

# District Highlights

VOLUME 2-ISSUE 4 NOVEMBER 2022

## NEWTOWN MAINTENANCE & FACILITIES DEPARTMENT

### DEAR NEWTOWN COMMUNITY,

More often than not, when we think of corporate entities and governmental agencies, we envision flowcharts that outline vertical layers of authority. School systems are a little different. Perhaps we can envision a more lateral flowchart model. If we look at the deeper meaning of a school SYSTEM, then we are able to see more clearly that everyone working in that system are really caregivers to all the students and families in the community. If we look at the system in detail, we can see that every person working within the central office and individual schools are vital members of a precision machine (metaphorically speaking) made up of interdependent parts. Schools are special places where every member of the staff has the potential to influence and encourage students in ways that last a lifetime. With the regular part of their duties, custodians/maintenance and facilities personnel re-create pristine welcoming places each day for students. Shimmering floors, refreshed classrooms, and spotless cafeterias await the hustle bustle of students each day. All the things that make for "good working order" and answering calls, that respond to every imaginable facilities issue during the day, becomes routine for these caring, creative, and flexible staff members. This issue of District Highlights is proud to illuminate the custodial/maintenance and facilities part of our school system and the enormous impact behind the scenes that all these staff members generously contribute for the benefit of the Newtown Public School Students. Enjoy!

Don Ramsey, BOE Communications Subcommittee Chairman

## FIELD OF DREAMS



**By Chris Melillo, Superintendent**

In the 1989 movie, *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner plays an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella. As a farmer, Ray has fallen on hard times, but while standing in his corn field one day, he sees a vision of a baseball field where part of his cornfield is accompanied by a voice telling him, "If you build it, he will come". Ray then sets out to build the baseball field from his vision, being spurred onward by a voice telling him that if he builds it, they will come. Much like this movie, many in Newtown saw the potential that an artificial multipurpose field would bring to the greater community. The benefits of the artificial turf field would increase play space by allowing multiple teams to use the field during the same sports season. Modern turf fields also reduce injuries, allow play under adverse weather, and at the same time decrease water use compared to natural turf.

Previously, a grass multipurpose field endured heavy use by multiple high school sports, marching band and many local youth organizations. The excessive use of the field resulted in an area where the grass would not grow and would result in the field becoming a literal "dust bowl." The new turf field allows for increased usage in the area due to its durability, versatility and low-maintenance characteristics. This field can be played on essentially 24 hours a day, seven days a week.. These fields are especially useful in the spring and fall, when temperatures are more moderate than in the heat of the summer.

Through a collaborative effort from the greater Newtown community. Newtown Public Schools unveiled its new multipurpose turf field in early September. With support from the Parks and Recreation Commission, a private donation, Newtown High School athletic groups, town funding, and youth sports groups made this "dream" become a reality. Currently, the field is being used by Newtown Youth Football, Newtown Marching Band, and Newtown High School Football. Later in the year, a majority of the field sports will have access to the field, as well as



Newtown Youth Lacrosse. Most school sports fields are also used for gym class, band practice, community activities as well as practices and games.

## HAWLEY HVAC PROJECT

**By Dan Cruson**

In August of 2003 the Climate Control Committee, a group of Newtown School District staff, administrators, and parents, released a report analyzing all 6 district schools (Reed was under construction at the time). The report detailed a number of recommendations classified as short term, median term and long-term projects. Among the long-term recommendations were large scale improvements to the HVAC systems at Hawley, Newtown Middle School, and Middle Gate, in that order, to address issues with air quality. This began the 20-year journey to bring the first of these projects, installing a modern HVAC system at Hawley, to fruition.

The project that was recommended and is currently underway is more than just air conditioning. The goal was to improve the air quality within the building through the ability to properly filter and temper air being drawn in from outside the building. Air conditioning is a part of the project, but it is an added benefit to the project. When I spoke with Bob Gerbert, the Director of Facilities, about the project, he likened it to buying a new car. He said that you would go out and buy a car for \$45,000 and if air conditioning was only \$2,000 extra you would probably spring for that added benefit. The same is true here, the majority of the system is focused on manage the air flow through the building but since it is already doing that it can also cool the air when needed.

