English tests used to be given only in grades 4 and 8; they are now given in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Scores on all 12 of these tests were released this fall and showed a pattern familiar to BH-BL teachers: strong results in the elementary grades and unsatisfactory results in middle school, particularly in grade 8. For instance, BH-BL 5th graders' English scores were the best among the 13 Suburban Council school districts, and our 3rd and 6th graders were second best among this same very competitive group of districts.

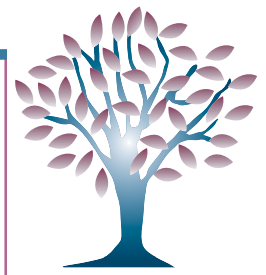
However, only 62% of Burnt Hills 8th graders passed the 2006 English exam and 75% passed the math exam. "Our results echo a regional and statewide pattern of much lower scores in 8th grade," says Evans. Middle school seems to be a time of transition when pupils are distracted by many new pressures, including social and hormonal changes. "Our dedicated teachers and administrators continue to work on raising these scores," Evans says. The good news, he notes, is that low 8th grade scores are no indication of how BH-BL students perform when they get to high school. There, Regents exam passing rates are much more typical of BH-BL pupils, with 94% of all juniors passing the English Regents and 98% of students passing the Math A Regents in June 2006.

Goal is even higher achievement

Although overall BH-BL pupil accomplishments are pretty impressive, there's still room for improvement. With leadership from the Board of Education, all five BH-BL schools have been setting annual, measurable student learning goals that are intentionally beyond what we now achieve. For instance, high school staff intend to get to a 98% Regents diploma rate by 2008, and middle school teachers are determined to reduce the number of pupils who fail two or more courses by 20% by 2008. "There's no point in setting easy goals," says Superintendent Jim Schultz. "We're convinced that teamwork is powerful. When all staff in a school or a department focus on a very specific goal, amazing things can and will happen."

For more examples of BH-BL test scores, go to: www.bhbl.org/pdfs/MeasuresofSuccess2006.pdf ♦

In math test scores, BH-BL pupils finished 3rd out of 85 Greater Capital Region school districts.



District website growing

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More features will be added this year. For instance, by January BH-BL will be part of the “School News Notifier” service from the Capital Region BOCES. This will allow parents and others to sign up to receive automatic emails when a specific event occurs, such as when school is closed due to bad weather, the district is notified by the police that a sex offender is living in our area, or the Board of Education announces the next step in budget discussions.

The site has already proved helpful when instant communication is needed. “When severe weather hits, the TV stations carry a little information about each school district, but our website has unlimited space, so we can report more details about closings,” explains BH-BL webmaster Christy Multer. Another example occurred when a woman was assaulted in her home near Pashley Elementary one afternoon last year. Glenville police asked Pashley to keep the children and buses at school until her assailant could be caught. “This is the sort of urgent news we can quickly post on the website and can keep updating it as needed,” says Multer.

The website’s primary goal is to allow parents and residents to get answers to their questions at their own convenience any time of the day or night. It also includes a “Feedback” button and many staff email addresses to facilitate two-way communication with the public. “The need for better communication is cited in almost every discussion that comes up in education today,” notes Superintendent Jim Schultz. “Over time as our website continues to grow, we’re hoping *www.bhbl.org* will be the first place people look for the information they need.” ♦

BH-BL Sept. 2006 website statistics

Total visits to the site in September: 24,000
 Visits per day: 800
 Unique visitors: 6,192
 Most active day of the week: Tuesdays
 Least active day of the week: Saturdays
 Most active hour of the day: 9 - 10 am
 Least active hour of the day: 3 - 4 am
 Files most often downloaded from the site:
 2006-07 district calendar & 2006-07 high school course guide
 After the US, most frequent location of site visitors: Germany 91, Canada 16, Netherlands 12, Turkey 10, & United Kingdom 8

