

CONNECTIONS

A report to the community from Michigan City Area Schools

Summer 2024

Mission

We are a diverse community of families, students, and staff who take pride in our schools, contribute positively to society, and prepare students for lifelong success.

Vision

Michigan City Area Schools: High expectations. Supported students. Innovative paths to success.

Values

Trust

We believe in promoting a culture of integrity so that all members of our community experience deep trust and partnership with the district.

Diversity

We believe in celebrating diversity and empowering all members of our community.

Growth

We believe in continuously growing, learning, and improving, so that all of our students experience academic and personal success.

Pride

We believe in cultivating pride in our schools.

A Message from the Superintendent

It has been another remarkable school year!

As I look back on the achievements and milestones of 2023-24, I am filled with immense pride in our students, families, staff, and community.

This marked the first year of the implementation of our new Strategic Plan, which lays out the vision that will guide us for the next five years. It's exciting work, and it has involved our entire school community – students, teachers, staff, parents, partners, and community members.

We have redesigned this edition of *Connections*, our annual summer report to the community. We've arranged it based on our Values (which are embodied in our district's new Habits of Character) and on the Pillars of our Strategic Plan, which are listed below.



I hope you will visit our website at http://educateMC.net/strategicplanning to read more about these Pillar initiatives and timelines for implementation, and to tell us how you would like to be involved in this work.

And finally, I announced in May that I will be retiring on August 2, after 14 years as MCAS Superintendent and 50 years in education. It has been my honor and privilege to serve this district! Together, we accomplished a great deal for our students, bolstering the instructional core while increasing opportunities PreK-12 in STEM, the Arts, Athletics, and more. We have remained squarely focused on preparing our students for college and careers, partnering with business and industry in order to meet regional workforce needs.

I am grateful to our school community — students, parents, staff, and partners — for your tireless dedication and unwavering support. I cannot think of a better way to conclude my professional career. Please know that I will continue to support our community and will always remain immersed in Wolves culture.

Great things lie ahead for MCAS!

Barbara Eason - Watter,

Dr. Barbara Eason-Watkins Superintendent

Our Pillars are:



From the cover: Chase McMillon and Ashley Sparks are 2024 Michigan City High School Distinguished Graduates and members of the MCAS Strategic Plan Steering team.

LIVING OUR VALUES



We have been blown away by the efforts our school community has made to live out our values. Our community showed up for one another in many ways last school year!

Making Good Character a Habit

In August, MCAS launched its new "Habits of Character" districtwide. The 7 habits were developed by a district Crew Council based on the input of staff, families, students, and community members. Magnets featuring the Habits have been distributed to all K-8 families, and banners listing them are displayed at each school. (MCAS Superintendent Dr. Eason-Watkins is pictured with one of the banners on the previous page.) Visit our website to download your copy!

Schools have embraced the Habits and have made them a keystone of their culture. At Barker Middle School, students are honored as "Beacons" of character. At Krueger, character assemblies acknowledge support for kids living with health students nominated as examples of the Habits in action. This summer, artwork

by third-graders from Pine and Edgewood will be featured at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in conjunction with its summer exhibit, "KAPOW! Mighty Mythos," a selection of Marvel comic books, toys, and more from the collection of the Graf Dairy Hero Foundation. The student artwork features imagined Habits of Character superheroes in action.

Students and staff across MCAS also embodied the Habits in November with "Wear Red for Amir Day," supporting Barker 8th grader Amir Agemy. Agemy, who has type 1 Diabetes and hearing loss, was named a Riley Children's Foundation Champion and encouraged all to show challenges by wearing Riley Red. Many donated \$1, helping him raise over \$1,000.





Serving School & Community: "Better World Day"

MCAS elementary and middle schools celebrated Better World Day on May 3, joining schools across the nation in a day of student-led service tied to lessons learned in the classroom.

Students got to work at their schools - and fanned out across the city – performing acts of service. At Lake Hills, first graders created windchimes for senior citizens. Knapp students painted the school bathrooms with positive sayings. Krueger students planted more than 1,000 trees at Karwick Nature Preserve for their "May the Forest Be with You" project. And Coolspring students (pictured here) created care

Pride in Our Past

The Michigan City Area Schools "And Then Some" Wall of Fame got a makeover last year. The Wall, which honors former school employees, was established in 1976, and it featured small plaques honoring each inductee. But by 2019, the Wall (housed at Heritage Hall at Michigan City High School) was out of space.

bags for patients, complete with snacks and a coloring book they designed with notes of encouragement.

