

# School gains upgrade in academics

Milton L. Olive Middle gets rating boost from state

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND  
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A once-troubled Wyandanch school has won an upgrade in its state academic rating, as staffers there plan further improvements that include expansion of college-prep coursework, theatrical training and technical education.

Milton L. Olive Middle School, which enrolls 620 students in grades six-to-eight, is being elevated to good academic standing, nine years after being identified by state authorities as academically “struggling,” local administrators said. The school’s new status becomes official July 1.

Gina Talbert, superintendent of the Wyandanch district, described the school’s progress as the result of years of intensive work that included accelerated coursework for advanced students, together with intensive tutoring in English for those newly arrived from other countries.

“So we’re elated, we’re very encouraged and happy for our scholars and families and faculty and staff,” said Talbert, who has served as schools chief since 2019. “Districtwide, we’re

very happy about the direction in which we’re going and looking forward to continued improvement.”

The state Department of Education in Albany, which rates public schools under federal law, is allowing local districts to announce upgrades in status after freezing designations for two years during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hempstead released news of improvements at its high school and middle school on March 13, and Roosevelt scheduled a formal announcement of similar progress Tuesday night.

In a media advisory, Roosevelt officials said they were “thrilled” by the decision in Albany to remove their high school and middle school from a statewide needs-improvement list and raise the schools’ status to good standing.

At the Olive school in Wyandanch, Principal Shannon Burton told a visiting reporter on Monday that student attendance rates had improved markedly over three years, rising from 84% to 91%. Burton said that improved attendance, along with higher test scores among bilingual students, were both factors in the state’s decision to boost the school’s rating.

More improvements are on the way, the principal added. Starting next fall, accelerated learning will expand, with



Milton L. Olive Middle School Principal Shannon Burton at the Wyandanch school. ■ Video: newsday.tv

about 150 of the middle school’s students to be enrolled in courses such as algebra and geometry usually reserved for high schoolers.

Meanwhile, other students will be allowed to focus either on performing arts or career and technical education, while also meeting regular academic requirements, Shannon said. Course choices in the arts are to include theater, studio art and African band. Choices in the career area would include culinary arts, software coding and marketing.

“We’ll be doing courses here that not a lot of middle schools in New York are doing,” Shan-

non added, in reference to the accelerated courses. The principal came to Wyandanch in July, after working as a teacher and administrator in Yonkers and New York City.

Federal and state systems for rating schools are complex and heavy on acronyms. For example, schools requiring overall improvement are categorized as in need of Comprehensive Support and Improvement, or CSI. Those needing upgrades in one area or a few areas are identified as Targeted Support and Improvement, or TSI.

Schools meeting all requirements, which were formerly described as in good academic

standing, now are grouped in a new category of Local Support and Improvement, or LSI.

Olive Middle School, formerly in the TSI group, is moving to LSI status. Meanwhile, Wyandanch’s high school, which was also TSI, is moving down a notch in ratings, because the school failed to adequately boost achievement among students who were economically disadvantaged, district officials said. The high school’s new designation will be Additional Targeted Support and Improvement, or ATSI.

Talbert said the district was “working toward upgrading that in coming years.”

## Couple indicted in fatal stabbing of Port Jefferson Station man

BY NICOLE FULLER  
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A Port Jefferson couple has been indicted in the 2021 fatal stabbing of a landscaper whose body was found at an entrance to the Setauket-Greenway Walking Trail, Suffolk prosecutors said Tuesday.

Jose Martinez-Vazquez, 24, and Tiffany Diaz-Cabrera, 20, both of Port Jefferson, were indicted on a charge of second-degree murder in the fatal stab-

bing of Benjamin Flores-Mendez, 39, of Port Jefferson Station.

“These defendants allegedly followed the victim and violently attacked him,” Suffolk District Attorney Ray Tierney said in a statement Tuesday. “This was a senseless and cold-blooded execution of an innocent unsuspecting man. Bringing justice to Mr. Flores-Mendez and his loved ones is our priority as we continue to gather evidence for this

heinous crime.”

Martinez-Vazquez’s Patchogue-based attorney, John Halverson, said his client pleaded not guilty at his arraignment on the indictment Monday.

“My client maintains his innocence and we look forward to fighting these charges.”

Diaz-Cabrera’s attorney, Luigi Belcastro of Central Islip, said of his client: “She’s presumed innocent and she’s maintaining her innocence at this

time. I think when the facts come out it’s going to show she had no hand in what occurred that day.”

Suffolk County Court Judge Karen M. Wilutis ordered both defendants held without bail.

Prosecutors have alleged that Martinez-Vazquez and Diaz-Cabrera, who police have said were boyfriend and girlfriend, “targeted” Flores-Mendez and followed him into the Port Jefferson Station entrance of the Setauket-

Greenway Walking Trail on June 17, 2021. The pair, according to prosecutors, “allegedly acted in concert” in Flores-Mendez’s stabbing.

Prosecutors have not revealed a motive. Asked Tuesday, Tania Lopez, a spokeswoman for the district attorney’s office, said: “The motive remains under investigation.”

Diaz-Cabrera is due back in court on April 25. Martinez-Vazquez’s next court date is April 26.