

# Traditions

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**FORT THOMAS**

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

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Retired teacher **Carolyn Honchell** explains how essential an overhead projector once was in the classroom to current Johnson students at the school's 100th birthday celebration.

SPECIAL FOCUS:  
**Our Stamp on the Future**

**SPRING/SUMMER 2024**

# FROM THE Superintendent

To our Fort Thomas Community,

I hope that you're enjoying the first days and weeks of summer while reveling in everything that a much-deserved break from school has to offer. Please savor the time off and recharge for when we reconvene in a couple of months! I'd like to personally thank each of you for the important role you played in making our 2023-24 academic year one of our best ever in Fort Thomas. Summer affords us time to reflect on all of the successes, the academic pursuits and extracurricular activities that we celebrated in our five schools since we started the journey together last August. I firmly believe that the teaching and learning in our classrooms and labs contain the hallmarks of a world-class education. Our amazing faculty challenges and mentors our students in equal measure, inspiring achievement, positioning our graduates for postsecondary successes of all kinds and doing so against the backdrop of unmatched community support. It's a privilege, and a great responsibility, to make sure we are doing our part to



**Superintendent Robinson** holds a recently-hatched chick on his visit to a Moyer Elementary third grade science class.

meet and exceed the standards of excellence that have been in place for generations. We are truly Rich in Tradition, Focused on the Future.

Thank you for reading the Spring/Summer 2024 issue of *Traditions*, one of my favorite platforms to spotlight the wonderful happenings in our schools. The theme for this edition is "Our Stamp on the Future". As strong as we are today, we know our best days are ahead of us, and that our people and programs in our schools have still-untapped greatness that our exceptional performers will summon to guide us into uncharted territory.

During the 2023-24 school year, our community benefited from countless examples of our forward-thinking and compassionate students leading the charge in their learning, supported by dedicated professionals. For example, we witnessed the Highlands High School Class of 2024 partner with the VA Hospital in Fort Thomas to make a positive impact on the patients and families at the medical center. The HHS art club built four cornhole boards (with beautifully painted logos of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines) and delivered them to the hospital for the patients to



Mr. Robinson asks **Emerson Seiter** about the Johnson 2nd grader's project for the school's 100th birthday celebration in March.

enjoy, an initiative called "Seniors and Soldiers", and it drew rave reviews from all involved. Our Woodfill elementary students learned about the science of growing their own vegetables at school, as well as the entrepreneurial opportunities available to them by selling lettuce at the Fort Thomas Farmers Market. Also, I was fortunate this spring to have two HHS Film and Broadcasting students reach out to me with an idea to start a Superintendent podcast, "Focus on the Fort", to inform the community about the wonderful things going on in our schools and interview the people who drive our successes. We welcome you to tune in!

The aforementioned projects are clearly tethered to the tenets laid out in our strategic plan: for our students to be a part of a positive and engaged culture; that they are demonstrating achievement and embarking on one-of-a-kind experiences and opportunities; that they are exhibiting growth in the process and developing competencies embedded in our Fort Thomas Graduate blueprint. Throughout this publication, you will read other inspiring examples of how our schools are flourishing by using the strategic plan as a roadmap in delivering a memorable educational experience. Our students only have one K-12 journey, and we believe in maximizing the potential unique to every child at every step along the road.

Now is a time for great celebration, as it's such an exciting era in which to be a part of our school system in Fort Thomas. For decades, the baton has been passed from one generation to the next to keep our schools as the consistent heartbeat of our community. As shared in our student-authored article featuring artist alumnus Gregory Manchess, we cherish our past, covet our present, and use the boundless opportunities of today to ensure our Fort Thomas graduates leave an indelible mark on the world, long after they leave the Nest.

Please settle in and learn how we're achieving great things together!

Happy Reading,

Brian Robinson  
Superintendent





# 2023-2024 Recognitions

## 2023-24 State Champions

### Individual Champions

- ▶ **Sophie Uhl** – Forensics – Dramatic Interpretation
- ▶ **Eliana Niese and Jack Wilson** – TSA – Data Science & Analytics Engineering
- ▶ **Addyson Elfert** – FCCLA - Sports Nutrition - Level 2

### Team Champions

- ▶ **Highlands Boys 6th Grade and Under Cross Country Team**
- ▶ **We The People**

## Perfect ACT

- ▶ **Flynn Cook**
- ▶ **Benjamin Gilkerson**
- ▶ **Oliver Martin**

## 2024 Governor's Programs

### Governor's Scholar Program

- ▶ **Marshall Anstaett**
- ▶ **Lily Arnberg**
- ▶ **Felicity Berling**
- ▶ **Hannah Clifton**
- ▶ **Chelsea Crisler**
- ▶ **Kate Fausz**
- ▶ **Sophia Hamilton**
- ▶ **Abigail Herald**
- ▶ **Natalie Hurles**
- ▶ **Oliver Martin**

### Governor's School for the Arts

- ▶ **Liam Delaney** – Film & Photography
- ▶ **Sophia Hamilton** – Film & Photography
- ▶ **Brianna Horner** – Dance
- ▶ **Anne Kuhnhein** – Dance
- ▶ **Sylvie Martin** – Vocal Music
- ▶ **Abigail McKinley** – Instrumental Music - Strings
- ▶ **Chase Pawsat** – Instrumental Music - Strings
- ▶ **Jenna Richey** – Film & Photography
- ▶ **Hayden Rolf** – Film & Photography
- ▶ **Aisley Street** – Dance
- ▶ **Addison Tallent** – Drama

