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The Grand Island Central School District BRIDGE

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The Community Newsletter for the Grand Island Central School District

A Message from Superintendent



Brian Graham, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Dear Grand Island Families and Community,

Welcome to the 2026-2027 school year.

There is something special about the start of a new school year. Our hallways fill with familiar faces and new ones. Our classrooms come alive with curiosity and conversation. Our schools become what they have always been, at their best, vibrant places of learning, connection, and possibility.

This year begins with a particular sense of gratitude. Grand Island voters said yes to their public schools this June, and the trust behind that vote is not lost on any of us. It is our job this year to honor it. That means being careful stewards of every dollar you have entrusted to us, being clear and consistent communicators about the work you have asked us to do, and being unmistakable about the outcomes that matter most for your children.

I am proud to share that we are welcoming close to a dozen new teachers and administrators this fall. Each one was hired because of what they will bring to a Grand Island classroom, a Grand Island team, or a Grand Island family conference table. You will meet them at Open House nights, at concerts, at games, and in the drop-off line. Please make them feel at home. They chose us, and we are lucky they did.

Our promise to every child in this district this year is simple, and I want to state it plainly. Engagement in classrooms that expect the best of them. Empowerment to speak, create, and lead. Belonging in schools that are theirs. Every child. Every day. That framework will guide our building leaders, our teachers, our support staff, and me.

Beyond the classroom, you will continue to see our students do what Grand Island students do. Compete for their teams. Take the stage. Serve their community. Represent this district with the character we have come to expect. These accomplishments belong to our students first, and to the educators, staff, and families who stand behind them every step of the way.

None of the work ahead happens in isolation. A strong school district is built on strong partnerships among our students, our families, our staff, our Board of Education, and this community. I am grateful for that partnership every single day, and I do not take a moment of it for granted.

So as we open another year, I ask three things. Students, embrace what this year offers you. Families, stay close to your schools and to the adults who teach and care for your children. Community, keep showing up for the young people who will shape what Grand Island becomes next.

Here is to a safe, successful, and memorable 2026-2027 school year.

Warm regards,

Brian Graham, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Grand Island School District



A Message from Board of Education President



As we begin a new school year, I want to welcome our students, families, staff and the entire Grand Island community back to another year of learning, growth and opportunity.

There is a tremendous amount of work that takes place behind the scenes to prepare our schools for the return of students. Throughout the summer, our school-related personnel, faculty and staff worked diligently to ensure our buildings were clean, organized, maintained and ready for a new school year. Our summer programs also kept students learning, growing and connected to their school community.

On behalf of the Board of Education, I want to thank everyone who contributed to making this summer a success. Much of this work happens behind the scenes, but it makes an enormous difference when our students walk through our doors on the first day of school.

Every school year brings new challenges, new opportunities and new students who are counting on us. Some students will return excited and confident, while others may be nervous, uncertain or facing challenges we may know nothing about. As a school community, it is our responsibility to make sure every student feels welcomed, supported and ready to learn.

We are incredibly fortunate to have such a dedicated team of educators, administrators, teachers and school-related personnel caring for our students each day. Their commitment to our children and to the Grand Island community is something we can all be proud of.

As parents, families and community members, we each play an important role in supporting our students. The impact we have on a child can extend far beyond the classroom. A conversation, an encouraging word, a welcoming smile or simply showing a student that we believe in them can make a lasting difference.

As we look ahead to the 2026-27 school year, the Board of Education remains committed to supporting our students, our staff and our community. We are excited about the opportunities ahead and grateful for the continued partnership of our families and community.

Thank you for your continued support of the Grand Island Central School District. We wish all of our students and families a safe, successful and rewarding school year.

Welcome back, and let's make it a great one!

Jay Grover
President, Board of Education
Grand Island Central School District





Welcome, Board of Education Member James Mulcahy!



