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SPRING 2026

WESTERVILLE CITY SCHOOLS

The Voice of the 'Ville

PREPARING STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPETITIVE AND CHANGING WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE

A Message from the Superintendent

Welcome to the first issue of our newspaper! We are excited to use this medium to bring our community members updates on all aspects of the Westerville City School District.

While sharing information on the earned income tax issue during the fall election, we quickly learned that it was very challenging for community members–especially those without current students–to stay informed about our school district.

A newspaper that is delivered directly to our residents brings important information straight to you, without the need to seek it out. With the loss of local newspapers, it has become challenging for us to share the accomplishments and challenges of our district with all residents. While social media does help us reach some residents, we are excited to reach ALL residents with this publication. We are using bulk mailing, because it is much cheaper than mailing directly to individual addresses, so there is a chance that you may have received this publication even though you live in a neighboring district. Even with those outliers, bulk route mailing is still the most efficient way to mail information to all residents.

In the future, we will be incorporating local advertising into our publication. These ads will help defray some of the costs associated with producing the newspaper, and they offer local businesses an opportunity to reach potential customers. Please see the back of the paper for information.

In this issue, you will find features on many student accomplishments and innovative learning activities throughout our schools, as well as information on facilities projects, a glimpse into our Portrait of a Graduate (the skills we are building for all students who graduate from WCS), and much more.

We are currently planning on sending out quarterly issues, with the next one slated for post-graduation, so we can share pictures of the Class of 2026. That issue will include a wrap-up of the year, as well as updates on summer maintenance projects in our buildings. Our next issue will also feature updates on our strategic plan objectives.

Thank you for your continued support and the opportunity to serve the students of the Westerville City Schools. I am honored to work alongside many dedicated staff members who work hard every day to create a district that is inclusive of all students... a place "Where You Belong."

Have a great last quarter of the school year!

Angie Hamberg, *Superintendent*

Portrait of a Graduate serves as foundation to WCSD's educational approach

The Portrait of a Graduate is more than just a plan; it is a promise to students. The framework ensures that from their first day of school to graduation every student gains the tools they need to learn, thrive and contribute to the world. It is made up of six skills and characteristics that serve as the foundation to the District's educational approach: Adaptability, Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Social-Emotional Wellness.









Information about Earned Income Tax approved in November

Earlier this year, Westerville City Schools residents received a notice from the Ohio Department of Taxation (ODT) regarding a new school district income tax. We would like to provide clarification on the specific type of tax approved by voters this past November.

While the ODT letter notes that the new tax is effective beginning January 1, 2026 at a rate of 0.75%, it is important to understand that this is an Earned Income Tax.

What is Taxed? The tax approved by our community applies only to earned income. This includes:

- Wages and salaries reported by your employer on your W-2
- Net self-employment income for sole proprietors and partnerships

Residents should contact their employers to ensure they have an Ohio IT 4 Form with their school district of residence listed. You can find your school district of residence using the Ohio Tax Finder at thefinder.tax.ohio.gov. The Westerville City School District's ID Number is 2514.

What is NOT Taxed? Because this is an "Earned Income" tax rather than a "Traditional" tax, it does not apply to:

- Retirement income (such as Social Security, pensions, or 401(k) distributions)
- Interest and dividends
- Capital gains
- Unemployment benefits

For further information, visit the ODT's FAQ page at tax.ohio.gov/faq-SD or call 1-800-282-1780

Meet the Westerville City Schools Board of Education

The 2026 Westerville City Schools Board of Education members meet once a month during the calendar year.



(back row left to right: Louise Valentine, Vice President Jennifer Aultman)
(front row left to right: Tatjana Brown, President Kristy Meyer, Anisa Liban)

Kristy Meyer was first elected to the Board in 2022. Kristy is a non-profit leader with over 20 years advocating for a cleaner, safer, more just environment. She has held leadership roles at the Ohio Environmental Council, Freshwater Future, and Smart Columbus before launching Upriver Consulting where she helps environmentally-driven organizations clarify, create, and execute strategic campaigns so their people-focused policies win. Kristy strongly supports public education and believes all children deserve access to quality learning. She values public schools for fostering lifelong learning, critical thinking, and civic responsibility, while also strengthening local economies, promoting social mobility, and building more cohesive, engaged communities.

Jennifer Aultman was first elected to the Board in 2020. Jennifer was born in Westerville, graduated from Westerville North High School, and moved back to the area to raise her three kids. She co-founded the Westerville Partners for Education to build creative relationships and programs (including Starry Night and Book Bonanza!) that support learning and well-being for our students. She served on the Elementary Programming Administrative Committee, the Elementary Attendance Boundary Realignment Committee, as a Westerville Parent Council representative and is a member of several parent-teacher organizations.

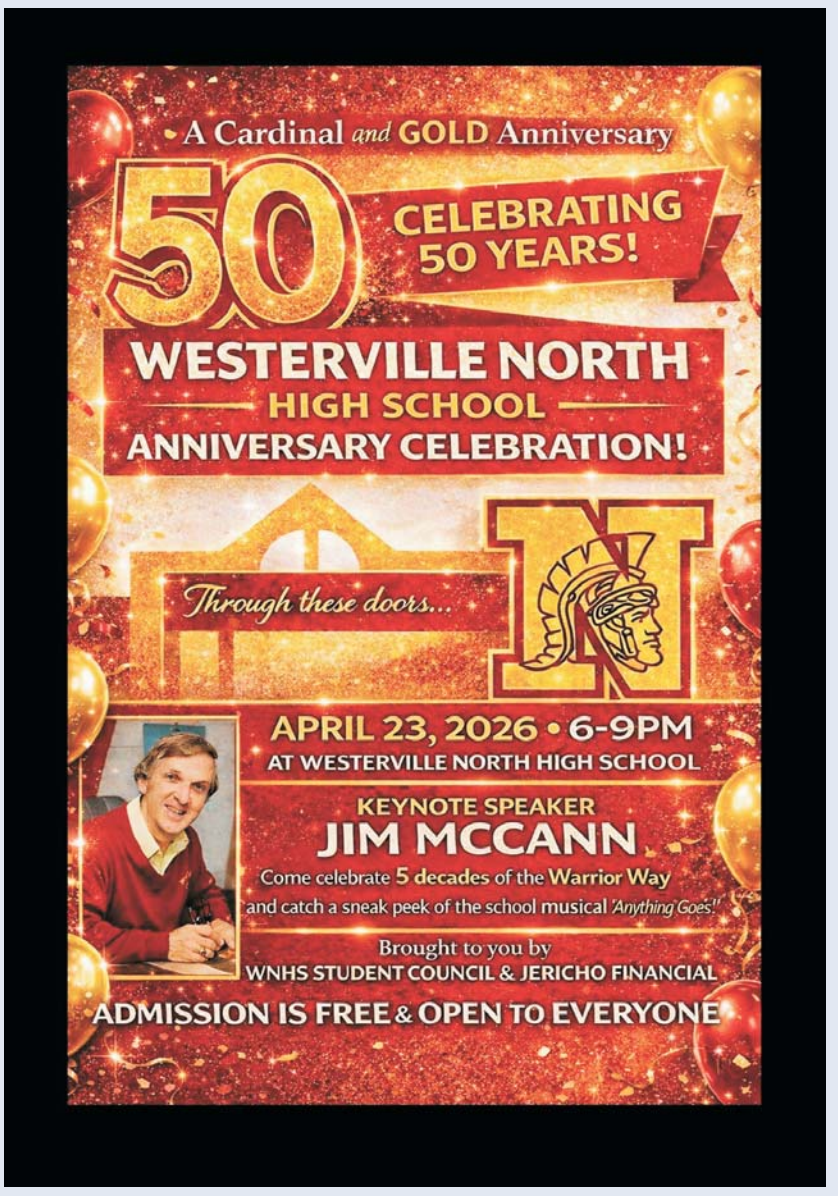
Tatjana Brown was first elected to the Board in 2026. Tatjana has been a Westerville resident for 20 years, where she lives with her husband and their three children. She and her husband opened Meza Wine Shop in the heart of Uptown Westerville in 2008. In 2023, recognizing the need for more consistent and sustainable fundraising opportunities, particularly for local PTO/PTA organizations and extracurricular groups within the district. Tatjana developed an infrastructure to support large-scale fundraising efforts. Through this work, she has helped raise more than $30,000 annually for local schools and community organizations.

Anisa Liban was first elected to the Board in 2026 after first being appointed to the board in 2024. She is a nonprofit leader and public policy professional with experience spanning local and state government, nonprofit consulting, and community advocacy. Throughout her career, Anisa has worked to strengthen organizations, expand access to community resources, and advance initiatives that support families, with a particular focus on immigrant and refugee communities across Ohio. Her work focuses on building partnerships across government, nonprofit, and community sectors to help organizations navigate systems and deliver meaningful impact. In recognition of her leadership and community service, Anisa was named a 2025 Woman on the Rise by the YWCA Columbus. She lives in Westerville with her husband and son.

