

# EDUCATION BUZZ

Centenary University's Education and Mathematics  
Department Newsletter

## Dr. Kovach Receives National Recognition

On National Teacher Appreciation Day (May 4, 2020), First Lady Melania Trump called Dr. Danielle Kovach to thank her for her great work as an educator. The first lady expressed appreciation for all that Dr. Kovach's does for her students. Mrs. Trump also asked how Dr. Kovach and



her students were coping during this time. Dr. Kovach responded that the teachers were working hard to make sure that both their students' emotional and academic needs were being met. Dr. Kovach said how proud she was of her students and how hard they have been working. As they talked, Mrs. Trump also asked Dr. Kovach about working with her students' parents during this time. To this, Dr. Kovach expressed gratitude to her students' parents for their support.

Dr. Danielle Kovach was also named the 2021 President of the Council for Exceptional Children. CEC is the leading advocacy group for special education students and parents. Dr. Kovach teaches special education classes for the Education and Mathematics Department at Centenary. Dr. Kovach received her B.S. in Special and Elementary Education from Kutztown University and holds two master's degrees in both special education and educational technology as well as a doctorate from Walden University. Since 1997, she has taught 2nd- and 3rd-grade special education students at Tulsa Trail Elementary School in Hopatcong. Among many honors and awards, she was the 2014 Council for Exceptional Children Teacher of the Year and the 2011 NJ State Teacher of the Year. She was also awarded the 2012 NEA Foundation Teaching Award for Excellence.

Dr. Kovach emphasizes the importance of thinking outside of the

box. "As teachers," she says, "it is very easy to stay within our classroom and just focus on our classroom. On a broader scope, we need to work together with our colleagues, administrators, and other teachers. Over the years, I've worked hard to make the world open to my students." Dr. Kovach has achieved this through grant writing, collaborating with other teachers, and bringing in new ideas and new methods of teaching to her classroom.

A special education team of four teachers at her school worked together to write a grant to receive \$4,000 for funding for equipment to produce video social stories. Students with special needs may have difficulties with social situations, so the teachers plan role playing activities. With video social stories, teachers practice social scenarios involving social cues and how individuals react in certain situations. Dr. Kovach and her team plan to start a YouTube channel with the stories.

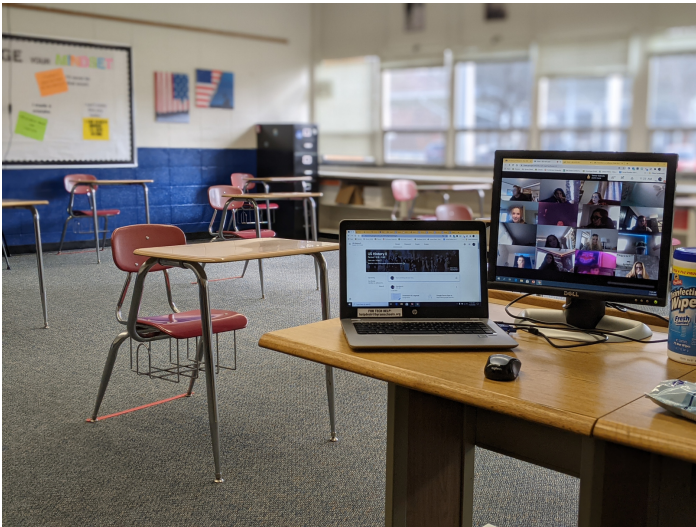
The top priority in Dr. Kovach's class is to build relationships first. "Get to know your students," she says. "Make a connection with your students. Students need to be in an environment where they know that they are loved, safe, and cared for. Kids have intuition as to who likes them and who doesn't. They know when teachers are not being genuine. Provide comfort, security, and relationship with students and with families." Dr. Kovach certainly goes above and beyond to get to know her students. She likes to drive around town and see where her kids are coming from. She also works with students to make sure they are getting the supports and instruction that they need. Listening is critical for Dr. Kovach. "My students are often my greatest teachers," she says. If something she is teaching isn't working, she takes in their feedback.

