

HOPATCONG BOROUGH SCHOOLS

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Hopatcong, NJ

Title: Hopatcong Students Shine!

Cynthia Randina, Hopatcong Superintendent of Schools, Announces -

The Front Stage Players' performance of Willy Wonka may at first seem like many other school plays, however, it stands out in a big way. Many of the kids on stage face challenges every day that others do not. But, with the help of their buddies, all students had the chance to put their differences aside and show everyone what they are capable of. Led by Hopatcong teachers Audra Bauer, Danielle Kovach, Ashley Miller, and Julie Wilson, the program began in September and concluded with a final performance on Friday, June 10th.

"It was amazing to see our kids shine on stage," said Kovach, special education teacher and grant coordinator. "The goal for this program was for our students to feel confident and proud of their accomplishments. When the curtain closed, we wanted them to say, I did it!" And every student did. It was their night to shine.

Over 50 students took the stage to a packed Hopatcong High School Auditorium. There was not a dry eye in the house and the students received a standing ovation. "I don't think there has been a moment in my life when I had no words. But wow!" said Mike Rahill, parent of Front Stage performer Lilly Rahill. "What an awesome job everyone involved did. So many parents tonight who wouldn't expect to see their kids front and center did tonight. That was incredible!" Lilly was one of 20 students who assisted as a peer buddy.

Getting ready for opening night took a tremendous amount of hard work and effort from everyone involved in the program. "Not only was I proud of all the students involved, I was extremely proud of all the time and effort that our faculty put into this evening," said Hopatcong High School Principal Lou Benfatti. "They created such a great experience for all the students involved and also drew the community of Hopatcong together."

To support the Front Stage program, Bauer, Kovach, Miller, and Wilson were awarded a \$5,000 Frederick L. Hipp Foundation for Excellence in Education grant funded by the New Jersey Education Association. The grant used drama to boost confidence, self-esteem, and social skills for students with special needs and their non-disabled peer buddies. While students with disabilities may not often get the opportunity to shine on stage, the purpose of Front Stage was to bring students out from behind the curtain and into the spotlight. This cross-curricular grant addressed the needs of students with varying challenges across multiple grade levels through a fusion of art and common core state standards. It also included students without disabilities who possess leadership skills or those in need of emotional or social growth. Grant funding included the purchase of a musical production license, a field trip to the Growing Stage Theater, materials for props and costumes, and t-shirts for all

participants. The program was such a success that the teachers would like to establish the Front Stage program in the Hopatcong School District next year.

If you missed the performance, highlights of the Front Stage program will be showcased on the Emmy award winning show, *Classroom Close-up, NJ*. Airdates are set for December 11, 2016 and January 15, 2017. In its 22nd season, *Classroom Close-up, NJ* features innovative projects in New Jersey public schools. The show is a co-production of the NJEA and Public Media NJ, Inc. with additional funding from PSE&G.