### Governor's School for Entrepreneurs

- ▶ **Nick Wilson**

## NaviGo Scholars

- ▶ **Jude Borden**
- ▶ **Wyatt Carbone**
- ▶ **Mitchell Dixon**
- ▶ **Logan Iacono**
- ▶ **Sage Johnson**
- ▶ **Joe Reynolds**

## National Merit Finalists

- ▶ **Bradley Groneck**
- ▶ **Ryan Groneck**
- ▶ **Sophia Scherrer**
- ▶ **Connor Wehby**
- ▶ **Jackson Wilson**

## Presidential Scholar

- ▶ **Owen Borden**

## Broadcasting Awards

### Ohio Valley Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences

#### Best Non-Fiction

- ▶ **Up In Flames** – Emma Barton, Travis Votel, Emmerson Fraley, Emma Doerr

#### Best Editor

- ▶ **Hayden Rolf**

#### Best Sports Broadcaster of the Year

- ▶ **Brennan Bucher**

## KMEA All-State

### HHS Orchestra

- ▶ **Noah Huber** – Symphony
- ▶ **Abigail McKinley** – Commonwealth
- ▶ **Elliot Martin** – Commonwealth

- ▶ **Amelia Crozier**
- ▶ **Elyse Hart**
- ▶ **Beatrice Landon**
- ▶ **Edie Twehues** – Kentucky Junior High Mixed Choir
- ▶ **Lucy Schill** – Kentucky Junior High Treble Choir

### HHS Choir

- ▶ **Garrett Cutajar** – TTBB
- ▶ **Weston Higgason** – TTBB
- ▶ **Sylvie Martin** – SATB
- ▶ **Rafe Pinkston** – TTBB
- ▶ **Eva Sarakatsannis** – SSAA
- ▶ **Evan Stuart** – SATB
- ▶ **Caroline Weber** – KJHC

- ▶ **Ella Kate Reynolds**
- ▶ **Kit Valentine**

### MES Choir

- ▶ **Genevieve Deinlein** – Kentucky Children's Choir

### WES Choir

- ▶ **Norah Dillon** – Kentucky Children's Choir
- ▶ **Lily Hobson** – Kentucky Children's Choir

### HMS Choir

- ▶ **Kentucky Children's Choir**
- ▶ **Hannah Bere**

## 2023-2024 Cappies

Congratulations to the HHS Theatre on their 17 nominations. Winners include:

### Best Sound

- ▶ **Violet Hisey, Mason Haffey, Max Hamilton and Crew**

### Featured Actor in a Female Role

- ▶ **Peyton Pope**

### Lead Actor in a Female Role

- ▶ **Samantha Heilman**

## DISTRICT STORY

# “Defenses of Learning” Blend Knowledge & Communication



Ava Muchmore and Ellie Pfetzer deliver their fifth grade Genius presentations while Morgan Ripley and fellow classmates listen in.

American journalist **Margaret Fuller** once observed, “If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it.” The first American female war correspondent, Ms. Fuller saw the merit in not only learning, but equally as important, in effectively communicating that wisdom as far and wide as possible to deliver as much value as possible to others.

For several years, school and community stakeholders have collaborated to identify the necessary competencies to be developed as our students embark on their K-12 journey toward becoming a Fort Thomas Graduate: empathetic collaboration, curious critical thinking, global communication and courageous leadership. Our strategic plan outlines how our students set out to master these attributes: by learning in a positive and engaged culture, taking part in memorable experiences and opportunities, and by staying attuned to achievement and individual student growth throughout the K-12 journey.

Having the opportunity to communicate progress at key points along the journey provides an opportunity for our learning community to support the individual growth of each student. As such, a team of stakeholders from throughout the school community is preparing opportunities for students to participate in “Defenses of Learning” at different transitional points in the student experience. “Defenses of Learning” will open the door for students to deliver in-person presentations and provide evidence that they have mastered certain skills and outline areas for continued growth. While specific details are still under development for these presentations,

we are considering 5th grade, as elementary school concludes and middle school awaits; 8th grade, as students approach high school; and 12th grade, as our soon-to-be Fort Thomas graduates prepare to embrace postsecondary challenges and opportunities of all kinds when they leave the Nest.

“It is important because we want our students to be able to have ownership of their learning and understand that what they are doing has purpose as they develop the skills of the Fort Thomas Graduate,” said **Keith Faust**, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning.

“Defenses of Learning” will allow students to accumulate evidence and compile a digital

**“We want our students to be able to have ownership of their learning and understand that what they are doing has purpose.”**

resume that illustrates their progress in achieving key competencies in front of an audience of school and community stakeholders. For example, a student may choose to defend the experience of taking part in Unified Bocce at Woodfill Elementary School, as a way to hone the empathetic collaboration skills that are so important for Fort Thomas graduates to meet and exceed the expectations of the 21st century.

“The competencies of the Fort Thomas Graduate are very relevant and transferrable to every facet of life. Working to develop these skills and have our students talk about the impact of the experience is something we all feel is good for students.”

In Fort Thomas, we seek to inspire in our students a lifelong love of learning, of course, but in conjunction with that pursuit, we want them to be equipped with interpersonal and presentation skills to effectively convey their ideas, findings, goals and areas of improvement.

Our goal is to incrementally introduce “Defenses of Learning” over the next several years and achieve full implementation during the 2026-2027 school year.





# DISTRICT UPDATES

## A Community Jewel Awaits in Tower Park

It's a project truly brimming with promise and possibilities. A long-held vision is coming to fruition thanks to a host of school and community partnerships.

