

GREATNESS UPDATE

 **PAPILLION LA VISTA**
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

FALL 2026



*A Home for
the Leopards*

PAGE 10

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NOTE FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT



There's a phrase that keeps surfacing as I read through this issue: **you belong here**. Not as a slogan, but as something our staff and families are actively building in small daily moments and big decisions alike.

You'll see it in how a new school welcomed families into the process before it even opened, giving them a real voice in the choices that shaped it. You'll see it in a team that's used to winning, choosing to treat every season like a fresh start, leaning on each other rather than resting on past success. And you'll see it in the many ways our students give their time and energy to people outside our school walls, because that sense of belonging doesn't stop at the front door.

Our staff choose this, every day, in how they talk to students, plan their lessons, and show up for the people around them. You can see the results in our attendance numbers and our graduation outcomes, but you can also just see it in the way our students carry themselves, at school and beyond it.

Thank you for being part of it.

Yours in education,

Cindy Ricketts 

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stories in this issue!

The Greatness Update is created by the PLCS Communications Department. For more information about Papillion La Vista Community Schools, visit www.plcschools.org. You can contact us at 402-537-6200 or by emailing communications@plcschools.org.



CARRIAGE HILL



YATP



WALNUT CREEK



PAPILLION MIDDLE



BELL



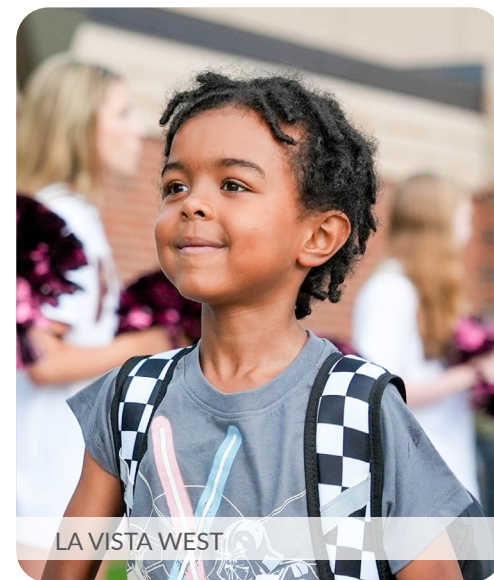
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PAPILLION LA VISTA SOUTH HIGH



