

Meet the Midway School Board candidates. **A6**

GREENE COUNTY RECORD



Luv-N-Greene holds 9/11 remembrance. **B1**

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2021

More students failed SOLs in 2020

Pandemic-related disruptions affected testing, outcomes during last school year

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
Staff Writer

As expected, the results of Virginia's 2020-21 Standards of Learning (SOL) tests reflect the extraordinary circumstances faced by students and schools last year.

Overall, 64% of Greene County students passed their English/Reading SOLs (given in grades 3-8), while 40% passed the math exams (grades 3-8 plus geometry and algebra 1 and 2) and 56% passed in science (grades 5 and 8 as well as biol-

ogy, chemistry and earth science). By comparison, pass rates in 2019 were 70% for English, 77% in math and 76% in science. Statewide, 69% of Virginia students passed their reading SOLs, 54% passed in math and 59% in science last year. SOLs

were not given in spring 2020 due to the unanticipated early closure of schools that March, when the COVID-19 pandemic first began to affect Virginia residents in full force.

"There were so many different variables at play

for this past testing session that trying to make any comparisons to years past—like we typically would—just really doesn't make sense," said GCPS Assistant Superintendent Dr. Bryan Huber. "In the 2019-20 school year, SOLs were canceled, so

students didn't take them at all (due to school closures). And then their experience in school was much different last year, so for some students they really hadn't tested in two years. For example, our

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fourth-grade students took an SOL for the very first time in their lives during a pandemic.”

According to a recent press release from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), 2021 SOL test results followed trends on state tests nationwide. These pass rates reflect disruptions to instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, decreased participation in state assessment programs, pandemic-related declines in enrollment, fewer retakes and more flexible “opt-out” provisions for parents concerned about community spread of the virus.

“What matters now is where we go from here, and we will use the data from the SOLs to identify the unique needs of every learner as our schools resume in-person instruction for all students,” said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. James Lane.

Despite the unusual circumstances of the past school year—with roughly 40% of Greene County students attending school virtually all year and middle and high school students attending in person only two days per week—the state mandated that schools would offer the exams as usual last year. Virtual students were required to come in to the buildings in person to take the tests in order to maintain security protocols.

“Many of them had not been in a school building for over a year, and that’s a challenge,” Huber said. “We also had the factor of students not taking the SOL, which typically is very few and far between. This year, our virtual students were given the option of whether they wanted to take it, so we had much less participating than in years past.”

In a typical school year, participation in these federally-mandated tests is usually around 99%, according to VDOE. In 2021, 75.5% of Virginia students in affected grades took the reading assessment; 78.7% took the math exams; and 80% took the science tests.

“Looking at the participation rates, there was at least a five to 10% drop in the number of students actually sitting for the SOL as compared to years past,” said Huber.

The state waived all school accreditation requirements for 2021-22, releasing some of the pressure on schools to perform well during an unusual year. The Board of Education also granted flexibility in guidelines for the awarding of verified credits for graduation, meaning that some requirements were lowered in the past year.

One big factor in the drop in pass rates for 2021, according to Huber, is that students were not offered the ability to retake the exams this year. In a normal year, students who fail their first attempt by a small margin are permitted to retake the test. According to VDOE, retakes typically account for an up to 5% increase in school pass rates compared to first attempts.

“Typically if students score in a certain range, they are permitted to retake the SOL to see if they can pass—we did not do that (this year),”

Huber said. “Students that will retake typically score in the 375-400 range and then they retake, and about 50% of our students are successful on retakes.”

Due to the complex nature of the past school year, Huber says teachers and administrators did not spend a lot of time worrying about passing standardized tests.

“Across the board, we did not spend any time with test prep,” he said. “Typically, in the spring months, we would periodically have students do practice tests or revisit previously-learned skills and those sorts of things; we didn’t do that. We knew that these scores would have no impact on accreditation, so we opted to spend time on instruction and social-emotional learning.”

While VDOE has reported the results of the 2020-21 SOL tests, accreditation ratings for the past school year will not be calculated. All schools will have accreditation waived for 2021-22, as they did during the 2020-21 school year.

“Across the board, the state has waived accreditation, which is directly tied to these assessments,” Huber said. “I think the good thing that allowed school divisions to do is shift the narrative from the test to what does this child and family need to be OK throughout this pandemic, and a lot of that was around the social and emotional supports and mental health supports that were in place last year that we spent time on, instead of spending time on things such as test preparation.”

Overall, 64% of Greene County students passed the English SOLs in 2021—compared to 70% in 2019. That breaks down to 52% passing in third grade; 59% in fourth grade; 61% in fifth grade; 67% in sixth grade; 70% in seventh grade; 59% in eighth grade; and 78% in end-of-course exams.