In tandem with the City of Fort Thomas, the Fort Thomas Independent Schools, guided by the forward-thinking Board of Education, saw a once-in-a-generation opportunity to completely renovate the aging Tower Park Athletic Complex and add a community jewel to our city and the surrounding region. Our vision is for the complex to continue serving as a beacon of health and wellness for users of all abilities and expand our reach to include our neighbors throughout Northern Kentucky and the Commonwealth.

"I am very excited for what's in store at Tower Park because it fits perfectly within our vision to provide the best possible platforms for our students to succeed, and doing so within a framework that connects our community to the facilities in a very positive way," Superintendent **Brian Robinson** said. "I am also very pleased that our users and spectators will be able to experience the facility with a heightened premium on safety."

This project has the capacity to impact all of our programs and enhance the community. The blueprints call for a safer, more modernized experience for both participants and patrons alike: new synthetic turf, re-surfaced and expanded track lanes, more parking options that better facilitate drop-off and pick-up, restrooms, smoother access both in and out of the park, shelter in the event of inclement weather and a training fieldhouse to allow our student-

athletes and coaches to prepare for competition. As has been the case for years, and will continue to be long into the future, whenever the facility is not in use by the schools, youth sports may rent the facility and the track and public restrooms will be open for the community to access. The complex also opens up the opportunity for city sponsored programming.

"I believe that a safer and modernized complex allows for us to grow in a very sustainable way," Robinson added. "The facility becomes accessible for all patrons to enjoy programming in a way limited by the previous design. We can also explore adding more sports at the high school level, and what's very appealing is the prospect of having Tower Park be able to host regular season and postseason tournaments in various sports at all levels of competition. We want it to be a sought-after destination and believe the cutting-edge design allows for it to be just that."

The project will be completed in phases and would not be possible if not for partners who have voiced support for the project at every step. Partnership with the City of Fort Thomas has been a critical element. State Representative **Mike Clines** led the way in sharing our vision to our elected officials in Frankfort, with Senator **Shelley Funke Frommeyer** providing important support with lawmakers. Recognizing the space as a community complex, the Kentucky General Assembly earmarked funding for the Tower Park renovation during the 2024 legislative session, and St. Elizabeth Healthcare and OrthoCincy have committed to significant sponsorships. The partnership to make this project a reality is yet another example of what makes our greater Fort Thomas Community so unique.

Our Fort Thomas neighbors have also demonstrated admirable patience as traffic patterns in and around Tower Park have changed to accommodate construction. We are very thankful for their understanding as we work on what will be a magnificent complex for our community.

We are pleased to announce that the Fort Thomas Board of Education approved the impactful work in our final phase on May 20, 2024 and construction will begin this summer. Please visit the Fort Thomas Independent Schools and City of Fort Thomas websites for traffic updates during construction. We look forward to many great days and nights to come at the new Tower Park Athletic Complex!



An artist's rendering shows the vision for how a beautifully-revamped complex at Tower Park will look once complete.

# SCHOOL UPDATES

## Johnson Elementary

# J

JOHNSON  
elementary

### 100 YEARS: CELEBRATING THE PAST TO CHART OUR FUTURE



For one night, and what a grand celebration it was on the north side of Fort Thomas, Johnson Elementary School looked like a wall-to-wall time capsule: a century of meaningful memorabilia covered the walls and lined the tables of the classrooms and cafeteria. As fifth grader **Ryder Jacobs** walked through the school for the 100th birthday party in March, he felt a sense of pride and accomplishment, knowing the months of hard work that had gone into it.

"It was just awesome," Jacobs said. "And it was challenging, too. Sometimes it took a lot of work to find answers or facts for what we were studying."

The Jaguars celebrated their milestone 100th anniversary by displaying photos, mementos, artifacts, reflections, bricks from the old building, as well as assorted projects and artwork that told the story of the past century in a community showcase. It looked like a museum exhibit, as hundreds of students from kindergarten through fifth grades put in enough study to receive honorary doctorates and become unofficial curators.

"We became the experts on Johnson Elementary through all of our dedication and research," said fifth grader **Eve Ellison**. Throughout the school, retired teachers beamed as they saw one another and reminisced. A retired JES second grade teacher, **Carolyn Honchell**, explained to a student how critical an overhead projector once was to conducting classroom lessons. Gene Taylor, who attended Johnson in the 1940s and early 1950s, remembers the school fondly as a "wonderful place" that prepared both him and his children for life after leaving the Nest.

For principal **Ashley Dikeos**, embracing and encapsulating the past one hundred years at Johnson Elementary contained two important dynamics: a celebration of the past but, just as significantly, something that offers a glimpse into an exciting future.

"For us, the beauty of the showcase is that it was

almost exclusively student-driven, and through project-based learning our students adopted growth mindsets and relied on their creativity to become teachers for our entire community," Dikeos said. "They put so much work into conveying lessons about virtually every element of Johnson's rich past and how our school is fully committed to preparing them for success in both Fort Thomas and beyond." The students also exhibited proficiency in the core attributes of a Fort Thomas Graduate: curious and critical thinking, empathetic collaboration, global communication and creative problem solving.

**Sally Schoellman**'s fourth grade class explored the valiant military courage of the school's namesake, Robert D. Johnson, in World War I. **Aimee Shadwell**'s third graders examined environmental impacts of Johnson's transformation through the generations.

