

2017-2018

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THE JOURNEY OF
MICHAEL BONNER
AND HIS SECOND
GRADE CLASS

PITT COUNTY SCHOOLS

PEOPLE
PROGRAMS
EXPANSION
INNOVATION

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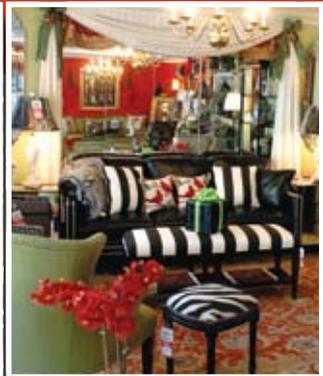


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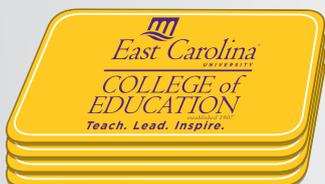
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ABOUT THE COVER

PHOTO BY MICHAEL ROZMAN/WARNER BROS.



Ellen surprises second grade teacher Michael Bonner on 'The Ellen DeGeneres Show' in January 2017. Bonner teaches at South Greenville Elementary, a Title I school where 100 percent of the students are impoverished and sometimes face tremendous challenges including hunger and homelessness. Bonner and his students first gained attention on social media after he rewarded them for passing their reading test by allowing them to make rap music videos using the lessons they learned in class.



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Thank you for your interest in learning more about Pitt County Schools. Whether you have a child in one of our schools, you are considering us for your child's education, or you are a curious member of the community, you can reference this publication to learn more about the many opportunities provided to the nearly 24,000 students who inspire us on a daily basis.

This magazine highlights our amazing schools, our wonderful staff and the programs and activities that are offered within our district. In all, Pitt County Schools is comprised of 16 elementary schools, six K-8 schools, seven middle schools, seven high schools and a pre-K education center. Additionally, we will share information about the extracurricular opportunities and academic programs that have helped Pitt County Schools achieve record graduation rates in recent years while providing each child a rigorous and personalized education.

As one of the 15 largest school systems in North Carolina, we are fortunate to be located in a county that is among the state's fastest growing and features a thriving business, medical and educational community. It is our goal that all residents and visitors will be aware of the many outstanding things happening each day in our schools.

We celebrate every child and challenge every learner in Pitt County Schools. We want all of our students to become happy, healthy, productive contributing members of society. This magazine is just one way that we are highlighting how we achieve this goal. You can also visit our website pittschools.org to learn more about us.

Thank you again for your interest in Pitt County Schools!



kindest regards,
Dr. Ethan Lenker
 Superintendent
 Pitt County Schools

who.
what.
where.
when.
why.



story by lucas simonds

REASON FOR THE RHYME

It has been a whirlwind of a year for one Pitt County teacher whose creativity in motivating his students landed him on national television twice and earned a once in a lifetime trip for his class.



It all started when Bonner's class was struggling with their tests about the "who, what, where, when and why" standard. To help them out, he wrote a rap about the standard and promised them they could shoot a music video if they did well on their next test.

When Michael Bonner, a second grade teacher at South Greenville Elementary School, made a music video with his class in September 2016, he had no idea what a wild ride he had begun.

It all started when Bonner's class was struggling with their tests about the "who, what, where, when and why" standard. To help them out, he wrote a rap about the standard and promised them they could shoot a music video if they did well on their next test.

When they "passed with flying colors," Bonner was true to his word, but posting the video online started the ball rolling toward a destination he could not have imagined.

"I put the video up on Facebook and it went viral," Bonner said. "I really did not expect it to, I just put it up as a bet my students won.

But then I was out with some friends and they told me I needed to look at Facebook and it had like 1,000 shares in three hours. I thought, 'What happened?'"

Starting with local news channels, word of the video spread quickly, and one day while eating lunch with his students Bonner received a call from the Ellen DeGeneres Show.

"I did a Skype interview with their producers and then didn't hear from them for about two months," Bonner said. "Everybody at the school was hyped about it, but I was feeling a little anxious because I didn't want to miss the moment, but at the same time I didn't want to put my focus on it because it was never about that in the beginning. I was just teaching my kids."

Finally, however, the call came and a team from Ellen came to the school to interview Bonner and his class. They then flew him out to attend a taping of the show in the audience, not letting him know he would actually be a guest on the show.