Check it out

at www.bhbl.org

To learn about:	Click on:
1. Rules for student conduct & the dress code in each school	“Student Handbook” in that school’s Quick View
2. Each day’s sporting events & directions	“Sports”
3. Upcoming alumni reunions & addresses of former BH-BL classmates	“Alumni”
4. Official district policies on hundreds of topics	“Board of Education”
5. Teacher email addresses	“Staff Directory” in that school’s Quick View
6. What’s for lunch today	“Cafeteria”
7. How the school budget is developed & how tax bills are determined	“Board of Education”

District implements stricter audit controls

In the wake of the Roslyn school scandal on Long Island, the State Comptroller’s Office has issued tighter audit requirements for all NY school districts. During the past year, state auditing teams have also begun visiting every district to pore over financial records and check for compliance with the comptroller’s new five-point plan.

While BH-BL has yet to receive a visit from state auditors, staff members have already instituted new controls and tightened up procedures. “We’ve had 20 years of clean audits with not one adverse finding from our independent external auditor, Dorfman-Robbie, PC,” says Assistant Superintendent Jacqueline St. Onge, “but the comptroller is

now asking for much greater control than before. In almost every school district his team visits, they’ve found room for improvement. At BH-BL we’re trying to make those improvements before they get here.”

The district has hired a part-time claims auditor, who checks every bill paid to see if proper procedures were followed. The business office is requiring staff to provide more details to support claims made for various types of expenses, and we are contracting with an independent CPA to serve as an internal auditor and advise us where we are vulnerable and what procedural changes are needed. ♦



Summer Construction Projects

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tive projects in the whole campaign had to be scheduled at three of our schools simultaneously.

Despite the anxious weeks when needed parts were late in arriving, the O'Rourke Middle School opened in September with a brand new library, and classes resumed on time at the BH-BL High School and Pashley Elementary.

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Middle School work complete

Work at the Middle School actually began 18 months ago. Now, that school has a bigger cafeteria with a new stage and a brand new kitchen, a new more efficient heating system, more electrical capacity, two remodeled science labs, two additional classrooms, and other improvements, including the brand new Robert S. Speck Library Media Center visible from Lakehill Road.

More than a mile of new piping at High School

By far the biggest construction project at the High School this summer was replacing that building's 50-year-old original steam heating system with a much more energy-efficient hot water system. This involved installing not only new central boilers and new univents in most classrooms but also new piping to connect everything. To do this, ceilings were removed in offices and hallways throughout both floors of the front, original section of the school. More than a mile of piping had to be installed in hundreds of small sections up inside hallway ceilings. During this process, old ceiling tiles were replaced, and brighter energy-efficient lights were installed as well.

Another big high school project was installing a larger electrical transformer to significantly increase electrical capacity. Keeping computer servers and the district phone system (whose hub is in the high school) running throughout this transition was a challenge. "As a team we saw some incredible efforts on the part of our construction, maintenance, and custodial crews all summer," says Superintendent Jim Schultz, pointing in particular to the five-day period when the high school was without power and BH-BL construction chiefs Jim Martin, Tony Puglisi and Tom Quinn took turns

This interior view of the Middle School's Robert S. Speck Library Media Center shows the room's skylights, which add to the spacious airy feeling of the central reading area.

Named to honor our 33-year veteran school board member, the Speck Library Media Center has a separate exterior entrance and is intended to be used for community as well as school events. It houses Mr. Speck's school history archives and includes a flexible-use dual classroom/computer lab. The district was also excited to learn in early October that it is receiving a \$25,000 member-item grant from Senator Hugh Farley to pay for new Middle School library computers.



coming in at midnight or later to gas up generators to keep district phones, email, and internet access running.

Other High School projects include a new main entrance that is fully handicapped accessible with an updated look and new canopy. Several handicapped parking spots were added in front of the school. Projects still under construction on the back of the school include a new band room, expanded Fitness Center and small storage area.

Changes at Pashley

Pashley Elementary School is sporting a new look, too, as workers there finish up an enlarged new main entrance. As planned, the adjoining brand new kitchen is still under construction. In the meantime, food service staff are serving pupils right in the cafeteria. Using techniques learned last year when the Middle School kitchen was under construction, staff have been grilling some Pashley food items outdoors, and much food is brought in from other schools.