**Erin Staff**'s kindergarteners reviewed old exterior photos of Johnson and produced beautiful paintings to hang on the walls. **Jill Booth**'s students put together biographies of Johnson alumni who went on to become great artists, and, similarly, **Olivia Bryant**'s fourth graders spotlighted famous athletes, such as Highlands girls' basketball coach **Jaime Walz Richey** and a professional soccer player, FC Cincinnati's **Quimi Ordenez**.

What stood out, too, were the student reflections, answering the question "What does Johnson mean to me?"

"It's a place that makes me feel really special. The teachers are really nice and they show the students they really care," Ellison said.

And it's been that way, passed along from one generation at Johnson to the next for the past century. Cheers on a milestone birthday, and here's to an exciting 100 years to come!



Top Left: Past and present Johnson Elementary teachers, staff and administration reminisced at the school's 100th birthday celebration in March.

Lower Right: (L-R) Siblings **Hailey** and **Hannah Bere** practice using a cassette recorder and electric typewriter, two relics on display at the community gathering.





# SCHOOL UPDATES

## Moyer Elementary

### LIGHTHOUSE TEAMS RADIATE POSITIVITY AT THE RANCH

The application had been turned in. Now it was time to wait.

**Larsyn Riesenbeck** was going through her daily fourth grade routine at Moyer, all the while anticipating a decision. Riesenbeck sought to be on the newly-formed Student Lighthouse Team, as the job description can be boiled down to a simple question the young leaders ask themselves, and each other.

"What can we do to make Moyer even better?"

The note for Larsyn to come to the office arrived in Mrs. Schneider's class. The moment was here, and Riesenbeck remembers it vividly.

"I went down there and Mrs. Luebbers, the counselor, was waiting to ask if I wanted to be on the Student Lighthouse Team," Riesenbeck said. "I was so excited. It's been such a great activity to improve our school. And Moyer's already amazing."

Thirteen 4th and 5th graders are taking the lead on a host of initiatives to make the Moyer school community feel even better about being Mustangs, and for the community to feel extra welcome when they walk in the doors. Student Lighthouse members greet our Watch DOGS (Dads of Great Students) when fathers (and male role models) spend the day interacting with students and teachers at Moyer, crafting the visitor itinerary and showing them around the classrooms and hallways.

"It's really important for our community to know they are welcome here," said **Anderson Elen**, one of the Lighthouse Team members. "Parents don't get to be here every day, and it's important they know what we do and how we treat each other at Moyer." The important initiatives, that guidance counselor **Shauna Luebbers** spearheads, tie back to enhancing the already-strong positive and engaged culture at Moyer. The team meets after school once a month.

The Student Lighthouse Team picks up cameras and visits classrooms and hallways to capture "Golden Mustangs"—students who demonstrate positive leadership characteristics both in and out of the classroom, and the photos were then compiled to make a book of all the past and present Golden Mustangs to be stored in the library for all students to enjoy. The Student Lighthouse Team has galvanized the entire school, grades K-5, around a "Blessing Bag" concept. Students, teachers and Moyer families brought non-perishable food and



**Mike Loyson** (left) meets with Student Lighthouse members **Larsyn Riesenbeck** (middle) and **Ari Tomlin** (right) before starting his day as a Watch DOG at Moyer.

hygiene supplies to school, so that every student (approximately 490 in all) left for summer vacation with bags to distribute to people in our community who cope with food and housing insecurity, should they be asking for help when students are out and about over the summer.

"I truly believe that a central part of our role as leaders and educators is to help each child find the genius that lives within each of them," said **Dr. Dawn Laber**, the principal at Moyer. "When children tap into that genius, and find that student voice, some very special things happen, and we are seeing that very powerfully with the Student Lighthouse Team."

For the "Blessing Bags", the Student Lighthouse Team has specified the different kinds of items that each grade level will donate. They also made flyers to communicate the information and organized the logistics around stuffing the bags when the items were dropped off in May.

The exciting part? This is just the first year, with boundless opportunities for how the Student Lighthouse Team will continue to blossom and evolve, and further enhance Mustang pride.

"To be able to encourage the whole school to be a part of such an important project, and help our neighbors who ask for help, it brings us closer together as Mustangs to all have a common cause," Riesenbeck said.

And you can make the case that the term "Lighthouse" fits the mission perfectly, as the students serve as beacons of inspiration, not only to the community, but to each other, along Highland Avenue.

# SCHOOL UPDATES

## Woodfill Elementary



### LEADING BY SERVING: WOODFILL ADDRESSES REGIONAL HUNGER

**A**dmiring the final product in her hands, the metaphor resonated with **Violet Reed** and reinforced the “why” behind the initiative. It was in equal measure powerful and a call to action.

The fifth grade class at Woodfill Elementary worked both diligently and creatively in **Leah Fryman**’s art room. Pliable hands converted mounds of clay into bowls. A kiln then applied essential heat and after drying, students treated the bowls to colorful glazes and designs of all kinds. While the bowls turned out beautifully, Ms. Reed noticed something impactful in the bowl’s emptiness and traced the symbolism back to what she had been learning at school about food insecurity.

“Sometimes, all people and families have when it comes time to eat is an empty bowl,” Reed said. “It’s important for us to put ourselves in their shoes. How would that feel? By understanding the problem, hopefully we can be leaders and go about solving it.”

The 2023-24 school year opened the door for Woodfill to re-introduce the “Empty Bowls, Empty Bellies” project. Woodfill partnered throughout the school year with the Henry Hosea House, a soup kitchen in neighboring Newport, and brought a Hosea House employee to school to educate the student body about what food insecurity entails, the scope of the problem, and most importantly how they can help Hosea House make a difference.