"They had these four other people there with me, who were actually actors, and they told us we were all part of this teacher web series and that we would be doing voiceovers after the show," Bonner said. "Then, before the last segment, Ellen looked at me for about two seconds and looked away. I thought, 'What was that?' And the next thing you know she called me up, and I was completely blown away."

On top of featuring Bonner and his students on the show, Ellen provided his class with a 55-inch television, drones, iPad minis and Beats headphones, as well as a \$25,000 check for the school, all sponsored by Walmart.

Ellen also set up a fundraiser on GoFundMe that would go on to raise more than \$100,000 for the school.

Better yet, the journey for Bonner and his class did not stop there, and staff from Ellen were soon back in touch because they wanted to bring the entire class out to appear on another episode.



"She called a little bit before school ended and said 'Hey, I think they want to fly you and your whole class out.' And I said, 'They want to do what? Stop lying,'" Bonner said. "We had to put the whole thing together in a week with permission slips, travel supplies, chaperones, food, money, board of education approval.

"It was tough, but when we got there, to see those kids' faces shine, to see their faces when they could order anything on the menu that they want, to see them at Universal Studios, to see all that and those memories is irreplaceable."

More than anything, the chance to see the reward of their hard work in the classroom and to experience the world outside of Greenville has provided his students, many of whom struggle against poverty and even homelessness every day, gave them hope and a new drive for learning, Bonner said.

"I was blessed with the opportunity to do these things for them that I couldn't do within my own means," Bonner said. "To expose these kids to another state, another experience, another ride is vital for me. I travel frequently. I know how much it costs. My mother and father grew up in poverty. They didn't get on an

airplane until about three years ago. I got on one when I was 15. And now my students did it when they were seven.

"The unique thing about poverty is that there's a lot of excuses and crutches in it: 'Well, nobody's helping you.' 'Nobody ever gave me a chance.' This year, I obliterated all of those things for my kids. They can never say a teacher never cared for them, never paid for them, never gave their heart and their all because I broke all of those excuses."

That struggle against poverty and the effects it can have on students in the classroom is something that weighs heavy on Bonner's mind every day as he comes to work at a Title I school where 100 percent of the student body comes from poverty in some form. Having come from a similar situation himself, growing up in Perquimans County, Bonner strives to make sure that none of his students have an excuse not to rise above their situation.

"I went to all Title I schools. Poverty is high there, as high as the school I'm at now," Bonner said. "I remember when it came time to think about college our counselor had papers on the door with information about two scholarships. I played basketball and got a full ride

to Winston-Salem State, so I wasn't worried about that, but I had 13 other friends on the team who didn't have that and whose grades weren't the best. The next year my mother becomes the guidance counselor and she shows me this file cabinet full of information about scholarships.

"At that moment I knew someone had given us an educational disadvantage because they didn't show us everything ... a lot of those guys I knew are now in jail or dead or trying to decide between selling drugs and a minimum wage job. I was blessed to get out, but when I think about that one situation, the opportunity to have assistance to go to college, and they weren't given the full chance, we don't know what they could do today.

"So, in my classroom, I take that life experience and I use it every day. It's tough here, but every day we come in here swinging to give them everything we have."

Starting out at Winston-Salem State University studying psychology, Bonner eventually found his way to Elizabeth City State University, where he changed gears and graduated with his degree in elementary education in 2013.

Michael Rozman/Warner Bros.



He has taught at South Greenville for four years, and he has always been mindful of the challenges his students face both in and out of the classroom.

"This is the problem with high-poverty schools. People say, 'The kids are hungry, we know.' But, we have to put ourselves in the mindset of when we ourselves don't have breakfast in the morning and then we're at work trying to perform at our optimum level. We're not able to do it, and kids are smaller, their brains haven't even fully developed yet. They're going through so many changes on top of being hungry, on top of any parental conflicts at home, on top of their classmates knowing about their situation. It's not easy," Bonner said. "We have to have an understanding with them. We talk about knowing what the kids deal with, but we have to really think about all the things they go through. A lot of these kids weren't reading early. A lot of them didn't have a parent that could spend time with them. A lot of them haven't had the chance to travel even to Raleigh, so when you understand this, then your teaching can go to another level, to show grace and mercy to them and give them all you've got."

Seeing the statistics of how many students like his will grow up to fall into crime or other dangerous situations, Bonner is determined to not only excite them about learning, but also to serve as a strong positive role model of the value of education.

