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Hopatcong

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standards for three consecutive years.

The district must now allocate 20 percent of its federal funding — about \$33,000 — for needy students to supplement education services such as tutoring. It also must complete a school improvement plan detailing what measures it will take to enhance scores.

New programs for 2005-06

The middle school's plan for 2005-06 includes providing additional professional development activities for teachers, implementing test-preparation programs and making teachers aware of the areas needing improvement.

"During our in-service days teachers are reviewing the curriculum to find where deficiencies are so we can target those areas early on," Williams said. "If we're particularly strong in an area, we might spend less time there and more in another area."

Problem-solving in math and writing in language arts are areas that have consistently seemed to need improvement, Williams said.

The district has also set up some of its own practices to help lift test scores, including rearranging the lessons in its curriculum and aligning instructional materials to meet the demands of the testing program.

"Usually teachers start with chapter 1 and go to chapter 20," Superintendent Wayne Threlkeld said. "But the tests are given in March and some areas may not be taught until April or May. The teacher

might now move Chapter 18 up earlier in the year if that is something covered on the test."

For the past four years, the district has administered its own assessment tests to students in grades not taking the state tests. The district's tests mirror those given by the state and are used to forecast how students will fare the next year and identify areas in need of improvement.

Remedial classes in both math and language arts are also offered at all grade levels. Doug Merkle, who teaches a remedial math class to high school students, says he has seen improvements in his class during last three years it has been offered.

"The numbers [of students] in the remedial classes are going down as students come into high school," Merkle said. "If we can catch kids at risk earlier, we can fix more problems."

In Merkle's class, students spend time working out problems on the computer at their own pace but are also offered one-on-one help and work in small groups.

"It's very effective because different students respond to different ways of learning," Merkle said. "Kids are benefiting from it and I've been seeing tremendous progress."

Diverse students a factor in scores

While administrators are working to improve scores at the middle school, concerns are also rising at the district's other grade levels. Hopatcong High School met the standards this year after not meeting them the two years prior. The Durban Avenue Elementary School was put on an early-warning list because



Photo by Ellie Ashby/NJH

Students in the halls between periods at Hopatcong Middle School last week.

it did not pass the special education language arts indicator this year but had in previous years.

Hopatcong's diverse student population is a factor in its lower percentage scores, said Assistant Superintendent Trudy Doyle.

"Most of our subgroups are counted whereas other schools may not have enough students in each subgroup to count," she said.

If a grade level does not contain at least 20 students in a subgroup, the subgroup's results are not counted toward the school's overall score. For the special education subgroup, a grade must contain at least 35 students.

Special education students should be held to different standards, Threlkeld said.

"If the goal is by 2014 to make sure no child is left behind it's more realistic to

desegregate the groups and let them stand on their own merit," Threlkeld said. "When they are all thrown into the hopper together it makes it look like there's a huge problem and there's not a huge problem in Hopatcong."

Doyle agreed. "We don't leave them behind," Doyle said. "We are giving them an adequate education and tracking their progress, but holding them to the same standards as other students defies logic."

Nearly 20 percent of Hopatcong's students are in special education, which is slightly higher than the average in the county.

"It may be a tad higher, but many schools have 16 or 17 percent," County Superintendent of Schools Barry Worman said. "And Sussex Tech is well over 30 percent."

Sussex County Technical School is currently in year-two status after scores from its special education subgroups did not meet the required percentages.

Combining scores from all subgroups together can pose a problem for school districts, Worman said.

"It can be one or two students that put them in a failing place," he said. "A school could be succeeding overall and if one or two fails that subcategory could still fail."

Despite obtaining third-year status, Hopatcong Middle School did increase its scores in the last year, Threlkeld said.

"If the percentage were the same as the previous year, we would have exceeded the standards," he said.

Doyle remains hopeful for this school year's test results.

"We have done well and seen scores rise," she said. "We will do whatever we can to get out of this mess."

Fisher

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"soft" reputation. After marking Fisher as an easy target, he gave a pistol to Russo, his underling in the gang, with the order to "show him what's up."

But — even leaving aside the two sentences coming up on Oct. 19, exactly a week after the second anniversary of Mark's death — that doesn't mean the case, or the trips to Brooklyn, are anywhere near over.

"I say this is just the beginning," Nancy Fisher said Friday, a day after Russo's conviction and three days after Guica's. "Is it closure for us? It's not."

For the Fishers, the chain of events that led Mark from an Upper East Side bar to a party at Guica's house with people he had just met, to lying face-down next to a sidewalk two blocks away, six bullet wounds in his torso, remains shrouded in speculation.