Joy and Edgewood Better World Day "kid captains" were featured on a national webinar hosted by EL Education, which spotlighted their unique projects. Edgewood students, who learned that the U.S. is one of only two countries that have not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, drafted a Children's Bill of Rights; Joy students visited the Nest shelter, the Salvation Army, and other community agencies to drop off donations, volunteer, and learn.

Former inductees, their relatives, and

the new Wall of Fame, which features smaller plates. Many took home the old

plaques to mark the occasion. To date,

educateMC.net/WOF for a complete list!

in our community. Visit http://

friends gathered in November to celebrate





Pillar Spotlight: Clear and Consistent Communication



We will ensure that information is easily accessible and that all members of our community feel that their voices matter.

Key Initiatives

We will create a welcoming culture that encourages feedback and reflection. We will develop a network of ambassadors who will share accurate and positive information about our schools. We will implement two-way communication platforms that allow us to reach all constituents and provide them with opportunities for engagement.



"Our team has been doing walk-throughs at schools, and some simple changes have already been made to make sure buildings are welcoming and customer-friendly. I'm excited to continue this work because it will make a real difference for our soon-to-be first grader."

Lindsey Cavin, Parent, Pillar Team Member

These Dads are Pros!

Three MCAS elementary buildings have launched chapters of a nationwide program called "All Pro Dad."

One day a month, dads or other father figures and their kids meet at school for All Pro Dads activities that invoke meaningful conversations. The characterbased curriculum encourages growth and communication between dads and their children, at an age-appropriate level. Meetings center on topics such as forgiveness, leadership, humility, and purpose; take-home resources help dads and children continue the conversation with fun activities related to the topic.

MCAS School Board President Marty Corley leads the chapter at Edgewood Elementary where his son is a student, and at Springfield Elementary.



All Pro Dad Coolspring chapter captain Ray Alvarez says one of the best parts of the meetings is a "pride moment" where fathers share a word of praise with their children. "Everyone is busy throughout the week, but it's important to slow down and say, 'we are going to focus on the kids right here for a moment," he says. "Children need to hear that positivity from us."

Pillar Teams at Work

Pillar Team members (including staff, students, and community members) met on a regular basis this year to work on the Strategic Plan. In addition, the Steering Team reviewed data to track progress.

While the Strategic Plan is intended to last, it is not intended to stay the same. As pillar teams try new initiatives, they gain feedback and insights, pivoting as needed.



Want current updates on our plan? Visit http://educateMC.net/strategicplanning

We heard from you! We made informed pivots based on your feedback.

> **1,655 responses** to the End of Year 1 Impact Survey, including **929 student** responses.

We conducted **23 classroom** walk-throughs across elementary, middle, and high school classrooms.

We conducted **4 focus groups** (1 for elementary, 2 for middle, and 1 for high) with **45 students.**

We hosted **5 in-person** and **2 virtual sessions** with the Steering Team, Pillar Teams, and school leaders.

Pillar Spotlight: Educating the Whole Child



We will provide students with equitable resources that will support their emotional and mental health needs, including increased social-emotional learning resources.

Key Initiatives

We will implement a tool (such as an app) to serve as a mental health/learning environment screener and connect students with resources. We will expand "Crew" to all grades, with a focus on emotional awareness, academic success, and opportunities for relationship-building. We will form a circle of care made up of teachers, counselors, social workers, success coaches, staff, and parents to support students from enrollment through graduation, using SEL and trauma-informed care techniques.



"Each building, from Little Wolves to Michigan City High School, has been introduced to a concept called Restorative Practices. Staff are learning about the impact of trauma on a child's developing brain, and proactive strategies they can use in the classroom to manage behavior. This is a game-changer for our district."

> Stephanie Rozinski, MCAS Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Specialist, Pillar Team Member

Making Playgrounds Fun for All

Students at Joy Elementary School now play together at recess, thanks to a playground renovation completed last fall.