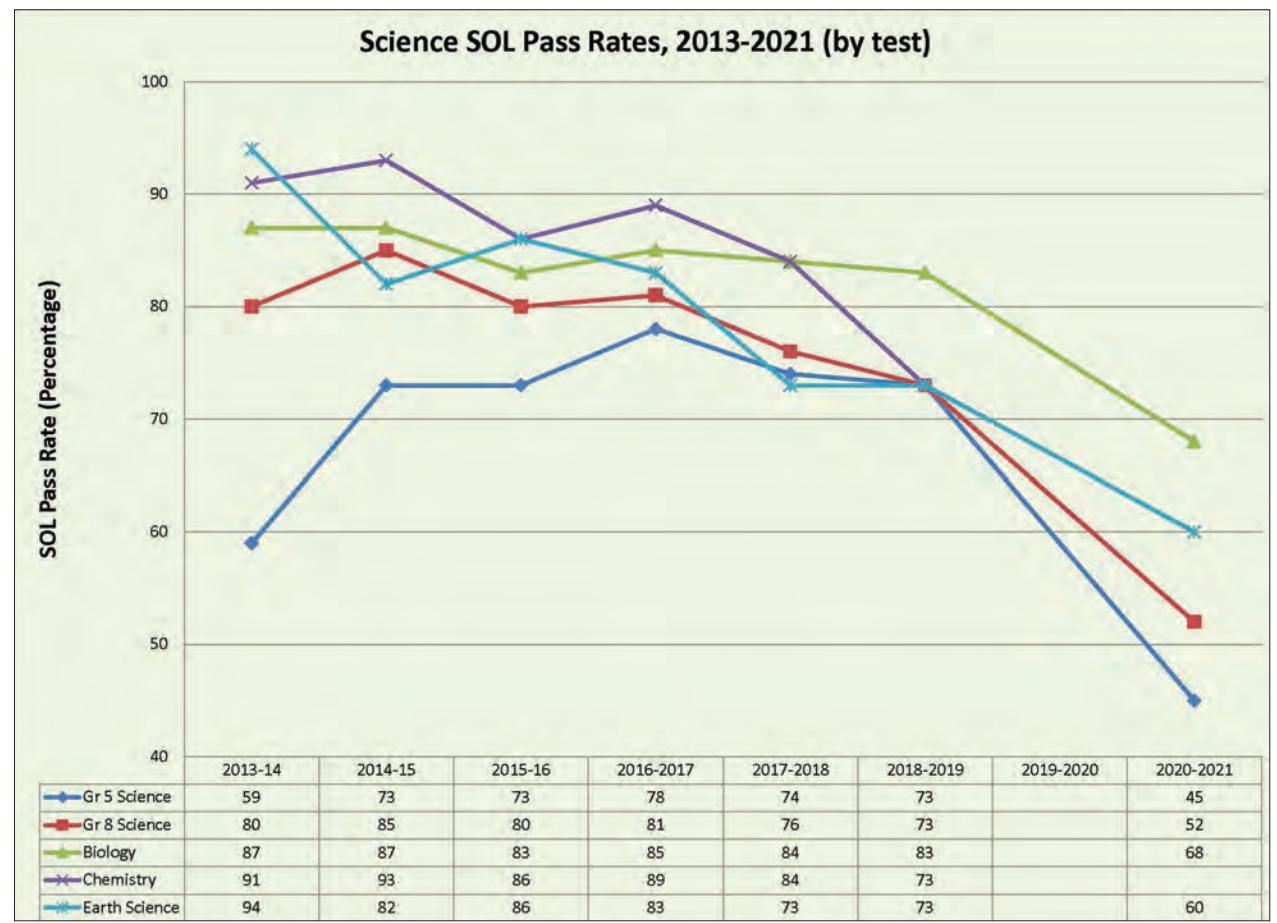
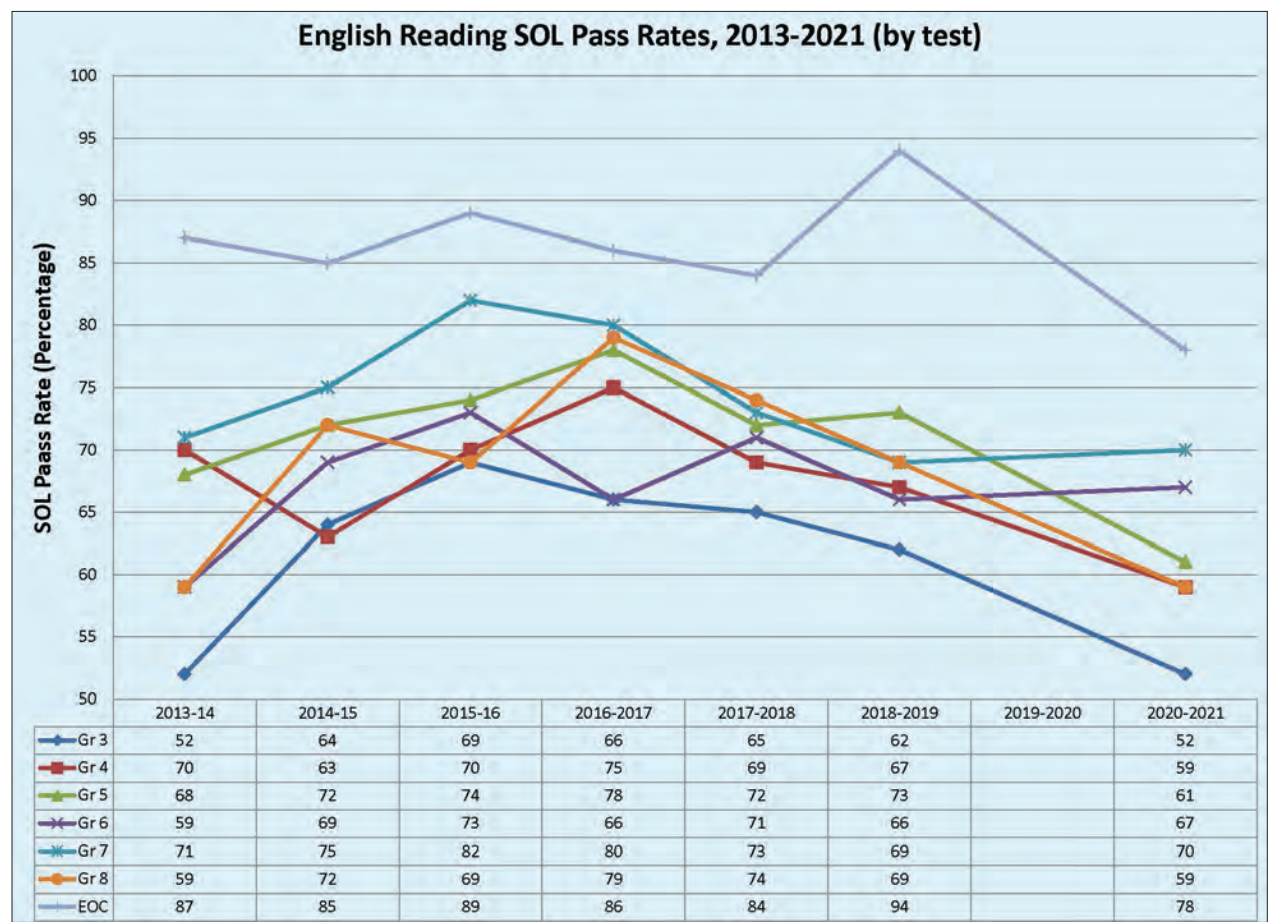
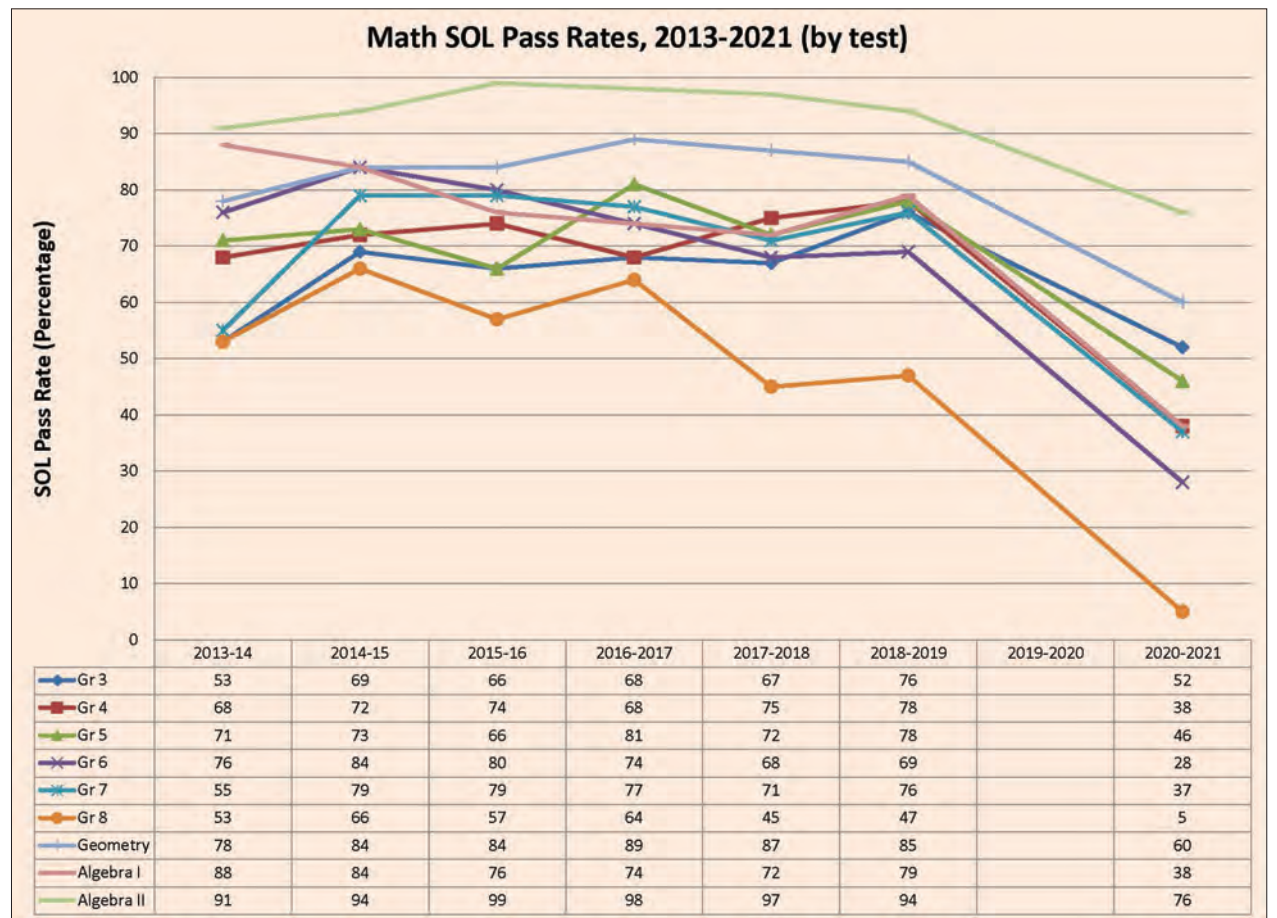
In the math field, only 40% of students passed their 2021 SOL tests in Greene, compared to 77% in 2019. This breaks down to 52% in third grade; 38% in fourth grade; 46% in fifth grade; 28% in sixth grade; 37% in seventh grade; 5% in eighth grade; 60% in geometry; 38% in Algebra 1; and 76% in Algebra 2.

