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# Meriden Children First Initiative



[www.meridenchildrenfirst.org](http://www.meridenchildrenfirst.org)

Winter 2005/2006 Issue #51

## Progress Made to Expand Full-Day Kindergarten in Meriden

For several years the Meriden Board of Education has had the expansion of full-day kindergarten as a priority. Given limits to school space and budgets, this has been a paper goal to date.

There is every good reason in the world to expand the availability of full-day kindergarten. Kids who have full-day K experience do better on a range of measures than their half-day peers. Meriden ranks 8<sup>th</sup> of 11 other CT towns that are similar to Meriden in annual hours of kindergarten instruction.

It's important to remember that no matter what the dollar cost today to expand K, there's a greater cost for our children and community to NOT do anything. Investing in early education such as full-day K has a great return, not least of which are reduced and more expensive expenditures on remediation and drop-outs.

To give this important effort a boost, a group of Meriden kindergarten teachers and principals met with State Senator Tom Gaffey and State Representative Cathy Abercrombie to discuss the need and value of a full-day kindergarten program and ways to make it happen in Meriden.

Not long after that, Board of Education Member Trevor Thorpe took the torch and convened a committee of parent and community leaders to discuss how best to implement full-day kindergarten. That group has met twice, and will have a final report in January 2006.

There are two primary questions related to expanding full-day K. One, where do we put the estimated additional 20 classrooms needed? And, how do we pay for the additional 20 K teachers to fill those classrooms?

On the first question, current

elementary schools are stretched for space. While several of them could have additions built, there's concern that this approach would not be cost effective and that the construction may be disruptive to students in other parts of the school. An idea is now being tested that would build a new stand-alone facility with a focus just on kindergarten students. The cost of the facility is reimbursed by the State of Connecticut by more than 85%. That's a good deal.

The other question is how do we pay for the salaries, benefits and other supporting costs for the additional K classrooms? This would run in the area of \$1 million a year. The early thinking here is that a combination of Board of Education year-end surpluses, a modest city contribution and a state funding match might do the trick.

It is expected that the Board of Education will adopt the Full-day Kindergarten Committee report and then ask for the City Council's support to help make full-day K in Meriden a reality.

Children First is a non-partisan community-wide collaborative of parent and community leaders with a shared vision: *All Meriden children will come to school ready to learn and will be successful.*

Children First is supported by grants from the Graustein Memorial Foundation, Napier Foundation, Cuno Foundation, Meriden Foundation, CDBG and other important partners.

Send articles, information & comments to

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## *Bits and Pieces . . .*

### **Early Learning Center**

A consortium of Meriden non-profit groups and parent leaders has been planning to create an early learning and nature center for Meriden children. There is a pressing need for affordable preschool, not only to help children prepare for school, but to support our many working families. This center is one response to the estimated need for more than 300 additional affordable preschool spaces in Meriden.

We are still working on gaining control of a site, which has proven quite a challenging task. In April, the City Council voted down a resolution that would have sold four acres of city-owned land to the partnering non-profits.

Our group continues to discuss how best to meet the critical need for Meriden preschoolers.

### **Parent leadership!**

Congrats to new Meriden Board of Education Member Barbara Sokol and City Councilor Hilda Santiago, both graduates of the Children First Parent Leadership Training class.

### **More parent leadership!**

Children First is sponsoring four parent leaders in the Meriden Chamber of Commerce Leadership Challenge. They are: Amy Filippides, Holly Ludemann, Craig Hazel and Dante' Bartolomeo.

### **Children Behavioral Health**

More than 50 service providers and others with a concern about local children's behavioral health met with Lt. Governor Kevin Sullivan this summer. He has a keen interest in mental health issues, and applauded efforts of the Meriden Wallingford Behavioral Health Collaborative to raise awareness on local

## **Helping Children Improve Reading Skills**

**Senior Buddy Readers**, sponsored by Children First, continues to flourish. The effort links 75 senior volunteers with more than 220 first and second graders to improve reading skills in six Meriden elementary schools: Hale, Franklin, Hanover, Putnam, Th. Hooker, and Pulaski.

Both participating children and senior volunteers benefit from this unique and effective program.

To find out more about Buddy Readers and to volunteer, contact **Donna Mordarski or Cathy Lewis** with Children First at 630-3566.

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Donate your **old cell phones and used ink cartridges** to Children First. Proceeds benefit the Buddy Reader Program. Call 630-3566 for pick-up or drop them off at Children First inside the Meriden Public Library.

In 2004, your ink cartridges were turned into more than \$400!

## **120 Attend Children First Annual Meeting!**

On October 12, more than 120 people braved a chilly & wet evening to attend the Children First annual meeting. Participants enjoyed thoughtful and inspiring remarks from David Nee, the Director of the Graustein Memorial Fund and from Juan Figueroa, the President of the Meriden-based Universal Health Foundation.