The new playgrounds have a spongy, flat surface that is wheelchair accessible, allowing all students to play together on equipment such as gliders, domes, and roller tables. A communication panel even helps non-verbal students interact with their peers. The project was funded by a grant from the Health Foundation of Laporte and by MCAS, utilizing ESSER funding made available through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The playgrounds are open for the public to enjoy before and after school. MCAS plans to improve accessibility of playgrounds at all elementary schools; improvements will begin at several buildings this summer.



Healthy Food, from Farm to School

MCAS now partners with the NWI Food Council to serve locally sourced food from area farms for school meals, supported by a grant from the Indiana Department of Health. The district received its first delivery through the program – apples from Garwood Orchards – on October 6. Cafeterias also served local honey (used in breakfast bars), spring mix lettuce, peppers, potatoes, radishes, sprouts, beets, tomatoes, corn on the cob, and ground beef. Students were even treated to fresh apple cider and maple syrup!

Area farms participating in the program include Garwood Orchards, Rainfield Farm, Tuholski Produce, Kankakee Valley



Homestead, Fischer Farms, and others. "Kids enjoy learning about Indiana agriculture and are eager to give new foods a try," says MCAS Food Service Director Nicole Santana. "We can't wait to incorporate more fresh proteins, such as chicken and beef, in new recipes."

What is Crew?

All K-8 students in MCAS take part in sessions called "Crew" to build relationships and help one another succeed academically and socially. Follow this QR code to view a video created by students and staff at Marsh Elementary for "Better World Day," which explains what Crew and the Habits of Character mean to them!



Pillar Spotlight: Culture and Environment



We will work to ensure that Michigan Area City Schools is a community that all members appreciate, celebrate, and are proud to be a part of.

We will enhance support for all sports and extracurriculars across the district (PreK-12). We will update, beautify, or add facilities, keeping a focus on safety. We will strengthen the overall culture for district staff, celebrating diversity.

Shelly Malott, District Library/Media Assistant, Pillar Team Member



"Our team is working on adding more extracurriculars — especially at the elementary and middle school levels — and we're addressing barriers like transportation so that more students can participate. I'm also super excited about the new Teacher and Employee of the Year program. It is so important to recognize and celebrate our AMAZING staff!"

A Safer Ride

The MCAS Transportation Department continues to innovate!

This year, a wireless networking device called FirstNet was added to all 58 buses in the fleet, replacing an analog radio system that had a limited range. Firstnet is a secure broadband system used by first responders; MCAS is one of the first districts to use it on school buses. The console features a handheld unit that can be ejected for use outside the bus.

Twenty-eight MCAS buses now use environmentally friendly propane fuel. These buses are also equipped with stateof-the-art safety features such as flashing LED lights on stop arms, six cameras located inside and outside the bus, and illuminated "School Bus" signs for added visibility.

MCAS Transportation Director Sue Harrison says that eight gas buses will be next in line to have these special features.



Future Wolves a Focus of Athletics

MCAS added a new sport to its "Future Wolves" athletic lineup this year: Volleyball! All eight elementary schools fielded co-ed teams, involving 195 students in grades 5 and 6. The popularity of the program bodes well for the future, as the Indiana High School Athletic Association approved full recognition of Boys Volleyball and Girls Wrestling beginning next year. (These are two sports in which MCHS already competes!)

High school athletes also visited elementary schools this year to speak to younger students about the importance of good grades and sportsmanship. The Future Wolves were eager to learn about what it is like to be an athlete at the next level and cheered for the older students as if they were celebrities. In other Athletics news: Be on the lookout for a new Athletic Hall of Fame for alumni of Michigan City High School! The first induction to the "Pack of Honor" will take place this fall.





Teachers, Employees of the Year Celebrated

Five staff members who have gone above and beyond to serve students were the recipients of the district's first-ever Teacher and Employee of the Year award.

The five winners were surprised on April 12 by a "prize patrol" that included MCAS Superintendent Dr. Barbara Eason-Watkins, Associate Superintendent Dr. Wendel McCollum, and representatives of Comcast and the Michigan City Chamber, sponsors of the program. Each recipient was presented with \$500, an engraved award, and a bag of gift items, courtesy of Comcast and the Chamber. More than 400 nominations were received for the program, which also honored teachers and support staff winners at each school. (Read more about the district winners and the school finalists at http:// educateMC.net/TOY_EOY.)