“It was predicted early on in the school year—not just locally but at the state level—that reading scores would be much less impacted as compared to math scores, because those math scores are definitely new skills that are being learned as opposed to the skill of reading, which you can retain much longer and apply to new tests,” Huber said.

In science, 56% of Greene County students passed in 2021 compared to 76% in 2019. The breakdown was 45% passing for fifth grade science; 52% for eighth grade; 68% for biology; and 60% for earth science. No exams were given for chemistry in 2021.

“I think that can be attributed to some of those same factors I mentioned with no test prep,” Huber said. “Because we had less time with students in the buildings, our focus was definitely leaning towards literacy and math more than some of the other content areas, so I think that could explain the difference.”

It is important to



note that some subjects stopped giving SOL exams in 2019. Statistics on pass rates for writing, fifth- and eighth-grade history, VA and U.S. history, geography and civics are available up through 2019 but are not included in this comparison as they have not been given since the pandemic.

“They’re doing performance assessments, which are locally developed and then scored with a rubric,” Huber explained. “You can’t compare performance on the assessments with, let’s say, a multiple-choice test.”

The 2014 Virginia General Assembly eliminated SOL assessments in select subjects, requiring local school divisions to continue to teach the content but to measure student achievement

with local alternative assessments. According to VDOE, school divisions must annually certify that they have provided instruction and administered an alternative assessment consistent with Board of Education guidelines in grades and subjects that no longer have a corresponding SOL test.

One other factor to carefully consider when analyzing testing data is the breakdown of pass rates according to demographic data.

“I think it’s very widely known that the pandemic has most disproportionately affected our subgroups of students—which would include our English learners, our students with disabilities—for a variety of reasons, and we saw that progressing throughout the year,”

Huber said. “Obviously, exposure to language is important for English learners to continue to progress, and if you’re virtual or only coming to school two days a week, you’re going to unfortunately suffer the effects of that.”

To assist the English Learners (also referred to as Limited English Proficient), new teachers have been added to GCPS staff to reduce the caseload of students per teacher.

“This allows for more direct time with that language acquisition support,” Huber said. “We also utilize some of our other positions to focus on improving the status of our long-term English Learners to try to reduce the number of students that are in that category.”

New positions,

including student success coaches and school psychologists, have also been added this year in an attempt to assist those students most at risk of falling behind due to the challenges of the past year.

“While the impact of the pandemic is clear, the SOL data from last year also highlights inequities between student groups,” Lane said. “VDOE remains resolute in its commitment to supporting educators to close these achievement gaps and help all students succeed in the classroom. Virginia is fortunate to have world-class teachers and school leaders that continue to demonstrate their ability to successfully navigate these ongoing challenges and help

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every student thrive.”

The state certainly anticipated these learning losses, and much is being planned to help students bridge the gap as they return to classrooms this fall.

“Virginia’s 2020-2021 SOL test scores tell us what we already knew—students need to be in the classroom without disruption to learn effectively,” Lane said. “The connections, structures and supports our school communities provide are irreplaceable, and many students did not have access to in-person instruction for the full academic year. We must now focus on unfinished learning and acceleration to mitigate the impact the pandemic has had on student results.”

Recovery efforts are supported by an infusion of both state and federal funding for the commonwealth’s public schools. In May, Governor Ralph Northam announced \$62.7 million in Virginia LEARNS Education Recovery grants to help school divisions expand and implement targeted

initiatives to address the impact of the pandemic on student learning. These grants are given to fund increased in-person instruction and small-group learning; targeted remediation and enrichment; strategic virtual learning, technology and staff training; social-emotional, behavioral and mental health supports for both students and staff; alternate learning opportunities; student progress monitoring and assessment; and planning and implementing year-round or extended-year calendars.

Additionally, \$147 million from the federal American Rescue Plan’s Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund are required to be used by the commonwealth to support instructional recovery efforts. The funding includes \$105 million to address unfinished learning, \$21 million for evidence-based afterschool programs and \$21 million for evidence-based summer learning.

