

District hires new middle school principal

By Jackie Lupo

On March 30, the Hastings Board of Education appointed Jennifer Spirelli as the next principal of Farragut Middle School. On July 1, she will take over that position from Gail Kipper, who is retiring after 21 years as the school's top administrator.

Spirelli, 38, is currently the principal of the middle school in Somers, in northern Westchester.

"We are excited that she is joining us," Hastings Schools Superintendent Valerie Henning-Piedmonte stated. "Both her previous superintendent and principal praised her for her leadership, wonderful relationships with parents, teachers, children, and her colleagues, and the ability to support teachers in all curriculum areas."

Contacted at her home in Ardsley on April 3, Spirelli said she and her husband, Robert, a high school math teacher in Sleepy Hollow, were staying home with their two preschoolers, Owen and Riley, and taking walks with their dog, a Boxer named Mick. "Like every other family, we're trying to find a balance," she said.

The sense of community in Hastings was one factor that attracted Spirelli. She was impressed by the results of a student survey that revealed that students felt connected to their teachers. She also connected with the values she perceived in Hastings.

"The schools are the center of the community," she said. "It's really a small-town feel, and I wanted to be a part of that."

Prior to joining the Somers School District in 2016, Spirelli was a middle and high school science teacher in the New York City school system for nine years. She was recognized as a Master Teacher, was nominated for the Fellows of the Academy of Teachers, and was honored by the National Science Teachers Association. She served as an adjunct professor of forensic science for the Syracuse University Project Advance program.

Spirelli earned a bachelor's degree in biology, with a minor in chemistry, from SUNY Oneonta, and went on to earn a master's degree in secondary education from SUNY Cortland and a master's in educational leadership from Bank Street College of Education.

An avid volleyball player, Spirelli coached volleyball for summer camps during college. The experience, she said, "helped me realize I loved coaching and teaching." On that basis, she decided to pursue a career in education instead of



Jennifer Spirelli

becoming a biochemist.

During her four years at Somers, Spirelli led a variety of initiatives, including launching an International Baccalaureate (IB) program in the middle school. "We are applying for candidacy this coming fall," she said. "There is a lot of rigor for students and teachers. It's a conceptual way of teaching."

She also worked on a program called LIFE (Living Inclusively for Everyone), which addresses the special needs of students in inclusive classrooms.

"For social-emotional learning, I did a lot of advisory work and global citizen work," Spirelli said. She supported a social-emotional learning program called "No Place for Hate." She also worked on revamping the school's Code of Conduct to include "restorative practices."

"That means that students have to work on the relationships they have before an incident happens, by developing empathy skills and problem-solving skills," she explained.

Her job involved leading the RTI (Response to Intervention) program, which follows students' academic progress to be sure that their needs are addressed before they lag behind. She also worked on compiling data for a review of the school's special education program.

Spirelli said there should be a strong connection between home and school, and that she looks forward to partnering with FMS families.

"Parents are every child's first teacher," she stated, "and I believe that by working together, we can make sure the needs of our diverse student population are met."