Other changes at Pashley include work to install an elevator. Pashley is the last district school to receive handicapped access to its second floor. Also, school hallways are now noticeably lighter and brighter, thanks to new ceilings and lighting fixtures installed this summer. Additional lights were also installed in the school parking lot.

Higher costs mean fewer projects

An ongoing problem throughout the five-year campaign has been how fast construction costs have risen nationwide, particularly the huge increases in the price of steel and roof insulation in 2004, even before Hurricane Katrina drove prices still higher. Since the district cannot exceed the \$16 million authorized by the voters, many planned projects have been scaled back and some had to be dropped altogether. Now, state EXCEL aid may provide some relief. (See related sidebar, right.) ♦



Pashley Elementary School's brand new entrance provides better handicapped access, more security since the entry is now visible to office staff, and a vestibule with double doors to keep out the winter winds and save energy.

EXCEL aid means no cost to local taxpayers

Another bond vote on horizon in January or February

BH-BL administrators recently learned that a new form of state building aid could mean as much as \$4.9 million in new state funding to renovate or upgrade our school facilities.

The new program is called EXCEL aid (Expanding Children's Education and Learning). It was included in the NY state legislature's budget last April, providing \$1.8 billion in infrastructure improvements for New York City schools and \$800 million for other school districts, based on their enrollment. Detailed terms and conditions for applying for EXCEL aid weren't announced by the State Education Department until October.

Using EXCEL aid, Burnt Hills could finance projects of approximately \$4.9 million with NO COST to local taxpayers because:

- State EXCEL aid would pay for \$1,100,000 (23%) to cover what is usually the local taxpayers' share of renovation projects, and
- Regular state building aid would pay the remaining \$3,800,000 (77%).

Although there is no deadline for applying for EXCEL, the State Education Department is recommending school districts do it soon since no one knows how long the available funds will last. The Board of Education is considering a January or February 2007 referendum to be sure BH-BL gets its share of this money.

"Our first thought was to use this to help pay for the existing \$16 million construction campaign," says Assistant Superintendent for Support Services Jacqueline St. Onge, "but unfortunately the law won't allow us to use EXCEL funds to pay for any work that has already been bonded."

The good news is that EXCEL can pay for many of the projects that were originally part of the current \$16 million campaign but that had to be cut when construction costs grew so rapidly in the past three years. "These are projects that the community already told us were priorities, like roofing work at Stevens and replacing more windows and hallway ceilings," says St. Onge.

In a preliminary discussion, school board members were excited that EXCEL aid was a chance to get the state to pay for some of our long-term energy concerns, like replacing all the single-pane windows on the front wall of the high school. "With EXCEL aid we have the chance to reap a double benefit: the state pays for the work and then we save heating dollars for years to come," says St. Onge.

Updated costs for projects cut from the 2003 renovations plan are being calculated, and more information on the possible EXCEL referendum will be shared as soon as possible. ♦





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Currently both secondary schools are working to reduce their number of "disengaged" students by helping these students form a strong and healthy connection with at least one adult at school.

Is my child safe at school?

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and federal safety mandates, plus higher parental expectations regarding safety. Here's a list of many of the things we do at Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake to ensure the safety of students and staff.