While SOL tests are one tool to provide teachers and administrators information on where students are excelling or falling behind after a

tumultuous year and a half of pandemic learning, Greene County schools have also begun collecting data on the needs of students—including their social and emotional needs and mental health concerns. According to Huber, the district is already in the process of breaking down pre-assessment data and comparing it with SOL results in order to formulate specific recovery plans for each child.

“I think it’s important for people to know that this is not a problem that’s going to magically fixed in a year,” he said. “This is something that we really have to look at what is our strategy to help students make growth over the long term, to do the best they can to catch up while also making sure that we’re taking care of their social and emotional needs and their mental health. Just because there may be some gaps or some students who have fallen behind, we don’t want to lose sight of the whole child.”

It is clear that SOL test results, while indicative of some of the challenges facing Greene County students and teachers, are only a smaller piece of a much larger puzzle.

Day reflects on 42 yrs caring for Greene's children

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
Staff Writer

Debbie Day's second-grade class at Ruckersville Elementary School spent a beautiful "Beach Day" outside June 2, playing games and celebrating the end of another successful year. Just three days before the beginning of her official retirement, Day's party of preference was one that included her beloved students—a given after 42 years of service to the community's kids.

In 1979, 23 years old and freshly graduated from Longwood College, Day applied for the job as second-grade teacher with Greene County Primary School (now Nathanael Greene Primary)—then located where William Monroe Middle School is today. The elementary and middle schools were not yet built, and

Ruckersville Elementary was still 20 years in the future. The county population was around one-third of what it is today.

"I did my student teaching in Fairfax County and decided I did not want to teach in a big county like that—I was tired of it," Day said. "No one had ever heard of Greene County and I just decided—I saw it in the paper. ... At the last minute I applied in Greene and I came down for the interview."

Day's dad was away on business, so she and her mom drove down from Northern Virginia to meet Greene County Public Schools' administrators and take a tour of the county. On the way home, she told her mom she really liked it because she loved the country.

"And that night they called and offered me the job," Day recalled. "They had a school board meeting that night and they called me at about eight



COURTESY PHOTO

Debbie Day's yearbook picture from Greene County Primary School in spring 1989.

or nine. My dad didn't even know I had taken the job for a week ... because that was before cell phones. So it was just pure luck, and then I fell in love with Greene."

There were no apartments for rent in Greene County in



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Ruckersville second-grade teacher Debbie Day didn't want a traditional retirement party. After 42 years of teaching, she could think of no better way to celebrate than by sharing a fun afternoon of games with her beloved students.

1979, so Day found an apartment in Charlottesville and later bought a house near Ruckersville.

For all but eight of the 42

years, Day has been at the helm of a second-grade classroom. When RES first opened, she

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taught third grade until a second-grade position became available.

"It just happened to be the grade that they had a job for when I was looking, and then I just fell in love with it," she said. "I love this age; they're still young enough that everything excites them—they believe in all the magic of everything. By third grade, they're starting to get a little more mature, starting to get into all the social things ... it's just a really neat age."

In the second month of Day's first year, a gas main rupture triggered an explosion and fire at the Greene County Courthouse complex, about two blocks away.

"I was in the classroom with the big glass windows and it knocked me out of my chair at my desk," Day recalled. "The percussion from the blast knocked me out of my chair. It didn't seem to crack the windows or anything, but ... I ended up on the floor—I remember that."

In fact, the explosion took place just before payday, and the county vault burned, including paychecks for county employees. Day remembers calling her parents to see if they could help her if she was unable to pay rent on her new apartment; luckily, the accounting department came through and all the teachers were paid on time.

A lot has changed in Greene since 1979. In addition to new educational facilities and a population that has tripled, Day has been witness to the major flood of 1995 that stranded students at an after-school program at which Day was administrator; the blizzard of 1996, which saw schools closed for days and buses buried; and some of the first personal computers in Greene County schools.

"They eased them in—they brought one into the classroom and we had to take a professional development (class) on how to plug them in and how to start them and, you know the basics," Day said. "It was many years ago, and the kids didn't hardly get on them then—there weren't enough. They maybe only had two or three computers in the whole school at first, and most of them were in the office for office work. Now, you look and starting in kindergarten they have tablets and computers, and they know how to turn them on and do everything better than I do, sometimes."

Besides learning each new technology as it came along, education itself has changed a lot since 1979. The first Standards of Learning tests began in 1998.

"When I first started teaching here, I remember I asked, 'What do we teach for units?' and they said, 'anything you want,'" Day recalled. "Of course now we have pacing guides and we have to hold to them, so that's good. But I do think there's a little too much pressure on these younger kids with the testing ... but that's a problem for every school—that's not a Greene County problem."

Susan Field, RES kindergarten teacher, worked with Day for

"Someone who's never taught, they'll say to me, 'I don't know how you can do this for so many years.' When you love it, and you know this is what you were born to do, then it's not hard at all."

—Debbie Day, Ruckersville Elementary teacher

one year at the primary school and has been with her since RES opened in 1998.