Dr. Kovach is a role model for her elementary students and her college students. She knows that educators often face many challenges in their schools, especially as technology, evaluation, and methods of instruction change over time. Dr. Kovach offers a positive outlook that we can all appreciate during challenging times of change: "As new things come about, we need to be open to that change and learn from that change. Work collaboratively to tackle whatever hurdles may come our way."

# Stories from the Classroom

## Pandemic Teaching: Flexibility is Key

By Dr. Peter Morris, Social Studies Teacher, Byram Middle School; Ed.D. Centenary University, December 2020



Teaching is hard. Delivering effective instruction, engaging students, fostering positive relationships, communicating with parents, meeting the social and emotional needs of our students, and balancing so many other jobs means teachers are constantly being pulled in so many different directions. That was before the COVID pandemic forced school to be taught virtually in one form or another. Teachers now have to meet those same requirements while meeting with all students through an online video platform, or some in person, or any combination of the two. Flexibility has never been more important.

The incredible thing is that teachers and students are rising to meet the challenge. As an 8th-grade and 6th-grade teacher, I know that above all, establishing and maintaining relationships with students is the most important thing I can do. This has taken many forms in my classroom. Every day starts with an emotional well-being check. This can be a survey, Google Form, or just a good old fashioned conversation with my students. Meeting with students virtually needs to follow a routine to be effective. Students log on (in our K-8 district we use Google Meet), and we work as a class. Throughout the period, I have scheduled times to check in with individual students or small groups. Students work together in virtual Breakout rooms to collaborate on assignments and to provide support for one another when necessary. Parent communication is a necessity; it is essential that teachers and parents work

together to provide consistent support for the kids. Students are logging in every day, participating, and doing well, all from the comfort of their kitchens or living rooms.

All of this is being done with strict safety protocols. Desks are spaced 6 feet apart. Students are grouped in cohorts throughout the day so as to minimize the likelihood of infection. Masks are required throughout the day, with a 15-minute outside break scheduled at staggered times. While all of these procedures are certainly stressful for students, personally I have been absolutely amazed at how mature and understanding they have been, from 1st grade through 8th.

Of course, there have been challenges. For the majority of teachers and students, the one thing that cannot be fixed with some technological duct tape is the most important part of education: relationships. Teachers miss being able to work closely with students to help them solve a problem. Students miss sitting with one another in the cafeteria and chatting. The drama club misses being able to prepare for a performance, the soccer team misses the camaraderie and competition, the band misses playing together every Thursday morning. This is and always has been the wonderful thing about education; the togetherness is what drives us.

Being successful in this new normal is a challenge. However, I have been blown away by what teachers, students, and administrators have been able to do, and with a generally positive attitude. For me, the amazing community at Centenary University has been a solid support system. I have had the chance to work with some amazing professors while finishing up my Doctor of Education program. Centenary faculty have provided amazing insight on both the theory and practice of education. My fellow students at Centenary have been nothing short of inspiring. I have had the chance to work regularly with teachers and administrators from other districts; the community Centenary has provided allows us to share ideas and strategies for how to meet the needs of our students.

Teaching is hard. Especially in 2020. But when all of us in the field work toward the same common goal of providing the best possible education for our kids no matter the obstacles in our way, it can be done - and we can have a great time doing it.

# Stories from the Classroom

## A Team-Teaching Powerhouse

Team teaching is an effective educational strategy that is often used in Grades K through 12. It is not, however, common at the graduate level, and it is rare in doctoral level programs. Centenary students in the Educational Leadership program, however, have been provided with the opportunity to experience a unique team-teaching approach in two courses: “Human Resources Management/Advanced Law Seminar” and “Bargaining and Negotiating.”

Practitioners in the field of education often state that team teaching, when done properly, is like a marriage between professionals. In this case, it actually is! The above courses feature two experts in the field of education: Dr. Ernest Palestis and his wife, Monica Palestis, Esq., one a Superintendent of Schools and the other a school board attorney. Each brings a unique perspective and expertise to the course. With an understanding of each other’s strengths and weaknesses, they have collaborated to develop a comprehensive and practical approach to the subject matter. This provides students with a unique learning environment.

