

## Chapter Four — Niskayuna High School

*Thank you to all the past and present contributors to this history, including:  
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Until 1957, Niskayuna students completed their education by attending a high school of their choice in the surrounding area. A citizens' committee appointed by the Board of Education recommended in 1954 that the new school district build its own high school. After voters approved a referendum, a plan to bring quality, nationally-recruited staff was put into place. Superintendent Calvin Gross hired Omer Renfrow as principal of the new high school in 1956. He recruited four academic department heads: John Hogan for English, Myrtle Larkin for social studies, Gerald York for mathematics, and Mimi Richards for science. While the high school was being constructed during 1956-57, the school's leadership team met in the old Rexford School to develop the program and begin recruiting the new school's faculty.

By 1957, 18 full-time faculty members had been appointed; half of the group had previously served as department chairpeople and taught at the college level. Courses were required in English, citizenship education (social studies), science, math, music, fine arts and physical education. Courses were also offered in business education and industrial arts. Music was given a special place in the school's program. Dr. Gross, who was an outstanding violinist

himself, brought New England music teacher Wendell Phillips to Niskayuna and charged him with developing a strong program for the whole District. The fine arts program was started in 1957 under the leadership of Philip Wells. A strong extracurricular program emphasizing a variety of interscholastic athletics and after-school clubs were planned as an intrinsic part of the high school program. Boys' sports were interscholastic, while girls' sports were primarily intramural.

In September 1957, 750 sophomores and juniors attended their first classes at the new high school. Sophomores, juniors and seniors attended in 1958-59, with the first graduation taking place in June 1959. Aaron Fink became the new principal in 1959. That year, amid a good deal of controversy, the ninth grade was moved from Van Antwerp Junior High to the high school to offer those students greater program opportunities. To ease overcrowding at the elementary level, the sixth grade was shifted to the junior high.

### Early praise

From the beginning, great care had been taken by the superintendent, principal and department chairs to employ quality staff with a desire to meet the needs of all students and combine solid educa-

tional practices with innovation. When Joseph Oakey became principal in 1961, Niskayuna was already recognized as one of the leading college preparatory high schools in the area. Under Oakey's principalship, the high school received a \$500,000 federal grant to develop independent study programs. Special programs for below-average students emerged. Graduation requirements changed. In 1966-67, to meet the needs of a growing population, some 90,000 square feet of space was added, doubling the size of the high school.

### 1960s and 1970s

When Francis R. Taormina became principal in 1968, he was to preside over a student population that reflected the changes in society at the time. Students during the late 1960s and early 1970s adopted idealistic attitudes and wanted to "change the world." More electives and special programs were offered in school. Student freedom was the issue of the time: off-campus passes came into existence; a designated smoking area was established. The freedom to move through the school during free periods, earlier considered a senior privilege, was extended to the entire student body. To allow more personalization as the school population rose from 1,530 students

in 1968 to 1,870 students in 1974, a two-house system was established.

**1980s**

In 1982, Edward A. Carangelo became principal. The 1980s saw a steady decline in the student population that began in the late 1970s as the baby boom of the 1940s and 1950s ended. Enrollment dropped from a high of 1,870 students to a low of 1,100 students in 1993. Despite the decline in population, the District was able to maintain and even expand the number and variety of courses offered. The information technology explosion of the 1980s resulted in student use of computers in school and home, the modernization of the media center, and the use of videos in the classroom. In 1990, the high school added an art gallery, photography lab, computer and science labs, and a new gymnasium.

During the 1980s the high school continued its recognized excellence as a college preparatory program, fueled by a strong student body, high parental expectations and involvement, and an innovative teaching staff. In 1983, Niskayuna was named one of the five most successful high schools in New York State, and as one of the top 79 high schools in the United States by the U.S. Department of Education. This was the first year of the federal "Excellence in Education" award program, and a significant tribute to the high school community. The School of Excellence flag was presented to Principal Carangelo in ceremonies at the White House in Washington, D.C.

As part of its 25th anniversary celebration in 1983, Niskayuna High

School established the Hall of Fame, a gallery of distinguished graduates. The program honors those who have made their mark in a specific field of endeavor, in civic and humanitarian affairs, or in other areas deemed to merit special recognition. The names of the graduates who have been inducted into the Hall of Fame can be found beginning on page 57.