LA VISTA WEST



PAPILLION LA VISTA HIGH



PRAIRIE QUEEN



ANDERSON GROVE

ACROSS PLCs IN 25 PHOTOS



GOLDEN HILLS



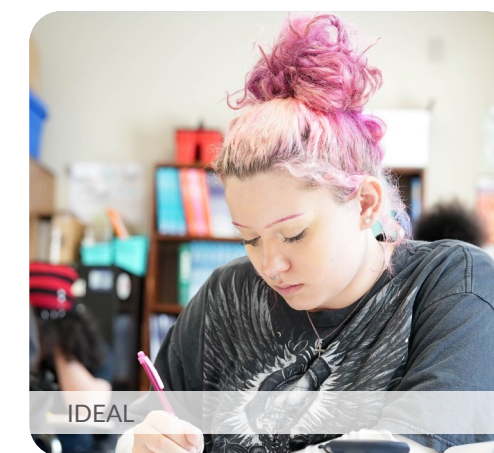
PATRIOT



PARKVIEW HEIGHTS



ASHBURY



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LA VISTA MIDDLE



EARLY CHILDHOOD



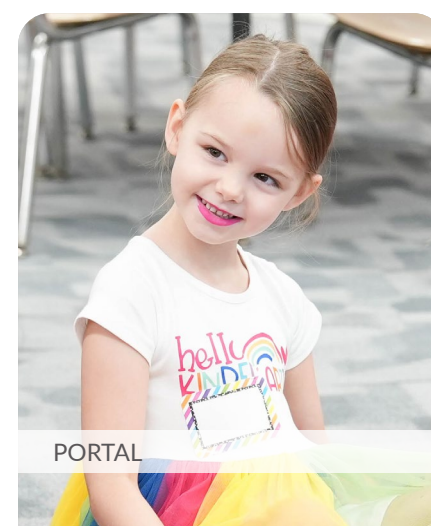
TARA HEIGHTS



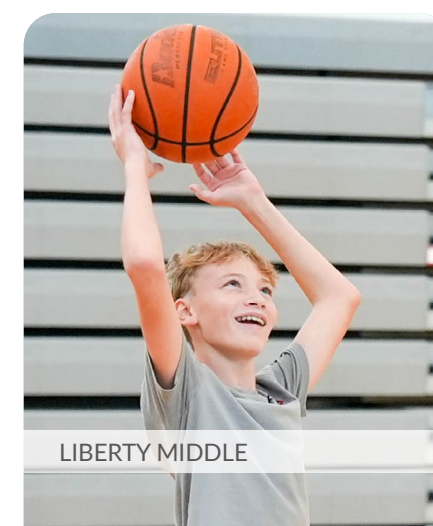
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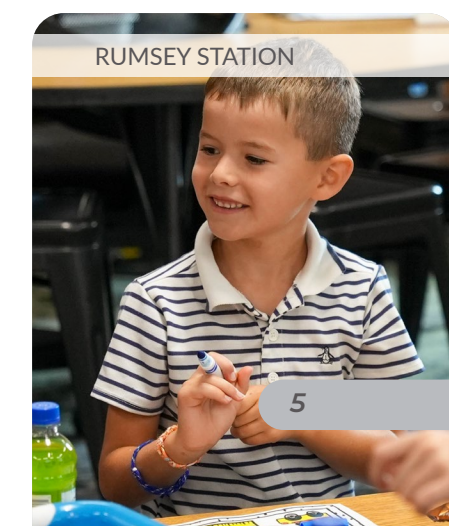
HICKORY HILL



PORTAL



LIBERTY MIDDLE



RUMSEY STATION

THE POWER WITHIN

How does a championship team approach a new season?

"I talk about it being a blank slate," explains Papillion La Vista South volleyball coach Katie Tarman. "Truly, it is. It's a new season, and the kids in their roles are different - they've grown a little bit. So in my mind, it's like I'm starting as a brand new coach; they're starting as brand new players."

The team starts the season with a new motto, a new book to study together, and eyes fully forward. Though they know the competition is working hard to put a stop to their championship run, to the Titans a championship mindset is something you carry regardless of the previous year's results. Their theme this year, "Power With, Power To, Power Within," nods to the importance of strong relationships (*with*), physical training (*to*), and internal work (*within*).

"There's another whole element to sports, and that's our brains and how they function, and how they overcome adversity," Coach Tarman explains. It's the not-so-secret sauce of this third element that helps these student athletes become the best versions of themselves across all aspects of their lives and performance. This intentional psychological integration has shown clear results over the course of Tarman's tenure at Papillion La Vista South.

"We see our girls show leadership in a better way," Coach Tarman expands. "They bring others with them. They're more confident in themselves. They're more confident in their ability to overcome whatever is happening on the court, whatever is going on in their personal lives. They're stronger."

It's not just something she observes in the athletes; it's something the girls see in themselves as well, and the team's five seniors set the standard of vulnerability, hard work, and mental resilience for the rest of the team.

"I tore my ACL my freshman year and my meniscus," shares senior Kambria Bails, "and

I think our mental trainings are really what helped kind of overcome that and to be able to accomplish something I never thought I'd be able to accomplish again."

Senior Lyric Judson explains how the book study, journal work, and team focus on internal toughness sticks with her off the court. "It helps no matter what I'm doing," she says. "It could be schoolwork, it could be in a class, at work, anywhere, with my friends even. I have to have a tough mindset and just be able to get through hard things. And I think that really helps us in the long run."

The team's work to create the championship trifecta builds bonds that are essential to team function and long-term success. According to the athletes, they hold a high standard for each other as well as themselves. As a historically strong program with many championships to the school's name, they feel the target on the Titan team's back, but their mental training and team focus helps put that external pressure behind them. The team is clear: they're feeling the positive impact in their lives, whether in the classroom or extracurricular activities.

"My self-confidence has grown a lot," adds senior Maddox Graves. "Realizing that I'm powerful and I have a whole group of women supporting me, everywhere I go."

"I've learned how to take criticism and feedback a lot better in volleyball and outside of volleyball," shares senior Makenna Sanders. "Somebody is giving you feedback because they want you to get better. So, whether that's my family, people at work, I can adjust to that more because volleyball showed me how to do that."

