

# WILLOUGHBY - EASTLAKE CITY SCHOOLS COMMUNITY UPDATE

## Message from the Superintendent

As we approach the close of the first semester and prepare for a well-deserved winter break, I want to extend our deepest gratitude to our students, families, and community.

This school year began with tremendous momentum. From the energy in our classrooms to the enthusiasm at concerts, games, and school events, it is evident that Willoughby-Eastlake is a community that cares deeply about its children. Thank you for your partnership, your encouragement, and your ongoing support. Our students are thriving because of the strong relationships between home, school, and community.

Looking ahead to the second semester, we could not be more excited about what is to come. We will continue expanding innovative learning opportunities across all grade levels. New programs in career-technical education, Artificial Intelligence-infused learning pathways, and future-ready experiences are taking shape. These efforts reflect our commitment to ensuring that every student is prepared, academically, socially, and professionally, for whatever path they pursue.

**A Look at School Funding.** To sustain this progress, we must also look at how our district is funded. As you may know, Willoughby-Eastlake relies primarily on local property taxes. Recently, a School Funding Work Group, composed of community members representing all stakeholders, met to study our funding history and explore future options. Their work was thoughtful, thorough, and grounded in our shared commitment to strong schools and a thriving community.

Please continue reading about school funding options on page two of this newsletter to learn more about the current funding model and options to ensure financial stability for years to come.

As we enter the holiday season, I want to once again express our appreciation for the incredible families who make Willoughby-Eastlake such a special place. Your support allows us to focus on what matters most, helping our students grow, succeed and step confidently into their future.

We wish you a peaceful holiday season and a very Happy New Year. We look forward to welcoming students back in January and continuing this great work together.

*Patrick Ward*

**Patrick Ward, PhD. | Superintendent**  
[#MyChoiceWilloughbyEastlake](#)



# Understanding School Funding

Currently, Willoughby-Eastlake relies on five fixed-sum (emergency) levies that generate funding through property taxes totaling approximately \$43 million. Because these are "fixed-sum," they do not generate additional revenue when property values rise; they collect the exact same dollar amount year after year. As a result, our funding cannot keep up with inflation, eventually forcing the district to return to voters for additional funds.

The Work Group examined an option to resolve this cycle by replacing these fixed-sum levies with an Earned Income Tax (EIT).

An EIT applies only to active wages and earned income. It does not apply to pensions, Social Security, retirement income, or investment income.

The potential benefits of this shift are significant and include:

- **Property tax relief:** A reduction in property taxes for most Willoughby-Eastlake homeowners.
- **Tax relief for seniors:** Senior citizens would see property tax relief and would not pay the new tax on their retirement income.
- **Reduced burden on local businesses:** Shifting the model helps our local economy.
- **Stable and sustainable funding:** A funding model tied to district income growth allows the district to keep up with inflation without constant levy renewals.
- **Elimination of renewal levies:** This would eliminate the need to repeatedly ask voters to renew the five existing fixed-sum levies as they would be discontinued.

Community feedback is essential as we continue to study these options. No decisions have been made, but the conversation is vital, and we are committed to transparency every step of the way.

*Patrick Ward*

Patrick Ward, PhD. | Superintendent  
#MyChoiceWilloughbyEastlake

*Nick Ciarniello*

Nick Ciarniello | Treasurer/Chief Financial Officer

## *Financing Our Future Video Series*

### Dr. Ward Explains School Funding

Click Links Below



Understanding School Funding  
and Our Schools  
Video #1



Understanding School Funding  
and Our Schools  
Video #2



"Life is what you make it," a commonly adopted mantra encouraging a positive outlook in difficult situations where opportunity feels lacking. While I love the sentiment, I feel the phrase is misleading, suggesting that in order to turn hard times into something worthwhile, you must overcome them on your own. This, I have learned, is not the case.

Learning has always come naturally to me. I had found, from a young age, the value of hard work and independence, and all the places those characteristics can get you. I excelled in my work and was praised for it, for doing it myself. I was smart because I did not need help to succeed. This concept stuck with me, engraved into the surface of my soul as I continued through the grades.