- The district Safety Committee meets monthly to evaluate ALL aspects of school life that relate to safety. Whether the concern is air quality, construction safety, playground safety or preparing for a flu epidemic, having a committee of teachers, parents, custodians and other staff take a comprehensive look at these issues together has been very beneficial. Several of the improvements listed below grew out of Safety Committee recommendations.
- All school staff wear photo ID badges daily, and under state law, all new staff (even substitutes) are fingerprinted and checked for criminal records, particularly any record of child abuse.
- During the school day, exterior doors are kept locked from the outside except for the main school entrance. All substitutes, volunteers and visitors entering the building must sign in and wear a temporary ID badge during school hours.
- Several school entrances have been renovated to improve staff members' view of those entering their building. Some schools have security cameras at their entrance or other specific area. Some schools have hall monitors who sign in visitors. The high school employs three security monitors with law enforcement experience who help supervise entrances, hallways, parking lots and sporting events.
- Parking lot improvements for greater safety have included adding speed bumps, better lighting, and/or security cameras. At Charlton Heights the parking lot was completely redesigned recently to separate bus and car traffic for safety.
- High school pupils who drive in an unsafe manner at school have their parking privileges taken away. Students who commit vandalism are made to pay for repairs to the school property they damaged. Teens who break the law at school are turned over to the police. This kind of firm response to inappropriate or unsafe behavior is a deterrent that sends a strong message to our students.
- All students get a copy of their school's Student Handbook, which includes a Code of Conduct spelling out rules for appropriate behavior and the consequences of inappropriate behavior. (These are also available at www.bhbl.org.)
- We have been fortunate to have a state trooper assigned to our district full time for several years. School resource officer Trooper Walter Sparks is based at the high school but works with staff in all five schools. He conducts site security surveys, addresses specific concerns as they come up, and has been very helpful in investigating and resolving incidents quickly. The visible presence of a state trooper, particularly at the high school, is another reason why the number of serious incidents in our schools is so low.
- Every 11 months, the fire marshal and buildings and grounds supervisor perform a detailed room-by-room inspection of all schools and other district buildings for hazards. Their reports are shared with custodians, principals and the Board of Education, and any needed corrective actions are taken.
- Protecting students' health and safety is what our five school nurses do all day. For instance, procedures to safeguard children with life-threatening allergies were recently updated with help from parents.
- BH-BL bus routes are written to reduce the number of children who must cross a road to enter or exit a bus. This is just one detail in the Transportation Department's comprehensive emphasis on safety. Other examples of bus safety practices are listed in the district calendar and at www.bhbl.org/district/bus/buspolicy.htm
- As required by law, school computers use filtering software that protects pupils from inappropriate online material.
- Starting in elementary school, pupils are taught how to keep their bodies healthy and how to say "no" to drugs, smoking and other unsafe (though sometimes popular) behaviors.
- Teachers and teacher assistants receive training in how to recognize troubled pupils or those



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- who may be at risk. Each school has a social worker and a Pupil Assistance Team to coordinate help for such pupils. Currently both secondary schools are working to reduce their number of “disengaged” students by helping these students form a strong and healthy connection with at least one adult at school. This is a key strategy for avoiding Columbine-type situations.
- As required by law, students have 10 fire drills a year. They also practice situations called a school “lock-out” (no one may enter or leave the building but classes go on as usual indoors) and a “lock-down” (everyone goes into the nearest room, locks the door and waits for further instructions on the public address system). The latter would be used to move everyone out of harm’s way while a suspected threat inside the building (such as from an intruder) was evaluated.
 - School staff use and practice the same Incident Command System of crisis management that is used by police and fire officials for better communication and cooperation during an emergency. We also follow the safety and security recommendations of the State Education Department related to federal Homeland Security Alert Levels.
 - BH-BL staff receive advice, training and safety updates from the Capital Region BOCES Risk Management Service. Thanks to the speed of email and the BOCES concept of local school districts working together on shared needs, BH-BL administrators are often informed about possible safety threats before these threats become public knowledge, which enables us to be better prepared.
 - Copies of the Material Safety Data Sheets for all potentially hazardous substances used in each school can be viewed by contacting the school principal. Also available for public perusal in the district business office are the district’s emergency preparedness plan, asbestos management plan, annual fire inspection reports, and the results of testing for radon in the air and lead in the water.

Most importantly, our schools work hard to create an atmosphere in which everyone is responsible for safety and everyone will be listened to. No one wants schools that feel like a prison, but students and parents and all staff need to be safety conscious and to speak up whenever they spot a potential hazard. Continuing this dialogue can help us stay safe as our community grows and our society changes in future years. As October’s school shooting headlines have once again demonstrated, we really are all in this together. ◆

Reassessment follow-up:

Property assessments soar, causing tax rates to fall

In September BH-BL Superintendent Jim Schultz had to disappoint several residents who wanted another sports team, bus route or high school course for their child. Surely the district could afford this now, they said, thanks to “all that extra money” coming in from the huge rise in Ballston and Glenville’s property assessments this year.