Senior Finley Moone explains that the mental work helps her not to fixate on her mistakes. Exercising the brain is one part of the work ethic and hunger that the team demonstrates daily. ▶

The term "student athlete" not only categorizes an athlete's age or level of play, but nods to a bigger picture for each individual. The Titan seniors shared some of their extracurricular activities and academic endeavors that round out their experience. Volleyball is just one area where they apply their mental resilience training.



Makenna Sanders works at the PLCS Foundation Kids Club, is taking AP Statistics, bakes for her own bake stand, and has performed in show choir.



Finley Moone is in the Athletic Training Academy, participates in track and field, and is taking AP Statistics and Honors American Government.



Lyric Judson (L) participates in track and field, and is taking AP English Literature & Composition and AP Psychology.

Kambria Bails (R) completed the Leadership Academy, and is in National Honor Society, AP Calculus, and AP English Literature & Composition.



Maddox Graves is part of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Athletic Training Academy, and is taking AP Statistics and classes at Metro.

▶ "We want to work harder than everyone else because we know everyone else is working," Moone concludes, "but we also have a clean slate."

With athletes who are active in academic life and activities outside of volleyball, Coach Tarman sums up the importance of approaching a new season with more than just physical training.

"Volleyball is just the avenue that we get to try to teach these life skills. We're trying to raise young women to be confident and ready to take on whatever comes at them in life." 🙌



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KNOWN FOR GREATNESS

Papillion La Vista Community Schools is proud of the many paths graduates take after leaving our halls. Among them are two alumni whose activities and academics at PLCS helped set them on a path to careers serving the very community they grew up in, one through fire and emergency response, the other through community policing. Their paths look different, but both reflect the same lasting connection to home: a commitment to showing up for the community every single day.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

from Classroom Preparation to Career Success

Mia Frei, Class of 2018

In her time in high school, Mia (Pearson) Frei served as captain of the Monarchs' state championship softball team. An interest in law enforcement had already taken root by then. "We had family friends in law enforcement, and hearing about the job always intrigued me," she says.

Frei serves with the Papillion Police Department, and this December will mark five years on the job. Today, she works night shift road patrol, and her role extends well beyond patrol duty. She serves on the Sarpy County Crisis Negotiations Team, works as a Field Training Officer, and is part of the department's Recruitment team. For Frei, the job is deeply tied to the community she grew up in. "It means a lot to give back to the community I grew up in," she says. "I love leaving a call where I felt like I was able to be personable to our citizens and truly help them in a time of need."

Building relationships is at the heart of how she approaches the work. "I always love meeting new people and building those relationships." It's an approach that hasn't gone unnoticed. "It's always a running joke in our department that 'Mia knows everybody,' and sometimes I feel like I do!"



Josh Meyers, Class of 2023

While at PLSHS, Josh Meyers played football and competed in powerlifting. He also took part in the district's Career Academy, a program that partners with Metro Community College to give students hands-on education in the fire service. Through the academy, Meyers graduated high school with an associate's degree in fire science technology already in hand.

Today, he's serving the same community he grew up in as a Firefighter/EMT with the Papillion Fire Department. For Meyers, the career choice was about more than the job itself. "I wanted a career that would allow myself to serve my community on a day-to-day basis," he says. As a proud Papillion resident and PLCS graduate, Meyers calls it an honor to work for the city that raised him. "I am grateful to serve the community that has given me so much."

Meyers's commitment to giving back doesn't stop at the station. He regularly volunteers with the PLCS Community Closet, helping families access clothing and hygiene essentials, and also volunteers with Ralston Fire/Rescue. One of his favorite parts of the job is connecting with the next generation of firefighters through community outreach events and station tours. "It is a great feeling to have, as not long ago I was the one asking the questions and wanting to become a career firefighter someday."



A home for the Leopards



When asked if she was ready for the new school year at Lincoln View Elementary, parent Britnye Wheeler's response was "So ready!"

It wasn't just a classic tongue-in-cheek eagerness to have kids back in school. Through intentional feedback sessions in early planning conversations about opening Lincoln View, Wheeler already felt invested in the Lincoln View Leopard community. She attended several meetings to discuss the boundary changes between Prairie Queen Elementary and Lincoln View.

"I was able to express my concerns or my opinions on the boundaries, get perspective from the other parents that attended, and also be able to ask questions to Dr. Rikli and the other board members that were there," Wheeler remembers. "So I thought that was really valuable that they were able to have us included."