I have a background in economics and finance. I earned a MA in economics from The Ohio State University and an MBA in finance and accounting from the University of Chicago. I worked for 45 years in the banking and energy fields. I also worked as an economist, financial analyst, rate of return expert (at the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio) and risk officer, retiring eight years ago. Currently, I am an adjunct lecturer in economics at UB. I've taught as an adjunct, off and on, for more than 47 years.

Welcome, Board of Education Member Mike Madigan!



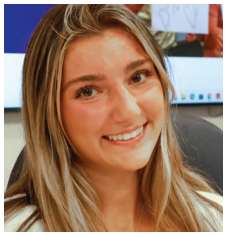
I am honored to serve on the Grand Island Central School District Board of Education. My focus is disciplined oversight, transparent decision-making, responsible financial management, and strengthening both vocational and traditional education so every student is prepared for success.

A Grand Island resident since 1987, I am retired after a successful career in the Biotechnology Industry. Most recently I was Senior Program Manager at Thermo Fisher Scientific (GIBCO) from 2007 to 2025. Earlier I led teams as Manager of Manufacturing and Manager of Process Engineering, managing large budgets and earning multiple leadership awards. As a certified Project Management Professional (PMP), I take a data-driven approach that emphasizes results and accountability.

My wife, Leslie—a lifelong Islander—and I raised our sons, William and Matthew, in the Grand Island schools. As a parent and taxpayer, I value academic excellence while remaining mindful of property taxes.

I previously served eight years as Town Councilman and have been a Grand Island Volunteer Fireman since 2015. I am committed to transparent governance, fiscal discipline, and putting students and taxpayers first.

Meet Olivia Govern: New Student Representative to the Board of Education



Grand Island High School senior Olivia Govern is stepping into a new leadership role this year as the district's student representative to the Board of Education.

Olivia brings a wealth of leadership and school involvement to the position. She serves as vice president of Student Council and is a class officer for the Class of 2027, where she also manages the class's social media. She is also a member of Yearbook Club and Interact Club.

Outside of school, Olivia is gaining valuable experience in the local business community. She works at Brick Oven, where she takes phone orders, and works with East Exit Homes on social media marketing.

Olivia is also a member of the Academy of Finance and the National Business Honor Society, reflecting her interest in business and her commitment to academic achievement.

As student representative, Olivia will have the opportunity to bring a student perspective to Board of Education meetings and help strengthen communication between students and district leadership.

We look forward to hearing Olivia's voice and perspective as she takes on this important role and represents her fellow students throughout the school year.







Follow Us!

Follow @GrandIslandCSD on X (the social media platform formerly known as Twitter), and scan the QR codes to follow us on Instagram and Facebook.

You can also visit our website at www.grandislandschools.org.

@GRANDISLANDSCHOOLDISTRICT



A message from Transportation



Welcome back to a fantastic new 26-27 school year! As our buses have rolled into full swing, please remember that all Alternate Transportation Forms must be submitted and kept current with the GICSD Transportation Department to ensure seamless routes for your students. Late bus services have already begun for High School and Middle School students, while Elementary late buses are scheduled to start in late September—stay tuned for the exact start date. AND PLEASE NOTE * Late buses are an abbreviated service so your students' bus stop may be different then their current school bus stop.

For real-time tracking and GPS coordinates of your child's bus, be sure to download and utilize the VERSATRANS MY STOP app.

As always, student safety remains our highest priority; our dedicated drivers undergo rigorous safety training, and our top-notch maintenance team ensures our fleet meets the absolute highest safety standards every single day.

We are here to assist you from 6 AM - 5PM M - TH and 6 AM - 4:30 PM Fri.

Please contact us at 716-773-8890 or my email theresaalizadeh@gicsd.org

Thank you,
Theresa Alizadeh
Transportation Supervisor



Strong Schools, Strong Community

The connection between education and property values

When people think about the value of a strong public school district, they often think first about students, about quality instruction, extracurricular opportunities, dedicated teachers, and the experiences that help young people prepare for their futures.

But the impact of a strong school system reaches beyond the classroom.