Louise Valentine was first elected to the Board in 2024. Louise has lived in Genoa Township for more than 10 years with her husband and twin boys, who attend Westerville City Schools. In 2017, Louise became involved in civics and advocacy, ultimately running twice for state legislative seats on platforms advocating pro-public education policies and initiatives, including full and fair state funding for public schools. In 2018, she joined LEAD Ohio as the Deputy Director, designing and facilitating training programs and educational support for emerging progressive leaders around the state. Louise was promoted to Executive Director of LEAD Ohio in January of 2023 and now manages a team of five full-time associates.



Westerville North High School's 50th anniversary is a celebration of community.



The festivities run 6-9 p.m. Thursday, April 23, with retired principal Jim McCann delivering the keynote. The evening also features student performances, guest speakers and remarks from Principal Kurt Yancey and Athletic Director Wes Elifritz. Social studies teacher and event organizer Ben Hartnell will spotlight the school's history since opening in 1975.

Westerville High Schools Mark Black History Month with Powerful Student-Led Performances

Students across Westerville City Schools took center stage in February, presenting three original Black History Month programs that explored identity, heritage and the journey toward self-discovery. Held at Westerville Central High School, Westerville North High School and Westerville South High School, the student-directed productions combined storytelling, music and dance to reflect experiences that resonate deeply within their school communities.

Each program approached the theme of identity from a unique perspective, while sharing a common message: understanding your roots and defining who you are.



Westerville Central: Preparing for the Next Chapter

At Westerville Central High School, student directors focused their program on the transition from high school to life beyond graduation, specifically highlighting the experience of attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The show followed the journeys of five individuals, reflecting both the uncertainty and excitement that many students face as they prepare for adulthood.

Senior Mel-Victoria Bila, who wrote the program, said the theme was chosen to reflect a pivotal time in students' lives.

"We chose this topic because after high school, it's hard to find where your next spot is going to be," Bila said. "When you are a teen and moving onto adult life, you face hardships and a world of new opportunities."

The Feb. 18 performance featured a range of artistic expression, including spoken word, singing, acting and multiple styles of dance, showcasing both the creative talents and personal perspectives of Westerville Central students.



Westerville North: Celebrating Culture and Connection

At Westerville North High School, this year's program, titled "Roots and Rhythms," explored cultural identity and the shared experiences that unite the Black community. The story centered on a family reunion, where a grandfather recounted the history of a treasured heirloom. When the item went missing, the family's search led them to a cultural center, revealing deeper connections to their heritage.

Student director Isaac Cofie said the show was designed to reflect the sense of belonging that culture can provide.

"We wanted to do something that resembles home and how different cultures can feel like home for different people," Cofie said.

The Feb. 12 program featured singing, acting and dance performances, including a quartet performance of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" that set the tone for the evening.



Westerville South: Balancing Dreams and Identity

At Westerville South High School, the program "Price of Dreams" examined identity through the experiences of two seniors navigating their final year of high school. As the characters pursued different paths, they were challenged to balance their personal aspirations with their relationships and sense of self.

Senior Rodav Kalengayi, who helped direct the acting performances, said the story reflected a struggle many students understand.

"It's about that internal conflict with what people see you as versus what you want to be," Kalengayi said.

The Feb. 26 performance included scripted scenes, vocal performances, spoken word and a variety of dance styles, highlighting the emotional depth and artistic talent of Westerville South students.

Across all three high schools, students played a central role in writing, directing and performing in the programs, using the stage as a platform to share personal stories and cultural experiences.

Together, the performances demonstrated not only artistic excellence, but also the power of student voice. Through music, storytelling and movement, Westerville students honored Black history while reflecting on their own journeys – past, present and future.



WCSD Board of Education recognizes Westerville Parent Council 2026 and Westerville Education Foundation

Parent groups and booster organizations spent 65,510 hours supporting Westerville City Schools students in and out of the classroom last year. Those hours would translate to $949,895 if paid by the District's lowest hourly contracted hours, Westerville Parent Council President Ryan Hilperts said during a presentation at Monday's Board of Education meeting. Those hours are an equivalent of 44 WCSD employees, she added.

"I'm excited to recognize the unbelievable ingenuity, the dedication and the time that our organizations give to our schools," Hilperts said. "I continue to be overwhelmed by the ways our caregivers show up for our children and our schools."

Superintendent Angie Hamberg and board members recognized Westerville Parent Council and its member groups along with Emma Nelson from the Westerville Foundation during February's meeting.

Westerville Parent Council is a non-profit organization that unifies 35 groups, including PTAs, PTOs, PTSAs, booster and community organizations. They provide an avenue for collaboration, support and the sharing of district-wide information to help ensure that families are engaged and connected in the District.

In addition to volunteer hours, the Westerville Parent Council provided $56,752 in scholarships to WCSD seniors and raised about $1.1 million in monetary donations during the 2024-25 school year.

The Westerville Education Foundation also provided $26,251 in support of innovative projects during their fall 2025 grant cycle.



Top left: Cole Jones – Blendon MS, Lydia Carter – Westerville North HS
Bottom left: Olivia Yanni – Blendon MS, Christian Harkins – Westerville Central HS
Top right: Layla Saburi – Walnut Springs MS, Nehemiah Thomas – Westerville South HS
Bottom Right: Cameron Childress – Genoa MS, Ethan Burns – Westerville Central HS, Jackson Childress – Genoa MS

"We Are The 'Ville" initiative

Through surveys, focus group meetings and informal conversations, our student athletes, coaches, administrators, athletic directors and booster groups have talked about the need for positive role models in the stands so students and the community can have a positive experience during an athletic contest. Students shared the need to be in an environment where they feel supported, respected and are provided space to grow and enjoy the game.

Sportsmanship clearly matters to our students, staff and community. In response, the District launched a sportsmanship awareness campaign during the 2024-25 school year. "We are the Ville" is a reminder to students that no matter which school they attend, it's still one Westerville. The goal of "We are the Ville" is to reinforce camaraderie and good sportsmanship.

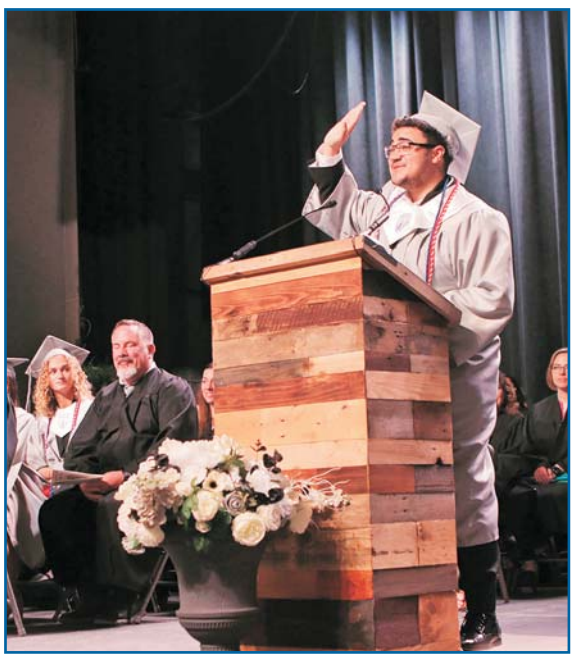
"We are the Ville" award, will be given to an athlete each season (fall, winter, spring) and recognized by the District and Board of Education for exhibiting the best type of sportsmanship and conduct combined with a high standard of playing ability. Names of the recipients will be engraved on the award, which will be kept at the student's home school.

Westerville City Schools 2026 Graduation Information

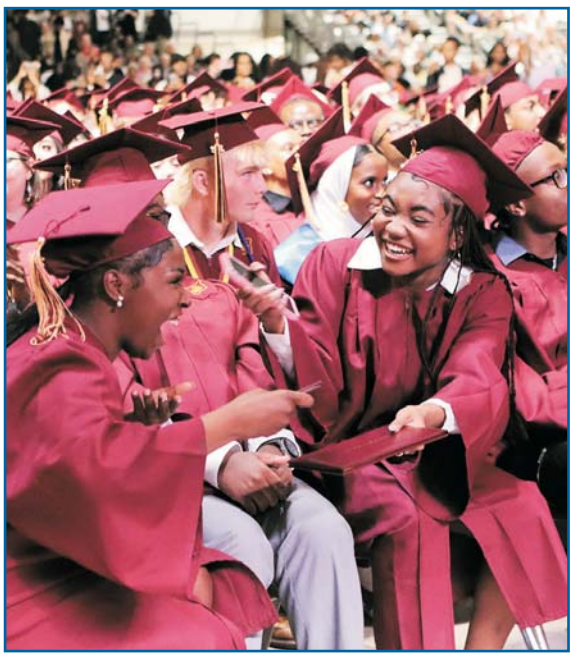
OUR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WILL BE HONORED

SATURDAY, MAY 23, 2026

Ohio State Fairgrounds Celeste Center, 717 E 17th Avenue, Columbus, Ohio.