I felt the first crack in my resolve early in my sophomore year. The weight of my world began to encroach, making it challenging for me to keep my head above rising water. I was hit with a surplus of work and content I was not immediately understanding; this was a new experience for me, and I had no idea how to handle it. I felt so lost and immensely overwhelmed. While, on a surface level, I knew I could reach out to my friends, family, and even staff for support, I had driven myself into such a deep understanding that help, in any form, would be a discredit to my intelligence, causing me to refrain from speaking up. However, self-reliance is never maintainable; in trying to keep up the collected facade I had crafted I realized I was making my life, and school experience, infinitely harder than necessary.

After weeks of relentless struggle, I finally decided to put my pride aside and began to ask more questions, not only in the classroom, but personally after class. I found immediate results in the math department; as a sophomore, taking two math classes became increasingly more challenging to manage as the year progressed and both class workloads and content increased. However, in reaching out to both of my teachers, asking questions, clarifying concepts, and walking through problems with them, I found their classes much more manageable and success at a level that met my standards soon followed. I took this new development in stride, applying it to my other classes because, if it works for two, why would it not work for the others? I found joy in asking questions because it meant building stronger relationships with teachers, making school a much more enjoyable environment even when things got difficult.

The importance of building relationships and putting trust into others, especially those there for the sole purpose of helping you, has become evident to me through precious moments like a passionate discussion about an assigned reading, or the equal excitement in both myself, and my teacher, when I finally understand a concept I have been struggling with in biology. It is not only in the hard times my teachers are there to guide me through, but also the times of calm where we can both relish in the success that has been built from the hard work and time we both invested. It is in swallowing my pride and making myself vulnerable that I find help is not diminishing, but it is an incredible expression of community, of people supporting you, not for their benefit, but because they want to see you succeed. That is a true act of love, one I witness in the classroom every single day, one that is in abundance not only at South, but in the entire Willoughby-Eastlake district. It is through my high school experience that I have found life is not what I make it, because I could never make it alone. Life is what we make it, and I could not be more grateful for that.

"We are so proud of the dedication and collaboration of our staff across every school in the district. Earning state-level PBIS recognition is a wonderful milestone, but more importantly, it reflects the culture we are building in Willoughby-Eastlake, where positive behavior is celebrated, students feel supported, and every child has the opportunity to thrive."

Heather Dodd  
Director, Pupil Services



**GOLD** – Edison, North, Longfellow, School of Innovation, Thomas Jefferson  
**SILVER** – Grant, Royalview, Willowick Middle, Eastlake Middle  
**BRONZE** – Willoughby Middle, South, Preschool

We are incredibly proud of the hard work happening in every one of our buildings around Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This year, every school in our district earned state-level PBIS recognition, a tremendous accomplishment that reflects the consistency, commitment, and collaboration of our staff. While these awards are worth celebrating, our work is about far more than recognition. PBIS is helping us strengthen school culture, reinforce positive behavior, and create environments where students feel supported, successful, and connected.

# Aligned for Impact: Creativity, Innovation and Engagement

## What's Cooking at Willowick?

Sixth grade students at **Willowick Middle School** are stepping away from their desks and into the kitchen to discover that great meals start long before the oven is preheated. In the new "Farm to Table" course, the classroom transforms into a bustling culinary hub where students trace the journey of their food from local fields to their own plates.

Under the guidance of teacher **Samantha Bly**, these young chefs are mastering budget-friendly, nutritious recipes designed for air fryers and toaster ovens, making healthy eating both accessible and achievable. By collaborating to chop, season, and serve the meals, students aren't just learning to read recipes and handle small appliances; they are gaining the confidence to provide for themselves while developing a deep-rooted appreciation for the farmers who feed our community.