Dr. Ernest Palestis served as a Superintendent of Schools for 27 years. He has been a principal, supervisor, and teacher. He has participated in numerous negotiations and legal issues during his career. He serves as an expert witness on education issues in civil litigation cases. Dr. Palestis has been a member of the NJEA, PSA, and NJASA. He serves as a mentor for aspiring superintendents and other school administrators. Finally, Dr. Palestis has an in-depth understanding of teacher issues, based on his experience as the President of a local Association.

Monica Palestis Esq. is an attorney with 23 years of experience in education law. She has conducted special education program reviews/audits, and she frequently presents workshops for boards of education, staff, and parents. She is frequently published in state and national journals. She was a member of three boards of education and served as Board President in two of those districts. Her legal experience includes being Senior Associate Counsel with New Jersey School Boards Association, operating as a sole practitioner representing parents of students with disabilities and serving as Of Counsel for Sciarrillo Cornell Merlino McKeever and Osborne.

Both Dr. Palestis and Ms. Palestis have been recognized by the New Jersey Legislature, the New Jersey Department of Education, and New Jersey School Boards Association for their work in developing



innovative public education programs.

Interestingly, their first team-teaching course, “Human Resources Management / Advanced Law Seminar,” occurred during the Covid-19 outbreak. Most students in the course were current administrators and were preparing to open schools in the fall in a way that ensured that educational goals were met while also maximizing safety. The syllabus was extended so that legal issues related to the pandemic could be addressed. For example, the Family First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA), emergency preparedness documents, the legal implications of working during a pandemic, the CARES act and schools, and so on.

Using a similar approach in the Bargaining and Negotiating course, topics such as the contractual implications of Covid-19 were reviewed. Doctoral candidate Brittany Schiano says: “The Palestis team teaching was super beneficial because instead of getting one professor’s opinion, they always made an effort to both comment on our posts and assignments. I learned a lot from the insight they brought to the topics in class based on their respective experiences.”

The Doctorate in Educational Leadership at Centenary is led by a talented and well-known group of educational professionals, all with significant experience in their respective area of expertise. With Dr. and Ms. Palestis, students are getting a double dose, as they are at once exposed to two highly regarded professionals in a single class. No other program in the state can provide that level of knowledge and command of the subject matter. We are certainly fortunate to have both on our faculty.



# Stories from the Classroom

## Centenarians Teaching Together

**Interview of Rose Shine, Master of Education in Literacy Instruction candidate, and her student teacher Ashley Ayers, Bachelor's in Elementary Education and TOSD Endorsement, anticipated December 2020. They teach second grade at Riverview School in Denville.**

### **What changes did the school make to scheduling and/or teaching modalities this year due to the pandemic?**

We began the year with in-person instruction every day for a minimum day. Students were dismissed and finished the day virtually. Students were also given the choice to go fully remote. Special Area teachers were paired with classroom teachers as co-teachers. Specials happen virtually during the afternoon session.

### **What is your approach to these changes?**

We have tried to establish new routines and procedures that allow the children to remain safe and socially distanced as their health is our top priority. Routines and procedures have been practiced diligently, and lots of time has been spent on ensuring that students are comfortable with them. We have spent a big chunk of this new year getting to know each other and establishing a safe and welcoming environment.

### **Can you give any examples of successful/impactful lessons or activities that you have done through technology?**

As of November 9, we were forced to switch to fully virtual instruction due to an increase in COVID cases. Our second graders are logging in to Google Classroom and have live Zoom sessions each day. We were not able to do partner and group work when we were in person. However, breakout rooms have allowed the children to work with partners again, and this is something that they have missed. Breakout rooms allow the students to partner read as well as discuss their thinking about books. They have learned to share their screens in order to share books and even their writing pieces. This opportunity for social interaction has been a positive aspect of virtual learning. I am optimistic that when we return to in-person instruction, students can continue this work.