Unfortunately, there was no “extra money,” though this is a common misconception. In actuality, schools do not benefit when property values are reevaluated. A town-wide revaluation does not change the total TAX LEVY, which is how much money the school district needs to balance its budget. The revaluation simply recalculates who should pay what portion of the SAME tax levy to try to share the tax burden more fairly.

In fact, when property values go up dramatically through a revaluation, the tax RATE per thousand dollars of assessed value goes down because the school still needs the same number of tax dollars (the tax levy). That is exactly what happened in Glenville and Ballston this fall. Assessed property values grew by more than 50%, but tax rates declined. Ballston residents paid \$17.85 per thousand dollars of their new assessment, down from a rate of \$22.32 in 2005. The Glenville school tax rate fell even more because it had been longer since Glenville reassessed its properties. The new Glenville tax rate was \$17.85, down from \$27.14 per thousand dollars of assessed value in 2005.

Of course even though Glenville and Ballston tax rates declined, most BH-BL homeowners’ school tax bill increased because the tax levy was 5.8% higher than it was in 2005. The point is that this increase was exactly what the Board of Education had predicted it would be when it presented the school budget to the voters last May. ◆

Board of Education

Elizabeth Herkenham,
President
Nancy Della Pia
Timothy Kelliher
Joseph Pericone, Jr.
Robert Speck
Michael Wolf

50 Cypress Drive
Glenville, NY 12302
518/399-9141
518/399-1882 fax
www.bhbl.org

B U R N T H I L L S - B A L L S T O N L A K E C E N T R A L S C H O O L S

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Community budget interaction is school board goal

It may only be November, but BH-BL Board of Education members are already thinking about how to improve next spring's school budget process. One goal for Board president Elizabeth Herkenham is to involve more residents and community groups in budget discussions.

A list of groups and their representatives is being formed. Groups who would like to be kept informed about the new budget as it develops from January to May 2007, or who may wish to have a Board of Education member come speak to them, should contact Mrs. Herkenham at 384-0065. Also, anyone can follow the budget process as it unfolds on the district website. Just go to www.bhbl.org and click on "Board of Education." ♦

Charlton Heights playground efforts will let the "Magic" continue

After a year of fund-raisers, Charlton Heights parents, staff and students have raised \$55,136 toward the \$90,000 they need to rebuild the school's Magic Maze creative playground next June. The school is hoping to defray many costs with donated building supplies and will need hundreds of volunteers to actually construct the playground on June 13 - 17, 2007. "It's great fun to all be working together on such a worthwhile goal," says principal Tim Sinnenberg. Many more fund-raisers are planned this year. You can check out what's happening next on the Charlton Heights pages of www.bhbl.org or call volunteer chair Mary Beth Frewin at 399-7736 with your questions. ♦

Can't hide that Spartan pride!

BH-BL Student Achievement

- 99% of BH-BL 4th graders passed the 2005 state science exam — the second best results in the state.
- BH-BL math tests scores ranked 3rd out of 85 Greater Capital Region school districts.
- BH-BL overall achievement was ranked 5th out of 85 school districts by the *Business Review* newspaper.
- 10 years ago, typically 65% of the graduating class earned Regents diplomas. Now that number is 93-94%.
- Typically 50% or more of the BH-BL graduating class goes beyond state Regents requirements to earn a BH-BL Merit Seal on their diplomas.
- More special education pupils are earning Regents diplomas too, including 10 of 23 graduates with disabilities in 2005.
- Thanks to lots of extra efforts and new approaches to old problems, our dropout rate has remained at 0.9% to 1.5% over the last four years despite more state tests and course requirements for graduation.
- Teachers work together on annual goals to improve student performance in specific, measurable ways, such as higher passing rates on 4th grade English exams and high school Regents exams.

See page 2 for more information on what's happening with test scores and other measurements of BH-BL student learning.