## Beyond the Chalkboard

Step into **Eastlake North's** STEM Hub during geometry period, and you won't find rows of students quietly scratching proofs onto paper. Instead, you'll find a high-energy "math laboratory" where the walls of the traditional classroom have literally come down. Teachers **Mathew Blair**, **Charlie Peters**, and **Emilie Coyne**, alongside **Instructional Coach Paula Clark**, have merged their classes to create a personalized learning frontier.

Here, students don't just study transformations and congruence; they experience them. Whether they are immersed in a virtual reality landscape or navigating interactive challenges on Desmos and DeltaMath, learners are in the driver's seat. The most unique ingredient? A "Spiciness Scale" that allows students to choose their own adventure. From "Spice-Free" foundations to the "Spiciest" challenges, students select a path that matches their confidence level, turning a standard math lesson into a custom-fit, immersive quest for mastery.

## A Badge of Joy: Third Grader's Artwork Helps Eastlake Officers "Shop with a Cop"

The halls of **Thomas Jefferson Elementary** were filled with a little extra holiday magic as a simple drawing contest turned into a community-wide mission of giving. It all started with a vision from **Eastlake Police Officer McGrath**: what if the badges worn by the Eastlake Police Department this December were designed by the very students they protect? In a creative trial run, TJ students were tasked with designing a holiday badge that officers could purchase to wear on duty, with all proceeds benefiting the local Shop with a Cop program. After a department-wide vote, the officers chose a vibrant, festive design by third grader, **Kalli**.



In a heartwarming surprise, officers visited Kalli's classroom to announce her victory, presenting her with her own official badge and a few extras for her family to cherish. Thanks to the coordination of **Officer Koehnle**, a generous production donation from **Mayor Overstreet**, and the enthusiastic support of the officers, the initiative raised an incredible \$950 for families in need. This "pilot program" was such a resounding success that the department plans to expand the contest to **Longfellow Elementary** next year, ensuring that even more young artists can help make the season bright for their neighbors.



# Aligned for Impact: Leaders for Today and Tomorrow



Being 'future-ready' means more than just academic mastery; it requires the confidence to navigate challenges and the resilience to lead. That is exactly what the **ROX (Rule Our Experiences)** program is cultivating across the district. ROX isn't a typical school club. It is a 20-week journey of self-discovery, resilience, and radical confidence for girls. Across our middle and high schools, ROX is creating a sacred space where girls are learning that their voices aren't just background noise, they are instruments of leadership.

The magic of ROX lies in its ability to meet every girl exactly where she is. Guided by a dedicated team of licensed counselors, social workers, and educators, groups of ten girls meet weekly in each school to navigate the complexities of youth.

"It has been particularly rewarding to witness some of the quieter individuals emerge as leaders and become more engaged in group discussions," says **Heather Dodd, Director of Pupil Services**.

The program doesn't just empower the shy; it refines the bold. "Conversely, those who entered the program as self-identified 'born leaders' have recognized opportunities to take a step back and allow others to take the lead," Dodd explains. "They have gained insights into their communication styles and learned how to utilize them effectively."

What does it look like to "Rule Your Experience"? It happens through a mix of trust-building, journaling, and role-playing. **Special Education Coordinator Carli Garrard** describes a typical session as a place where girls check in and tackle the "big" topics such as:

- Healthy Relationships and Friendships
- Navigating Social Media
- Effective Communication
- Self-Advocacy and Body Image



By practicing these skills in a safe, small-group environment, students aren't just reading about leadership, they are living it. This future-ready approach ensures that when our students graduate, they aren't just academically prepared; they are emotionally equipped to navigate the world with a sense of agency.

The heart of ROX is best captured by **School Counselor Michelle Selby**, one of the program's dedicated facilitators, "My hope is that each girl who participates can grow in her self-confidence, feel comfortable in her own skin, and not be afraid to use her voice. Girls have important things to say, valuable contributions to make to conversations, and deserve to be seen and heard."

As these girls find their footing, they aren't just changing their own lives; they are changing the culture of our schools. They are becoming self-advocates and leaders for themselves and the world they will impact no matter their role as adults.