**1990s**

Niskayuna High School's excellence in music and the fine arts continued through the 1990s. High school performance groups — orchestra, symphonic band, choir — received numerous awards and recognitions. Musical and dramatic productions by the students were exemplary. Many individuals who received their initial musical training in Niskayuna went on to outstanding professional music careers. The accomplishments of the fine arts program are celebrated by the astounding number of awards and scholarships earned by Niskayuna art students year after year at every level of the scholastic art world.

The school offered a tremendous variety of extracurricular options.



**In the late 1960s some of the District's kindergarten classes were moved to the high school to provide more space in the elementary schools for the rapidly growing population. Pictured above, high school and kindergarten students wait together in line to use the water fountain.**

The school newspaper *The Warrior*, (originally called *The Silver Warrior*), and *Nisk-Art*, a literary and art magazine published by the English and art departments, earned state and national recognition. Students were involved in clubs that supported projects in the community, and served on policy-making committees at the high school as well as the District level.

The sports program begun in 1957 thrived. Half the population that was originally excluded — girls — were given equal opportunity to participate. Early on, athletics were used to forge a sense of pride and bonding for the new school, and over the years, competitive sports helped establish a strong loyalty to the high school and a sense of school spirit.

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Individual and team accomplishments have been consistently unique and outstanding. Niskayuna championships are listed on page 60.

**Parent support**

The contributions of parents and parent groups have been instrumental to the success of the high school. The Parent Teacher Organization initiated programs like “Niska-Youth,” a program of social activities in the 1960s and early 1970s, and “after-prom parties,” a safe alternative to drinking and driving. The PTO contributed financially to school programs and beautification, such as planting the spruce trees that border the fence between the high school and the Grand Union (now St. James Place).

The Boosters Club has provided leadership and financial support for the athletic program from the beginning. The present girls’ soccer field, improvements in the track and tennis courts, and establishing the practice football field are just a few of the Boosters’ many accomplishments. The Boosters’ support was especially important during times of school budget defeats and cuts in the athletic program.

Friends of Music came into existence when the high school was opened. Before the time that music lessons were provided by the District, Friends of Music arranged for and scheduled private lessons for any interested student. They brought in gifted professional musicians, ensembles and teachers. They promoted Music Department programs and awarded recognition and scholarships to deserving school

musicians. In recent years, Friends of Music has helped support renovations to the auditorium, stage and Little Theater.

With confidence and a reaffirmation of its mission statement, Niskayuna High School moved forward throughout the 1990s with its theme of excellence in education. Numerous honors were bestowed upon the school, including being named one of the nation’s Top 10 High Schools by the School Match Service, and ranked as one of the Top 400 High Schools in the country in a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education. At the same time, students and faculty continued the tradition of excellence in and out of the classroom. The past decade saw students continuing to rank among the best in the United States. Niskayuna honored numerous National Merit Scholarship

Finalists annually and produced state- and nationally-recognized excellence in virtually every scholastic discipline. The high school’s multi-talented artists and musicians distinguished themselves among the best nationally. Niskayuna High School also enjoyed athletic success in sectional and state competitions in a variety of sports including girls’ and boys’ soccer, tennis, lacrosse, wrestling and outdoor and indoor track. Recognizing that a new millennium was fast approaching, it became clear, however, that changes were necessary at the school to maintain its position among the finest high schools in the nation.

**Technology improvements**

Modernization became a key concern for staff and administrators in the high school. Networking and



**In 1983 Niskayuna High School was named one of the top high schools in the United States as part of the first year of the federal government’s “Excellence in Education” program. Pictured at the White House ceremony are, from left: Assistant Superintendent Francis R. Taormina, Superintendent Anthony Singe, Principal Edward A. Carangelo and Board member William McColl.**



**Changes at the high school in 2000 included the addition of a School Resource Officer to its staff, Niskayuna Police Officer Alan Bell.**

Internet connections became high priorities. The community at large supported new bond issues and school budgets that reflected the need to stay on pace with the technological boom of the 1990s. Today, every classroom is equipped for Internet use. Several technology hubs are located throughout the high school, newly redesigned and outfitted computer labs are state-of-the-art, and each teacher is working with his or her own laptop computer to facilitate the development and delivery of interactive lessons. Computer literacy has become a necessary tool for faculty and students alike.