Rose Shine (left) and Ashley Ayers (right)

### **Is there anything that you are doing now in class that you never would have done before?**

We have learned to slow things down. In the past, we would have a working snack because there was always so much to do. This can't happen now because desks must be cleaned and hands must be washed. We, now, must take time for a true snack break. This has had positive results. We are able to interact with students on a personal level while others are washing their hands. We are also able to use this time to read aloud to our students during snack because this time is now carved into the schedule.

### **How have your students responded to the current education environment?**

The students have been amazingly resilient. They were glad to be back at school, enjoyed seeing their friends, and were settling into a routine. Now that we have switched to remote learning, the children haven't missed a beat. They are very supportive of each other and their teachers. Recently, my computer froze up and the children were kicked out of our Zoom session. They were left in the waiting room, and I had no way to let them in. Once the glitch was fixed, I apologized and their response was, "It's okay, it's not your fault. Technology does that sometimes." While this is not an ideal learning situation, our students have developed great patience and empathy throughout this process.

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**How has your education at Centenary contributed to your teaching practice?**

My education at Centenary has allowed me to prioritize what is most important, building relationships with students. Spending time getting to know students and their needs has proven to be crucial in meeting them where they are and moving them forward. Centenary has reinforced this student-centered approach. The literacy training I have received has allowed me to focus on what my students need when it comes to reading. The tools that I have gained through my coursework have proven invaluable and have assisted me as I create lessons and deliver meaningful instruction to my students.

**Is there anything else that you would like to share?**

I admire and am awed by today's educators. They face the Herculean task of educating our students in the midst of a pandemic. They meet this challenge with grace, optimism, creativity, and strength. They are a consistent and supportive presence in the lives of children who are dealing with uncertain times. I am honored to teach with these gifted professionals and am forever grateful to them.

## Departmental Events

On August 24th, Centenary University's Education and Mathematics Department presented a webinar on addressing systemic racism in our schools. Over 250 local educators registered for the event which featured a keynote address by Dr. Richard Sévère followed by age/grade-level facilitated breakout sessions featuring Dr. Richard Tomko, Dr. Jeanene Dutt, Sarah Bilotti, Dennis Copeland, Nicholas Diaz and Josue Falaise, all well-known educators and Centenary faculty. The goal was for participants to come away with specific strategies and tools to use in their classrooms and for schools to start the difficult and uncomfortable conversations surrounding systemic racism. The webinar was generously sponsored by Visions Federal Credit Union and the Educational Opportunity Program at Centenary University.



“Some days, doing the best we can may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but life isn't perfect on any front--and doing what we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else.”

**Fred Rogers**

# Alumni Spotlight

**Interview with Dr. Cathleen Benedict, an Assistant Professor and a Graduate Director in the Education and Mathematics Department and Centenary alumna.**

## How did studying at Centenary impact your career?

I graduated with a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Educational Practice in 2006. I was part of the first cohort at Centenary for this degree. The coursework and professors enabled a perspective on teacher leadership that I had not thought about prior to my graduate work at Centenary. I had



incentive to continue my graduate studies, a renewed inspiration as an educator, and recognized that teachers have expertise in many areas that need to be shared. I had been teaching in Denville for over 20 years at Riverview Elementary School. I was a general education and special education teacher during my tenure. I found myself, after graduating from Centenary, involved in many cross-district initiatives where I worked alongside administrators and members of the Denville community. I am most proud of my work in establishing a mentoring program for teachers new to the district as well as training mentors amongst my grades K-8 colleagues. Mentoring evolved into the notion of working with preservice teachers and teaching at the graduate level. I wanted to explore both further, and this led me to Rutgers University where I earned a Doctor of Education degree with a concentration in Teacher Leadership in 2014. Centenary enabled a spark of inspiration plus the confidence and skills I needed to do what I love to do today.