SCHEDULE

Doors will open one hour before the ceremony begins. Graduation attendees will enter the Celeste Center at the main entrances located on the West side of the building.

Ceremonies begin:

- WESTERVILLE NORTH HIGH SCHOOL - 10:00 a.m.
- WESTERVILLE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL - 2:00 p.m.
- WESTERVILLE SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL - 6:00 p.m.

NO balloons, backpacks or noise makers will be permitted inside the Celeste Center. The use of air horns, other noise-making devices and beach balls is distracting and strictly prohibited. In consideration of your graduates and neighbors, please turn off all cell phones, watches, or other electronic devices.

During and After Commencement

- ONLY GRADUATES are permitted in the staging area located behind the curtains.
- Students and families are expected to act in a manner that reflects the dignity of the ceremony. As each name is called, we ask the audience to please hold all applause until every student of the graduating class has been recognized.
- At the conclusion of the ceremony, graduates will participate in the recessional where they will need to pick up their individual diplomas.
- All guests need to remain seated until the conclusion of the recessional.
- Guests will need to exit the Celeste Center and meet their graduates in the parking lot.
- Following the ceremony, graduates and guests will not be permitted back into the building. Please take all your belongings with you.

PARKING

$7.00 per vehicle on the day of graduation. Credit card or cash. *Exact change is preferred, but not required.*

PROGRAMS

Printed programs will be distributed in every graduate's rehearsal packet. We will not be distributing programs the day of the event. If you would like to follow along with a printed copy, please bring your program with you to the ceremony. Otherwise, we will have QR codes available that you may scan for digital/mobile viewing during the event.

LIVE-STREAM

The graduation ceremony will also be live-streamed and that link will be available on the Westerville City Schools website.

Beyond the Bell

WCSD facilities offer area groups opportunities to connect, perform, play

Once the school day is over and students and staff are gone for the day, schools across the District take on a new life.

On Monday nights, the band room at Westerville Central High School serves as a weekly practice space for the more than 80 local musicians who make up the Westerville Community Bands.



Thursday nights at Wilder Elementary's gym is the latest gathering spot for the Westerville Men's Basketball group, which has played pick-up games at a WCSD gym for about 30 years.

Meanwhile, since 2019, Triumphant Church has held its Sunday morning services in the media center at Westerville North High School.

On weeknights, gyms and classrooms across multiple elementary schools come alive with community activities, from youth sports leagues to Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts meetings, and Westerville Special Olympics practices. Weekends are especially busy at the high schools, where dance groups take the stage for performances and youth sports leagues compete in tournaments.

As a service to the community, the District and Board of Education have long welcomed local groups and organizations to use school spaces – as long as their events and gatherings don't conflict with the building's instructional- or school-related activities.

"Our schools are more than learning spaces," said Superintendent Angie Hamberg. "They are hubs that support the needs of our community, whether it's bringing groups together or increasing access to sports and wellness programs for all ages."

Last year, the District's 23 schools accommodated more than 2,300 requests – a quarter of which were at the high schools. (Mark Twain Elementary received the most community use last year with almost 350 facility requests.)

The District charges a fee to rent school spaces to cover personnel costs and utilities; Fees for use by community groups are not intended to generate revenue for the District. PTAs/PTOs, school booster groups and other organizations whose activities are tied to WCSD students and whose benefits go to charity community projects or the District do not have to pay a fee.



Among the more than 300 groups that requested to rent space last year, more than half were local community organizations and businesses in need of flexible, multi-use facilities.

"Being able to find that multi-purpose space to be able to accommodate what we do, it's difficult to find in this area," said Rev. Vaughn Bell, who is the founding pastor of Triumphant Church.

The church has held its Sunday worship services at WNHS' media center since 2019. By renting space at the high school, Bell was able to keep the church in the community after its previous meeting space, a conference center at Commerce Park, was sold. It has helped build relationships with school leaders and staff where the church members have taken on volunteer projects to beautify the school. It has also fostered partnerships with other churches to support the District. For example, Triumphant Church partnered with St. Matthews recently to adopt a classroom at Blendon Middle School and provide supplies for the teacher and students.

"Since it's keeping us in the community, it's helped us to build relationships beyond the four walls of the church," said Bell, a former WCSD Board of Education member.

This year, the church is celebrating its 20th anniversary – a milestone that is also tied to the District. Bell first opened the church in 2005 at WNHS' auditorium.

For the Westerville Community Bands, practicing in District spaces has also led to connections that ultimately benefit students and the community.

The Community Bands sponsors annual scholarships for WCSD music students, holds a Central Ohio concerto competition for high school students, organizes Honor Bands at the middle school and high school and brings students across the District to perform with some of Ohio's most outstanding conductors. The band also supports jazz education with annual guest artist concerts and clinics.

"We are thankful for the partnership with Westerville Schools and look forward to many more exciting programs and opportunities for our community," Westerville Community Bands Assistant Director Phil Louden said. These bands have practiced in District spaces for more than 30 years.

Among the frequent users of the Districtís spaces: youth sports leagues. Throughout the year, more than a dozen groups such as i9 Sports, Westerville Youth Baseball and Softball League, Warhawks Youth Basketball Association, Westerville North C-League Basketball, and the Wildcat Youth Basketball Association operate practices and games on the District's courts and outdoor fields.



"Over the years, thousands of our kids have had opportunities to play because the fields and courts within the District have been available to us," said Steve Cox, who owns the i9 Sports franchise serving North Columbus Metro, Cincinnati/East & Northeast, & Northern Kentucky.

"Our kids love the big game experience of playing in Westerville Central stadium, while our families love the convenience of playing at schools within the District."

Brent Isler, who leads the Warhawks Youth Basketball Association, is grateful to be able to use school facilities for their youth teams to practice.

"Being able to utilize Westerville Schools gyms is vital for us to be able to run a youth basketball program," he said. "We are building this program to be more than just playing basketball on the court but giving back to the community and developing character off the court."

Schools have served as a constant for groups like the Westerville Men's Basketball league, which has gathered at various elementary gyms for pick-up basketball games for more than 30 years. As players have come and gone throughout the years, it has been a comfort that the location has relatively remained the same.

"We love that the Westerville City Schools make their facilities available for community groups such as ours as a place to gather and stay connected," said Hal Forster, who leads the group of recreational basketball players. Currently, they meet up every Thursday evening at Wilder Elementary.

Many of the players, including Forster, have ties to the District. His three daughters all attended Pointview Elementary, Blendon Middle School and graduated from Westerville South High School.

"These types of activities foster goodwill towards the schools even after our children have graduated," Forster said. "It is another reason why Westerville is a great place to live."

WCSD facility upgrades, maintenance projects enhance safety and learning spaces

Schools across the District opened the 2025-2026 school year with a variety of facility updates – from new kitchens to outdoor track improvements – all aimed at creating safer, more supportive spaces for students and staff.

This spring, community members will also have an opportunity to see some of these improvements firsthand. With voting taking place in several district schools, many voters will be visiting these spaces for the first time since the updates were completed.

One of the biggest projects was at Mark Twain and Robert Frost elementaries, where new floor-to-ceiling walls now separate the gym from classroom areas – a change that families had asked for to make the schools more secure. The project also included updating restrooms to better serve students with physical needs.

Other updates funded by permanent improvement funds include new roofs at all three high schools; heating and cooling upgrades at Cherrington, Walnut Springs and Genoa; and fresh asphalt at several buildings. New outdoor tracks at Genoa and Walnut Springs were also put in.

Director of Facilities Doug Swartz said these projects are focused on reducing long-term maintenance and repair costs while improving energy efficiency to lower utility bills. They also align with the maintenance and repair program for the District's facilities.

Last summer also marked the final phase of Facilities Master Plan projects voters approved in 2019. That work included updates at Hawthorne and Whittier elementaries, where kitchens now feature new flooring and lighting to better serve students.

"The kitchen projects are all about maximizing efficiency so every school can deliver the same level of food service to students," Swartz said.

Each kitchen includes new equipment – steamer, oven, sinks – that were paid for by the Food Services Department. They also funded a replacement walk-in cooler and freezer for Genoa.

At Hawthorne, part of the cafeteria and stage has also been converted into small group spaces – a direct result of the increasing specialized learning needs of students.

"These projects are about making sure our schools are safe, welcoming places where students and staff can thrive," Swartz said.



Robert Frost



Mark Twain



Hanby



Minerva France Elementary earns Outstanding Project Award

Minerva France Elementary has been recognized for its innovative design by *Design* magazine's Educational Facilities Design Awards Showcase.

The school, which opened in the fall of 2022, was recognized as an outstanding project and featured many design attributes "worthy of emulation."

The design of Minerva France Elementary pays tribute to the former Minerva Park Amusement Park. The curved portion of the building's exterior was inspired by the amusement park's Scenic Railway roller-coaster, while its turrets reflect architectural details of a building once on the amusement park's grounds. The project was designed by TRIAD Architects.