### **New groups formed**

Throughout the last 10 years, Niskayuna, like so many other high schools in our country, also has had to deal with a variety of challenges

resulting from a fast-changing society and a highly complex world. Young people are dealing with many compelling issues that often leave them confused, angry and searching for answers. One new organization to emerge from this decade that hopes to address some of these issues is The Visibility Club. Visibility has sought to prohibit discrimination of any kind in the school and has worked to promote the rights of gays and lesbians. Since its inception, Visibility has

become a model program for similar organizations throughout the state.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. J. Briggs McAndrews, The Community Partnership was formed to “build bridges” between the students, faculty, town and business community. It has become an active and vibrant part of our lives as a source of support and recognition for deeds well done. In another effort to bring together all facets of the high school community, the Shared Decision Making Committee (SDM) was developed. Today, it helps bring focus to and encourage open discussion on a variety of topics important to the continued success of the high school.

### **Safety issues**

As the new millennium began, the high school was eager to change with

the times. A world made more dangerous by the events of Columbine and 9/11/01 exposed the need for the implementation of more significant safety measures. Video cameras were installed at the entrances to the school, adult staff were required to wear identification badges at all times, lock-down drills became a part of school policy, and the presence of a police officer serving as the School Resource Officer became a reality.

### **The Block**

Certainly the most significant change at the high school in recent years is the implementation of the Extended Learning Time Schedule or “The Block.” The 2000-2001 school year saw this controversial decision, aided by the SDM process, take effect. It replaced the traditional nine-period day of 40-minute classes with four blocks of 80 minutes and a 40-minute learning lab using a complex eight-day rotation. Supporters of The Block believe that students learn better when given the opportunity to spend more time on task while at the same time dealing with only half the number of courses per day. Now in its third year, the schedule has been modified to five blocks of 78-minute periods on a two-day rotation.

### **Building improvements**

In the last decade, Niskayuna High School has undergone several important changes to its physical plant as well as its academic program. A long-awaited access road, leading to Nott Street East and designed to alleviate on-campus traffic congestion, was constructed in

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1993. In 1996, a state-of-the-art, lighted athletic complex was installed at the high school. Now, male and female athletes in soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, football and track can compete under the lights thanks to the hard work and dedication of community members working together. The year 2002 saw the construction of four all-purpose classrooms, and the remodeling of science rooms and computer labs that brought these facilities up-to-date for the 21st century. Similarly, the high school auditorium and Little Theater, which continue to be the sites for outstanding performances by the school's talented musicians, actors, and performers, were completely remodeled and upgraded.

Lastly, as this history book goes to print, we await the completion and dedication of the new fitness center and swimming pool complex, which is due to open in fall 2003.

### New leadership

Change also happened in terms of personnel. In 2001, John Rickert was named high school principal to succeed the retiring Edward Carangelo and, in 2002, Dr. Kevin Baughman became superintendent. Perhaps more significant was the unusually large number of retirements of "Baby Boomer" teachers who, in many cases served Niskayuna High School for a large portion of its 50-year history with pride and dignity. As Niskayuna celebrates its

Golden Anniversary, a new generation of faculty replete with youthful, intelligent and energetic teachers is prepared to help Niskayuna High School students meet the challenges of the 21st century and continue our proud tradition of excellence.



**Through a New York State program called Operation Recognition, beginning in 2001 schools could grant high school diplomas to World War II veterans who were unable to receive their diploma due to service commitments. Twenty-four veterans received Niskayuna High School diplomas in spring 2001, including Leon Nielsen, center, surrounded by his granddaughter, Iroquois student Lisa Salerno (left) and his daughter Linda. In 2002 the program was expanded to include Korean War veterans.**

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**In 2002, construction at the high school included renovation and addition of technology all over the school, including in this refurbished Language Lab.**

### High School Principals:

- Omer Renfrow, 1957-59
- Aaron Fink, 1959-61
- Joseph Oakey, 1961-68
- Francis R. Taormina, 1968-82
- Edward A. Carangelo, 1982-2001
- John Rickert, 2001-present