



**Harry A. Conte West Hills**  
A School of Exploration and Innovation  
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November 2, 2020

Dear Conte Families:

We are deeply saddened to learn of the death of one of our former employees and grandparent, Debbe Barnes. Debbe had been a member of our Conte community for twelve years. She served our school in several capacities. She was a member of the Parent Team, office volunteer, and until June 2020, as a part-time teacher assistant in the Pre-K4 classroom. One of the annual Conte traditions that Mrs. Barnes spearheaded each December for the past five years was the Polar Express. She looked forward to organizing this activity and playing the role of the conductor on the Polar Express. This was a delight for our students especially those in pre-kindergarten through third grade. Debbe was a caring and loving individual who found joy in serving our Conte families. We will miss Debbe's presence and her faithful and dedicated service to our community.

As this information is communicated to our students, they will respond in different ways. We encourage you to talk with your child and spend time listening to the questions they may have about death and dying. Answer their questions honestly and directly. If you need assistance with responding to any of their questions, our school support team (guidance counselor and social worker) will be available during school hours to schedule virtual meetings with students and families. It is important when dealing with this kind of tragedy that students feel loved and supported.

Below are some suggestions that parents/guardians may find useful when talking with children:

- Be a good listener. Listen carefully for any misconceptions or distortions that your child may have
- Provide physical closeness. Spend extra time with your child. Talk and offer reassurance.
- Encourage your child to ask questions and discuss their feelings.
- Affirm all expressions. It's okay to express feelings honestly. Tolerate the expressions rather than dismissing them or discouraging them.
- Encourage written expressions such as notes, letters, picture to the family.
- Watch for signs of trouble such as aggression or withdrawal.
- Help your child return to as normal a routine as possible.

If you need the assistance of a member of the school's support team, please contact the school at (475) 220-5400 or send a message through Class Dojo to your child's teacher and you will be connected to a member of the team.

Our deepest sympathies to the Barnes family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

**Thomas McCarthy**  
Assistant Principal

**Dianne Spence**  
Principal

**Regina Carini**  
Assistant Principal