“At Woodfill, a project of this magnitude clearly reflects our vision and values, and speaks to what we want the school experience to be for our students,” principal **John Gesenhues** said. “Sometimes that calls for us to explore issues in our community, such as hunger, and demonstrate with our actions that often the best way to exhibit leadership skills is by serving others. These are the unforgettable experiences and opportunities we want our students to embrace.”

On the evening of March 13th, Woodfill held a fifth grade showcase in the cafeteria, with bowls from art class lined up along side tables, and families enjoyed a tomato soup and grilled cheese dinner. Proceeds from the evening’s meal, as well as from the money raised from teachers auctioning off their bowls, will go to the Hosea House’s efforts to combat hunger in the region.

“It is very important for us to be involved in this kind of learning which is so much bigger and more important than ourselves,” 5th grader **Bridgette Claytor** said. “I’ve learned so much and it has inspired me to help as much as I can along with

my classmates.”

Woodfill has embraced a “5 Cs” approach to unveiling impactful programming for students, and Mr. Gesenhues says the “Empty Bowls, Empty Bellies” initiative truly meets every one: content, creativity, communication, as well as the last two, collaboration and community.

Students and families have signed up throughout the spring to volunteer at the Hosea House and serve meals to our neighbors in-need, working with a regional partner to tackle a community-related concern. **Fiona Kilmer** couldn’t wait for the privilege of doing so.

“All I want to do is provide a meal to someone and make their day,” Kilmer, a 5th grader, said.

Learning through empathy. Leading by serving. It’s a powerful blueprint, and one that’s working beautifully at Woodfill.



5th grader **Auden Weiss** serves a meal alongside fellow volunteers at the Hosea House in Newport.



Woodfill 5th graders review their bowls that served as one pillar of the “Empty Bowls, Empty Bellies” initiative.







## SCHOOL UPDATES **Highlands Middle**

### STUDENT GROWTH FINDS ITS FOUNDATIONS IN ADVISORY

**L**illy Ahlfeld had finally made it. All of the hard work, the costumes and the auditions, learning and memorizing lines, it had all crystallized perfectly in this moment. A big dream became reality under the bright lights of the Performing Arts Center.

Students at Highlands Middle School are demonstrating individual growth both in and out of the classroom, and clear springboards for success can be traced back to Advisory, a class that meets once-per-week during the school year and equips students with the tools to chase academic, extracurricular and personal milestones. As teacher **Kathy Donelan** flipped through Lilly Ahlfeld's Digital Portfolio in Schoology, the goal-setting was spelled out right there on the screen, in clear detail with action steps to achieve success on-stage.

The radiant lights make the audience nearly invisible to the actors on stage. But what became clear for Ms. Ahlfeld was the palpable joy in accomplishing a goal she once considered seemingly out-of-reach.

"It was very cool, almost magical, honestly," Ahlfeld remembers of her role playing Ms. Wormwood in *Matilda*. "It's a whole new world up there and I thought I was going to be in the chorus or ensemble. I kept getting callbacks for a lead role and it was a great feeling."

A theater aficionado who has attended not only middle school and high school productions growing up, but also shows at the Aronoff in downtown Cincinnati with her family, Lilly Ahlfeld wanted to be a key part of the middle school play.

"It was such a good feeling to know that I can do hard things," Ahlfeld says. Mrs. Donelan attended *Matilda* and said she was absolutely thrilled to see a student successfully pursue a passion after charting a course for months to do so in Advisory.



HMS 8th grader **Sam Cleves** uses a flight simulator in **Brian McDowell's** classroom to explore the world of aviation.



HMS 8th grader **Lilly Ahlfeld** stars in the musical *Matilda* alongside castmates (seated L-R) **Preston Borchardt** and **Sam Leyschok**.

Teacher **Brian Alessandro** points to relationship-building as one of the ingredients behind Advisory's success, as students often set goals to improve STAR reading and math scores. Mr. Alessandro remembers one student, in particular, who dedicated time to reading with a clear plan and demonstrated enough improvement to emerge from reading remediation.

"At Highlands Middle School, our teachers and staff provide outstanding guidance to our students across the board, but it's our goal for each student to have a go-to adult in the building who they know really cares about them personally," principal **Erika Volpenhein** said. Mrs. Volpenhein has intentionally created a curriculum for students to pursue interests not only within core subjects, but also "encore" electives such as graphic design, broadcasting, personal finance, and even aviation.

"It is just so cool to be able to have a hands-on experience like this in school, going through what it's like to fly an airplane," said 8th grader **Abe Morel**. Morel relishes any chance to use one of two flight simulators in science teacher **Brian McDowell's** classroom. A third simulator will be coming next year thanks to a generous grant from the Fort Thomas Education Foundation.

"We want our students to know that they're coming to school with opportunities to pursue potential careers here," said McDowell. By exploring an array of interests, students can identify what appeals to them, what doesn't, and make more purposeful decisions about selecting classes and extracurriculars in high school and beyond.

For Lilly Ahlfeld, a lead role in *Matilda* wasn't the end, but the beginning.

"For me, it's the friendships I make in theater and traveling out of my comfort zone that are most rewarding," Ahlfeld said, pledging to continue down a fulfilling road in the performing arts.

# SCHOOL UPDATES Highlands High



## PLCs ARE MVPs FOR CLASSROOM ACHIEVEMENT AT HIGHLANDS

Conference sessions had adjourned for the day. The content was both impactful and enriching, and it was time for the Fort Thomas attendees to find a bite to eat.