Learning By Design is a national publication that recognizes pre-K to 12 and college/university projects. It is produced in partnership with the American Institute of Architects' Committee on Architecture for Education; the Association for Learning Environments; SCUP, the Society for College and University Planning; and the Association of University Interior Designers.

Westerville South recognized for facility design in national trade publication



The first phase of Westerville South High School's renovation/addition project was recognized by *American School & University* magazine for its innovative design.

The issue is dedicated to an Educational Interiors Showcase, which casts a spotlight on school facility design and how they enhance learning and promote student success.

The first phase of the Westerville South project, designed by TRIAD Architects, was recognized as an Outstanding Design in classroom spaces. The project, which was completed in December 2020, included converting the auxiliary gym into classrooms and project-based learning spaces.

American School & University is a national publication that informs education professionals on the latest trends, technologies and strategies that are driving the education facilities and business market. The publication also honors Education Design Excellence through industry-leading design competitions: Architectural Portfolio and Education Interiors Showcase.

WCSD avoids more than $35 million in energy expenses since 2007 amid rising energy costs

Despite expanding its footprint by over 240,000 square feet, Westerville City Schools is spending less on utilities today than it did in 2007. A comprehensive energy management program has allowed the district to avoid more than $35 million in expenses over the last 17 years.



In the 2024-25 school year, the District's electricity, water, and gas costs totaled $3.5 million – down from $3.9 million in 2006-07. This reduction comes despite the addition of the Early Learning Center, two new schools and major renovations at three schools including Westerville South High School.

The District's success relies on a "load shedding" strategy during peak demand. On extreme temperature days, staff adjust HVAC set points to prevent straining the power grid and incurring surcharges. In some summer instances, systems are powered down entirely to relieve grid pressure.

Efficiency upgrades have further slashed overhead:

- LED Transition: Major lighting overhauls at various parking lots and exterior buildings have reduced both energy use and maintenance. Westerville North High School's auditorium recently switched to LED lighting two years ago, which helps conserve energy and doesn't require as much maintenance.
- Smart Sensors: Parking lot lights now utilize motion and photo-eye sensors rather than fixed timers, further reducing energy consumption.
- Incentives: Since 2012, the District has received $730,000 in rebates – about $556,000 from Enel X for its heating and air conditioning management plan and nearly $175,000 from the City of Westerville and American Electric Power for the LED lighting upgrades.

District leaders credit a "team effort" for the sustained savings. Through initiatives like the "Holiday Shutdown," staff are encouraged to unplug devices and close blinds during winter break – one of the district's largest savings windows.

The District has received national recognition for their efforts, earning a PACEsetter award in 2009 for energy efficiency and the Chairman's Sustainability Award from Cenergistic in 2013. The District partnered with Cenergistic to implement the company's energy management program.

In-house expertise saves WCSD thousands in maintenance

Westerville City Schools is leveraging a rare asset to maintain its 116-bus fleet: a fully certified in-house mechanical team. By performing its own repairs, the District avoids an estimated $15,000 in annual maintenance fees – a figure that excludes the hidden costs of fuel and downtime associated with outside vendors.



The District's mechanics are specialized in BlueBird buses and Roush engines, allowing WCSD to claim reimbursements directly from the manufacturers for warranty work. This setup eliminates the weeks-long delays common with third-party shops.

"The turnaround time to send vehicles to be serviced is inefficient," said Fleet and Logistics Manager Shawn Dawson. "Vendors may have a bus for a month; we can often turn it around overnight."

Technology also plays a critical role. Using GPS-linked diagnostic software, mechanics can troubleshoot '"check engine" lights in real-time while a bus is mid-route. This allows for an instant decision: continue the run or dispatch a replacement to prevent engine damage.

For the past 15 years, WCSD mechanics have worked on the District's fleet. About 50 buses get serviced each year, from replacing a broken bolt or fixing a leak. Now, WCSD mechanics have been so well-known for their work that they've supported neighboring school districts and the City of Westerville with their buses and vehicles.

Through this blend of specialized training and "smart" technology, the Transportation Department ensures that maintenance issues don't impact the families they serve.

Clean energy, clear savings: The future of WCSD school buses



Westerville City Schools is one step closer to a fully propane-powered fleet following the addition of 12 new buses this year. Replacing aging diesel units as part of a 14-year refresh cycle, the move brings the district's propane-operated fleet to nearly 75%.

The transition has proven as fiscally sound as it is environmentally conscious. Since 2018, the District has secured more than $900,000 in state and federal grants for vehicle purchases, supplemented by $40,000 in fuel rebates.

Propane can cost up to 50% less than diesel, making it less expensive to operate. And since propane burns more cleanly than diesel, it can help drive down maintenance costs, too.

The District has its own propane system in the bus garage to bring a fueling system in-house. But with so many propane buses now in the fleet, Shawn Dawson, the District's Fleet and Logistics Manager, worked with BrightStar Propane & Fuels to build an off-site fueling system for drivers whose routes are in the northern part of the District. BrightStar spent $100,000 to update their system to support fueling WCSD buses this summer – at no cost to the District.

WCSD's logistics strategy continues to garner national attention. In 2020, the district ranked No. 4 in the NAFA Fleet Management Association's Green Garage Contest, making it the only school district in the nation to crack the top 10. The district also maintains a "Top 40 Green Fleets" designation for its ongoing contribution to environmental sustainability.

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From prompts to projects: AI takes shape in Westerville classrooms

When seventh-grader Carmelo Wyatt first asked Google Gemini to build an online wrestling game, the code appeared instantly – but the player wouldn't move.

"Make the keys," he wrote in the prompt.

Gemini assigned controls for jumping, pinning and dodging. Wyatt tested it again. Better – but now he wanted the game to play against him.

So he kept going.

Over two days, Wyatt refined prompts, tested code, adjusted features and learned through trial and error. By the end, he had built a playable wrestling game for Jason Siwekís engineering class at Minerva Park Middle School. It was an eye-opening experience for Wyatt, who hadn't used AI for a class assignment before.

"You have to be more specific, give more details," he said. "You've got to make a lot more changes to get what you want."

As AI shifts from novelty to classroom tool, educators have been carefully exploring how to use it responsibly.



According to a 2025 College Board study, AI use among high school students continues to climb, increasing from 79% to 84% between January and May. About half of students report using AI to brainstorm ideas, revise writing or conduct research. ChatGPT remains the most-used platform, with 69% of students saying they've used it for schoolwork.

In January, Westerville City Schools narrowed student AI access to Google Gemini and NotebookLM, citing stronger privacy protections and built-in safety tools.

At Westerville North High School, social studies teacher Dr. Ben Hartnell began experimenting with AI last year by allowing students to use it for visual elements tied to projects.

This year, he expanded its use, with clear guardrails.

Students using the tool must submit their original prompts and a log of the edits required to fix AI errors. They're also responsible for verifying accuracy.

To prove the point, Hartnell shows students an AI-generated poster of the Battle of Bunker Hill. At a glance, it looks authentic; a closer look reveals a soldier holding a WWI-era rifle and an anachronistic flag.

"It's bigger than the wrong firearm or flag being shown. It's the fact that students – and adults – are quick to accept what's being depicted as fact. I'm teaching my students about taking ownership of their journey to get from Point A to



Point B. This has flipped the script and reduced their blind trust in what AI kicks back to them. When students know how to establish parameters with their AI inquiries and requests, it puts the onus back on them. They are now the ones responsible for teaching AI how to 'get it right' instead of the other way around."

One student noted it took seven rounds of edits to fix a British soldier's uniform: "AI isn't as smart as everybody thinks it is. You have to help it a lot."

At Minerva Park, teacher Jason Siwek uses "vibe coding" – describing desired outcomes in plain language – to teach students the art of the prompt.

"Language acquisition is key," Siwek said. "You can't just say, 'Make it better.' What does 'better' mean?"

Wyatt learned this when he asked the AI to make his game "more better," only to see blood splatter appear during wrestling moves. He quickly pivoted, prompting the AI to "make it a kid game" with sparkles and bright colors.

Instruction and Technology Specialist Drew Farrell says the district-wide response has been measured. Through professional development and Schoology courses, staff are learning to align AI use with Portrait of a Graduate competencies like critical thinking and problem-solving.

For Hartnell's students, the tool has become an assistant for accessibility – generating summaries and flashcards from transcripts – rather than a ghostwriter.

"They are starting to see big time flaws in it and that's the point – I don't want them to assume the answer it gives them is perfect," he said. "It's not. Questioning AI's answers by confirming or refuting it with additional sources gives them a crucial starting point. Students feel empowered about controlling AI rather than AI controlling them."

JA BizTown Brings Economics and Citizenship to Life for Westerville Students

All elementary fifth grade students in Westerville City Schools participate in the Junior Achievement BizTown program, a hands-on experience that brings classroom learning to life. The JA BizTown program provides students with a realistic opportunity to see how basic economic concepts are applied in the real world. By participating in JA BizTown, students experience the responsibilities and opportunities of citizenship within a free enterprise system while building critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership skills.