New Lincoln View parent Joe Stanieich-Burke also got involved in early planning processes by participating in the discussion to develop the new school's mascot.

"It was really fun to get a peek behind the curtain and see what was being planned and get our input of what mascots we liked," he notes. "My favorite part about sitting in that room was listening to the kids get involved. Because, of course, parents showed up with their constructive feedback, but then watching the kids get super involved and have really insightful feedback was just really fun and engaging to listen to."

Stanieich-Burke enjoyed the experience, but expressed how he has felt his voice has been valued since "day one" as a parent in the district. "I feel like the Papillion La Vista school district has done a good job engaging families and collecting our feedback," he explains. "And so for me, it was just another box that I could check to say, 'They're listening again, and they're letting us get involved.'"

Stanieich-Burke's son Callum, a second grader this year, didn't favor the leopard among the mascot choices, but still admits it's cool. While seeing the school for the first time and jumping between colorful tiles in the hallways, Callum said he liked the new playground, and also appreciated the familiar spaces of the gym and music room.

Wheeler's three daughters - third grade twins Melanie and Macy and fifth grader Baylee - also noticed how Lincoln View felt a lot like Prairie Queen, but "backwards." All three agreed that they enjoyed the colors in the new building, the big classrooms, and the playground features.

The Stanieich-Burkes like the neighborhood location of Lincoln View, a priority in Papillion La Vista Community Schools. In the summer, they started practicing their walk to the school.

"We know a lot of the families, so seeing them walking their kids to school or walking home from school I think is just going to be a very great experience for us as a family," Stanieich-Burke considers.

For Callum, Melanie, Macy, and Baylee, there was one clear, standout thing to look forward to: seeing old friends and making new ones. Some things don't change, no matter the environment.

"I was PTO at Prairie Queen, and I'm continuing PTO at Lincoln View," says Wheeler. "And I think it's so fantastic to be able to start up a new school and gain those relationships with the school, with the staff, with [Principal] Mrs. Thompson, and be able to collaborate with other parents and start our own new traditions at Lincoln View." 🐾



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"The value of volunteering is giving back to the community and not expecting anything back in return, making sure everybody's cared for."

Papillion La Vista High School junior Connor McKelvey spent time over the summer volunteering with NeighborGood food pantry, which relies on volunteer support to help clients, sort donations, stock shelves, and bag groceries. As a member of the National Honor Society at PLHS, Connor is required to maintain a threshold of volunteer hours.

"It's important for students my age to engage with our communities because it's honestly a sort of life skill to be able to not only communicate with people, but help them out," he notes. "Especially when you're young, when you have a lot of time that you're able to give."

RJ Vitera, now a senior at PLHS, also dedicated part of his summer to volunteering. A member of the group Teen Faith at his church, RJ participates in activities to give back to his church and the community. The group regularly creates care bags for vulnerable groups like the unhoused or pregnant women, among other services opportunities. Over the summer, RJ volunteered at the church's fireworks tent.

"The value of volunteering is being able to help others and hopefully make their lives better," RJ explains. "And it's not only rewarding for them, but it's also rewarding for me. Being able to see other people's lives hopefully improve makes me feel good."

the value of giving back



Both Connor and RJ are on the Monarch football team. While sports participation has grown them in leadership skills and team building, both express the value in engaging in a variety of extracurricular activities, including community service.

"All the new experiences that you learn, you keep learning from that as you go forward with your life," reflects RJ. "Situations where you do need to take charge and kind of guide others in the right direction - I've learned that through volunteering and things of that nature."

"We have a lot of time and a lot of energy to expend, so having extra activities is very important for us," says Connor. "It's good for your mental health too." ¹⁰



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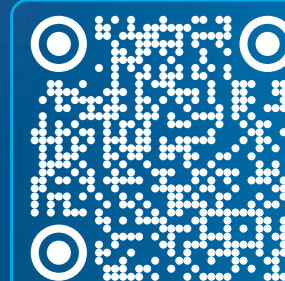
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2026 PLCS Greatness Awards

The PLCS Greatness Awards are presented annually to staff members in five categories: Secondary Teacher/Specialist, Elementary Teacher/Specialist, Classified Staff Member, Rookie Teacher, and Substitute Teacher. These staff members of the year demonstrate the trademark greatness that characterizes PLCS staff and education!