## What have been some highlights of your career?

I have always been an educator up for a challenge with interests beyond the walls of my classroom. It has resulted in a variety of experiences. One that stands out is the Fulbright Teaching Exchange that I was awarded 20 years ago. I spent a year teaching in the United Kingdom, specifically Northern Ireland. I taught a class of Primary 5 students, our Grade 3. I was there for an entire calendar year, and it was an amazing professional and personal experience. There were challenges to living and working in a country that was in conflict. However, it didn't take long to get used to the culture of this history-rich and beautiful area of Ireland. The British Army patrolled the section of Derry City where I lived and worked. Helicopters often hovered over the neighborhood as Derry was separated into Catholic and Protestant areas separated by the Foyle River. The students I taught that year and the people I met still warm my heart when I think about the experiences I had. I am still in contact with friends made while there and when I travel over for a visit, I always have a place to stay!

Another highlight was when I began to work at Centenary in January of 2017. Although it was hard to leave my elementary students and my colleagues, I knew it was time for a change. Plus, I needed to put my doctorate to good use, and Centenary presented the perfect opportunity to do just that. Getting used to the structure of higher education has been interesting and, at times, a challenge. I have learned a lot and, I am grateful for the guidance and the answers to numerous questions asked of the faculty in the Education and Mathematics Department. What a group of dedicated and hardworking professionals. I am so grateful to be a part of the team!

## What made you want to work at Centenary?

Coming to the campus feels like coming home. In late fall of 2016, there was an opportunity at Centenary to work with undergraduate and graduate students pursuing the qualifications needed to work with our special education population. It was time to move from an elementary school setting into higher education. I had a lot of experience teaching special education students and working with a child study team and parents. I thrived on the improvements that took place when students with special needs began to grow in knowledge and confidence. It was experience combined with the culture of Centenary University that I had experienced as a graduate student that helped to make the change.

## How do your courses help prepare future teachers?

I am the Director of Graduate Programs in Special Education. I teach both graduate and undergraduate courses needed for the Teacher of Students with Disabilities (TOSD) certification. This certification allows teachers to work with special education students in grades K-12. These courses help teachers to work with students identified as having a diagnosed learning challenge; however, the courses also enable teachers work with students across the classroom. Every classroom has students who are academically challenged and students in need of an academic challenge.

## Can you tell readers about your graduate program?

Educational theory must be filtered into classrooms through expert teaching practices. When asked to speak at an open house or information session, I always like to stress that our graduates receive a practical education. Our professors are experts who understand how to teach the aspects of educational theory as functional classroom practices. Our graduate students gain both knowledge and experience needed to make impactful changes to student learning. Graduate and undergraduate students are encouraged to incorporate what they learn into their own classrooms. Students are encouraged to study what can best increase personal teaching practices leading to student achievement.





## DEFENSIVE CORNER

The following Ed.D. candidates recently defended their dissertations:

**Melissa Sabol:** *Child Study Team Members' Attitudes Towards Individualized Educational Goals and Their Alignment with Standards*

**Susan Ciccotelli:** *K-6 Schools and the Active Shooter: Teachers' Perceptions of Security Implementation*

**Edward Lazzara:** *Assisting the High School Transition for Students Through the Implementation of a Freshman Seminar Course*

**Peter Morris:** *Teachers and Tech: The Relationship Between Motivation, Educational Technology and Teacher Job Satisfaction*

**Brian Kitchin:** *Self Esteem and Academic Achievement in Middle School Students: A Correlational Study*

## Research

Dr. Erica McCrystal, Education and Mathematics faculty member and Graduate Director of the Master of Education in Educational Practice program, presented her research at Centenary University's Professional Colloquium on September 16, 2020. Dr. McCrystal discussed the relationships between people in Gotham City throughout the history of the Batman franchise. Her book *Gotham City Living: The Social Dynamics in the Batman Comics and Media* will be published in April by Bloomsbury Press.

Dr. Ken Greene, who teaches in the Education and Mathematics Department's doctoral program, published an article in *NJ Spotlight News* titled: "Op-Ed: The Changes We Should Expect to Take Place in Schooling." Dr. Greene is the Superintendent of Newton Public Schools, co-director of NJ Consortia for Excellence through Equity, and past president of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. His article discusses changes that educators should anticipate as a result to the current pandemic.