To accomplish this, the entirety of the 1921 and 1948 section of Hawley needs to be outfitted with duct work. In addition, there will be 2 air handlers added to the lower roof of the 1921 section, 2 air handlers added in the roof of the 1921 section, and 4 air handlers added to the roof of the 1948 section of the building. The 1997 section of the school was originally built with 6 air handlers to drive the HVAC for the public portions of that section (gym, library, offices, etc). However, a 7th air handler will be added to extend the existing system into the classrooms that are in that section of the building. All of this will handle the delivery of fresh air from outside into the building. In cooler months it will also temper the air coming in so that it arrives in the rooms warmer than if it came directly in, although the existing heating system will continue to handle the main heating of the building. And in warmer months the system will be able to cool the air to keep the building at a comfortable temperature.

In the summer of 2020, design work began in earnest so that a clear picture could be created of the time and cost that would be required to make this project a reality. The district hired Christopher Williams Associates to do the architectural designs and BVH to complete the mechanical and electrical engineering diagrams. Once those were complete, Downs Construction took the designs and did walk throughs of the building to prepare a cost estimate as well as two potential schedules for completing the work. The two schedules gave the Board of Education the option to either move the classes at Hawley out of the building for a year or try and complete the project in three distinct pieces across three years.

After much discussion it was decided that the safest plan for the students and staff of Hawley would be for them to be out of the building while work was being done.

Planning to be able to do the work necessary to bring a modern HVAC system to the two oldest parts of Hawley, which were built in 1921 and 1948, was a herculean task. Since the project was scheduled to take close to a year to complete, temporary classrooms had to be found for the students and teachers to move to for the 22-23 school year. Space was found at Sandy Hook and Reed Intermediate school that could be used by the classes from Hawley, while space at Head O' Meadow was made available for the Pre-School program that is normally at Sandy Hook to use. Once school let out in June, the actual work could begin with the maintenance staff and temporary summer employees working with Siracusa Moving and Storage across three days to transport everything from Hawley to either Sandy Hook or Reed Intermediate so it would be available for the 2022-2023 school year.

Work continues to be on schedule and on budget since June. As of late October 2022, all of the ceilings and wall demolition has been completed in the 1921 and 1948 portions of the building and the work of installing the ducts and wiring is ongoing. There are two parts of the project which have been delayed by supply chain issues, a main switch gear and a transformer which are currently scheduled to arrive in July. However, both parts are not needed until near the end of the project, so their delay has not caused work to stop or even slow down. So, the continued hope and expectation is that students will be able to return to Hawley school in August of 2023 to higher air quality and a more pleasant learning environment.

*I would like to thank the Director of Facilities, Bob Gerbert, for sitting down with me to discuss the project's history and current progress.*

## DISTRICT SUMMER PROJECTS

**By Janet Kuzma**

When school lets out in June, most of our students & staff take a much needed break and spend time with their families. While our custodial and maintenance staff don't get to take the summers off, they do get a chance for a change of pace and to showcase some of their skills through the districts summer projects. This past summer was no exception with projects being done at five of our seven schools.

There were multiple projects that took place at Head O' Meadow school over the summer to give the school some much needed updates. As a former student of Head O' Meadow back in the 1980's, I had to chuckle when I returned to Head O' meadow a few year ago to see the decades old bright green rubber floor still there. After many years of use, the floor began to have some trouble spots which became a tripping hazard. It was obviously time for some updating. The project was completed on time and ready to welcome kids on the first day of school.

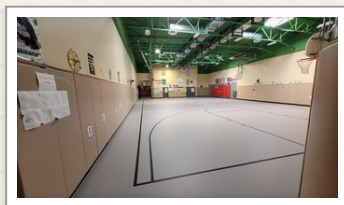
Also at Head O' Meadow, there were bathrooms throughout the school that were in need of some updating. What is unique about this project is that portions of it were hired out to vendors. We also had the skills among our maintenance staff to keep a good portion of the work in house. Between the vendors and the in-house staff, they worked very hard to get this project completed by the start of school in August.

Head O' Meadow was also in need of replacement carpeting around their media center. Some remedies were tried, like re-gluing, but eventually the carpet continued to curl up around the edges and become a tripping hazard. There were also similar issues with carpets at Middle Gate & Reed School which led to replacing those as well. Both the green and the blue house on the upper level of Reed received new carpet.

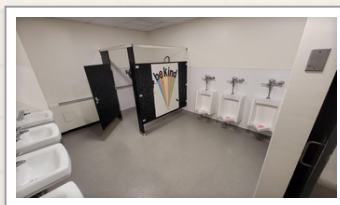
At Newtown Middle School, our staff was working hard to give the main gym a fresh coat of paint to spruce it up. Newtown Middle School also saw a portion of the sidewalk replaced beginning from the street down to the C-Wing. This is a project which will continue over the next few summers to get the entire sidewalk replaced.

