

Darling promoted to principal position

By Kris DiLorenzo

Jennifer Darling, the assistant principal at Concord Road Elementary School for the past five years, had her own "moving up" ceremony on July 11, when the Ardsley Board of Education confirmed her promotion to principal, at a salary of \$156,000.

Darling, 42, fills the position vacated by Melissa Szymanski, who, effective July 1, became the Hastings School District's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

"Being that I was here for five years, I already know a lot of things," she told the Enterprise. "I feel like I'm going to manage my time very wisely, and at the beginning of every month look ahead so I can plan my time accordingly."

Darling's expertise includes how to teach, coach, and lead. Since earning her master's degree in literacy at Hunter College of The City University of New York, and a second master's, in leadership for educational change from the Principal's Institute at Bank Street College in Manhattan, she has taught at two Bronx public schools and was an instructional coach, literacy coach, and lead teacher. She served as assistant principal of P.S. 199 in the Bronx for a year before coming to Ardsley.

Darling takes the reins at an important time. This fall, Concord Road will have 10 kindergarten sections, one more than last year. All 56 classrooms will be in use full time, whether for regular classes or for art, music, science, special education, or English language learners. Schools Superintendent Ryan Schoenfeld estimates enrollment for the 2019-



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Jennifer Darling, the new principal of Concord Road Elementary School

Darling

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2020 school year will be 867 for Concord Road. When Darling started as assistant principal, enrollment was 754.

"Because we're growing," Darling said, "my goal is to think about ways to unify the building. Sometimes we get together for a faculty meeting, and people who work at the far end of the building will say, 'I didn't know you worked here.'" She wants to create spaces and events to foster more interaction.

Darling reckons that one of the biggest changes for her will be more public speaking — at open house nights, concerts, the spring "moving up" ceremony, and school board meetings. "I'm excited to think about how I'm going to present," she said. "Everybody's different as a leader. Certain traditions have been passed down, but I'm hoping to make some new traditions."

She's also excited about SEL (social emotional learning), an initiative that helps students with conflict management, problem solving, self-expression, relationships, and other aspects of their growth. "Social emotional learning is for students to build their emotional vocabulary so they have the tools and the language to regulate their emotions," Darling explained.

Last year, Concord Road School introduced the faculty to "RULER," an approach to SEL developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. The acronym stands for "Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating" emotion. This year, the goals are for the children to create a student charter, and to map their emotions using a "Mood Meter."

"The charter is about how they want their classroom community to be, how they'll interact with each other," Darling elaborated, "such as, be respectful of somebody else's ideas, or listen when someone else is speaking."

The "Mood Meter," a grid on paper, is divided into zones color-coded to match a spectrum of emotions, so students can chart their feelings at different times.

Darling also touts "ROAR" (Respectful, Outwardly kind and caring, Always safe and Responsible), a homegrown way of promoting positive behavior. Early in the semester, students will be introduced to these concepts through a video about playground behavior.

Concord Road already practices ROAR etiquette. Its three playground "Buddy Benches" encourage children to sit with others who may feel isolated, or ask them to join an activity. To participate in "peaceful playgrounds," students also engage in cooperative, creative play by stenciling areas on the ground for various games.

Inclusion and diversity are high on the school's agenda. "Through strategic planning and working with parents, we want to ensure that the libraries and staff are diverse, so we have many flavors walking through the building, and everybody accepts everybody for who they are," Darling stated.

Fun is another priority. Darling wants to make sure students and teachers balance joy with critical thinking, while keeping academic standards rigorous. "It's OK to have some fun," she asserted. "Sometimes I feel that teachers are stressed out about content, but sometimes I'll pass by a classroom and there's a dance party."

Education has been fun for the Port Chester resident since she was a child in White Plains. At home, she played school, not just house. "It was a natural thing for me," Darling noted.

Her 8-year-old twins, Summer and Riley, attend King Street School in Port Chester, and Summer seems to have the

school-is-fun gene.

"My daughter wants to come to school here because she would like to be my assistant," Darling laughed.

Schoenfeld explained why Darling was chosen over more than 50 applicants. "Over the past five years Ms. Darling has demonstrated her leadership skills as the Concord Road Elementary School assistant principal. Jennifer also successfully went through a rigorous interview process in June with an interview committee of stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, a human resource assistant, an administrative assistant, a teaching assistant, and a board of education member."

"I feel very honored to have been given this position," Darling said. "I want the community to know that I care deeply about the community and the kids, and making Concord Road School the great place that it is."