



# The High School View

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## Autism Acceptance Month concludes with coffeehouse

BY NIKEYA TANKARD AND CHLOE NICOTERA

To celebrate the end of both Autism Acceptance Month and National Poetry Month, the school's Best Buddies program sponsored a Coffeehouse Open Mic event last Thursday in the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School (MVRHS) cafeteria. The event demonstrated to participants and audience members how different communities within the school can come together and share similar life experiences.

Best Buddies is a club that meets weekly to foster friendships among neurotypical and neurodivergent students within the high school. Club adviser and school librarian Kevin McGrath said that the mission of both the program and the coffeehouse was to

promote inclusivity both in school and out.

"It used to be called Autism Awareness Month," said special education director Barbara Bianco, who co-organized the event with Mr. McGrath. "A lot of people now know someone in their family or have a friend who is on the autism spectrum. So we're moving more toward autism acceptance, and that means that we fully appreciate and understand the unique talents and viewpoints that those who are neurodiverse can bring to our community."

English teacher Emily Cavanagh said, "When we heard about the idea to promote Autism Acceptance Month through a coffeehouse, some of the other English teachers and I thought it would be great to promote it in our



ISA MERRIAM

classes alongside National Poetry Month."

Voyager student Connor McGrath was the master of ceremonies for the evening. He kicked off the evening of performances with a presentation of a 3D

animated video he created, titled "Until the World."

Junior Destiny Brown read her original poem, "This Town." "It's about me and how I am in my family, because I am completely different from most of my

family members," she said. "Everyone wants to feel like they are accepted in some way, and not being accepted makes you feel like you're different from everybody else."

Junior Alyssa Sylvia then sang her cover of Halsey's "Castle," a song about overcoming the systemic oppression of the patriarchy.

Kyra Wildanger, a student in the Voyager program, sang a cover of Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On." Though she was admittedly nervous before performing, there was no trace of shyness when she took the microphone. Several audience members snapped photos of her smiling and swaying to the song.

At the end of the evening, freshman Kelly Aredes took the stage and shared her original poem "At Love Capacity,"

after her English teacher suggested she read it. "I was really nervous at first," said Kelly, "but everyone [in the audience] was really supportive. And even though I wasn't entirely prepared to perform, I'm definitely glad I did it."

Ms. Cavanagh said, "I was so impressed with the students who got up there. I think it takes a lot of bravery to get up and share your poetry and sing in public. It's just a really nice community event."

"I think the messages from the performances were overwhelmingly positive," said Mr. McGrath.

Kelly spoke to the importance of showing up and contributing to events like these. "It's all about supporting the community," she said. "For kids in Best Buddies, for kids who have autism, for all of us, just being here to support and just watch each other perform — I know it means a lot." **HSV**

## Committee unveils pilot schedule

BY JULIA SAYRE

After several months of organization and preparation, the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School (MVRHS) Scheduling Committee has released a new schedule that will be piloted starting on Monday, May 15, and run through the end of the school year. The scheduling committee has been meeting since January to discuss feedback from staff and students about the current schedule, and to determine what changes should be enacted for the upcoming school year.

Guidance counselor and scheduling committee member Sheila McHugh explained that the scheduling committee's intent was to remedy some of the issues with the current schedule. "This process began due to

expressed frustration from staff and students regarding the schedule this year, and the hope of having more community engagement and collaboration available to students," she said.

The pilot schedule features a fixed rotation of ABCD and EFGH days, a "fast Monday" where students will meet with every class, and a combined flex-lunch block in the middle of the day. Currently, ABCD and EFGH days rotate each week, and flex — a 40-minute block where students meet with teachers for extra help — takes place after first period.

The "fast Monday" will begin on May 15, and the combined flex-lunch block will begin to be piloted on May 30. Principal Sara Dingley explained the rationale behind combining flex and lunch into an hourlong

block in the middle of the school day. "The lunch-flex idea is to try to maximize opportunities for students to meet as a club or with teachers," she said. "It also creates a communal lunch opportunity so that all students can take a break and connect with friends during the day."

The 16-member scheduling committee began meeting biweekly in January. Instructional coach and Spanish teacher Justine DeOliveira, restorative justice coordinator Nell Coogan, and director of guidance John Fiorito led the committee, which was tasked with addressing an array of scheduling concerns while also adhering to certain nonnegotiable parameters.

One priority of the committee was devising a schedule that worked for all

students, including those who work part-time during school hours. "We have had many iterations, and know that there is no 'perfect' schedule," said Ms. Coogan. "Ideally, we will have a schedule that works for students who are here full-time as well as those with outside mentorships, internships, and work-study opportunities on-Island."

Committee members met via Zoom with staff from Monomoy High School in Harwich and Haddam-Killingworth High School in Higganum, Conn. Both schools utilize a combined flex-lunch model in their schedules, so the meetings allowed committee members to ask questions and envision how this type of schedule might work at MVRHS.

Ms. Dingley emphasized that an effective schedule has the power to strengthen school-community con-

nections. "One of the main goals is to create a schedule that is friendly to community engagement, work-based learning, and opportunities for college credits and part-time employees," she said.

The scheduling committee must also ensure that classes meet three times a week, and that class blocks rotate so that student-athletes don't always miss the same class when departing early for off-Island games.

After the pilot schedule is implemented, the committee will gather additional feedback from staff and students about what's working and what might need to be changed.

With the first "fast Monday" less than two weeks away, guidance counselor Ms. McHugh is feeling optimistic about the progress that's been made. "As a new staff member, I did not realize all that goes into these sorts of changes. I've been



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impressed by everyone's contributions, perspectives, and understanding throughout the process," she said. "I'm grateful to be in a school community where we're willing to try something new." **HSV**

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