

# Community Update

WINTER 2025 EDITION



ROCHESTER  
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

PRIDE IN EXCELLENCE

## Learn. Lead. Inspire. Making connections through joyful, meaningful learning

“What a joy it is to see children connect their knowledge to the world around them,” said first grade teacher Laura Kirklin. “When learning becomes meaningful, students can be fully engaged critical thinkers who make important contributions in their daily lives.”

As educational programs continually evolve, research shows that student-centered, inquiry-based instructional strategies help students develop skills related to learning, literacy and life.

“Meaningful learning is a process of connecting new knowledge to prior understanding,” said Pasquale Cusumano, assistant superintendent of secondary and adult education. “Meaningful learning is active, constructive and long-lasting. It allows students to be fully engaged in the learning process.”



### Fostering positive learning environments

A peek into a first-grade classroom shows students participating in reading and writing workshop activities where they work together to develop decoding, phonics and comprehension skills. Importantly, these academic lessons take

place within a climate of trust—and they are focused on students sharing their opinions, ideas and knowledge.

Students read with buddies; record their ideas in daily gratitude journals; have pen pal companions at a local senior center; share reviews with their favorite local businesses; and create their own Kidland game with unique characters to make phonics fun and interactive.

At the end of a word game similar to musical chairs, a student immediately responded, “That was so fun! Can we play again?”

“Especially at the elementary level, play-based learning is personal and deeply rewarding, because children are engaged in meaningful activities that they truly enjoy with people they truly care about,” Kirklin said. At morning meetings, young students say hello in different

*Cont. on page 2*



## Supporting growth and achievement through master property planning

Master property planning helps an organization assess the use of its land and infrastructure by evaluating current conditions, considering future opportunities, and identifying detailed actions that can optimize facility and operational efficiencies.

“We are a sizable district. To maximize resources that support student growth and achievement, it is important to periodically look at our facilities and operations so we can proactively plan for future opportunities,” said Superintendent Nicholas Russo, Ed.S.

As the largest school district in Oakland County, Rochester Community Schools consists of 22 school buildings and four support structures that encompass approximately 2.8 million square feet on more than 560 acres.

“The master property planning process, which includes a facilities utilization study, aligns with our district’s broader strategic plan,” said Russo. “The data from the study, which is analyzed by an unbiased professional organization and presented to a community advisory committee for review, will inform our decisions so we can best meet the needs of our students, staff and community.”

On Oct. 17, 2024, the district advertised a request for proposal (RFP) for a professional consultant to conduct a facilities utilization study. Five bids

were received and thoroughly evaluated by the district’s educational, business, facilities and capital projects leaders. Selection criteria included the company’s history, approach, fees, references, and previous experience in providing services for educational institutions.

At the Nov. 18 Board of Education meeting, Plante Moran Realpoint was awarded a contract to engage as the consultant and facilitator for the facilities utilization study.

The study considers current and historical demographic and enrollment data by school; school feeder paths; district programs and services to include pre-kindergarten, transitional kindergarten, Great Start Readiness Program, early childhood special education, Early On, special education Adult Transition Programs and Services, school-age care,

*Cont. on page 2*





## Master property planning (cont.) from page 1

alternative educational opportunities and adult education; virtual campus offerings; market trends and projections; funding procurement; and strategic planning goals and objectives.

Stakeholders were invited to get involved.

“Community input remains an important part of the process,” said Russo. “Plante Moran Realpoint is forming an advisory committee to look at data from the facilities utilization study and assess our short- and long-term needs. This committee will include a sampling of representatives from each building, parents,

staff, board members, local business owners and individuals from special interest groups, such as our special education parent advisory committee and parent-teacher association.”

Results from the facilities utilization study will be shared publicly with the Board of Education and the community as information becomes available.

“We are committed to an inclusive and transparent process,” said Russo. “Our schools represent the pride of our community and this comprehensive assessment will ensure we are optimizing facilities and operations to best meet the needs of our students, staff and families.”

Community members are invited to share questions and concerns by using the Talk to RCS feature on the district’s website at [www.rochester.k12.mi.us](http://www.rochester.k12.mi.us).