The Highlands High School traveling contingent was sitting down for dinner together in Iowa, when the magnitude of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), the focus of the professional development summit, resonated with English teacher **Brady Dowling**.

Principal **John Darnell** remembers the conversation.

"Mr. Dowling saw that with all of the time and energy that faculty and staff are investing in each other, the true beneficiaries are the students. When professional development can be tied directly to optimized instruction for students, it's a win-win for everyone in the classroom," Darnell said.

In essence, the entire school community is achieving more through professional development and enhanced classroom instruction.

For slightly more than a year, Highlands High School has organized teacher schedules so that

faculty and staff teaching the same (or similar) subjects have the same planning periods. Once per week, they meet in Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs, which represent healthy knowledge-sharing ecosystems where teachers get together, review best practices,

share teaching and learning tips, analyze data, grow together and yes, in the end, it's all about reinvesting that knowledge back in the classroom in the best, most effective manner possible.

Mr. Darnell, the principal, encourages teachers and staff to ask one another three key questions during the PLC process: "What do we expect students to know?", "How do we know that they know it?", and "What do we do if they are falling short of learning it?"

Teachers have thoroughly embraced PLCs as a twelve month a year calling, even charting their plans once students leave for the summer. The Class of 2023 had walked across the stage at graduation all of two days earlier when Kevin Listerman, Matt Ewald and members of the science department PLC met at a Fort Thomas coffee shop to map out their curriculum strategies and best practices for the upcoming academic year.

**"Our students showed huge gains in the several skills that we focused on and remediated during the first semester. The PLC model has made me a better teacher."**



HHS English 1 teachers (L-R) **Shannon Henson** and **Brady Dowling** share best practices in their PLC during a planning period in the spring semester.







World Language teachers (L-R) **Emily Haffey, Ellen Buchanan, Kristin Wilson** and **Maggie Walker** enjoy the energy of the HHS hallway for a PLC meeting in March.

For **Beth Brubaker**, the healthy collaboration and camaraderie, and connectedness in their vision, have been game-changers. PLCs require a paradigm shift from “me” to “we”, from “my students” to “our students”, by embracing a team approach to seek out the best classroom strategies.

“With the day-to-day hustle, being an educator can sometimes feel like being on an island with ‘my’ students and ‘my’ instruction. The PLC model changes that entirely,” said Mrs. Brubaker, who has partnered in a PLC with **Angie Gintonio** for the past two years. “Being able to work together—analyzing data, adjusting instruction based on data, and creating meaningful experiences has been a highlight for me.”

Mrs. Brubaker and Mrs. Gintonio have seen noticeable progress in student performance based on a shared strategy that both teachers brought to the classroom during the first semester in the fall of 2023.

“Our first semester exam results were an absolute highlight for us. Our students showed huge gains in the several skills that we focused on and remediated during the first semester. The PLC model has made me a better teacher and my students have benefitted from it,” Brubaker said.

Mr. Dowling, an English teacher at Highlands, said for all intents and purposes he has worked in PLCs, without officially calling them PLCs until the recent rollout at Highlands, for his entire career. And it has truly spotlighted how gifted the Highlands faculty and staff truly are, using a unique blend of talent, creativity and experience to create an enriching classroom environment.

“I have learned that sometimes the best form

of professional development is simply being given time to work with your colleagues across all departments,” Dowling said. “We have an incredibly talented team of teachers at HHS who have great ideas about how to reach students.”

Professional Learning Communities are thriving throughout all of our five schools, and at Highlands, the high school will take the next step to full implementation when a PLC associate travels to Fort Thomas during the 2024-25 school year to advance the initiatives with teachers, staff and administration.

“PLCs are 100 percent centered about student learning, and while we are talking about students, the impact on our teachers and staff professionally is just a phenomenal benefit here. As they interact and then implement their strategies in classrooms, our teachers are able to see the fruits of what they’re doing,” Mr. Darnell said.



Science teachers (L-R) **Kevin Listerman, Yang Wen** and **Matt Ewald** make a list of essential learning priorities during their biology PLC session.

# Gregory Manchess '73: From Highlands to the Hall of Fame

WRITTEN BY: HHS JOURNALISM STUDENTS KARA LABER, SOPHIA LIPPOLIS, CYDNI MARTIN, AND JADE FARLEY



**H**ighlands '73 Alumnus Gregory Manchess is a renowned illustrator and award-winning painter. While his accomplishments and reputation are known nationally, he points to his foundation in Fort Thomas, at Highlands High School, as an opportunity to turn formative experiences into something extraordinary.

This past fall, the Highlands class of 1973 came together for their fiftieth reunion; Manchess described the event as "absolutely brilliant." He and his former classmates had a wonderful time reminiscing about their days in Fort Thomas and how this community shaped their lives. Gregory said his connection to Fort Thomas runs deep, as he was born in and spent his formative years in the Fort. He says Fort Thomas is always with him in the back of his mind, not just the place, but the sense of community that comes with it.

Manchess reflected on some of his best moments at Highlands High School. He spoke of his literature and creative writing teacher, Norman Yance, who not only taught him writing, but helped him further develop his understanding of artwork and various artists. On a recent visit to the high school, Manchess discovered the broadcasting and theater programs, the array of class offerings and how much the school has been enhanced, especially the recording and sound studios. "I can tell you

from growing up in town... It's fascinating to see what you can put your hands on right there at school. I mean, it's phenomenal! So, try to get to the point where you embrace that," Manchess said passionately.