Designed for students in grades 4-6, JA BizTown is presented in three progressive stages:

1. Classroom Preparation: Students complete a four-week economics curriculum in which they explore financial literacy, choose jobs, develop business plans, and learn about the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

2. JA BizTown Simulation Day: Students travel to the JA BizTown facility, where they take on the roles of citizens, business owners, employees, and consumers during a full-day simulation. With support from trained teachers and community volunteers, students operate businesses such as retail stores, manufacturing shops, media outlets, a utility service, a restaurant, a bank, and City Hall. Each business is equipped with modern tools and supplies, allowing students to experience firsthand what it takes to run a business, earn a paycheck, and manage their money.

3. Reflection and Extension: After the simulation, students return to the classroom to complete follow-up activities that reinforce what they learned and help them connect their experience to real-world economic concepts and future career pathways.

Through this immersive program, Westerville fifth graders gain valuable insight into how communities function and develop skills that will support their success as future citizens, employees, and leaders.



JA Junior Achievement BizTown



WCSD High School students tackle global issues with Global Scholars Diploma projects

As part of the capstone component in the Global Scholars Diploma program, students across the District's three high schools are tackling a global issue by addressing it at a local level.

This year, theyíve hosted mental health workshops for their peers, launched a club that brings students of all abilities together and raised awareness about clothing overconsumption.

Students will present their Take Action projects during a showcase at Otterbein University in April. Here are some of the projects students have launched this year:

MAKING BEST BUDDIES AT WNHS

Westerville North High School senior **Kacee Bohan** has been passionate about connecting with students of all abilities thanks to her experiences volunteering with the Special Olympics and a middle school special education class.



As part of her Take Action Project, she founded a Best Buddies chapter at WNHS to provide her peers an opportunity to build friendships with students they may not typically encounter in class.

Best Buddies is an international organization dedicated to ending the social, physical and economic isolation of the 200 million people worldwide with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Among their programs: one-to-one friendships, which has been one of Bohan's goals since starting a chapter at WNHS.

She has worked with intervention specialist **Sara Call** to build the club, which has a president, vice president and a buddy director – one of Call's students who helps plan and run events. So far, they have hosted card parties and board game events, where they try to pair students into one-to-one matches. The group recently hosted a Valentine's Day party during lunch where members decorated cookies and made valentines. About 40 students attended the event.

Bohan hopes the club will continue long after she graduates from WNHS.

"Continuing to educate people and promote connections is super important to me," she said.

CREATING SPACE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Westerville South High School senior **Dalia Arja** hosted a mental health workshop for Muslim teen girls like herself, giving them space to dive into social-emotional wellness and connect with each other.

She partnered with Saabiqaat, a local women's empowerment group founded by a WSHS 2017 alum, for the workshop. Saabiqaat fosters connection among Muslim women through discussions, challenges, events, lectures, workshops and walks.

"I've seen how often mental health struggles are misunderstood or minimized in our community," Arja said. "My goal was to create a safe, faith-centered space where young Muslims girls could openly engage in meaningful conversations about emotional well-being and leave feeling more informed and empowered."

She said partnering with Saabiqaat and working with its founder, Khadija, was especially meaningful. During her time at WSHS, the school did not have a Muslim Student Association – a group Arja is thankful to be a part of now.

"Being able to bring this conversation back to the community alongside someone who once walked the same halls as us was truly a full circle moment," she said.



TACKLING CLOTHING OVERCONSUMPTION

Westerville North High School junior **Quinn Kaminsky** dedicated her Take Action Project to raising awareness about clothing overconsumption – and how buying more, wearing items less has created a host of environmental waste concerns.

From the Interact Club to Advanced Placement Ecology classes, she presented the issue to her peers and how it can be reduced. She collected more than 600 articles of clothing through a drive she organized at school and donated everything to Neighborhood Bridges, which provides resources to students and families in the District.

Kaminsky drew inspiration for her project from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – 17 goals that offer a roadmap for ending poverty, protecting the planet and tackling inequalities in the world. She honed in on Goal No. 12, which focuses on responsible consumption and production.

"I decided to tackle this issue for my project after seeing how much overconsumption is normalized on social media and how much of an outreach it has to our youth," she said.

Kaminsky is not done yet. She plans to organize another clothing drive next year through the National Honor Society to continue to make an impact.

SUPPORTING PEERS

As an athlete, Westerville Central High School junior **Austyn Sharp** knows all too well the benefits of sports, how it fosters community and instills lessons of discipline and consistency. Through her Take Action project, she hopes to tackle financial barriers and increase access to sports for all students.

She launched Warhawk Equipped, which provides sporting equipment and hygiene products to students in need. She kicked off the initiative earlier this month, collecting monetary donations as well as hygiene items and new or gently-used sporting equipment.

Sharp partnered with the athletic department as well as student organizers at the school's Care Closet, which provides donated clothing and supplies for students. She set up an anonymous way for students to apply for resources to remove the possibility of social pressure or judgement.



Sharp hopes that what started as a Global Scholars project will have a lasting impact on her school community after she graduates.

"I founded this organization to turn the lessons of the playing field – discipline, fitness and mutual trust – into a foundation for student success," she said. "I want my peers to benefit from the things Westerville gave me."

PRONOUNCIATION MATTERS

Westerville North High School senior **Anna Leslein** wants to bolster connection and confidence among her peers by taking on an issue personal to her: pronouncing names correctly.

Leslein, who has heard multiple different mispronunciations of her last name, has focused her Take Action Project on creating a database that includes the names of freshmen, their phonetic spellings and an audible pronunciation.

"It's important that everyone has their name pronounced correctly as it's one of the small things that just makes someone's day so much better," she said. "It's also important to take into account that a decent portion of these names have some form of significance culturally for the individual which makes it just that more important to pronounce correctly."

As part of the project, she created a form where students can record themselves pronouncing their names and spelling them phonetically. She worked with counselors to distribute the forms to freshmen and linked the information to a database that teachers can search.

She hopes to connect with District leaders about expanding the project beyond WNHS, including creating a function where parents can provide pronunciations of their child's name into PowerSchool.

WCSD students start path to automotive careers with pre-apprenticeship program

Westerville Central High School graduate Jeilen Thompson has always been fascinated with cars. It was an interest his father shared with him as a child and Thompson wanted to continue learning about them, how they operate and how to troubleshoot problems.

Back in high school, Thompson splits his day between WCHS and Performance Columbus' service center, diving into all facets of automotive maintenance and repair and getting hands-on training on everything from engine work to vehicle diagnostics. He was among the first cohort of Westerville high school students participating in a year-long pre-apprenticeship program designed to prepare teens for careers in the automotive industry.

"I'm loving the challenge," Thompson said. "I'm getting challenged with some cars that have different wiring systems and challenging myself to learn how this part works for this specific car and compare that to how that part works differently for another car. I'm getting to learn all the puzzles and pieces."

Performance Columbus, an automotive dealership group with franchises across the state, launched their pre-apprenticeship program to partner with area school districts and help build the future workforce of automotive technicians – their biggest level of demand, said Jeff Anthony, director of the pre-apprenticeship program.

Two master technician trainers are dedicated to pre-apprenticeship students, discussing theory in the classroom and applying what they learned to hands-on experiences in the auto shop. Lessons are geared toward safety – for themselves and the owners of the vehicles they are servicing.

"I tell them, 'Being a technician, we have people's lives in our hands every day. Take this seriously,'" said Andy Callahan, a master technician trainer leading the pre-apprenticeship classes.

As an example, he cited a video circulating on social media where a tire from a truck fell off and struck the vehicle behind it – the result of a tire that likely was not tightened properly.

"That's what I'm trying to teach them," he said. "It's fun to go out and do the job but we take it seriously as technicians. You can't do it any other way."

At the end of the program, students can move onto Performance Columbus' paid apprenticeship program.

Three months into the program, Thompson knew he wanted to continue pursuing a path in the automotive industry.

"I definitely want to take this experience and maybe open up my own shop in the future, or I'd love to work for this place," he said. "They have a lot of good people here, especially because I'm learning from all of them. I"m comfortable with this place."







Students earn Lean Six Sigma Green Belt certifications through DACC programs

Eleven Westerville City Schools high school students have earned Lean Six Sigma Green Belt certifications through their career programs at the Delaware Area Career Center (DACC). The certification, which demonstrates students' ability to apply data-driven problem-solving skills and process improvement strategies, is considered highly valued in today's workforce.