After a few remarks noting the 10<sup>th</sup> year of Meriden Children First, We recognized this year's 'Children's Champions', Hilda Santiago and Geri Kogut. Both have given a lot of time and energy to bettering the lives of Meriden young people through their support of Children First and much more. The new Children First Board of Directors was also acknowledged.

Following the Children First program was a debate for candidates running for the Meriden Board of Education. The debate was ably moderated by Ralph Tomaselli of the Record-Journal, who co-sponsored the event along with the Greater Meriden Chamber of Commerce and the Meriden Federation of Teachers.

Thanks to the many people who helped make this event such a great success!

## *More Bits and Pieces . . .*

### **Meriden High Schools Conditions Not so Good**

This past summer on a hot, sweltering evening, about 20 Meriden parents concerned about the condition of Meriden's high schools took tour of Maloney High School with Board of Education member Bill Lutz and City Council/Chair of the School Building Committee Matt Dominello.

Our high schools today are safe, BUT:

- Built in the 1950s, both require major code updates.
- Both lack the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology needed to help our students achieve.
- The buildings are at the end of their useful life, and without action now the mechanical and other key systems will eventually fail. The longer we wait, the greater the cost to taxpayers and to our students.
- Student behavior, academic performance, and school pride will be enhanced in revitalized high school facilities.

Both Mr. Dominello and Mr. Lutz committed to exploring ways to move these projects forward.

On December 6, the Meriden Board of Education is expected to approve a proposal to hire an architect to make plans for improving Platt and Maloney High Schools. This is a small but vital first step to identify what needs to be done, how best to do it (one new larger school, two new schools, or renovate the existing high schools),

and how much it will cost. Having this information will be important for the City Council to have so they can make decisions on how to finance the improvements.

***What do you think we should do with the high schools?*** Vote today on a special on-line poll at [www.meridenchildrenfirst.org](http://www.meridenchildrenfirst.org)

### **Hubbard Park Improvements**

For nearly a year, Dawn Reynolds has led a feisty band of others with a concern for the crumbling playscape at Hubbard Park. The Meriden Park Department has also been an important partner.

This December, after months of meetings, park walks and research, the City Council adopted the Hubbard Park Playground Committee's plan for a new, safer, and relocated playscape. The next step is to have funding included in the City's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP).

Congrats to Dawn and all who stuck with this. It would NOT have happened without you!

*Dawn is a recent graduate of the Meriden Parent Leadership Training Institute.*

***iMPACT parent group meeting***  
*(Meriden Parents and Community Together).*

The group meets bimonthly at the Meriden Public Library to plan events and address issues important to Meriden children and families. Contact Children First to find out more.

*Special thanks to **Christine Allen** for her contributions to Children First as part of a field study placement through St. Joseph's College.*

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## ***Optional Reading:*** **Dave's Observations on Childhood**

*David Radcliffe has been the  
Director of Children First for six  
years.*

*The notes that follow feature his  
wife Chauce and sons, thirteen-  
year old Gage, and identical twin  
first-graders Ben and Noah.*

This summer past Noah complained about  
having popcorn stuck in his teeth. We  
were also surprised to find that the  
popcorn was a molar, his first big person  
tooth!

We ask the kids about their school days,  
and early this year Ben reported he had a  
new friend. "What's her name?" we  
asked. "I don't know," he said, "but she  
has hair and some teeth."

First day of first grade for Ben and Noah,  
we're working hard to get dressed and fed  
and shined up and all. It comes time to  
leave and we look at them and their faces  
are black from the woodstove! The lesson  
there is, no playing on the woodstove on  
school days.

When Chaucey gets a headache (4 men in  
her house, you know), she asks for an  
aspirin. Noah wondered, 'Mama, why do  
you want an assburn when your head hurts?'

We say, "Hyperventilate", our 5 year old  
hears, "High Vanilla Night".

I mentioned to a statistics professor that Ben  
and Noah dressed as the Grim Reaper and a  
skeleton for Halloween. She said that's a  
great example of 'cause and effect',  
statistically speaking!

*A complete set of these Notes (1999 to  
present) are available on request.*

**Meriden Children First**  
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## **2006 Meriden Community Resource Directory**

Revised one pager, easy-on-  
the-eyes in Spanish and  
English will be available by  
January 1, 2006! Call to  
reserve your copy today.

## **2005 Parent's Guide to the Education Budget**

Family-friendly booklet that  
explains all the mysterious and  
gooey insides of the local  
budget-setting process.

This is important info for  
parents & taxpayers.

Note that the 2006 edition will be  
available in March.

Call 630-3566 for a copy, stop  
by the library or  
print your own from  
[www.meridenchildrenfirst.org](http://www.meridenchildrenfirst.org)