For towns like Grand Island, public schools are part of what makes a community an attractive place to live, work, and invest. Many factors influence the price of a home, including location, condition, size, interest rates, and the overall housing market. Research has also consistently found a relationship between school quality and residential property values.

What is happening in Grand Island's housing market?

Grand Island's housing market is competitive in 2026. According to Redfin, the median sale price for a home on Grand Island was approximately $385,000 as of the most recent monthly report, an increase of 16.7 percent from the same period the previous year. Median price per square foot rose 14.2 percent.

Data from Realtor.com shows a similar pattern for the 14072 ZIP code, with homes selling at approximately 102 percent of asking price and moving in a median of 17 days.

Those numbers cannot prove that schools alone are driving the increase, and no serious analysis would suggest they could. Housing prices are shaped by many economic and property-specific factors. But the numbers do provide a useful backdrop for a fair question: what are the characteristics that make a community desirable enough to keep buyers competing for homes here?

Why schools matter to home buyers

For families with children, the answer is straightforward. When parents choose where to live, they weigh the schools their children will attend alongside commute time, neighborhood amenities, parks, recreation, and available housing.

But the relationship between schools and housing extends well beyond families with school-aged children.

A strong school district contributes to a community's reputation and desirability. That helps attract families who want to put down roots, and it supports a stable residential market that benefits homeowners more broadly.

Academic research has found a measurable relationship between school quality and home prices. A review published in the Journal of Housing Economics found that most studies identified significant capitalization of school quality into housing values, particularly when researchers looked at educational outcomes rather than just spending or inputs. Research on New York housing markets has found the same pattern locally.

The takeaway is not that a school district single-handedly determines what a house is worth. It is that schools are one meaningful piece of the larger equation that shapes how people perceive and value a community.

A benefit that reaches beyond the classroom

The connection between schools and property values is one reason public education is fairly viewed as a community investment.

When schools provide students with strong academic opportunities, arts and athletics, career preparation, and supportive learning environments, those experiences benefit students directly. They also contribute to the identity and attractiveness of the community as a whole.

That matters to homeowners who may not have children in the schools today.

A resident who bought a home decades ago may no longer have children attending Grand Island schools. A young professional may be purchasing a first home before starting a family. A retiree may be looking for a community with a strong quality of life. A business considering where to locate looks at the surrounding community when making decisions.

Each has a different reason for caring about the health of the community. Strong public schools can be part of that equation for all of them.

More than a number

A community's educational reputation is built over time through thousands of individual experiences: a teacher who inspires a student, an athletic team that brings people together, a music performance that fills an auditorium, a graduate who returns to raise a family, a student who discovers a career interest, or a school event that brings families and residents together.

Those experiences create something that is difficult to capture on a spreadsheet: community confidence.

And community confidence matters.

A shared investment in Grand Island

Public schools are one of the few institutions in a community that touch nearly every generation. They educate children, employ residents, partner with local organizations, host community events, and help shape the next generation of Grand Islanders.

The connection between schools and property values is not simply a conversation about real estate. It is a conversation about what makes a community desirable and sustainable over the long term.

For Grand Island homeowners, the health of our schools is about more than the value of any individual property. It is about maintaining a community where people want to live, where families want to raise their children, and where every resident has reason to feel invested in the place they call home.

Strong schools help build strong communities. And strong communities are valuable to all of us.

SOURCES

Redfin, Grand Island NY Housing Market: redfin.com/city/30165/NY/Grand-Island/housing-market

Realtor.com, 14072 Housing Market Overview: realtor.com/local/market/new-york/zipcode-14072

Nguyen-Hoang, P., and Yinger, J. (2011). The capitalization of school quality into house values: A review. Journal of Housing Economics, 20(1), 30 to 48.

Grand Island High School Launches Academy of Visual Arts

Grand Island High School is expanding opportunities for students interested in the visual arts with the launch of the Academy of Visual Arts (AVA), a program designed to help students develop their artistic skills, explore careers in the arts and prepare for college and future opportunities in the visual arts.