Three DACC programs (Engineering - Robotics, Automation and Design; Automotive Technology; and Welding) applied the training to their projects. The students who earned the certification, by category, include:

ENGINEERING - ROBOTICS, AUTOMATION AND DESIGN

- **Nathanael Beddoes, WSHS**
- **Thaddeus Burton II, WCHS**
- **Christopher Litteral, WNHS**
- **Christopher Taylor, WNHS**

AUTOMOTIVE TECHNOLOGY

- **Leo Harden, WSHS**
- **Reid Linak, WNHS**
- **Nathan Moore, WNHS**
- **Vance Smith, WSHS**
- **Andrew Swallow, WCHS**
- **Kian Wojniak, WSHS**

WELDING

- **Zane Thomas, WSHS**



SERVICE TO YOUTH AWARD WINNERS

The Sunrise Rotary Club of Westerville recognizes a staff member each month for going above and beyond to serve students.

The following staff members received awards this year:



Sept. 2025 - Lisa Wright
AN AIDE AT EMERSON ELEMENTARY



Sept. 2025 - Karen Yingling
A MEDIA SPECIALIST AT BLENDON MIDDLE SCHOOL



Oct. 2025- Jen Harris
A DISTRICT SCHOOL COUNSELOR



Nov. 2025 - Nick McIlwain
DIRECTOR OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION & ASSESSMENT AT THE ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT CENTER



Dec. 2025 - Riley Perone
A SCHOOL COUNSELOR AT WESTERVILLE NORTH HIGH SCHOOL



Jan. 2026 - Terri Stiles
A SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST AT ROBERT FROST ELEMENTARY

In the next issue, we will recognize the winners of the Westerville Education Foundation teacher of the month award.

Fouse Elementary art teacher turns book into a lesson on belonging

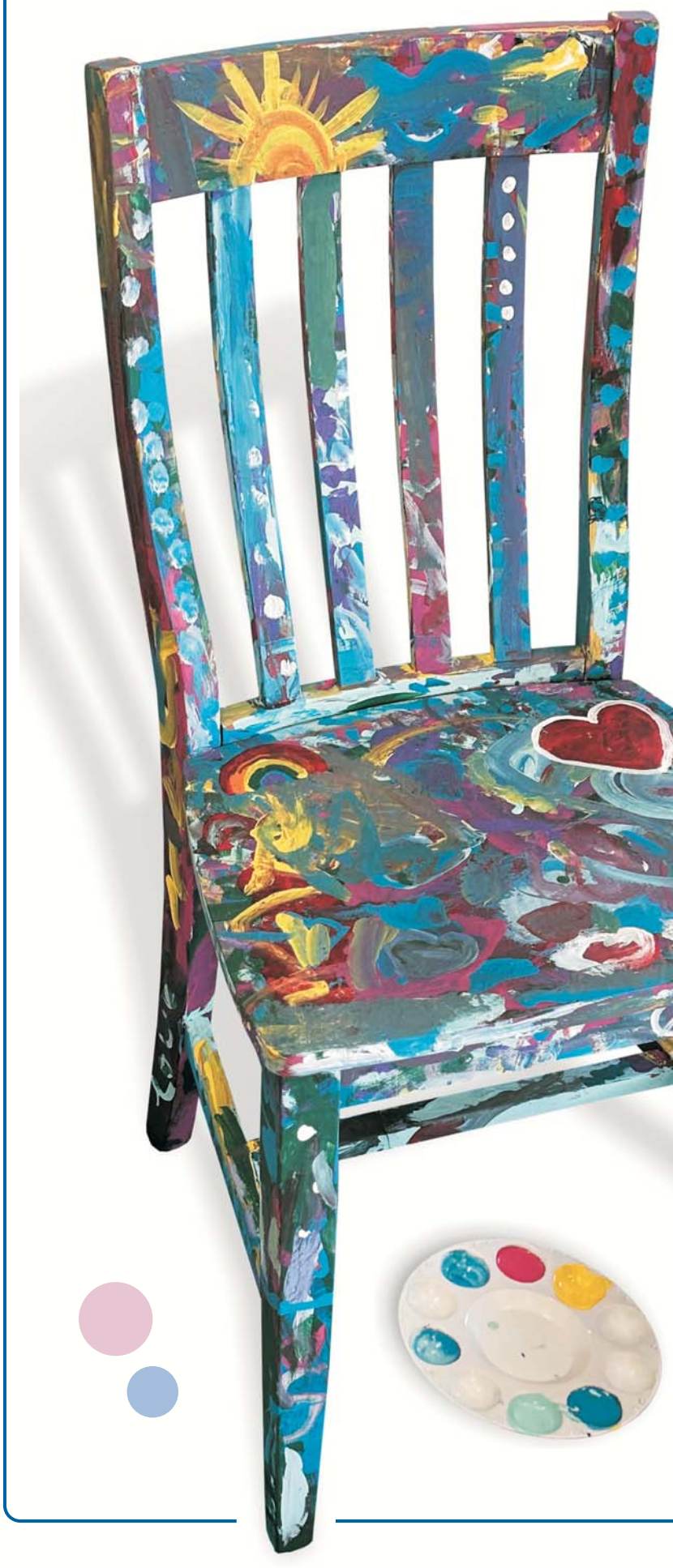
Fouse Elementary art teacher Heather Freado recently wrapped up a project dedicated to making "belonging" something students could touch – and paint.

It started after Freado's daughter brought home the book, *No More Chairs* by Dan Gill. The story, based on a real-life experience, follows two friends who are told there is "no more room" at a birthday party because one of them is Black.

In the book, the protagonist grows up to become a teacher who keeps an empty chair in his classroom as a permanent symbol that everyone is welcome.

Freado shared the book to all Fouse teachers. To bring the lesson home, she and her daughter purchased a chair from a local thrift store for her classroom. Throughout the following week, every student at Fouse had the opportunity to listen to the book and add their own brushstroke of paint to the chair.

The result is a vibrant, multi-colored "welcome chair" that now has a permanent home in the school's art room.





Annehurst Elementary students focus on kindness through new after school club



Annehurst Elementary's newest club is making kindness a priority. The 32 members of Annehurst's Camp Kindness gathered to start work on a project that will spread encouragement and kind words to kids in learning centers and orphanages in Peru.

Students recorded video messages introducing themselves and offering words of welcome – with a classmate translating into Spanish. They will start collecting items for a care package that will be delivered to kids in Peru over the summer.

Third-grade teacher Connor Ledford has inspired to create the club based on activities he did with his youth group that focused on service.

"I wanted to do an afterschool club where we focused on other people and can stop to think of others' needs above our own and act on it," he said.
The group meets for an hour every other week and already has more projects planned, including a Harry Potter-themed food drive competition. Students will be sorted into Hogwarts houses and compete to collect the most donations. Fifth-grade teacher Kelley Moff and counselor Jonelle Harrison also serve as advisors for the group.

To keep the momentum going, each student received a journal to track acts of kindness.

"My hope for them is to develop an understanding outside of their own self," Ledford said.

For third-grader Eloise Fogle, joining was an easy choice. "I really like being kind," she said. "When I saw there was a Camp Kindness, I knew we would be doing stuff where we'd be kind. I really liked that."

Lt. Gov. Jim Tressel kicks off statewide fitness challenge at Robert Frost Elementary







Ohio Lt. Gov. Jim Tressel kicked off the second round of his Team Tressel Fitness Challenge with a visit to students and staff at Robert Frost Elementary.

Robert Frost was one of three District schools to participate in the first round of the statewide challenge in September, which encourages students to build healthy habits around exercise, sleep and nutrition. Tressel's visit celebrated fourth- and fifth-graders who took part in the challenge, along with physical education teacher Eric Indiciani, who helped lead the effort.

"We wanted Robert Frost to know we're so proud of them for taking the challenge and recognizing that healthy habits are important," he said.



The visit included a school-wide assembly introducing round two, what it involves and why it matters. To bolster excitement around the challenge, several Challenge Captains joined Tressel during the visit: former Ohio State quarterback and NFL player Braxton Miller, former Ohio State and NFL wide receiver DeVier Posey, former Ohio State and NFL wide receiver Roy Hall Jr. and former Ohio State basketball player Dr. Lauren Miller. They led students through different fitness challenges – jumping jacks, push-ups, toe touches and leg balances – as well as emphasized the importance of quiet time.

"Students were loud and proud, respectful to one another and encouraged one another, which is what the challenge is all about," Tressel said.

A collaborative effort between Tressel and Ohio Department of Education and Workforce Director Steve Dackin, round two of the challenge kicked off in February with about 391,000 students participating. During the month-long challenge, students will progress through three levels – Bronze, Silver and Gold – as they select a menu of physical activity, nutrition and sleep activities from a challenge workbook.

In addition to Robert Frost, Annehurst Elementary and Genoa Middle School are participating in the second round.

Emerson Elementary is No. 15 among Ohio elementaries in 2026 U.S. News and World Report ranking





Emerson Elementary is ranked No. 15 among Ohio elementary schools – and the only one in Central Ohio in the top 20 – according to the U.S. News & World Report ranking of elementary and middle schools across the country.

In addition, all 14 WCSD eligible elementaries earned a Best Elementary Schools badge from the U.S. News & World Report for placing among the top 40% in the state. They include Emerson, Hanby, Alcott, Whittier, Annehurst, Fouse, Cherrington, McVay, Pointview, Hawthorne, Huber Ridge, Robert Frost, Mark Twain and Wilder elementaries.