Nomination forms, which can be submitted by staff, students, and the public, will be available in the fall for next year's program.



(L-R): Maryanne Garon (Transportation Employee of the Year), Jenny Jones (Secondary Teacher of the Year), Susan Shell (Elementary Teacher of the Year), Missy Burklow (Support Staff Employee of the Year), and Diana Walpole (Food Service Employee of the Year).

"Heart Safe" Schools

Barker Middle School and the Elston Building (which houses the Pathways alternative program and several A. K. Smith Career Center programs) are the first certified "Heart Safe" facilities in MCAS.

Heart Safe is a certification awarded by Project ADAM, a nationwide initiative that has saved the lives of more than 200 children, adolescents, and adults who went

into sudden cardiac arrest. Staff at both locations participated in training sessions and drills with the Michigan City Fire Department and LaPorte County EMS to earn certification.

All MCAS facilities are now equipped with AEDs, thanks to grants from the Health Foundation of LaPorte and the Duneland Health Council.



South Campus to Open In August for Career-Tech

LaPorte County Career and Technical Education has a new home for seven of its programs: The South Campus building at 1001 U.S. Hwy. 20.

The \$13.5 million South Campus will house programs in Automotive, Construction, Criminal Justice, Early Childhood, Health Careers, Smart Manufacturing, and Welding. The facility, which is also the home of the Little Wolves Early Learning Center preschool, is nearing completion this summer, in time for most of the programs to open there in August. CTE programs in Culinary, Cosmetology, Energy, Education Professions, EMT, Fire Science, and Machining will remain in operation at the A. K. Smith building (817 Lafayette Street).

"Over the past decade, our career and technical programs have grown exponentially," said MCAS Superintendent Dr. Barbara Eason-Watkins. "The South Campus allows us to provide state-of-theart classrooms and lab space to help prepare students for jobs in demand across our region." MCAS oversees the LaPorte County CTE program, which serves approximately 350 juniors and seniors from seven surrounding high schools, including LaPorte, Michigan City, New Buffalo, New Prairie, South Central, Tri-Township, and Westville.

Visit http://educateMC.net/careertech for information about all 14 CTE programs offered for area students!





Pillar Spotlight: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners



We will provide all students with the tools, resources, and support they need to experience success in school, meet their goals, and reach their full potential.

We will provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate mastery. We will implement an integrated, tiered system of supports for students.

We will diversify electives to give students more choice in course selections and postsecondary options.



"Our Pillar team is working to ensure students have multiple pathways and opportunities to explore different careers. We want to open doors, to spark an interest in something they may not have ever considered."

Patrice Huley, Instructional Coach, Pillar Team Member

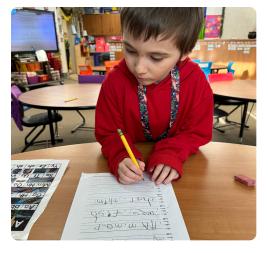
The Science of Reading: LETRS

This spring, the Indiana Department of Education announced a requirement that all elementary teachers must be trained in "Science of Reading" techniques to renew their licenses. But MCAS was ahead of the game: Over 30 of our district's teachers and instructional coaches already completed a training called LETRS – Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading And Spelling – and another 15 are starting this summer.

LETRS centers on the "reading brain" – providing a research-tested framework to teach students to decode letters on the

page and make meaning from the words. It incorporates phonemic awareness, phonics, word parts, spelling, and fluency, giving teachers tools to diagnose problems and differentiate instruction. Multisensory resources create language-rich classroom environments and build connections between reading and writing.

According to MCAS Curriculum Director Cathy Bildhauser, LETRS is making a real difference. "In some cases, students are doubling achievement on assessments in these classrooms."



Early College 10th Anniversary

Michigan City High School celebrated a milestone this year: the 10th Anniversary of its Early College, the first program of its kind in Northwest Indiana.

The MCHS Early College now serves up to 100 students each year, preparing them for college and careers in a "school within a school" environment. It focuses on students in the academic middle, along with those who may be the first in their families to attend college.

