

# COMMUNITY IS KEY TO GADSDEN ELEMENTARY EARNING "REWARD SCHOOL" STATUS

By Ron Barry

*[Gadsden Elementary School is one of two schools in the Crockett County School District to earn 2023-24 "Reward School" status; the other, Maury City Elementary School, will be featured in a separate story later this month.]*

When you read the State of Tennessee's guidelines for earning "Reward School" status, you won't find the word "relationships" mentioned even once.

But at Gadsden Elementary School, both Principal Marsha Foust and Assistant Principal Lindsey Bradford are convinced that the relationships forged within GES are the key factors to everything good that happens at the school.

"Relationships mean everything here," Foust said Thursday, citing why GES is on the State's 2023-24 "Reward School" list. "Our teachers are dedicated to the children and families represented here. They know the names of all the students in all the grades, whether they physically teach them or not. The cafeteria workers know which kids have food allergies, or which ones like certain foods when they're offered. We all meet in the gymnasium first thing every morning, and students have a chance to tell some news from their families or our staff gets to brag on some kids. It's truly a community; we don't have 100% buy-in, but it's pretty close, and that's what we're striving for."

Bradford added that focusing on relationships within the school community can be more effective than simply trying to qualify on school measurements, because "it's always a moving target with the State," she said. "The guidelines seem to change a little bit every year, so we just try to focus on loving our families and trusting it will take us where we need to be."

Gadsden also has a "Wildcat Crew," a group of fifth graders who do special chores around the school, welcome visitors at school events, and learn to be servant leaders.

The State says that schools are recognized as a "Reward School" when it "demonstrates high levels of performance and/or improvement in performance."

For 2023-24, the status was based on a school's performance on the federal accountability system: a school was recognized as a "Reward School" if it has an overall score of 3.1 or higher in accordance with the federal accountability calculation ("It's complicated," Foust laughed), and is not identified as a Comprehensive Improvement School, a Targeted Support and Improvement School, or an Additional Targeted Support and Improvement School.

Got that? You can see why Foust and Bradford concentrate on community relationships instead.

Only 377 schools in the entire state, across 97 districts, earned the distinction for 2023-24. For the Crockett County School District to have two of them is a tremendous achievement, said Director of Schools Phillip A. Pratt. The only elementary school in the Crockett system not to attain it this time - Friendship Elementary - was a "Reward School" last year, and it's almost impossible to gain the designation two years in a row because of the ever-changing metrics.

Foust said that recent physical improvements to the Gadsden school have been a tremendous help in the "vibe" that now permeates the facility.

"In the last couple of years, we've added a whole new cafeteria, a brand new playground, and an entire wing of new classrooms," she said. "The new classrooms have given us a lot of flexibility we didn't have before. STEM doesn't have to share space with Physical education; we have a music room now; we even have storage space for the first time."

A walk through the school finds the halls lined with motivational signs and encouraging thoughts. The walls of virtually every classroom are decorated with messages intended to assure each student that "you belong here."

"That's a big part of our focus," Bradford said. "We want the students to know they're exactly where they need to be to get the education that will benefit them."

While the actual Tennessee guidelines for being a "Reward School" include facets of achievement, growth, and attendance, Foust said it's the dedication and performance of the Gadsden teachers that make all the difference.

"The students know their teachers love them and care that they get what's best for them," she said. "We also think it's important that at least one of us (Foust or Bradford) is at the front door each day greeting them as they arrive at school, giving them a smile, or even sitting down and talking to them if we sense it's needed. We try to do everything we can to be a family here, and we're so grateful that it seems to be working really well."

Foust is in her thirty-fourth year in education and is nearing 20 years as Gadsden's principal. "And I really wouldn't want to be anywhere else than where I am," she said.



**Above:** Assistant Principal Lindsey Bradford (left) and Principal Marsha Foust (right) are grateful for the relationships that are foundational to everything GES can accomplish. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** Eric Weiss teaches a STEM lesson focused on studying animals who camouflage themselves, using black and white beans and black and white foundation boards to check the level of randomness as two students put beans in cups without trying to choose specific colors. (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Below:** Gadsden Elementary's brand new wing of classrooms has given the school an entirely new set of options for its offerings, providing separate rooms for music and STEM, room for class size growth, and even storage space it didn't have before. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Below:** There's even a simple explanation of why Gadsden Elementary is a "Reward School." (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** Another classroom wall reinforces the message of belonging. (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Left:** Classroom decorations are designed to make all students feel as if they "belong." (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** Here's an example of one of the new spacious classrooms in the most recent construction wings at the Gadsden school. (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Left:** The new GES playground and equipment provide plenty of space for entire classes to recreate at the same time. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** Just inside the hallway doors, students are greeted with a daily reminder of the school's expectations of them. (Photo by Ron Barry)