The AVA provides students with a comprehensive, four-year experience that combines art coursework, hands-on practice, creative exploration and connections with working professionals. Through learning, practice, participation and dedication to skill building, students will develop a strong foundation in the visual arts while gaining a broader understanding of the role of art in local, national and global communities.

"The Academy of Visual Arts is designed to give students who have a passion for art the opportunity to take that interest further," said High School Art Teacher Cindy Wynne. "Students will not only develop their artistic skills, but also explore the many educational and career pathways available to them in the visual arts."

A Four-Year Journey in the Arts

AVA students will participate in a balanced art program throughout all four years of high school. The program includes specialized coursework developed for Grand Island High School and aligned with New York State Visual and Media Arts standards.

Students will have opportunities to:

- Develop skills in both 2D and 3D art and design
- Explore historical and cultural contexts of art
- Strengthen observation, critical analysis and creative expression
- Research artists, resources and career opportunities
- Integrate technology to document, store and showcase their artwork
- Participate in performance-based assessments of their work and artistic growth
- Learn through field trips, workshops, guest lectures and apprenticeships
- Connect with artists and other professionals working in the field
- Use their artistic skills to serve the school and local community
- Gain exposure to the visual arts locally, statewide and globally
- Prepare for college and careers in the visual arts

The program is built around five core values: awareness of historical and cultural context; observation and critical analysis; creative expression and production; understanding resources and art research; and aesthetic understanding and viewpoints.



Preparing Students for What's Next

A key component of AVA is helping students see the connection between their artistic interests and future opportunities. Students will explore careers in the arts and gain experiences that can help them understand the wide range of pathways available beyond high school.

AVA enrollment will also satisfy New York State Visual Art Pathway to Graduation requirements through the Individual Arts Assessment Pathway (IAAP).

Becoming an AVA Student

Students interested in joining the Academy will begin by taking Studio in Art, generally during freshman year or through the eighth-grade Accelerated Studio in Art course. Students will then choose an art pathway in either 2D or 3D Art and Design and complete four additional full-year art electives, including at least one college-credit-bearing course.

Students must also complete the AVA application process, which includes creating and submitting a portfolio, writing an artist statement and participating in an individual interview with high school art faculty.

The portfolio will be developed through a student-created Google Site, providing students with an opportunity to digitally showcase their work and demonstrate their growth as artists.

Information about the Academy will be shared with students and families through the district website, freshman orientation activities and parent information nights. Program promotion is planned for January, with the application deadline and portfolio review/interview dates to be announced.

The Academy of Visual Arts represents another way Grand Island Central School District is creating opportunities for students to discover their interests, develop their talents and build skills that can carry them into college, careers and lifelong creative pursuits.

Tops Friendly Markets Gives Back to Grand Island Schools

Tops Friendly Markets representatives recently visited the high school to celebrate its continued support of Grand Island Central School District students and staff.

Through its "Tops in Education Program," Tops has helped provide additional resources and opportunities for students throughout the Grand Island school community. Each building has benefited from Tops' generosity, with donations totaling $3,946.76 across the district.

"The Tops in Education Program is a meaningful way for our customers to support the schools that are so important to their families and communities," said Courtney Mailhot, manager of community relations for Tops Friendly Markets. "Every participating purchase adds up, and together, our customers and schools have created more than $2 million in support since the program began. We are proud to continue that tradition and help schools provide students with enriching opportunities throughout the year."

Here's a look at the support each school has received:

- Grand Island Senior High School: $680.24
- Veronica E. Connor Middle School: $1,012.78
- Charlotte Sidway Elementary School: $824.45
- Huth Road Elementary School: $703.26
- William Kaegebein Elementary School: $726.03

Community partnerships like this help strengthen the connection between our schools and the community, providing valuable support that directly benefits students across the district.

Thank you, Tops Friendly Markets, for your continued generosity and support of Grand Island Schools.

To learn more, visit www.topsmarkets.com/education



Student Creativity Transforms Community Space

Junior Sophie Myers was recently recognized by the Grand Island Board of Education for her creativity and commitment to the community through a unique art project at VFW Post 9249 on Grand Island Boulevard.