Thanks to a partnership with Ivy Tech and Indiana University, the program enables students to earn both high school and college credits. Students can also earn the Indiana College Core, a block of 30 credits guaranteed to transfer to any public university in Indiana.

According to MCHS Early College Counselor Rhonda LaMarr, 647 students have now been a part of the Early College program.

"This program is challenging and rigorous, but we know that with a little extra encouragement our Early College students will soar," she said. "Students are completing this program with high GPAs, 30 or 40 or even more college credits, scholarships, and big plans. We are proud of our current students, our alumni, and our record of success!"



DID YOU KNOW?

In addition to the Early College program, Michigan City High School also offers an Honors College, which serves high-ability students through numerous dual-credit and Advanced Placement opportunities.

Problem-Solving: Key to Math Mastery

Marsh Elementary saw a boost in ILEARN Math scores this year, thanks to a new problem-solving approach. An instructional coach from EL Education worked with all grades at the school to pilot the new program, which supplements the existing curriculum.

"This involved getting rigorous math problems into the hands of students, letting them grapple with the material, getting their thoughts on paper, and then leading them in a discussion," says Principal Moniqua Neal. "They are pushed to be creative, and then learn from one another how to solve problems." The approach led to a deeper understanding of number sense and algebraic thinking while building oral language and communication skills. Problem Solving Math will be expanded to several other MCAS elementary schools in the fall.





Little Wolves Wanted!

The Little Wolves Early Learning Center had a successful first year!

To learn more about our brand new, high-quality preschool, visit littlewolveslearning.com or call (219) 873-2035.

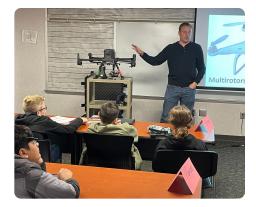
We're enrolling children anytime they turn age 4!

Drone Academy Takes Off

Students at Barker Middle School learned to program and pilot drones this year, thanks to a Drone Academy unit in teacher Amy Hamann's STEM Classes.

Guest speakers Lauren Allen and Nikky Witkowski from the Laporte and Porter County Purdue Extensions spent two days in classes. They taught students to use an iPad app to launch, fly, and hover Tello drones, writing their own code to fly the devices through obstacle courses. FAA "DronePro" Keenan Newton of Skyora (skyora.net) also worked with students, sharing his journey of entrepreneurship. Students learned about the applications of drones in the real world and the education necessary to pursue a career using drones.

Hamann says that in the future, Barker STEM students will be using "Real Flight 9.5" software to practice flying drones and other aircraft. The goal is to fly outdoor drones that have smart controllers.



Ready for the Workforce

Career-tech education in Michigan City is going strong! Forty MCHS seniors were invited to take part in the Ivy Tech graduation ceremony this spring, based on the number of technical certifications and dual credits they earned.

In May, the A.K. Smith Career Center held a Signing Day celebration for students committing to apprenticeships as

Training Future Sailors

After a successful pilot program last year involving Barker and Krueger Middle Schools, 23 more elementary and middle school students have learned how to sail this summer!

The students completed a two-week sailing program in partnership with the South Shore Sailing School, with support from the Unity Foundation of LaPorte County. In addition to being fun, sailing school

Carpenters and Electricians, and a pinning ceremony for Health Careers students earning their CNA (Certified Nurse Aide).

Automotive students also earned a recordbreaking 79 certifications. And students from the Culinary Academy traveled to Orlando to take part in the "Cooks Around the World" competition at Disney World. The students ranked 12th out of 83 teams.





teaches important STEM concepts, such as angles, buoyancy, and the kinetics of what makes a boat go through the water.

Dale Moyer, a Sailing School Board Member, helped found the partnership and feels it is helping reach a diverse group of future sailors. "Sailing instills confidence in students," he says. "They gain an appreciation of nature and our Great Lake and learn a safe way to have fun."



Pillar Spotlight: Student Voice and Opportunities



We will ensure that students' voices and choices are reflected in decisions made throughout the district by committing to getting their feedback and involvement on a consistent basis.

We will provide professional development for staff on incorporating student voice.

We will create more academic and extracurricular opportunities for students. We will seek student input and involvement in decisions that impact them.