## Joyful learning (cont.) from page 1

languages, shake hands, support one another through struggles and build respectful, inclusive relationships.

“Our districtwide Positivity Project builds character traits and challenges young learners to reflect on how they can contribute to a better classroom, school, local community and world,” Kirklin said.



### Prioritizing relevant, relatable learning

Meaningful learning involves a true understanding of how all the pieces of an entire concept fit together, beyond memorized answers to fixed questions. In this way, students are able to transfer and adapt their knowledge to solve new problems, examine new situations and build their skills.

As an example, to personalize lessons on plant life, weather and ecosystems, elementary students have created community gardens. To deepen their understanding of history, middle schoolers engage in role-playing activities to imagine themselves prioritizing issues as authors of the U.S. Constitution. To examine math and physics data related to traction and speed, high school students partner with traffic experts to reconstruct vehicle accident scenes.

“We connect content to the real world,” said Brandon Shurter, Advanced Placement (AP) environmental science teacher. Using local parks as their nontraditional classroom setting, high schoolers step into waders before entering the Clinton River to collect water samples and

analyze dissolved oxygen levels that affect the macro invertebrate population. “These field studies give students a hands-on look at the health of our stream ecosystems,” Shurter said. “This experience provides a lens to think about global environmental issues as well. Their learning builds and adapts and can be applied to new bodies of knowledge.”

Additional class activities with practical applications include personal home energy audits to assess the energy consumption in students’ households; experiments to calculate power generated from photo voltaic cells and spinning turbines; and harvesting lettuce grown on indoor hydroponic garden towers.

One student said the class inspired her to join the Green Club so she could put her knowledge to better use. “It wasn’t until I volunteered for the Green Club that I truly understood the impact of reducing, reusing and recycling,” she said. “This opportunity to lead recycling efforts at school affected my family’s practices and habits at home too. I’m even looking at environmental science as a possible career. The more I learn, the more I care about taking care of our natural resources.”



### Uncovering the joy of discovery

“Learning is enhanced when students feel a sense of passion and excitement about the subject matter,” said information literacy specialist Jennifer Lin. “We give students freedom and flexibility to learn about issues that are important to them.”

Lin collaborates closely with language arts

teacher Eva Hensley to implement the eighth-grade research project. This requires students to use databases for their research, evaluate sources for credibility and relevancy, synthesize information in a written paper and present their findings to peers, families and community members.

“While students are held to high academic standards, what makes this project meaningful and personal is that the content is student-directed, down to how they want to share the knowledge,” Lin said. “In years past, students have chosen to present their findings beyond Power Points. They designed and created call-to-action pins and stickers, recorded podcasts, made and distributed infographics and brochures, and one group even put together a puppet show.”

Lin said, “Students select their own personal passion projects. They have academic expectations to meet, but choosing the subject matter puts them in charge of their own learning experiences. Their learning is deeper and more complex than if we had assigned random topics.”

This semester, middle school students have chosen research subjects including social media’s impact on teens, immigration, substance abuse, anxiety, air pollution and gang violence. When asked why they selected their topics, one group of students responded, “We want to be involved in repairing the world. These are the things we wonder about and care about.”

With a commitment to students’ personal growth and success, Lin also ensures that her media center offers a wide variety of STEM activities, 3D printing, coding, inclusive books with diverse characters and stories, a makerspace club, technology-enhanced learning and other timely, creative outlets that students enjoy.

“I am proud that Rochester Community Schools celebrates the creative ideas, voices and gifts of all students at all grade levels,” Cusumano said. “Every single day, we are inspired by meaningful, joyful learning that motivates students to reach their fullest potential.”



# RCS Charity Week supports Camp Kesem, March 3-8

Special thanks to contributors Erica Proctor and Megan Batson from The Talon, Rochester High School's newspaper

Community members are invited to join Rochester Community Schools in celebrating this year's Charity Week, March 3-8, 2025. The action-packed week provides exciting fundraising opportunities for Camp Kesem, which supports children through and beyond a parent's cancer with free summer camp opportunities and year-round services.



Each year, RCS student leaders work together to select a charity that is personal to them. They plan friendly competitions among the high schools and host several combined events to raise money across the RCS community. Initiatives are student-led with collaboration from Rochester, Stoney Creek and Adams high schools and ACE, the Alternative Center for Education.