Sophie created a mural spanning the post's 140-foot fence, transforming a prominent community space into a vibrant display of student creativity. The project gave Sophie an opportunity to use her artistic talents in a meaningful way while creating something that can be enjoyed by members of the community.

Her work is a wonderful example of the impact students can have beyond the classroom and the positive difference they can make in the community. We are proud of Sophie for sharing her talents and helping bring student creativity to such a visible community space.



Seventh Graders Raise Awareness and Funds for Water in South Sudan

For seventh-grade teacher Lori Randles, teaching A Long Walk to Water by Linda Sue Park is about more than reading a book. It is an opportunity to help students understand the challenges faced by people in South Sudan—and show them how they can make a difference.

A Long Walk to Water, part of the seventh-grade curriculum at Veronica E. Connor Middle School, tells two parallel stories. One follows Nya, a fictional girl who spends much of her day walking long distances to collect water. The other follows Salva Dut, whose story is based on his real-life experience fleeing Sudan during the civil war and eventually coming to the United States.

After settling in Rochester and earning a business degree, Salva wanted to help the people of South Sudan. He founded Water for South Sudan, a nonprofit organization that brings clean water to remote villages by drilling wells.



Access to clean water can transform an entire community. Children, particularly girls who may otherwise spend hours collecting water, can attend school. Clean water also supports agriculture, improves hygiene and helps communities thrive.

As part of Randles' lessons on the book, VCMS seventh-graders have participated in the Iron Giraffe Challenge since 2012. The challenge encourages students to raise money to help fund wells in South Sudan.

VCMS funded its first well in 2016 and later helped fund a second well as part of a team of schools. Today, a well costs approximately $20,000. Over the past decade, Randles and her students have continued their fundraising efforts with tremendous support from their families and the Grand Island community.

For Randles, the effort is about raising both awareness and funds. She wants her students to understand that something as basic as access to clean water can dramatically change a person's life—and that they have the power to help.

Through the Iron Giraffe Challenge, students have raised thousands of dollars while learning valuable lessons about empathy, global citizenship and the impact of giving back. Their efforts have helped bring clean water and new opportunities to hundreds of people in remote villages in South Sudan, demonstrating that even a group of seventh-graders can make a lasting difference.

Second-Grade Teacher Brings Women Together Through Music and Giving Back

Huth Road Elementary School second-grade teacher Maureen Gambino is using her passion for music to bring women together while giving back to the community.

On Saturday, August 15th, Gambino hosted the Second Annual "WNY Women of Rock & Blues Festival" at the Diamond Hawk in Cheektowaga. The event featured more than 20 women performers, each bringing her own unique style to the stage.

Gambino founded the festival with the goal of creating a space where talented women could come together, share their music and support a meaningful cause.

"My mission is simple: to celebrate and support women through music, friendship and giving back to our community," Gambino said.

The festival included a 50/50 raffle and basket raffle, along with support from major sponsors. Proceeds from the event benefited the Family Justice Center, which provides assistance to individuals and families impacted by domestic violence.

Thanks to the generosity of performers, sponsors and attendees, the event raised $4,000 for the Family Justice Center.

Gambino's own band, Rock Angel, which has been performing throughout Western New York for 12 years, backed up many of the featured performers during the festival. She said she frequently uses her music and the stage as a platform to highlight positive causes and community initiatives.

That commitment to community also extends to Gambino's students. On Tuesday, August 4th, Rock Angel performed at Grand Island Town Park as part of National Night Out. Several students who had been in Gambino's second-grade class during the previous school year attended the event and even joined her on stage to dance while she performed.

"It was so special to see some of my Huth Road students there," Gambino said. "They came up on stage and danced while I was performing. I'm sure it was something they will never forget!"

Gambino plans to continue the festival tradition next summer. The third annual WNY Women of Rock & Blues Festival is scheduled for Sunday, August 1st, from 3-8 p.m. at Diamond Hawk.