"One out of three African American males is projected to go to prison. I have 13 in my class. We're fighting against these statistics. There is a school-to-prison pipeline and there are people profiting off of the downfall of kids like mine, but we're fighting against it, we won't tolerate it. We're standing up to take our learning into our own hands," Bonner said. "There's a Kanye West song where he says the only people he knew with money were the drug dealers, and our kids live in that type of environment. They may not know the people in these illegal activities, but they see it. So, I'll sometimes pull out a couple hundred dollars and give them a positive visual to replace that dysfunctional visual. Mr. Bonner isn't selling drugs or anything like that and he's here, his life seems like it's fine and he has money. When you're in poverty, money seems like it's everything, so I let them touch it and see that I earned my education as a teacher and that they can do the same with their education."

Working in a situation where many would simply be satisfied to see their students learn any small amount each year without worrying about high marks on tests, Bonner also pushes his class to break expectations and earn the highest grades they can.

"There's a thing called academic growth, which is measuring where they started at and where they may have progressed to after a certain time. At Title I schools, normally, because there are issues of poverty and kids not reading on grade level when they come into the classroom, they choose to focus more on growth than proficiency, which is a measure of performing at grade level," Bonner said. "Growth is great, but we're trying to get that proficiency just because people think we can't do it. That's the fun part about it. I want them to go there and be on grade level, I want that to be the norm. Growth is great, and it's necessary to reach proficiency, but proficiency is the real goal. I'm trying to change every dysfunctional idea in their heads and replace it with reality."

"I know that if they pass now on their reading scores, they're more than likely going to pass to the next grade. If they keep that up they'll go to high school, their GPAs will be fine, they can apply for colleges and scholarships, they can go to college or be an entrepreneur and they can live a successful life."

While he can only help them during a short time early in their lives, Bonner holds on to the hope that the difference he can make now will set them on the right course for good.

"There's so many different developmental things that happen from the time they leave me until the 12th grade. Every teacher is different, their home life can change, so much can happen," Bonner said. "That's why I try to make sure that they understand the importance of making smart choices. They won't always be with me, their class won't always be like mine, but they have to be able to perform and act like young, responsible individuals as they progress. I think about it constantly."

That true concern for the lives of his students is what keeps Bonner coming back into the classroom every day to sing, jump on the table, get down on the floor and do whatever it takes to make sure they can never say he did not give everything he could to help them succeed.

'The unique thing about poverty is that there's a lot of excuses and crutches in it: 'Well, nobody's helping you.' 'Nobody ever gave me a chance.' This year, I obliterated all of those things for my kids. They can never say a teacher never cared for them, never paid for them, never gave their heart and their all because I broke all of those excuses.'

- MICHAEL BONNER

Michael Rozman/Warner Bros.





is seldom good for anything else.

Understanding that students need to learn more than just the facts needed to pass the next test is what drives one Pitt County teacher to give her all every time she steps into the classroom.

HISTORY HAS A STORY

story & photography by lucas simonds

Proud! Fantastic!

Activating Knowledge

Learning Activities



Jennifer Attardi, an eighth grade social studies teacher at Chicod School, strives to lead her classes into new ways of thinking that will serve them long after any dates and names they learn in class may have faded from their minds.

"My philosophy of teaching history is centered around teaching them how to think like a historian," Attardi said. "It's how to investigate through the lenses of culture, geography and government ... it's about learning the content, but it's also about learning how to interact with the content."

Key in this approach for Attardi have been the "Habits of Mind," a set of 16 skills for learning and problem solving described by Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick. Working with her fellow teachers, Attardi has pushed to integrate the habits into classes across the board in the eighth grade at Chicod and in sixth through eighth grade social studies classes. She hopes to expand this into more classes over time.

Starting out, this effort has focused on five of the 16 habits — striving for accuracy and precision, managing impulsivity, listening with understanding and empathy, thinking flexibly and persisting.

Each is of value in practically any situation students may encounter, but in a class like social studies, which can often broach sensitive, emotionally charged subjects, habits such as thinking flexibly and listening with empathy are vital.

"The idea is to teach the kids to think flexibly, meaning not to get stuck in their own paradigms ... in doing so we build empathy, and we can think about how people in the past saw and thought about each other," Attardi said, noting that developing these mindsets can be difficult. "This is really the beginning of getting them into historical thinking, developing an intellectual discourse ... it can be tough, especially because this is the class where a lot of controversial topics will come up. Things like elections get brought up, and that's a tricky topic. So, we try to train them on how to have a conversation and disagree with somebody without assuming that means you have to dislike them. It's the beginning of academic courtesy."