Last but not least, two summer projects were completed at Newtown High School. The entire carpet flooring was replaced in the Lecture Hall due to regular wear and tear. The carpet is essentially one big piece and over time the tears become irreparable. The computer lab at the High School also received new flooring. This room was originally carpeted but was replaced entirely with vinyl tile flooring. The new flooring will be easier to clean and repair if necessary.

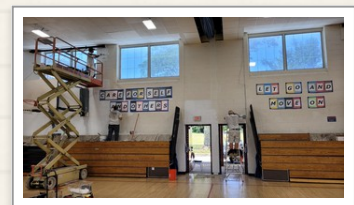
I would like to thank Bob Gerbert, Director of Facilities, for taking the time to speak with me about all the summer projects. When asked if there was anything else he would like to add, Mr. Gerbert said he would like to thank the maintenance and custodial staff for their hard work and effort in collaborating with vendors. Both staff and vendors worked many late nights and weekend hours to make sure the projects were completed. I would also like to join Mr. Gerbert in thanking everyone who helped make the return to school more pleasant with some much needed updates.



HOM GYMNASIUM



HOM BATHROOM



NMS GYMNASIUM

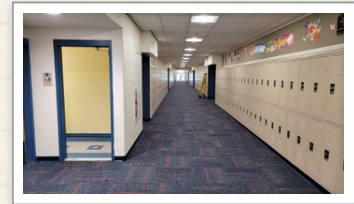




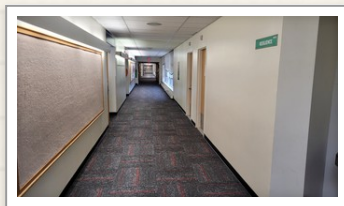
NHS LECTURE HALL



NHS COMPUTER LAB



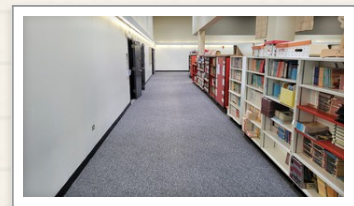
RIS UPPER LEVEL  
BLUE HOUSE



MIDDLE GATE HALL  
CARPET



NMS SIDEWALK  
REPAIR



HOM MEDIA CENTER  
CARPET

~ A CLOSER LOOK ~

## A MORE PERSONAL VIEW OF SCHOOL BASED CUSTODIANS



STEVE CARLSON



ERIC VENTURA



RICH MILLS

By Don Ramsey

In addition to exploring the day-to-day operation of our schools from a custodial/maintenance

perspective, it is most interesting to delve into the personalities behind the tools and equipment. For this article, we have selected Steve Carlson at Head O'Meadow School, Rich Mills at Reed Intermediate School, and Eric Ventura at Newtown High School. I want to thank each of these gentlemen for submitting to a personal interview and allowing me to see a more personal side of what motivates their all-important work.

Steve Carlson has been with us since 1992 when he began as a part time employee with tours at Hawley School as the Head Custodian and service at Newtown Middle School. He greeted me with a most affable manner and smiled generously for the camera knowing that he would be featured in a district wide publication. He told the story of Head O'Meadow in September of 2022 when he arrived as needing quite a bit attention. He credits all the teachers that showed gratitude for all his efforts to bring the school back online with spit shine cleanliness and good organization. He credited much of his motivation to the interpersonal comradery of all the staff at Head O'Meadow and the support of grateful parents who attend PTA functions and volunteer type activities. He enjoys tremendously the joy and spirit of kids during the day as well as special events with families. Speaking of Steve in the most complimentary way, Mr. Tim Napolitano said, "He along with the team, work hard to make sure that our building is taken care of. He is always willing to help with anything asked of him. He has built relationships with the students and staff. We are lucky to have him here at HOM!"