Through music, friendship and philanthropy, Gambino continues to find meaningful ways to connect with others and make a positive impact in the community.

Brett and Jenepher Banker selected for New York State Section VI Hall of Fame

Grand Island's Brett and Jenepher Banker have been selected for induction into the New York State Section VI Hall of Fame, a prestigious honor recognizing their decades of leadership, service and excellence in interscholastic athletics.

The husband-and-wife duo will be inducted in separate categories. Brett Banker was selected in the Administrator category, while Jenepher Banker was honored in the Coach category.

Jenepher Banker dedicated many years to Grand Island Central School District as a teacher and coach, building one of the most successful basketball programs in Section VI. During her 15 seasons leading the Vikings (1998-2013), she compiled 255 victories, won four Niagara Frontier League championships, captured seven Section VI titles and led Grand Island to four Far West Regional appearances, including a trip to the New York State Class A semifinals in 2011. She also coached five of the seven Grand Island players in program history to surpass 1,000 career points.

Following her retirement from Grand Island, Banker continued her coaching career at Daemen University, where she elevated the Wildcats into a national Division II powerhouse. From 2016-2025, she amassed 165 victories while leading the program to six consecutive East Coast Conference regular-season championships, five straight ECC Tournament titles and six consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances. Under her leadership, Daemen reached the NCAA Sweet 16 twice and the Elite Eight twice, and she coached 12 All-Conference players. Her success earned her East Coast Conference Coach of the Year honors four times.

Combined with 10 victories earlier in her career at Hartford High School in Vermont, Banker amassed 265 high school victories and 497 career wins across the high school and collegiate levels.

Brett Banker's career has spanned more than three decades of leadership in educational athletics across Western New York. During his 31 years with the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda Union Free School District, he oversaw athletics, K-12 health and physical education, wellness initiatives, recreation programming and school nursing services for approximately 9,000 students across 12 schools.

Although his professional career was centered in Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda, Banker made a lasting impact on the Grand Island community. While serving as Grand Island High School's Athletic Director, he established the school's first Athletic Hall of Fame, creating a permanent way to recognize outstanding alumni athletes and coaches while connecting current students to the district's proud athletic tradition.

He also created VIKE Night, a districtwide celebration that recognizes student-athletes from the fall, winter and spring sports seasons. The annual event brings together hundreds of students, families and coaches to celebrate dedication, perseverance, teamwork and sportsmanship while reinforcing the educational value of athletics.

Beyond his administrative leadership, Banker generously volunteered as a coach for Grand Island Athletics, leading house soccer teams for many years as his children grew up in the program. He also coached a Grand Island girls travel soccer team beginning when his daughter, Kallie, was eight years old, as well as his son Kolby's travel hockey team, which included many Grand Island student-athletes. His commitment to mentoring young athletes extended well beyond wins and losses, and he continues to maintain relationships with many former players.

Banker's influence has reached well beyond the local level. He is the only individual in Section VI history to serve three separate six-year terms as Section VI President, a testament to the trust and respect he has earned from colleagues throughout the region. He has also served six terms as Niagara Frontier League President, spent 18 years on the Section VI Executive Committee and served as Secretary of the New York State Athletic Administrators Association and Co-Chair of its statewide mentoring program.

His leadership has earned numerous honors throughout his career, including the Judith Knight Positive Change Award and the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association State Award of Merit. He has also completed extensive national leadership training and continues to mentor and educate athletic administrators across New York State.

Together, Brett and Jenepher Banker's careers have left a lasting mark on thousands of students, athletes, coaches and educators throughout Western New York. Their induction into the Section VI Hall of Fame recognizes not only their individual accomplishments, but also their shared commitment to developing young people through education and athletics.

Grand Island Central School District congratulates Brett and Jenepher Banker on this well-deserved recognition and thanks them for the enduring legacy they have created for Viking athletics and the broader Section VI community.





Meet Brian Willats - Dean of Athletics

1. For those who may not know you yet, can you tell us a little about your background and your experience in the Grand Island Central School District?