Each school has its own favorite traditions, and students compete to maximize the amount of money raised. For example, Rochester High School families and parents especially enjoy the breakfast cook-off and students can anticipate a new karaoke night. Adams is planning a wing-eating contest, food raffles and themed spirit days. Stoney Creek students love the annual duck race on the river beginning at Van Hoosen Farm and a new "Ticket to Skip It" event during the school day. ACE is participating in a movie night, charity basket sales and much more. All RCS high school students are invited to a

crosstown charity ball on March 8. In addition, each high school also plans its own fun-filled pep assembly to play games and learn more about Camp Kesem. "This event is not only a good way to raise money for charity, but it's also very fun for our student council and good for raising spirit in our school," said Collin Lott, Stoney Creek student council president.

Community events taking place outside the school day include the Falcon Fest, a family-friendly carnival run by Rochester clubs and athletic teams, and a charity gala, silent auction and family fun night, hosted by Adams. More information about these activities will be shared soon on school websites and social media accounts.

"We have to figure out how to hit every group within the school that can help raise money," said Kelley Cusmano, Rochester student council advisor. Last year, RCS raised over \$93,000 for Humble Design. This year's goal is a six-figure donation to Camp Kesem.

"This event has gathered our community together as a whole, whether it is from feeder schools or current parents," said Eda Nguyen, Adams student council secretary.

Community members are encouraged to use the QR code for donations to Camp Kesem. This link allows direct charitable contributions through the Rochester Community Schools Charity Week team page on the Camp Kesem website at: [www.kesem.org](http://www.kesem.org).

Donate March 3-8

camp kesem.  
A child's friend through and beyond a parent's cancer.

2025 CHARITY WEEK

Camp Kesem supports children through a parent's cancer

SCAN TO DONATE!  
[www.kesem.org](http://www.kesem.org)

# Structured Literacy supports skilled readers

The district's strategic plan indicates the need to implement Structured Literacy models in elementary classrooms.

Structured Literacy is a term that was adopted by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and describes the instructional approach for teaching foundational literacy skills based on how the brain processes print and language. While not a curriculum in itself, it refers to explicit, systemic and cumulative, diagnostic teaching.

Elements of Structured Literacy include phonology (the sound of spoken words); sound-symbol association (mapping sounds to printed letters in two directions); syllable instruction (unit of oral or written language with one vowel sound); morphology (the smallest unit of meaning); syntax (grammar and mechanics); and semantics (meaning).

"The district is currently engaging all elementary staff in comprehensive professional development to support the use of Structured Literacy approaches in our classrooms. The goal is always to provide instruction that supports confident, skilled and joyful readers," said Kimberly Hempton, assistant superintendent of elementary and early childhood education.

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# RCS remains focused on school safety

**"Ensuring a safe and secure teaching and learning environment remains my top priority. Nothing is more important than the well-being of our school community," said Superintendent Nicholas Russo, Ed.S.**

Safety updates for the 2024-25 school year have been significant and include the following. Rochester Community Schools:

- Updated and received board approval on the Emergency Operations Plans for the entire district
- Implemented standard response protocols in all buildings
- Trained all staff in active assailant response (run, hide, fight)
- Installed more than 100 additional cameras districtwide
- Upgraded school bus cameras and video surveillance servers and software
- Deployed more than 100 additional radios
- Implemented behavior threat assessment teams in all school buildings
- Designed and implemented behavior threat tracking in the student information system
- Improved the self-harm assessment process used by counselors and social workers
- Revised the district critical incident team and incident response team
- Prepared school-based critical incident teams.

Future initiatives include implementing a new rapid response safety solution and visitor management system for all school buildings.

Prior to 2024, updates included: Designing secure vestibules and entrances districtwide- Installing thumb turn locks on all classroom doors
- Installing more than 500 video surveillance cameras across the district
- Upgrading audio systems and placing strobe lights in critical spaces
- Installing Knox Boxes for first responders
- Upgrading the district radio network with repeaters
- Installing lockdown buttons in front office areas
- Completing security assessments in all school buildings
- Adding seven additional school counselors at the secondary level and seven behavior interventionists for elementary support.