While molding students into these new ways of thinking can be difficult at times, the payoff in the skills they can take away make it all worth it, Attardi added.

"Of course the subject matter counts, but if you can teach them how to think here then they know how to think in reading class, they know how to think in science class, it's like the scientific method that you can apply in so many other places," Attardi said.

To work toward these mindsets in social studies, students have to think more deeply about the people they are studying and the situations they experienced rather than the simple who, what, when and where.

"Just the facts is not fun, so I try to show them how history is a story. It's people, and they're exciting," Attardi said.

A major tool in helping students to look at the past in this new way is primary sources, documents and images created at the time that provide a first-hand look at how people thought about what was going on around them.



'My philosophy of teaching history is centered around teaching them how to think like a historian.'

- JENNIFER ATTARDI

When studying Manifest Destiny, students were tasked with studying a painting from 1872 that symbolically depicts the spread of American society into the West and challenged to think about the worldview and of the painter and the society he lived in.

When studying The Great Depression, a Little Orphan Annie comic served to change how students might think about that time in our past.

"We start by looking at the comic and reading an analysis to understand what it meant at the time. Then, we move on to having the students create their own comic or their own analysis," Attardi said. "They've studied the facts of the Depression, but you can't stop there, so coming at it from this angle helps bring in different levels and helps them understand that it was more than just people waiting in soup lines. It's especially engaging doing it in a hands-on way along with discussion, and it brings in writing as well as the social studies standards they need to meet."

These are only some of the ways Attardi strive to continually persist with her students and to be creative in teaching and learning, another value she hopes to pass on to them.

"Teaching a child to persist is something we always do. Persist through the lengthy reading passage on a boring topic you do not care for — you can do this. Persist through this school system that you and I both know is testing you too much and you don't always feel excited to learn because we're going to do what we can in here to make learning fun," Attardi said. "Sometimes we're just going to have to break

down and do these tests, but if you persist and do your best, I can figure out what you need to learn and I promise I'll spend every moment I have being creative about designing lessons that are fun to help you learn those things."

As she has progressed through her 14-year teaching career, Attardi has also learned that that creativity is likely to create situations in the classroom that may not look like traditional learning, but she is willing to break the mold in that way to meet the needs of her students.

"I'm much more comfortable with controlled chaos now," Attardi said. "If all the desks are pushed up against the wall and the kids are on the floor doing butcher paper projects with markers and meter sticks and having academic arguments and I'm stepping over them and it looks messy from the outside, I'm cool with that because I can defend that. They're literally on the ground level, learning and working."

Attardi was recognized for her hard work and innovative approaches in the classroom in 2016 when she was named N.C. History Teacher of the Year by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

"This is a very tough award to get, and one of the reasons that Jennifer really stands out is that, in teaching history, she not only teaches about history and the events of the past, but she teaches her students how to communicate ideas and take action about the issues and events that are going on today based on the history of the past," said Justyn Knox, a social studies specialist with the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

Now, looking toward the future, Attardi has also been selected as one of five teachers to help update the foundations course on the "Habits of Mind" taught by the Thinking Collaborative, an organization that provides professional development courses for teachers around the country. They will be working through the UNC Center for Teacher Quality and the Pitt County Schools Teacher Leadership Institute, and Attardi is grateful for the new opportunities that taking part in the institute has provided her.

"I'm very excited about this opportunity, this is huge," Attardi said. "If you want to empower teachers to adopt a program or a teaching framework then you need to invest in them and their education in that framework just like you would your students, and the only thing I've been a part of that comes close to that is the Teacher Leadership Institute."

In the end, this work both in and outside of the classroom serves the goal of bringing new energy to teachers and students, which Attardi hopes can make all the difference in their success.

"The 'Habits of Mind' do that for me. The students actually give me reminders about it. I'll tell them all the time to think flexibly, but then I'll be frustrated and they'll tell me, 'Ms. Attardi it's OK the document camera isn't cooperating, we just need to think flexibly today.' They bring it back to me and I know I'm making a difference, and that's what I'm here for."

EXPANSION

story & photography by lucas simonds

Construction projects take schools to next level

Construction projects are giving teachers at three Pitt County schools the tools and space they need to take their instruction to the next level.