I have been fortunate to spend the majority of my professional career serving students and families in the Grand Island Central School District. I began my career as a physical education teacher at Charlotte Sidway Elementary, where I spent 23 1/2 years developing a Pre-K through first grade program. During that time, I had the opportunity to work with thousands of students and develop a strong appreciation for the role that education, relationships, and extracurricular activities play in a young person's development. I have also been fortunate to serve as a coach, including JV football, JV baseball coach and most recently as a varsity baseball assistant coach. In addition, I have served as Director of Community Education for the past 2 years and last year was able to step into the role as Dean of Students at Grand Island High School. Each of these positions has given me a different perspective on our students, staff, families, and community. I am excited to bring those experiences together in my new role as Dean of Athletics.

2. You're not new to Grand Island, but you are stepping into a new role as Dean of Athletics. What drew you to this position?

Grand Island has been a very important part of my professional life, and athletics has always been something I am passionate about. When the opportunity to serve as Dean of Athletics became available, it felt like a great time to further my career. I have always believed in the value of athletics and what it can teach young people. Athletics has been in my blood since I was very young and I had amazing coaches that taught me so much throughout the years, including my father who was my first coach. This position gives me the opportunity to support our student-athletes, coaches, and programs on a broader level. I am excited about the opportunity to help our athletic department continue to grow while maintaining the traditions and values that make Grand Island special. I have also had great leaders in Jon Roth and Brett Banker that have shown me how things should operate in order to have a successful program.

3. What does being a Dean of Athletics mean to you, and what do you see as the most important responsibilities of the role?



To me, being Dean of Athletics is about being an advocate for our student-athletes and coaches and making sure I provide the best possible experience for our students to continue the success that we have had at GI throughout the years. There are many organizational and administrative responsibilities that come with the position, but I believe the most important responsibility is building relationships. I want our students and coaches to know that I am accessible, supportive, and willing to listen. My goal is to help create an environment where our programs are well-organized, competitive, inclusive, and focused on developing young people.

4. What are some of your priorities for Grand Island athletics as you begin this new role?

One of my first priorities is to listen and learn. I have a great resource in Brett Banker that I can go to in any circumstance that arises. Grand Island already has many outstanding coaches, programs, and traditions, and I want to understand what is working well and where we have opportunities to improve. I want to focus on communication, consistency, coach support, student-athlete development, and creating a positive experience for our families. I also want to continue looking for ways to improve facilities, resources, participation opportunities, and the overall visibility of Viking athletics.

5. What do you think makes Grand Island's athletic programs special?

We have dedicated coaches, supportive families, committed teachers, and student-athletes who take tremendous pride in being Vikings. There is a strong sense of community here on Grand Island. Our athletic programs are about much more than what happens on a scoreboard. They bring people together and create experiences and memories that students carry with them long after they graduate. I also think our history and traditions are important. We should be proud of where Viking athletics has been while continuing to look toward where we can go.

6. What do you hope to bring to the role from your previous experiences working with our students and staff?

I think one of the biggest things I bring is perspective. I have worked with students at the elementary and high school levels, coached multiple sports, worked

in community education, served in an administrative role and am also a parent of two Vikings that graduated with pride. Those experiences have taught me that every student and every coach is different. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. I want to use that experience to understand different perspectives, communicate effectively, and find solutions that are in the best interest of our students. I also understand the importance of being part of a team. Athletics is no different from education in that regard; we are most successful when we work together.

7. How do you hope to support and work with our coaches?

My goal is to be a resource for our coaches. Coaches have a tremendous amount of responsibility, and I want them to know that they have someone in the athletic department who is there to support them. That starts with communication and listening, which I have really worked on in my past role as the Dean of Students. I want to build strong relationships with our coaches and understand what they need to be successful. At the end of the day, our coaches have the greatest day-to-day impact on our student-athletes. Supporting our coaches is one of the best ways we can support our students.