Mr. Manchess has become an inspiration to many students and families in Fort Thomas. Seeing a fellow Highlands graduate grow into an extraordinary and well-known artist instills hope and pride in the generations that follow. Not only is his success inspiring, it demonstrates how the skills emphasized in the classroom transfer to real world experiences. His story shows that our students really do take away so many lessons from our teachers, both in and out of the classroom, and how those lessons can spark a passion that will lead to their future success.

Among his many accomplishments, Mr. Manchess has been commissioned by the US Postal Service. Getting the opportunity to create a stamp for NASA was a memorable and proud moment for the artist. Manchess reflected, "I was stunned when I tuned into the NASA channel on launch day and saw the patch on their shirts, the walls, notebooks, cups, on the pad, in the gantry, and in the white room (where the astronauts enter the capsule)! I can't explain how delighted I am to have been a part of it. To watch the guys suit up and enter the capsule and to know them is thrilling." According to his website, Mr. Manchess has designed the latest mission patches for NASA's Dragon Crews 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8, plus the Expeditions patch for the 67th Mission to the International Space Station.

Manchess has a number of additional artistic accomplishments. As a result, he will be featured in the American Museum of Illustration Hall of Fame. This museum, exclusively showcasing illustration art, was founded in 1998 in Rhode Island and will feature illustrators from all over the world. To attend Highlands, find an interest in art, and then design pieces for the US Postal Service and NASA is a remarkable journey. He is an amazing example of what can happen when one dreams big, works hard and is encouraged and supported by family, friends, caring teachers and an amazing little community called Fort Thomas. Mr. Manchess is a beacon of inspiration that challenges each of us to put our own stamp on the future.





# THE NESTIES The Best of the Nest

On April 11, 2024, Fort Thomas Independent Schools (FTIS) and the Fort Thomas Education Foundation (FTEF) co-hosted the 3rd Annual NESTIES: the Best of the Nest event. Faculty, staff, parents and the community joined together at the Fort Thomas Mess Hall to honor our 2024 Teachers of the Year and several others being recognized for significant contributions. **The Chalk Brothers** provided the evening's entertainment.

In addition to celebrating the amazing accomplishments of our three Teachers of the Year (one each for elementary, middle, and high school), we honored two staff members with the Outstanding Support Staff of the Year Award.



THE NESTIES  
*The Best of the Nest*

It was a wonderful night, recognizing the contributions of several faculty and staff that help make Fort Thomas Independent Schools so great. We look forward to seeing everyone for the fourth annual NESTIES: the Best of the Nest on April 10, 2025.

Save  
the  
Date



THE NESTIES  
*The Best of the Nest*

04.10.25

# OUR NESTIES Winners



Aimee Shadwell



Brooke Riesenbeck



Kelly Pratt-Booth



Donna Rizzo



Kimberley Klein



Jeff Schneider, Gretchen Hinkel and Melissa Trimbach





Kristina Sheehy, Alyssa Vanderpool and Bethany Howard



Peter Winkler, Bethany Howard and Alyssa Vanderpool



The Chalk Brothers



Kelly Pratt-Booth, Elise Carter and Ahren Wagner



Dawn Laber, Elizabeth Beimesche and Shauna Luebbers



Sally Schoellman, Jillian Booth and Ashley Dikeos



Jennifer Forgy, Kevin Listerman, and Jamee Flaherty



Click on the QR code to view our Teacher of the Year videos made by HHS students in the Filmmaking and Broadcasting class.



Click on the QR code to view our Nesties Photo Gallery



## Award Winners

**Kelly Pratt-Booth**

*NESTIES 2024 High School Teacher of the Year*

**Kimberley Klein**

*NESTIES 2024 Middle School Teacher of the Year*

**Aimee Shadwell**

*NESTIES 2024 Elementary Teacher of the Year*

**Brooke Riesenbeck**

*NESTIES 2024 Outstanding Support Staff of the Year*

**Donna M. Rizzo**

*NESTIES 2024 Outstanding Support Staff of the Year*

**Alyssa Vanderpool**

*KMEA Elementary Music Teacher of the Year*

**Bethany Howard**

*Forensics Middle School Teacher of the Year*

**Gretchen Hinkel**

*National Board Teacher Certification*

**Elise Carter**

*KEA Smith-Wilson Award*

**Elizabeth Beimesche**

*Golden Apple Award Winner*

**Jillian Booth**

*Golden Apple Award Winner*

**Kevin Listerman**

*Golden Apple Award Winner*

## 2024 Nesties Committee

Kerrie Anderson

Kristen Banocy

Chrissy Barlow

Jessica Duke

Keith Faust

Karen Kampschmidt

Abbe Kuhn

Monica Menninger

Alison Morris

Lindsey Van Orsdel

Krissy Richard

Ashley Turner

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KTL Speech, Physical & Occupational Therapy

**Friends of FTEF Sponsor:**

Highlands Middle School PTO

Johnson Elementary School PTO

Moyer Elementary School PTO

Woodfill Elementary School PTO



THE NESTIES  
*The Best of the Nest*



Faculty and staff from Moyer Elementary School celebrate alongside honorees from across the District.

# FTEF TEACHER GRANT PROGRAM

## Over \$71,000 in Grants Awarded This Year



This spring the 2024 Grant Patrol continued our annual tradition of going into classrooms and surprising teachers with their "big checks". Thanks to your generous donations and support of the FTEF during the year, we were able to award over \$71,000 in teacher grants. Eight teachers were surprised over the course of a two day period by the FTEF Grant Patrol. We are excited to see these #FTEFGrantsinAction next school year.