Completed projects at Lakeforest and Elmhurst elementary schools have added much needed space. Meanwhile, a long-awaited project is still underway at Chicod School to not only add extra space, but bring classrooms into the 21st century.

At Lakeforest, a 12,000-square-foot addition finished in May has provided eight new classrooms for the school that serves the fast-growing area near Vidant Medical Center.

The classrooms provide space for 200 more students inside the building, not only allowing six classes to move out of modular units, but also providing two extra classrooms for the school to grow into.

At Elmhurst, a 4,000-square-foot multipurpose room was finished just in time for the start of the new school year. The room fills a void that has been felt since 1955 when the school was built without a gymnasium.

In total, the addition comes in at 6,100 square feet with restrooms and a hallway connecting to the main building.

As an elementary school, the multipurpose room is set up to be used for physical education classes and play time, which will fit the school's needs as the county's Global Health and Wellness school.

The room is also set up with a sound system and everything else needed to run assemblies or other large programs.

"When we cut the ribbon on the new gym we're going to be able to do so much more than we can now," said Elmhurst principal Colleen Burt. "Right now, P.E. is in the classroom if it's raining or cold or in the cafeteria if it's not lunchtime. Once we have the gym we'll be able to do so much more not only with P.E. but with bringing in guests to do programs

like teaching them taekwon do and different exercises, the importance of stretching or life skills that will help them."

At Chicod, on the other hand, a much larger project is still ongoing to add approximately 61,000 square feet to the K-8 school. Construction is projected to be complete in 2018.

The expansion includes a bevy of new spaces needed to help move students and teachers out of the original 1929 building that is still partially in use.

Alongside 14 new classrooms, the new space will include a gymnasium with locker rooms and a new suite of administrative offices.

The project also includes work to centralize the heating and air conditioning system for all three wings of the school and upgrading technology systems.

"We really need some large, modern classrooms with updated technology," said fourth grade teacher Susan Jarvis. "We have been limited for so many years with technology, so as a teacher I'm really looking forward to the new classrooms ... I've always said it's never been about the bricks or the boards or the mortar, it's the people that make up Chicod that matter, but the building that we're in needs to be safe and updated, and our children deserve that."

With an ever-growing student population, the expansion will also help to make sure there is room for every student.

"I love that this is happening," said custodian Yonkella Burney. "We really need this. This is about the oldest school in Pitt County, at least the front part, so it was about time for a new building because we're growing with kids every school year."

Together, the three projects come in at a total cost of more than \$14 million — \$1.95 million at Lakeforest, \$1.19 million at Elmhurst and \$10.92 million at Chicod.

All three projects are part of a \$25 million

plan to improve schools around the county, which is funded by a bond passed by the Pitt County Board of Commissioners.

For members of the Pitt County Schools facilities team, who are always thinking of how to improve the schools, the chance to take on such a large number of projects at once has been a dream come true.

"It feels very good to be able to finally do these projects, and we're very thankful to both the school board and the county commissioners for approving this," said Aaron Errickson, the construction and project coordinator for Pitt County Schools.

When it came to choosing which projects to tackle first, these three were the most obvious because of the way they could improve the lives of students and faculty at the schools, Errickson added.

"We're looking to determine where growth will occur, but also looking at the aging of the buildings and how well they've aged and considering ADA compliance and our ability to meet their needs with technology," Errickson said.

In the case of Chicod, the work was particularly needed because classrooms in the 1929 simply could not be upgraded to work with the technology that is becoming standard in most classrooms. In both the new classrooms and those being retrofitted, the rooms will be laid out for not only current technology, but to be easily upgraded in the future.

"All of our new construction is laid out with platforms that enable us to get between the classrooms for technology upgrades," Errickson said. "We don't know what's coming, so we just need to be able to get in there to change things out when new technology arrives."

This forethought, as with all of the work being done to improve the schools, all serves one goal, as often stated by Superintendent Ethan Lenker: "Moving Pitt County forward."



TEACHER OF THE YEAR

YOU'LL FIGURE IT OUT

For the 2017 Pitt County Schools Teacher of the Year, standing still has never really been in her nature. When the chance came to head up her school's new program focused on hands-on learning in science, technology, engineering and math or STEM, she naturally jumped at the opportunity.

story & photography by lucas simonds



Beth Sanderson, the STEM teacher at Hope Middle School, is committed to never losing the desire and excitement for learning that she works every day to instill in her students.