8. What role do you think athletics plays in a student's overall educational experience?

I believe athletics is an extension of the classroom. It provides students with opportunities to learn lessons that cannot always be taught in the class. Students learn about teamwork, leadership, accountability, perseverance, communication, handling adversity, and how to work toward a common goal. They learn how to win with humility and how to respond when things don't go their way. Those are life skills and the goal is not simply to produce better athletes; it is to help develop better students, teammates, leaders, and members of our community.

9. Beyond wins and losses, what do you hope our student-athletes take away from participating in athletics?

I want them to learn how to work hard, deal with adversity, be accountable, support their teammates, and understand the importance of being part of something bigger than themselves. Years from now, I hope they remember the relationships they built, the teammates they shared experiences with, and the coaches who made a difference in their lives. The wins and losses are part of the experience, but the lessons and relationships are what last.

10. How do you envision strengthening the connection between our athletic programs, families and the broader Grand Island community?

Communication and involvement are key. We want our families and community members to feel connected to Viking athletics and proud of our student-athletes. I would like to continue finding ways to showcase our teams and recognize the accomplishments of our students and coaches. Grand Island is a community that cares about its students. Our athletic programs should be a reflection of that community pride.

11. Are there any areas of Grand Island athletics that you're particularly excited to build upon or expand?

We have many successful programs, and I want to make sure we are supporting all of our sports and providing opportunities for as many students as possible to participate. Building strong foundations at the modified and JV levels is important to the long-term success of our programs.

12. What do you want student-athletes to know about you and what they can expect from you in this role?

I want our student-athletes to know that I am here for them. I want them to feel comfortable coming to me, whether they have a question, a concern, or an idea. They can expect me to be fair, consistent, and honest. I will challenge them to be their best, but I will also support them when things don't go as planned.

13. What do you hope coaches and families know about your approach to leadership?

I believe in being visible, approachable, and willing to listen. I don't think leadership means having all the answers. Sometimes it means asking the right questions, listening to different perspectives, and working with people to find the best solution. I also believe in consistency and communication. Coaches and families should know what to expect from me, and I want to build trust through my actions.

14. As you look ahead to the 2026-27 school year, what are you most excited about?

I am excited to get the fall season under way and see the athletes compete. My favorite thing is to watch athletes battle on the field, court, pool, ice or course. I will also be excited to see some sports that I have not had the opportunity to see due to my schedule in coaching or watching my own kids. Most of all, I am excited about being part of something that has meant so much to me throughout my career at Grand Island.

15. Finally, what is one thing you'd like the Grand Island community to know about the future of Viking athletics?

I want the Grand Island community to know that the future of Viking athletics is bright. We have outstanding students, coaches, families, and community support, and there is a lot to be proud of. My goal is to continue our strong foundation that already exists while looking for ways to improve. We will celebrate our successes, learn from our challenges, and always keep our student-athletes at the center of what we do.

2026 Athletic Hall of Fame Inductees

Jill Conover-Class of 1999
Mike Feathers-Class of 2004
Mike McDonnell-Class of 1971
Jim Rodriguez-Class of 1976
Rich Samplinski-Class of 1986
Anthony Scott-Class of 1993
Jim Wagner-Class of 2000
Dan Walgate-Class of 1966
Coach Bill Riffel

Grand Island Central School District

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A New Viking Joins the GICSD Family

Grand Island Central School District recently unveiled a new Viking mascot.

The new mascot made its debut during the varsity football home opener, where students, families and community members had the opportunity to see the Viking come to life and join in the excitement of the season.

The new mascot was made possible through the generous support of the Sommer family, VFW Post 9249 and American Legion Post 1346. Their contributions helped bring this new symbol of Viking pride to the Grand Island community.

More than a mascot, the Viking represents the spirit and pride shared across our schools and community. From the classroom to the athletic field and throughout the Grand Island community, the new Viking will be a familiar face at school events, celebrations and activities for years to come.

GICSD extends its sincere thanks to the Sommer family, VFW Post 9249 and American Legion Post 1346 for their generosity and for helping create this exciting new tradition for Grand Island students and families.