Left to Right: Joe Pudenz, Jim Simpson, Cassidy Renken, Steffni Kalal, and Kathy Weaver



Jim Simpson - Secondary Teacher/Specialist

Papillion La Vista South High School - Mathematics Teacher

Jim has shaped careers as much as he's shaped students, running a classroom built on high expectations, structure, and somehow, dad jokes woven into difficult concepts. Nearly half of the entire math department learned the craft directly from him.



Joe Pudenz - Elementary Teacher/Specialist

Rumsey Station, Golden Hills - Physical Education Teacher

Joe shows up with energy that's contagious, setting a positive tone before the first bell even rings. Colleagues call him the "backbone of the school." Former students, as graduating seniors, still return on their last day to say their time with him was their favorite elementary memory.



Steffni Kalal - Classified Staff Member

La Vista Middle School - Secretary

Described by colleagues as the "lifeblood of the building," Steffni has quietly touched nearly every project, event, and committee that happens within her school's walls. There's almost nothing she hasn't shaped within her role.



Cassidy Renken - Rookie Teacher

Parkview Heights - First Grade Teacher

In just two years, Cassidy has built a classroom where students carrying some of the heaviest backgrounds or complex behavioral needs feel safe, seen, and capable. Her systems and routines reflect the practice of a veteran, not someone new to the profession.



Kathy Weaver - Substitute Teacher

Papillion La Vista Community Schools - Substitute

Kathy requires no direction; she simply knows what needs to be done, instructing students, guiding paraprofessionals, mentoring student aides, and giving teachers genuine peace of mind.

"Jim's influence can be seen not only in the students he has taught, but also in the many teachers he has helped develop."

"Joe doesn't just teach; he inspires excellence through his genuine investment in the holistic growth of his students."

"Steffni is integral to the staff and students' success on any given day. She can make every person she comes into contact with feel like the most important person to her in that moment."

"Cassidy's enthusiasm for teaching is contagious, inspiring students to be excited and engaged in their learning."

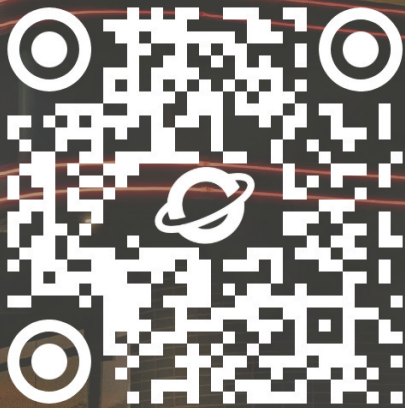
"Kathy consistently goes above and beyond to ensure that each child experienced not just academic growth, but belonging and joy at school."

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you belong here

Walk the halls at La Vista Middle School and you notice something before any spreadsheet tells you. Staff know their students' stories, interests, and daily happenings, and that connection is the whole point behind the school's approach to attendance.

For two years, LVMS has built its attendance strategy around one idea. You Belong Here.

"You Belong Here means intentionally creating an environment where students feel connected," said Allyson Judson, Assistant Principal at LVMS. "Staff are purposeful in their interactions with students and understand that when students feel a connection to adults, each other, activities, they're more likely to attend school regularly. Students succeed when they are present and engaged in their education."

Sometimes this philosophy shows up quietly, in a hallway check-in or a teacher remembering your weekend plans, and sometimes it shows up loud. Last year, LVMS ran two events built around attendance, a pop-up party and a drawing to (temporarily) tattoo the SRO, and neither happened by chance.

"We intentionally choose times that the data shows our attendance is statistically in a slump and give

students something fun to give them that extra push to come to school on the days that are hard," Judson said. Reminders went out at lunch and through Advisory in the days before each event, building anticipation for something worth showing up for.

The numbers back this up. Before LVMS shifted its focus toward belonging, more than 20 percent of students were chronically absent, and during the 2025-26 school year that number dropped below 14 percent, falling as low as 9 percent at some points during the year.

"These numbers show that proactive practices and intentionality make a huge difference," Judson said.

For LVMS staff, this goes beyond a number on a report. "The staff at LVMS care about your child and want to make a positive difference in their lives," Judson said. "It's hard to make an impact when students are not at school. The staff at LVMS are dedicated to helping your child succeed in all aspects of their educational journey. We want to partner with you. If you're having a hard time getting your child to school, please communicate with us. We are here to help." 



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