### Highlands High School:

Film and Broadcasting Anchor News Desk  
Photography Equipment  
New Strings Instruments  
Robotics Team Equipment

### Highlands Middle School:

Flight Simulator  
Photography Equipment  
New Strings Instruments

### Johnson Elementary School:

Sensory Seating

### Moyer Elementary School:

Preschool Books

### Woodfill Elementary:

Classroom Robot Upgrades  
Inclusive Playground Turf Project



Brian McDowell accepts a grant for a flight simulator at Highlands Middle School.



The HHS Film and Broadcast team accepts a grant for a new anchor desk.



Woodfill will resurface the playground this summer with a FTEF grant.



Mrs. Brubaker, Mrs. Beiting and Mrs. Reckers accept a grant for photography equipment.



Lindsay Cahill and Natalie Woeste accept a grant for sensory seating at Johnson.



Michelle Fair and Abby Jones accept a grant for preschool books.



Meredith Reber will add string instruments to the music class at Highlands Middle School with a \$3,900 grant.



# FORT THOMAS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

## The Power of Planned Giving



### PLANNED GIVING

LEAVE A LEGACY

**J**oin the 1891 Society to leave a legacy of your values and vision to the Fort Thomas Education Foundation (FTEF) through naming the FTEF as a beneficiary of your will, retirement plan, life insurance policy, or other planned giving vehicle. This is a great way to create a meaningful, long-term impact to the Foundation, your school, and your community. It is a powerful way to support the Highlands Tradition of Excellence. Even a modest-sized gift can make an enormous difference and put a stamp on the future FTIS students.

#### Ways you can join the 1891 Society:

- Leave the FTEF a stated dollar amount in your will or trust
- Leave a percentage of your residual estate (what remains after gifts to loved ones and expenses have been paid) in your will or trust to the FTEF.
- Name a specific asset, such as securities or other marketable property, in your will or trust.
- Name the FTEF as a beneficiary on your retirement account or life insurance policy. This is a simple and powerful way to support the FTEF without changing your will or living trust.

Since 2001, the FTEF has helped to provide funds beyond the operating budget for educational programs and activities for students and staff. Please consider a gift to the 1891 Society. Speak to your attorney or financial planner. Call **Amy Shaffer** at 859-815-2004 with any questions.

## Parents' Night Out

**A** big thank you to those who attended our 2nd Annual Parents' Night Out event on March 2nd at the Highland Country Club. Together we raised \$34,000 for our Teacher Grant Program! This sold-out event was attended by over 250 people who had a great time catching up with friends, eating amazing food and listening to our local favorite band, The Leftovers. Save the date for next year's event...March 1, 2025!





# FORT THOMAS EDUCATION FOUNDATION Foundation Club

## BLUEBIRD NATION!

JOIN THE FOUNDATION CLUB AND GET A FRONT ROW SEAT!



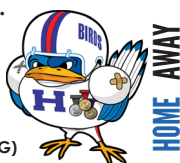
Join us under the lights and help our schools while cheering from the best seat in the house. Foundation Club Membership includes reserved parking, private entry with no lines, a catered pregame dinner and more.

If you renew your Foundation Club Membership or join the Foundation Club by **June 30, 2024**, you will be entered to win a Bluebird Family Pass.

**MEMBERSHIPS ARE LIMITED!**  
JOIN THE FOUNDATION CLUB TODAY AT [FTEF.ORG](https://www.ftef.org)

## 2024 SCHEDULE HIGHLANDS VARSITY FOOTBALL

8/9	LOUISVILLE MALE (SCRIMMAGE)
8/16	BLUE/WHITE (SCRIMMAGE)
8/23	LEXINGTON CATHOLIC
8/30	COVINGTON CATHOLIC
9/6	CAMPBELL CO
9/13	RYLE
9/20	RACELAND
9/27	COOPER
10/4	DIXIE HEIGHTS
10/11	BOONE CO.
10/18	CONNER
10/25	SCOTT (HOMECOMING)



## PLANNING A REUNION? LET US HELP!

- Reunion Resource Kit
- Tour Coordination
- Alumni Contact Information

**859.815.2004**  
**FTEF@FTEF.ORG**

## Save the Date!

**2024**  
HOMECOMING  
WEEKEND

**OCTOBER 25-27**

We hope to see  
you back at the Nest!

# FORT THOMAS

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

## H

HIGHLANDS  
HIGH

## H

HIGHLANDS  
MIDDLE

## J

JOHNSON  
elementary

## M

MOYER  
elementary

## W

WOODFILL  
elementary



HHS seniors proudly display their choice of college on "College T-shirt Day."



Follow us on Facebook: *Fort Thomas Independent Schools* | Follow us on Instagram: @FTSchools

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## FORT THOMAS INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS Directory

### BOARD OF EDUCATION

Ann Meyer - Chairperson  
Julie Kuhnhein - Vice-Chairperson  
Jeff Beach  
Clem Fennell  
Sarah Foster

### CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS

Brian Robinson - Superintendent  
Jamee Flaherty - Assistant Superintendent  
for Student Services  
Keith Faust - Assistant Superintendent  
for Teaching and Learning

### HIGHLANDS HIGH SCHOOL

Principal - John Darnell  
Assistant Principal - Jennifer Forgý  
Athletic Director - Wes Caldwell

### HIGHLANDS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Principal - Erika Volpenhein  
Assistant Principal - Jeff Schneider

### JOHNSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Principal - Ashley Dikeos  
Assistant Principal - Kristina Sheehy

### MOYER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Principal - Dawn Laber  
Assistant Principal - Peter Winkler

### WOODFILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Principal - John Gesenhues  
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