"A year ago, I don't think anyone realized how valuable student voice would be to the Strategic Planning process. Now, students will be included on all Pillar teams, and we are creating a student advisory committee for the district."

> Chase McMillon, MCHS Student, Pillar Team Member

Students across MCAS have been making their voices heard!

Student Voice at the Forefront

When **Knapp** Elementary School planned a new positive behavior reward system this year, a student subcommittee was formed to give input. Students helped price items according to their "Knapp Bucks" value and worked with teachers and staff to plan celebrations. Volunteers from Michigan City-based reading glasses company Peepers (pictured here) sponsored the store and helped organize the items.



At **MCHS**, State Senator Rodney Pol and State Representative Pat Boy convened a Youth Advisory Committee to engage students in the legislative process. They met with interested juniors and seniors to brief them on pending bills; students shared their opinions on a variety of issues, including mental health, the minimum wage, gun laws, and more. They will be back at it in the fall: Pol says he hopes the student committee at MCHS can help craft a piece of legislation that they deeply care about with the assistance of his legislative staff.



Springfield Elementary students took "Crew" to the next level this year, pairing up across grade levels to support one another and build relationships. In addition to daily Crew sessions in classrooms, students now meet with younger (or older) classmates they may otherwise not encounter at school. Older students generate ideas for the bimonthly Crew Connections, which included holiday activities and discussions about the Habits of Character. "This was a win-win on many levels," said principal Lisa Emshwiller. "Students embraced this, and our staff got to know each other better through the collaboration."



International Friends Forever

In March, Michigan City High School welcomed six students and two instructors from Zama Sogo High School in Japan. The students and teachers spent 10 days in Michigan City and were hosted by MCHS students studying Japanese. This longtime cultural partnership began in 2008 but was interrupted due to COVID; MCHS was thrilled to welcome the group back.

"This partnership is an example of the outstanding Foreign Language Department we have at Michigan City High School," said MCHS Principal Kyle Dean. "It gives our students and the students from Japan a 24/7 opportunity to practice their language skills, learn about both cultures from a teen perspective, and form lifelong friendships."



Tech Support Saturday to the Rescue!

Is your computer acting up? Is your identity safe online? Wish you understood that app your teen is using? The "Alpha-Bytes" Computer Science Honor Society at Michigan City High School helped members of the public with these issues and more on "Tech Support Saturday" in February.

Community members brought desktop computers, laptops, and other devices in need of repair; students provided basic fixes on-site. Devices in need of more extensive repairs were diagnosed at the event and returned later. As possible, needed parts were offered at no cost, thanks to a grant from the Computer Science Teachers Association. "Our students were excited to share their expertise," said MCHS teacher Carlos Melendez, the Computer Science Honor Society advisor. "This event allowed them to practice their technical skills and benefit the community."

Service is key for the Honor Society chapter, which inducted its first members in September. In November, several members who also compete on the MCHS Esports team raised \$730 for the Children's Miracle Networks through a 12-hour live gaming marathon on Twitch. Students also visited the Michigan City Senior Center to consult with them about their devices.



MCHS offers eight courses in Computer Science, with pathways in both Computer Science and Cybersecurity.

Mural Club Makes a Dramatic Impact

The MCHS Mural Club reinvented a school gathering space this year, creating nine colossal murals in the cafeteria and commons area.

Each of the dramatic murals features bold colors on a black background. The paintings are filled with imagination and symbolism, depicting phoenixes rising, graceful swans, fists raised in solidarity, whimsical animals, stars, and flowers. Students worked under the direction of Club Sponsor Art Teacher Sue Cleveland, in partnership with local artist Laura Marie Panozzo of LMP Arts, who donated supplies and many hours of expertise working with the students.

The Mural Club has created beautiful works of art throughout the school since 2016,

providing inspiration, hope, and joy around every corner of the building. It has also painted murals at the Michigan City Elston YMCA and Friendship Gardens. The Club's final painting this year was an outdoor mural at Naturally Wood Furniture Center, 1106 U.S. 20.

We can't wait to see what masterpieces they create next year!







Michigan City Area Schools 408 S. Carroll Avenue Michigan City, IN 46360

<u>www.EducateMC.net</u> (219) 873-2000

MICHIGAN C I Т HIGH SCHOOL Y STINGU ISH A I R FS G E