"Debbie is a kind, caring and loving teacher; she always has the greatest activities for her kids to do," Field said. "She plans wonderful days filled with fun and learning, always puts her students first and goes above and beyond. She helped me when it came time to teach oviparous (egg-laying) animals—Ms. Day had the animals to share and view. Who needs a stinky old pond somewhere when we can have an onsite field trip? I will miss our conversations and discussions of the old days."

When you've been teaching in a small county for several decades, it's inevitable that you will eventually begin to see the children of former students in your classroom.

"I think I've taught half the county," said Day, who has seen many children of former students over the years. "I always said I would have to retire before I get the grandkids of kids I've had, which I'm probably very close to that. Another one of our second-grade teachers, Lindsey McDaniel—I taught her in second grade and now she's one of my teammates that's here teaching second grade with me. ... You know you've had a good career when you end up working beside someone you taught."

"I tell (Day) this all the time, but she was one of my favorite teachers," McDaniel said last week. "She was why I wanted to become a teacher, because she just made learning so much fun. What I love most about her, as a student and as a co-worker just seeing her teach, is she really does make every student feel like her favorite student."

McDaniel began teaching in first grade at RES 11 years ago and moved up to second grade in 2017. Although it was coincidence that brought them to teach the same grade level in the same school, she says it has been an honor to teach beside her former teacher.

"I was a student who had a really hard time paying attention and she was just always so patient with me and loving; and I see that as she teaches her students," McDaniel said. "She really does just treat every learner like they are the best—no matter what background they have or what challenges they bring, she just treats them as special and unique as they are and they respect her for that. They want to do well and learn and grow, because they know that she creates a trusting environment for them."

McDaniel said she will really miss having Day in school next year, but that she hopes to continue to grow as an educator by following her example.

"She's just so creative and fun and she does things outside of the box, like she makes every holiday an amazing event," she said. "She

always has some tricks up her sleeve, and the things that she is able to accomplish in that room are amazing. Things have changed a lot since she's been teaching, and she has handled every technology hurdle with grace.

"I feel like she has always been a very positive light in the world of teaching, because she truly does love her job—absolutely adores every student she has," McDaniel continued. "She loves teaching down to her core, so it is really nice ... on those days where you really struggle, she brings you back to why you're here."

When it comes to struggling and learning new technology, 2020 was perhaps one of the most challenging years for educators due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the mitigation strategies and virtual learning models implemented in school buildings across the world. Day emphasized that her retirement had nothing to do with the challenges of the pandemic and that it was just the right time for her.

"I could have probably retired before this year, but I'm so glad I didn't," said Day, who will be 65 in August. "It was very scary, especially at my age. And my mother is still alive—she's 87 and I had to consider that. I haven't really been able to spend a lot of time with her because, being around the children, I could carry (COVID-19) to her. It was a decision we kind of made together, that I was going to do one more year, and that meant that I couldn't see her but through a window ... but I'm glad I did it because the fear has dissipated. As you can see, these are normal



Young Picasso
R. J. Smith paints a rainforest in Ms. Day's second grade class at Ruckersville Elementary School. Staff photo, Kevin Lamb

happy children—and that's what they should be. And hopefully it'll get even better before next year."

Day's mom relocated to Greene County years ago, after her husband passed away. Day said she's looking forward to spending more time with her now that school is out for the summer and some of the COVID restrictions have been lifted.

"My mother—both my parents, really—were very much into supporting education," Day said. "So when I said I never get to the laminator, my mom got me a laminator. Family support and community support like this—another reason I never left Greene is you cannot work with a better group of people. I taught and I volunteered before I became a teacher, and people here bind together. When you need something, they're there—it is really a phenomenal thing. ... It's been this way since I started teaching."

After 42 years of pacing the schools' cement floors, Day said her hips and knees aren't what they once were.

"I am much slower, but you know ... the kids just jump in and do,"

she said. "The other day they said to me, 'if you don't retire, we'll do all your grading for you.' We were over there eating and I said I needed to go get my clipboard; three of them jumped up and said 'I'll get it.' They pitch in and help—they know we've had a good day and now we need to help clean up. Kindness and responsibility, those are the biggest things; that's what we should be teaching."

Day said teaching is absolutely an act of love and has nothing to do with the money.

"Someone who's never taught, they'll say to me, 'I don't know how you can do this for so many years,'" Day said. "When you love it, and you know this is what you were born to do, then it's not hard at all."

As for a favorite memory, Day says it's impossible to pick just one.

"Every day I have a new favorite memory; but if I had to pick a category of favorite memories, it's when I hear about the success of one of my students," she said. "Like last night, when I posted (on Facebook) that this would be my last event, I had students I had taught that are in the Merchant Marines now

and are CEOs of companies answer me and tell me about things they remembered like this that we did ... and to me that means more than anything. Those are the good memories—that they still have memories of school being fun."

Dana Eastman, a retired teacher of 31 years who has been volunteering teaching sign language to Day's class for the past five, first met Day when one of her grandchildren was in Day's class.