The guilty verdicts, they hope,

may serve as catalysts to answer some of their nagging questions about who else may have been involved.

"Our hopes were always that, if they (Russo and Guica) were convicted, that maybe, down the road, more information will come to light," Michael Fisher said.

In an earlier conversation, on Monday morning, he said: "No newspaper has ever reported our version of events — what we think happened."

Of course, the Fishers are reticent when it comes to saying exactly what that version is — for fear that to do so would put the case in jeopardy. Suffice it to say that they feel there are others who have yet to be brought to justice.

Even Assistant District Attorney Anna-Sigga Nicolazzi, the lead prosecutor in the case, told the jury in her closing argument that there was likely a third person, along with Guica and Russo, present when Fisher was shot.

Nicolazzi said that person's

identity remains a mystery and has no effect on the guilt of the two defendants. She suggested, however, that it could have been Guica's younger brother, Matt Giuliano, who is known to have been at Guica's house just before the killing. Or maybe it was one of the companions with whom Russo arrived at the party.

But beyond the shooting itself, the Fishers question the apparent randomness of the series of events that led Mark to Brooklyn in the first place.

"People say, 'A fatal string of bad luck,'" Nancy Fisher said, quoting the headline of a New York Times article about the case. "That doesn't happen. It's too many, too coincidental to happen that way. ... You can have one (piece of) bad luck or two; you cannot have five or ten. It's impossible."

Mark's last night alive began with a trip into Manhattan with a group of friends from Fairfield University, where he was a sophomore. When they ran into another Fairfield student, Angel

DiPietro, Long Island, Mark began flirting with Meredith Denihan, one of DiPietro's friends from Garden City, Long Island.

At some point, the Fairfield group moved on to another bar, leaving Mark — either intentionally or unintentionally — with Denihan and DiPietro, who had met up with Al Cleary, her boyfriend's college roommate, and Cleary's childhood friend — Guica. Mark had no cell phone (Chris Peters, one of his Fairfield friends, had it), no money, and no idea how to get back to New Jersey.

After DiPietro's ID was rejected at another bar, the group decided to go back to Brooklyn, and Guica suggested his house because his parents were away. Mark asked if he could come along.

In the version told by prosecutors, Guica took a disliking to Fisher soon after the group arrived. Fisher angered him by "disrespecting" his house by sitting on a tabletop, and Guica may also have been jealous of Denihan's attention. Whatever the motive, Fisher was dead by

dawn.

Among the questions that especially nag the parents: Why did Mark, who always had his cell phone with him, not have it that night? Why did his friends leave him among strangers? Why was Denihan, as she herself testified, buying drinks for Mark at the bar, and not the other way around?

"Maybe we'll never know that, but these are the things that haunt us all the time," Michael Fisher said.

They there was the way in which everyone who was with Mark that night retained a lawyer and allegedly withheld information from police — even those who weren't really connected with the accused killers, like Denihan and DiPietro, whose father is a prominent Brooklyn defense attorney.

For the present, though, the Fishers are doing what they can to unwind after the trial, an experience they said was akin to reliving their son's wake and funeral two years ago.

"It felt like Mark's funeral was over. It felt like we'd just come back from burying Mark," Michael Fisher said, describing

the feeling of walking out of Brooklyn Supreme Court after Russo's guilty verdict. "It was a weird feeling. ... It was very hard."

There was also, in their view, a kind of character assassination by the witnesses who testified in the trial — Cleary, Denihan, DiPietro, and others — who described Mark as extremely drunk and popping pills at Guica's house. (The medical examiner's report, given during the trial, stated he had a blood-alcohol content of 2.1, almost three times the legal limit, and confirmed the presence of Ecstasy in his system.)

"They put Mark in a kind of character I never knew him as," Mark's younger sister, Alexis, said Monday morning. "I think their goal was to diminish his character."

These descriptions contrasted dramatically with the kind words everyone had for Mark after he was killed. Almost universally, those who knew him described him as an outgoing, unpretentious gentleman, the kind of popular athlete who would go out of his way to befriend the misfits in school.

All this is not to say that the Fishers are not satisfied with the convictions of Russo and Guica. On Oct. 12, they will again visit the site on Argyle Road where Mark was shot ("The only thing I know about that night is that they found Mark there," Nancy Fisher said), and one week later they will be at the sentencing.

"I believe there's a God up there, now that these two individuals were convicted," Nancy said. "And I believe light will come (to this case), too. I believe in the truth. The truth always comes, sooner or later, and I believe it will."

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