Meanwhile, Genoa, Heritage, Blendon and Walnut Springs middle schools earned Best Middle Schools badges for their high rankings.

Both Minerva France Elementary and Minerva Park Middle Schools were unranked because they recently opened and did not have multiple years of data.

U.S. News & World Report ranked more than 47,000 elementary schools and about 23,000 middle schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia for its report.

Elementary and middle schools are evaluated on mathematics and reading/language arts scores on state assessments, as well as test results in the context of socioeconomic demographics. In other words, the top-ranked schools are all high-achieving and have succeeded at educating all their students.

Blendon Middle School celebrates revamped gym

Blendon Middle School students and staff returned from winter break to a refreshed gym that features brighter lights, repainted walls and new school banners. Also new: rims and backboards for the basketball hoops, wall pads and a moveable partition to split the space.

The project, estimated between $50,000 to $55,000, was funded by a donation from the Brian and Mandi Yeager Family Foundation. The project started from a conversation between Principal Kendall Harris and Brian Yeager, who visited the school last year when his childís basketball team played against Blendon.

> *It felt less like a donation and more like a thank you.*

Yeager, a former Blendon student, told Harris he wanted to make a donation to give back to the school. Three months later, Harris received a message from the director of Architecture & Design from The Champion Companies – a real estate investment, development and management firm of which Yeager is the chairman and CEO. The proposal: to revamp the school gym.

Brian and Mandi Yeager, both of whom are Westerville South High School alums, were on hand during the school's pep rally to celebrate the new space. Harris presented Brian Yeager with a plaque in honor of their donation while students presented thank you cards signed by the student body.

"This place was never just a gym," Brian Yeager said during the pep rally. "It was a place where we learned teamwork, discipline, confidence and how to – most of all – push ourselves. This school taught me a lot and helped shape who I am today."

"When my wife and I had an opportunity to restore this gym, to me it felt less like a donation and more like a thank you," he added. "A thank you to the teachers who believed in us, the coaches who challenged us and our classmates who became our life-long friends."

After the presentation, the school launched into its pep rally festivities, which included recognizing the winter athletic teams and a variety of students-versus-staff games.















Minerva Park Middle School engineering presents The Price is Wrong

Eighth-grade engineering students in Jason Siwek's class at Minerva Park Middle School put their skills to the test with a take on *The Price is Right*.

Titled *The Price is Wrong*, the student-designed and -built game show was live-streamed for the whole school, giving participants a hands-on way to showcase their creations.

Jaguar pride: Student-led mosaic takes center stage at Genoa Middle School cafeteria





THE WALLS OF THE GENOA MIDDLE SCHOOL CAFETERIA HAVE BECOME THE LATEST CANVAS FOR STUDENT EXPRESSION.

A mosaic of the school's jaguar mascot now hangs at the center of the space with students in Juls Rathje's art classes slated to paint ribbon and other designs to accentuate the collaborative art piece.

This year, students have been working with mosaic artist Vicki Murphy to add additional murals in the building. They wrapped up a mural depicting movement in the art and music hallway earlier this school year. And students completed another mosaic mural of a sun that will be installed near the outdoor stepping stone garden over the summer.

For years, Rathje has received grants from the Ohio Arts Council and Westerville Education Foundation to collaborate with Murphy on a resident artist project that brings mosaic art to Genoa students.

Last year, Murphy worked with students to create a mindfulness mural that now hangs along one of the school's main hallways. Prior to that, she guided students on building murals inspired by themes of kindness and unity as well as a collection of outdoor mosaic art murals installed on the sidewalk near the eighth-grade wing.

Murals create an opportunity for students to work together collectively and collaboratively, Rathje said. She and Murphy talk to students about mural designs and images and artwork they'd like to see included in the piece.

Rathje also appreciates how mosaic art features materials students may not typically use in an art classroom: stained glass, tile and gemstones.

"I love having an artist-in-residence," she said. "I love for students to see the opportunity for art as a career and art as something that can be in their everyday life and something they can use outside of the classroom."

While past projects focused on abstract concepts, this year's mural turned inward. Rathje asked her students to identify the "heart" of the school; the unanimous choice was their mascot. During the fall semester, art students, especially eighth-graders, worked collaboratively on the design of the piece. Spring semester art students constructed the mosaic from their peers' designs.

By having students paint additional details on the cafeteria walls around the mascot mural, Rathje said every art student this year has contributed to the project.

Heritage Middle School students dive into earth science labs

Eighth-graders in Shannon Ball's advanced science class at Heritage Middle School "ran" glaciers down the sidewalks during a lab that simulated how glaciers move and shape the Earth.

Meanwhile, students in Meaghan Rajah's science class tested different cover crops – clover, radish, and buckwheat – to see which best holds soil and water. Their lab built on an earlier experiment by Ball's students, who grew the cover crops from seeds and tested them earlier in their life cycle.

Walnut Springs Middle School engineering students create board games

Students in Casey Koller's Engineering and Design Class at Walnut Springs Middle School wrapped up a "Create Your Own Board Game" project that required them to use their newly learned skills of creating items using both a laser and vinyl cutter. They presented their designs to the class with the Money Jumpers group (Nora Bosler, Celeste Ramirez, Delani Quigley and Ansley Huston) earning outstanding Board Game creation from the class.

Elementary boys find role models and shared roots in new peer mentoring initiative

At Robert Frost Elementary, fifth-grader Jeremiah Whitney discovered he and his new Westerville North High School mentor had the same first-grade teacher at Cherrington Elementary.

After meeting up with his Westerville Central High School mentor, Mark Twain Elementary fourth-grader Dominic Albertini now considers him a role model.



Pointview Elementary Liam Brewer is eager to spend more time in the classroom and on the playground with his Westerville South High School mentor for their next meeting later this month.

In February, boys from Robert Frost, Mark Twain and Pointview connected with role models who walked in their shoes – and who want to help them grow, develop and thrive in school and with their peers.

"Helping these kids out with what they can become is amazing," said WNHS senior Jakari Stovall, who mentors Whitney at Robert Frost. "I really wish I had this when I was in elementary school."

The peer mentoring initiative is part of an effort to provide elementary boys with positive role models who can help them navigate relationships, experiences and decisions. By partnering with high school students, it's building a peer mentoring program within the community, Student Support and Success Director Dr. Ja'Niece McAlpine said.



"It's like a 'for us, by us,'" she said. "You've gone through Westerville and now you're giving those seeds back that were planted in you."

McAlpine launched the initiative after several schools shared a need for a male counterpart of the Ruling Our Experiences (ROX) girls group, which is in place at every school. The ROX program features 20 lessons for girls in grades 5-12 that cover a host of topics, from navigating the challenges of adolescence to standing up.

Four elementaries are piloting the initiative this year: Robert Frost, Mark Twain, Pointview and Huber Ridge. If successful, McAlpine hopes to bring the program to other schools across the District.

Each school tailored the program to the needs of their students. Mark Twain leaders, for example, sought to partner high school mentors with fourth-grade boys to help with peer-to-peer relationships. Meanwhile, Pointview educators wanted high school mentors to work with third-grade boys on conflict resolution and sportsmanship.

High school mentors will meet with their mentees twice a month for the rest of the school year. Half of the visit will be dedicated to lessons on specific topics such as emotional regulation, conflict management and empathy. During the second half, high school students will join their younger peers for recess to practice those skills.



"One of the things I'd like them to understand is you're only in control of yourself," said WSHS senior Anderson Crill, who works with Brewer and two other Pointview students. "There are a lot of things you can't control. I really want to teach them that sometimes you're going to have to have a good attitude going into things. You're going to have to adapt and respond to that."

At Mark Twain, improving peer-to-peer relationships is a priority after survey data showed that students don't always feel valued by their peers, Principal Traci White said.

"Peer-to-peer relationships are the biggest challenge," she said. "That's what we're working on – peer conflict, de-escalating situations, empathy. Our goal is trying to build those peer-to-peer relationships. How can we make everyone feel welcome?"

For White, it was clear after the visit from the WCHS mentors how important their role will be in that lesson.

She said the high school mentors were prepared, engaging students to talk and build connections. On the playground, the high school boys joined them in a football game, and encouraged fair play and supported each other. In one instance, the mentors had two boys shake hands following a disagreement.

"It's amazing," White said. "They have a guide for the students so they know what to do. There's a purpose for it."

WCHS junior Kevin Ferrera is looking forward to building his connection with Albertini and learning how he can help him in the future.

"I was a little nervous," he said. "It's my first time being a peer mentor. I feel pretty good now. I want to know how he's doing in school and what subjects he's struggling with so I can help him out."