The ROX program is currently making an impact at Willoughby, Eastlake, and Willowick middle schools, the School of Innovation, and Willoughby South and Eastlake North high schools.

We want to extend a special thank you to the dedicated team of facilitators who make this possible: **Michelle Selby, Nicki Myers, Casey Cook, Leah Leshnak, Amanda Szabo, Emilie Alesnik, Michelle Messina, Jen Neumeyer, Allison Grant, Robin Hopkins, and Carli Garrard**.



# Community Engagement

## Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame

**DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI**  
2025-2026 HALL OF FAME NOMINATIONS  
**NOMINATIONS  
ACCEPTED THROUGH  
DECEMBER 31ST\***

Outstanding **North** and South alumni can be honored by YOU! Nominate graduates who will be recognized at our Induction Ceremony on March 5<sup>th</sup>!



Scan the QR code for qualifications and the nomination form.

**Willoughby-Eastlake  
CITY SCHOOLS**  
NOMINATIONS DEADLINE EXTENDED TO DECEMBER 31ST

**EVERY PERSON MATTERS. EVERY MOMENT COUNTS.**

In September, the Shared Vision Steering Committee members for Priority #2 (The W-E Experience) and Priority #4 (Communications and Community Engagement) tackled an important need in the district and one that inspires all of us - recognition of our distinguished alumni.

The group met and developed the criteria needed and the process of nominating graduates of both Eastlake North and Willoughby South for the Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame.

Willoughby-Eastlake City Schools seeks to recognize past graduates of the district who have distinguished themselves at a high level of achievement in an area of academics, the arts, business, government service, volunteerism through community service, athletics or as a respected leader in their profession or community. Please note that both Eastlake North and Willoughby South have separate athletic halls of fame for outstanding athletic achievements, but athletics can be a contributing factor in an overall distinguished alumni nomination.

Nominees are eligible if they graduated at least ten (10) years from the nomination deadline of December 31, 2025. Individuals may be nominated posthumously, and nominations can be submitted by any member of the public, however, we do not accept self-nominations. The Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony will be held on March 5, 2026, 6 p.m., at Regovich Catering.

To nominate a graduate, scan the QR code or visit this [Nomination Link](#).

## Senior Citizens' Night Out - Tuesday, January 20th Rescheduled from December



- ✓ Welcome remarks by Superintendent Dr. Patrick Ward
- ✓ Dinner served by food services personnel and student volunteers
- ✓ Holiday music and decorations provided by elementary, middle and high school students
- ✓ Residents ages 65+ are invited!

**Date:** Tuesday, January 20, 2026

**Time:** 4-6 p.m.

**Place:** Willoughby South High School  
4900 Shankland Boulevard

**RSVP:** Kristina Hill  
440-602-5099  
[kristina.hill@weschools.org](mailto:kristina.hill@weschools.org)



If you reserved your spot for December, please confirm your RSVP again so that we have an accurate head count. Thank you.

**Willoughby-Eastlake City Schools**  
35353 Curtis Blvd  
Eastlake, OH 44095

## School Board Members

Stacy Menser, President

Jaime Shatsman, Vice President

Krista Bair, Member

Gabrielle Miller, Member

Denise Verdi, Member

Follow the district on social media!



willoughbyeastlakecityschools



Willoughby-Eastlake Schools



@WESchools

## Calamity Day Information

Snow, ice and wind may have significant and varying impacts on the schools. Schools may be closed for many reasons. Snow and/or ice accumulation, sleet, wind chill, wind damage, water pipe breaks, or power outages are examples of utility and weather-related circumstances that may affect school operations. We take many factors into consideration, with the safety of students and staff a priority. In the event that schools need to be closed, we share that information via phone, text and email messages, social media and local news outlets.

The parent/guardian contact information is pulled from PowerSchool for the School Messenger phone calls, texts and emails. If you are not receiving messages regarding school closings, please ensure that your contact information is correct. Contact your school building's secretary if you need assistance.

 **HAPPY**   
 **HOLIDAYS** 