"I've been in the school system 47 years now ... and in all those years, I have worked with two master teachers; this is one of them," Eastman said. "Ms. Day is phenomenal and I'm so glad that one of my grandchildren had her and every class I've helped her with over the last five years, it's just been amazing the things she does. These are her children, and she loves every one of them ... she is the only one that I would totally trust with every single child in the world."

SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2021 • 6:00PM

TRUCK & TRACTOR PULL

JUNE 23-26, 2021

"ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE ORANGE COUNTY FAIR"

4H events throughout the week

JUNE 23, 2021 • 3:00PM

Orange County Fair Horse Show

JUNE 23, 2021 • 6:00PM

Orange County Fair Beauty Pageant

JUNE 24, 2021 • 7:00PM

Street Truck Dirt Drag

JUNE 25, 2021 • 7:00PM

Lawn Mower Pull

JUNE 26, 2021 • 10:00AM

CVATPA Tractor Pull

JUNE 26, 2021 • 7:00PM

Orange County Fair Demolition Derby



14501 Old Gordonsville Road Orange, Virginia

Local Girl Scouts help with virtual summer camp. **A3**

GREENE COUNTY RECORD



Thousands come out for
fun & fireworks. **B1**

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THURSDAY, JULY 8, 2021

WMMS kids take 1st, 8th in nation for NHD

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
Staff Writer

Two William Monroe Middle School students are first in the country for their National History Day (NHD) project. Eighth-graders Caroline Bruton and Kayla Shaller took first place in the junior group documentary category with “Communicating Through Cell Walls: The Secret Correspondence of America POWs in Vietnam.”

Additionally, sixth-grader Mukund Marri came in eighth nationwide for junior individual documentary with his project “Navajo Code—The Unbreakable

Code.” The three Monroe middle students were among 49 Virginians competing at the 2021 National History Day contest, which took place virtually in May and June, and competing against more than 3,000 students from across the country.

“Similar to a science fair but for history, the National History Day Contest was founded in 1974 to inspire students to conduct original historical research,” according to a press release from the Virginia Museum of History & Culture. “Since its creation, the contest has grown into an international competition with more than half a million participants and thousands of dollars in scholarship

awards and prizes annually.”

American documentary director and longtime supporter of NHD Ken Burns spoke to the award winners during the virtual awards ceremony June 19.

“History is what defines us and unites us as a country, and it is through understanding our past that we can make sense of and influence our present and future,” Burns said. “The power of history to bring people together, to foster unity and connection, is one of the many reasons that I became a filmmaker. ... I am continually impressed by the winners of these awards and excited for the future of the historical documentary field, knowing that those

who win this award will be the vanguard of a new generation of filmmakers.”

National History Day accepts entries in 18 categories, including documentary films, exhibits, papers, performances and websites. The junior division is for middle school students while high school students compete for scholarship money at the senior level. The theme for 2021 was “Communication in History: The Key to Understanding.”

This is the third year of NHD competition for Bruton and Shaller.

“In the past, the topics of their award-

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winning projects from previous district and state competitions include the triumph and tragedy of Bessie Coleman and child labor when they were in sixth grade and then last year they were breaking barriers with Penicillin and night witches," recalled seventh-grade Instructional Coach Allison Hughes. In 2020, Bruton took third place for her individual documentary, "Penicillin: Breaking Bacterial Barriers."

"This year we encouraged them to work together as a group," Hughes continued. "Together, they tackled one of the most complex topics that we have ever had any student research. We can't wait to see what they accomplish in high school."

"Communicating Through Cell Walls" tells the stories of American Prisoners of War and the multitude of ways they found to communicate secretly while held captive during the Vietnam War.

"Communication defines the very bonds that hold our society together," Bruton and Shaller wrote in the process paper submitted with their video. "In a time of crisis, the strength of these bonds is tested. The POWs tested and exceeded the limits of language put upon them by the North Vietnamese. ... It brought them together when they were at their breaking points, and helped them carve their way out of North Vietnam together."

At the state competition in May, the pair was awarded the Naval Order of the United States Award. The NOUS encourages research and writing on naval and maritime subjects and promotes the preservation of historic artifacts. Each year they award \$200 to one senior division project and \$100 to a junior division project that best explores naval history.

During the course of their research, Bruton and Shaller interviewed two POWs who shared personal stories about the use of Tap Code during the Vietnam War.

"Our interview with Commander Porter Halyburton (USN, Retired), a POW from 1965 to 1973, was crucial to our research and knowledge about the Tap Code and other communication," the pair wrote in their paper. "We also interviewed Lt. Col. Dane Hanson (USMC, Retired), a SERE school graduate. This interview assisted us

in our research about the school, whose curriculum has changed since the Vietnam War."

According to Shaller, the pair read a book about Halyburton and reached out through his university in an attempt to set up a meeting with him. When he did not respond, Bruton located Halyburton's address and the pair sent him a personal letter, to which he responded enthusiastically.

"It was very exciting to hear back from a former POW who we asked to interview about his experience using the Tap Code," Bruton said. "In the interview, he shared personal stories that were very interesting and helpful for us in understanding our topic."