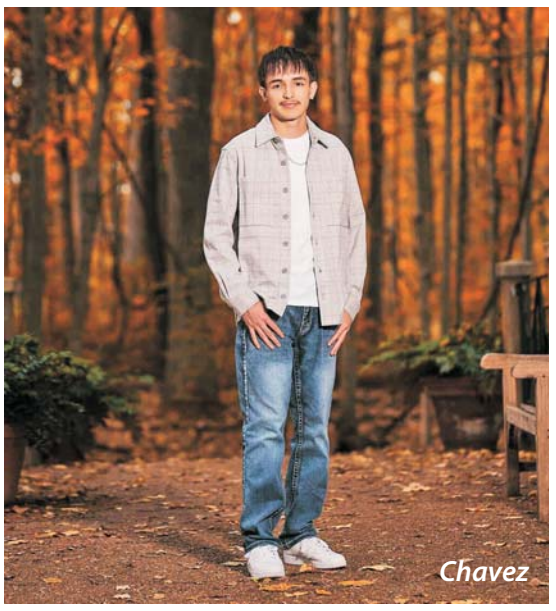
WSHS sophomore breaks 30-year school swim record

Westerville South High School sophomore Levi Wolfe broke the school mark in the 500 freestyle with a 4:40.47 finish on Jan. 17 at the Northeast Classic. The previous record, set in 1995 by WSHS alum Kevin Kissling, fell with its owner watching from the stands.

Kissling, who currently serves as a counselor at Westerville North High School, was at the meet to support his son when he saw Wolfe break his record.



Three WSHS seniors earn full-ride scholarships to prestigious universities through QuestBridge


Chavez


Omoniyi


Pedro

College was always the goal for Westerville South High School seniors Mark Chavez, Akeelah Omoniyi and Sami Pedro – and now their dream schools are officially within reach.

The three students are headed to their top college choices on full four-year scholarships through QuestBridge's National College Match, a program that connects high-achieving high school seniors from families with financial need with scholarships to the country's top universities.

"This was just a miracle so it's changed everything," said Omoniyi, who will attend Northwestern University to study political science on a prelaw track. "It's changed my life and the trajectory of it because when you get into a door, it opens even more doors."

QuestBridge partners with 55 colleges and universities in the U.S. to offer the National College Match scholarship. The scholarship covers the full cost of attendance for each college – including tuition, room and board, travel expenses, and books and supplies – with no student loans. Some scholarships require some type of student contribution in the form of work-study or student savings.

In 2025, there were 7,026 students selected as National College Match Finalists out of more than 25,000 applications.

Chavez, Omoniyi and Pedro were among 2,550 finalists who matched with a college or university.

"It means a lot," said Chavez, who will attend Yale University to study political science on a prelaw track. "It finally means what I've done is made something of myself."

Chavez applied to QuestBridge's National College Match program as a senior while Omoniyi started the process as a junior.

Pedro started her QuestBridge journey as a junior through the College Prep Scholars program, which equipped her with resources and connected her with peers across the country going through the National College Match's application process.

QUESTBRIDGE



Chavez and Omoniyi set their sights on universities where they could dive into law while Pedro looked for a university with a strong computer science program to fuel her love of science, math and problem-solving. She matched with a college she once thought was out of reach financially: Stanford University.

"It's a bit of a burden off of my shoulders and my parents too," she said. "It would have been a lot for them."

All three students are focused on finishing the rest of their senior year strong and preparing for a future they didn't think possible.

"Throughout your academic journey, you doubt yourself. You're like, 'I can't take this class. I can't do that,'" Omoniyi said. "You think you're good and then you think there's somebody better than me. Maybe I'm not worthy of this opportunity, especially coming from a low-income background."

"You think that this was a limit for me. QuestBridge broke that limit. I'll get to have the opportunities that (my mom) didn't. I want to make her proud. It's a huge burden off my family."

To learn more about the QuestBridge program, sccan the QR code

WCHS brings cutting-edge gene editing to the classroom

CRISPR technology – considered one of the most significant biological breakthroughs of the 21st century – is a tool that lets scientists "edit" the DNA of any living organism with surgical precision.

And at Westerville Central High School, students aren't just learning about it, they're using it.

WCHS is among only 5% of high schools nationwide to offer hands-on CRISPR labs. In January, students in Diana Arko's Medical Intervention class successfully edited DNA, utilizing the same technology currently used to treat sickle cell disease and advance HIV research.

The program was born from a partnership between Arko and science teacher Autumn McCormick. While in graduate school, the pair worked with university professors to study the science behind CRISPR, analyze research from its founders and develop a lab they could bring into their own classrooms.

Today, CRISPR is woven throughout the science curriculum. Students are first introduced to the concept in biology, then dive deeper in Medical Intervention and AP Biology, examining the technology through both medical and biotechnology lenses.

For alumni, the experience has been a professional springboard. Former students have leveraged their CRISPR backgrounds to land competitive research positions at Columbia, Emory, and The Ohio State University.

During a multi-day lab, students manipulated E. coli bacteria engineered to appear blue. Using CRISPR, they pinpointed the color gene, cut it with surgical precision, and inserted a "stop" signal to turn the bacteria white. To verify their success, students used a polymerase chain reaction to amplify the edited DNA and gel electrophoresis to visualize and confirm the genetic change.

For junior Kaleb Tran, the lab turned abstract theory into tangible science.

"At first, CRISPR was kind of vague," he said. "But once we started the lab, it made sense. It makes it real."





WCSD elementaries to welcome incoming kindergartners, families during open house nights

The future kindergarteners of Westerville City Schools are invited to explore what awaits them when they begin classes in the fall.

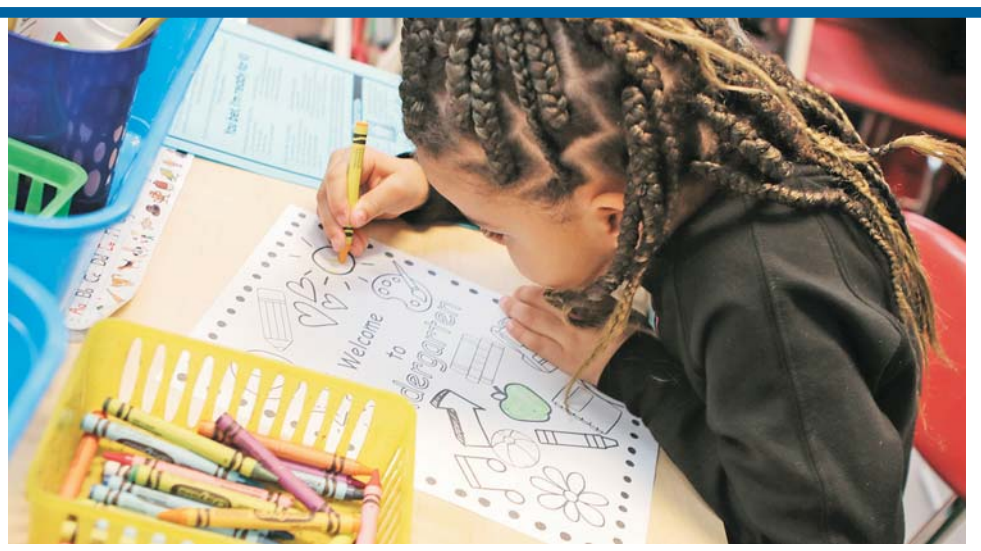
Educators across the District's elementary schools have organized open house events in April for incoming kindergarteners and families to tour buildings, visit classrooms, meet teachers and school staff and learn what to expect in their first year as an elementary student. The events are also helpful for teachers, where they could meet and observe students as well as assess skills needed to be successful in school.





KINDERGARTEN OPEN HOUSE DATES

Alcott's Owlet Evening: 6-7 p.m. April 29
Annehurst's Lil All-Stars in Training: 6-8 p.m. April 21
Cherrington's Cougar Cub Welcome Night: 5:30-7 p.m. April 30
Fouse's Future Foxes First Look: 6 p.m. April 23
Hawthorne's Kindergarten Open House: 5:30-6:30 p.m. April 21
Huber Ridge's Lil' Rocket Round Up: 6 p.m. April 22
Mark Twain's Little Otter Welcome Night: 6 p.m. April 21
McVay's Kindergarten Open House: 6 p.m. April 22
Minerva France's SOARing into Kindergarten: 5:15-7:15 p.m. April 30
Pointview's Panther Kindergarten Open House: 5:30 p.m. April 23
Robert Frost's Kindergarten Open House: 6 p.m. April 23
Whittier's Eagles SOAR into Kindergarten: 5:30 p.m. April 30
Wilder's PRIDE Student in Training: 6-8 p.m. April 30





Ohio State nursing students support WCS health screenings



Throughout the year, Ohio State University nursing students complete their pediatric rotations by assisting WCS school nurses with hearing and vision screenings.

Now in its second year, the partnership provides nursing students with hands-on experience with children across all ages and abilities. Their support also helps clinic staff, including those at the Early Learning Center preschool (pictured above), in ensuring every screening is completed.



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Ready to get involved? Contact Ruby Mathys at: 330.495.0339 or ruby@cdataprint.com

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