

# Consolidation receives high marks

*The creation of a Sixth Grade Center with 7th and 8th graders at Strayer has been “more successful than any of us thought it would be,” one parent said.*

**By Gary Weckselblatt**

Two months into the school year, the idea of placing sixth-grade students into a school just for themselves is receiving rave reviews.

“It’s really helped us ease into middle school as opposed to being thrown in,” said Julia Witte, one of several students relishing her new “home.”

Fellow sixth grader Brooke Alsante added “When you’re a younger student, things can be really hard. Eighth graders can really bully on sixth graders.”



**Strayer Middle School students Angelina Becker, left, Alexis Micucci and Gabby Casey.**

“This is a less stressful environment as young people are growing into adulthood,” said Riley Mann, president of the SGC student government. “Middle school is a very tough transition. A school environment can be intimidating at times. The teachers have done an excellent job allowing us to express ourselves. It’s been a very accepting environment.”

Formerly the Freshman Center, the newly named Sixth Grade Center houses students who previously would have attended Milford and Strayer middle schools. When the School Board voted last July to close Milford, parents on the Community Facilities Study Committee believed shifting sixth graders to their own school would benefit the youngsters in both the SGC and Strayer. And since the newly renovated Quakertown Community High School could handle the addition of ninth graders, the Board agreed with the committee’s consolidation plans.

“It’s been more successful than any of us thought it would be,” said Amy Harwick, a committee member who pushed for the SGC. “It’s such a vital year. The kids are coming together earlier with a chance to widen that circle of friends they can make. And they can take that with them as they move forward. I’ve spoken to a lot of parents, and they all seem to agree that their kids are flourishing. Everyone’s getting the same education, the same opportunities. That’s something that’s nice about it. Kids won’t be slipping through



**Sixth Grade Center student government officials, clockwise from front left, Brooke Alsante, Julia Witte, Riley Mann and Cecelia Bates.**

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the cracks.”

The closure of Milford to help reduce a structural budget deficit didn't sit well with many residents, who spoke out against the decision. However, students and teachers say the new structure is working.

“It was sad for them to close (MMS) down,” Cecelia Bates, vice president of the SGC student government, said. “But it's a good opportunity for everyone to build new friendships while you're younger. Overall I really do like the Sixth Grade Center. It's really well thought out.”

Alexis Micucci, formerly a student at Milford, is now an eighth-grader at Strayer. “It's kind of a shock that it closed,” she said. “Everyone loved it, and had a fun time at Milford. But it's kind of fun to have everybody in one building. I love being here.”

Sixth-grade teacher Julie Pennabaker, one of four teachers nationwide recognized for their effectiveness in the College Board's SpringBoard program in 2016, said Milford's closing is “a huge loss” and described the changes as “stressful” and “difficult.”

“Changes happen that are out of our control sometimes,” she said. “Teachers are collaborating together on what the kids' needs are. We're really focused on academics and the path to college and career readiness. This is a great place to work professionally. Every adult who works here really makes it about the kids.”

“There's relentless energy here. It's about dealing with it in a positive way and moving forward.”

Bridget Mortimer, a sixth-grade teacher who had been a reading specialist at Strayer, said “It's a neat experience to have sixth grad-

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**Riley Mann,  
Sixth Grade Center  
student government president**



ers all together. They're more comfortable, more relaxed, without the stresses of the older kids. It eases the transition a little bit. It's awesome for them and nice to be part of a small (teaching) staff. It's more of a family. You know who you can go to for everything. If we would have had sixth, seventh and eighth graders in one school for the whole district, to me that's overwhelming.”

Eighth grader Angelina Becker said the school changes had her concerned about potential “drama.” But she said there's been “less of that.”

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**Julie Pennabaker,  
Sixth grade teacher**

We're connecting more on a grade level than we ever did before. I think that by making us one school, it'll make us better people. Stuff like this happens and you just have to make the best of it.”

Gabby Casey, a seventh grader, said “We're one community now.”

Strayer Principal Derek Peiffer, who spent 10 years in the same position at Milford, said one benefit of the consolidation is the loss of the Milford-Strayer rivalry.

“Everyone had to come together in high school at one point,” he said. “Now they're coming together sooner and building a class camaraderie. And this is a great opportunity to build something new. Kids now have an exciting opportunity to build their legacy.”

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