The district also remains grateful for its emergency response partners at the Oakland County Sheriff's Office, the City of Rochester Police and Fire Departments, and the Rochester Hills Fire Department who help guide efforts to protect the school community.



## Introducing a new two-way communication platform ParentSquare

The RCS strategic plan identifies the need to leverage a variety of communication methods and tools to provide the community with updates, celebrate excellence, build trust and offer “windows” into the life of school buildings. A deliverable for year one includes enhancing two-way communication.



“The strategic plan is guiding our efforts to advance teaching and learning opportunities for our students and staff. Through this process, we are excited to enhance the way our community connects and communicates, where users can easily contribute to the conversation,” said Lori Grein, executive director of strategic communications.

After researching communication and engagement solutions that support student success, the district selected ParentSquare as the preferred platform.

**What is ParentSquare?** ParentSquare is a user-friendly platform designed to streamline communication between schools and families. It will allow the district to send messages, alerts and reminders through email, voice and text messaging. It also provides a space for two-way communication, so participants can reach out with questions or feedback.

The functionality of this one solution covers multiple platforms. Secure applications support a mobile app; language translation; current system integrations; mass notifications such as urgent alerts, newsletters, social media and attendance notices; classroom communications; sign-up forms, permissions and event responses.

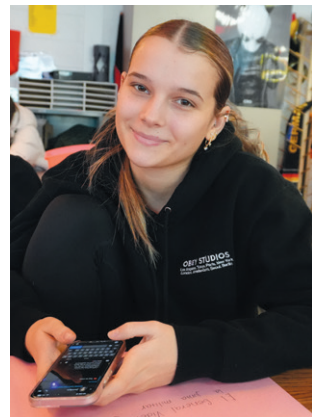
“Converting to a new communication platform in a district this size is a monumental lift. There are more than 92 points that we have to engage to ensure success, from data integration and network configuration to user training and technology support. Our teams are already hard at work and are motivated to bring this new platform to our students, staff and community,”

said Jeff Frankowiak, director of technology services.

The district is planning a phased approach to introduce ParentSquare. Phase one includes email and two-way text messaging, beginning with a pilot program. Phase two will include the addition of newsletters, attendance notifications and volunteer sign-ups.

Student and family data will be obtained from Synergy (ParentVUE and StudentVUE). Employee data will be acquired from Employee Online. The district is encouraging all users to ensure their information is correct on these platforms. Guidelines will be provided shortly to assist with these efforts.

“We are working to make this transition a smooth process and will be here to help our school community adjust to this new platform every step of the way,” said Frankowiak. “This is truly an exciting time for Rochester Community Schools.”



## Learn. Lead. Inspire.



## RCS offers outstanding pre-K education, including GSRP, a FREE program for four-year-old children

The Rochester Community School District continues to provide high-quality preschool opportunities that prepare three- and four-year-old children for kindergarten.

In addition, Michigan’s Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) has expanded to increase early education options for families in RCS and across the state. GSRP is a free preschool program for children who turn 4 on or before Dec. 1, 2025, and whose families meet eligibility guidelines. This resource is offered through the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential.

All GSRP programs work cooperatively with their intermediate school district and must adhere strictly to state standards for student-teacher ratios, early childhood specialist qualifications and classroom support plans.

Eligibility for free GSRP preschool is primarily determined based on family household income; thresholds

have been lowered to allow access for more families.

“Rochester Community Schools offers a variety of preschool programs that provide a secure and caring environment for young learners. As children begin their academic journey, they can expect to grow in independence, curiosity, self-confidence and social skills,” said Kimberly Hempton, assistant superintendent of elementary and early childhood education. “We look forward to introducing them to a lifelong love of learning.”



**Enroll online! RCS GSRP programs are enrolling now at [www.rochester.k12.mi.us](http://www.rochester.k12.mi.us).**

Tuition-based pre-K enrollment begins soon for RCS families who will have three- and four-year-old children during the 2025-26 school year. Currently enrolled RCS pre-K families can begin registration on March 7. New families can begin enrolling on March 13.