Shaller said she enjoyed doing the research from the comfort of her home while learning remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We didn't have the help of teachers and that was a downside, but I was at home and I could just sit there in my pajama pants and do research," she said.

"It was a little bit harder to get access to books, but we found a way," Bruton agreed. "We bought some, so now I get to have them forever instead of just checking them out from the library."

"They worked together at a distance and I think they have a lot to be proud of," said Bruton's dad during a celebration at the school last week. "Porter Halyburton was really generous with his time; I eavesdropped on the interview. ... It was cool that he was so willing to share his experience."

This is the first year that a student from WMMS has placed first in the nationwide contest. According to one of the judges, "this documentary plays as richly and smoothly as many professional documentaries."

For Marri, this was his first year competing in the junior division of NHD.

"When the pandemic changed our schedule, we struggled as teachers whether to include sixth-graders," Stephanie Hammer said. "We knew it was overwhelming, but we had a few students that expressed an interest in having more of a challenge than what hybrid or virtual (learning) offered. Mukund was one of them. ... As a finalist at the national level with his individual documentary, Mukund was in the top 10 of over 100 of the best of the best individual documentaries from each state."

Marri's documentary

explored how the Marine Corps recruited Navajo Code Talkers during World War II to serve as radio operators.

"I was watching a History Channel documentary on TV which talked about how an indigenous community played an important role in helping the U.S. win World War II," Marri said. "I went on to research more on how they helped the U.S. by developing secret code for military communication that was unbreakable."

The Navajo Code Talkers were recruited in 1941-42 by the U.S. Marine Corps for this mission because their language was so different from English that enemy soldiers could not decipher the messages that were being sent via radio.

"The National Archives turned out to be a great place for my research," Marri wrote in his project paper. "The primary source materials there described how Navajos were recruited, trained and later deployed on various missions in the Pacific. I learned that Navajo is a tonal-based language with four tone levels and the meaning of a word depends upon the tone level used. I was surprised to know that even another Navajo cannot decipher the code without training."

Marri's documentary also describes how the Code Talkers were required to keep their work a secret for many decades after the end of the war.

"After WWII, the Navajo Code Talkers were told to keep their work a secret. Since the codes remained unbroken, the U.S. military wanted to keep the program classified in case the Code Talkers were needed again in future wars," Marri wrote. "It took until 1968 for the public to know them. The recognition of Code Talkers was slow. In 2001 President George W. Bush gave the Congressional Gold Medal to five of the original 29 code talkers."

Marri placed eighth in the nation for his individual documentary, and said he definitely plans to enter the contest again next year.

"The Navajo Code Talkers is probably one of the most popular topics at National History Day," wrote one judge. "This project, however, is one of the best on the topic I have had the privilege of judging."

"I'm so proud of these kids and their passion to learn," said Marri's mom during the celebration. "When I was small, I was always into science and the STEM-related topics.



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

William Monroe Middle School students, left to right, Mukund Marri, Caroline Bruton and Kayla Shaller, were celebrated at the school last week for their hard work and placements during National History Day. Bruton's and Shaller's project won first in the nation for junior documentary. Marri earned eighth in the nation. This was Marri's first time working on an NHD project.

I did not pay that much attention to history. But with the kids, I learned. In the last three years, I learned a lot which I never knew previously. All that credit goes to the teachers here." Marri's older brother has previously competed in the senior division of NHD.

In addition to the student awards, WMMS history teacher Stephanie Hammer received the Naval Historical Society's Teacher of Distinction Award for 2021.

"This award is given to teachers of those students who place first, second or third nationally in their respective categories for projects with a naval or maritime theme," according to the press release. "Mrs. Hammer has participated in NHD for more than 10 years and her students always do exceptionally well at all levels of NHD competitions."

"While we talk about awards for the students, we think that Mrs.

Hammer has done a really, really wonderful job—not just with these kids but in all the years since we've seen," said Marri's dad during the ceremony, presenting Hammer with a potted orchid.

Hammer has participated in NHD since 2009, when her own daughter was in sixth grade.

"This is our 12th year. We've had two other students place third [one was Bruton in 2020] but this is our first first-place (national) award," she said. "National History Day is probably the reason why I'm still a teacher, and I appreciate Caroline and Kayla winning because that's why I got the (Naval Historical Foundation) prize."

Hammer's prize comes with a \$200 honorarium, a certificate of excellence and a three-year membership to the Naval Historical Foundation.

During the celebration in the middle school library July 1, the students'

documentaries were screened for their parents and teachers and they were given homemade cupcakes and balloons.

"We cannot underestimate the impact this school year has had on our students," said sixth-grade U.S. History teacher Barbara Aszbach. "None of us will forget it; most certainly our students will not. But the three students we are celebrating today—Mukund, Kayla and Caroline—have a unique experience among their peers. ... Our three winners here today went beyond simple and fleshed out the idea of communication in a new way."

Both documentaries will be available for viewing during the month of August at the Greene County Historical Society museum, 360 Main St. in Stanardsville. The recording of the virtual awards ceremony is available on the NHD website, nhd.org/virtual2021winners.



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