Working as Custodian since the opening of Reed School, Rich Mills is fast out the gate to express that helping kids is the intangible reward of his position. We had a long discussion about the challenges of moving and setting up 16 -18 classrooms from Hawley School to Reed

Intermediate while the HVAC project is underway at Hawley. From the most intimate inside perspective on the move, he is most positive about the "smooth transition" forming a school within a school in a most collegial way. He feels a great deal of satisfaction in facilitating that move from last June until the opening of schools when classroom facilities were ready for teachers and students to hit the ground running. Rich's ever cheerful demeanor is known by me on a personal level since the time of his service at Newtown Middle School before his transfer to Reed Intermediate upon that school opening mid-year of the 2002 – 2003 school year. Rich really enjoys his work and appreciates the fact that often he is the "first face" parents see when coming into the building during special events and performances. Though he especially enjoys his time in the cafeteria interacting directly with the students, he did point out the challenges of going from four lunch waves to six lunch waves after the merge of Hawley

School Students. Like Steve Carlson at Head O'Meadow, Rich expressed how parents show appreciation for his efforts to support various PTA functions and other after school events and

meetings. Speaking of Rich in a most grateful way, Reed School Principal, Dr. Matt Correia expressed that, "Rich is a dedicated and hardworking individual. It's always a Yes with Rich, no matter the task or difficulty level. Rich has been part of the RIS Custodial Team for years and works closely with administration, the main office and entire Reed Staff. Within his role, he

checks in with staff daily, is always seeking to provide support and make our days a little easier. He is kind, caring, and a go getter. We are truly lucky to have him at Reed!"

Newtown High School is the largest facility in the district. Along with that are challenges that traverse the needs of faculty in many types of educational settings. As I arrived on the campus,

Eric Ventura greeted me and we proceeded to the main office conference room for the interview. Indeed, Eric is a 1985 graduate of Newtown High School! Relating his experience as a student, Eric had nothing but fond memories including his role as manager of sports teams at the time. After graduation he worked for Stew Leonard's before taking on his role as Custodian at Newtown High School in the school year 2000 – 2001. In a most energetic and affectionate way, Eric emphasized that he found a home at Newtown High School. He alluded to a simple mission to just "make people happy". He mentioned his desire to be responsive and flexible to every need. While it is apparent that the regular duties of a custodian at such a large facility is varied due to the variety of educational offerings that include a natatorium and other specialized areas of activity oriented instruction, our conversation was centered around his activities to support the sports programs on his own time. He attends games and offers donations for plaques and banners and the state of the art scoreboard that overlooks the Nighthawks Football Stadium. Speaking of Eric in the most appreciative way along with all the other custodial staff that she said are, "simply amazing", Newtown High School Principal Dr. Kimberly Longobucco added that, "Eric is a hard worker who is dedicated to making sure everyone is taken care of. He always responds quickly and is a pleasure to work with. Eric is also an avid Newtown High School sports supporter. He attends all of our games and shares in the victories of our student athletes. We are very lucky and endlessly thankful to have Eric on the NHS team."

BOB GERBERT, DIRECTOR OF FACILITIES





**By Janet Kuzma**

I am very excited to take this opportunity and share a little bit of a “closer look” at Bob Gerbert, Director of Facilities.

Bob is a life-long CT resident. He was born and raised in Stamford but now lives with his wife of 13 years and 8 year old twin boys, in Trumbull. He began working for the Newtown Public School district in August of 2019 after leaving an unpleasant job at Purdue Pharma in Stamford. Prior to that, he worked for the Town of Stamford where he was the project manager for school capital projects. He knew from this experience that he wanted to work in a school district.

When you speak to Bob you can immediately see that he has passion for what he does. When asked what his favorite parts about the job were, he didn't hesitate and immediately responded

with, "I love the people!" What he also enjoys about the job is how with different facilities, "There is a new adventure every day and you're always getting presented with different kinds of tasks". Through all of the tasks, he has the opportunity to work with different people and move from building to building. He manages roughly 60 employees and he said, "It's a pleasure to work with every one of them because they are all going in the same direction and really care about their jobs".

I asked Mr. Gerbert if there were any challenges that he foresees in the near future and he expressed that while there are always budget challenges, we can expect to see some supply chain issues coming up as well. It can be crippling to a district if we are not able to get certain products, such as cleaning supplies, paper products, tools, and the like. While supply issues appeared to have improved for a while, it looks as though we might see issues coming back with higher prices on many items.

On a more positive note, I concluded my interview with Mr. Gerbert by asking him if there are any goals/projects that he is looking forward to completing. He expressed that when he came to Newtown there was a divide between the "town side" and Board of Education and that he wanted to bridge the gap. He would like for people to realize that now there is a good working relationship between both the town side and the Board of Education. He is also a member of several committees where there is collaboration between the two entities. As far as goals, he wishes to try and get ahead of the curve and be more proactive about things instead of waiting until things are broken to reactively address.

It was an absolute pleasure to interview Bob and I would like to thank him for giving us the opportunity to get to know him a little better on a personal level.



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