"I've moved around a lot because I feel like, when I stay at the same school in the same grade level, that I become stagnant as a teacher," Sanderson said. "So, throughout my teaching career, I've moved to different schools, different grade levels, different subject matters because it forces me to become a lifelong learner. It forces me to continue to aspire to learn more and to keep myself fresh."

In her 27 years of teaching in Pitt County, Sanderson has worked at Bethel School, Wahl-Coates Elementary School, Elmhurst Elementary School, the former Greenville Middle School, A.G. Cox Middle School, Chicod School and now Hope Middle School. She has taught primarily math and science, but also taught all subjects as an elementary teacher.

Through it all, her favorite classes to teach have been math and science at the middle school level.

"I love middle school kids," Sanderson said. "A lot of people tell me 'I don't know how you teach middle school,' but I love them. I like that I can have a thought-provoking conversation but can also joke around, and they kind of get my sarcastic humor."



Before she took up the mantle of the school's STEM teacher, Sanderson was teaching sixth grade math, but the opportunity to move into a new paradigm of teaching was too good to pass up.

"When the opportunity came up for the STEM program I went straight to an administrator and asked them to consider me," Sanderson said.

The STEM classes she now teaches correlate directly to the regular science and math curriculum, but do so with interesting modules in areas such as 3D design, pneumatics, electrical wiring, injection molding or robotics.

"They're getting hands-on experience with the science and math concepts the regular classroom teacher doesn't have the resources for," Sanderson said, noting the class also helps to spark an interest in possible future careers. "The class helps to educate them about what STEM careers are all about and

lets them dabble in different areas to find new things they didn't know about before or new interests."

Seeing students latch on to particular modules and excel is one of her favorite parts of the class.

"One student, Lily, has taken this 3D design program and loves it. She loves the process of designing a house and figuring out the floor plan, she just took to the software like it was second nature," Sanderson said. "Others, like my student Logan, came in with this understanding of pneumatics and air compressors because of his dad and his life experiences. So, for him to be able to talk on a higher level about that gives him this area to shine."

With many of the modules focused on solving particular real-world problems, students often struggle to work out the solution, but guiding them there and seeing the results is one of the most rewarding experiences in teaching, Sanderson said.

"To see the students succeed is amazing," Sanderson said. "I have some students who had been trying for four days to get a circuit to work and they finally succeeded, which was wonderful."

The STEM lab she now has to work with works particularly well for a style of teaching that gives students the chance to succeed on their own, she added.

"A lot of times in the classroom, teachers don't have time with what they need to cover to offer enough time for the problem-solving that needs to take place, so this lab really mimics real-world experiences. If something doesn't work, they usually have to figure out what to try next without me telling them because a lot of times I'll just walk away and tell them to figure it out," Sanderson said. "I had a group working in 3D design and they could not figure something out, but I told them, 'If I'm your boss and I give you this software and tell you to figure it out to teach it to the rest

'One of the challenges I did in the past was the physics of roller coasters. And the designs they came up with, it was just amazing the creativity a middle school student has if they're given the opportunity to dig deep within themselves and know they can create something unique.'

- BETH SANDERSON

of the firm, you've got to figure it out.' They have to back up, problem solve, troubleshoot what they've done right or wrong.

"At first they balk at it, but after a couple of times of hitting a wall and then backing up and figuring it out they gain this confidence and begin to run with it."

In addition to the standard modules for the class, Sanderson gives each grade a "Grand Challenge" for the year, such as building a catapult, designing a cereal box or creating a model of a scientific concept from another class.

Seeing the creative solutions students can come up with in situations like the challenges is another reason she always looks forward to her classes, Sanderson said.

"I've learned just what middle school students are capable of," Sanderson said. "One of the challenges I did in the past was the physics of roller coasters. And the designs they came up with, it was just amazing the creativity a middle school student has if they're given the opportunity to dig deep within themselves and know they can create something unique. That's something that has awed me, their abilities in this engineering process and their enthusiasm for it."

While the classes are now very different from what she spent most of her career doing, Sanderson has never felt more in her element.

"I was cut out for this room," Sanderson said. "I'm a big do-it-yourself-er in my personal life, so working with all of the things in here is kind of second nature to me. My dad was the same way, so I learned a lot as a child, and I never shy away from a challenge myself."

Looking back on her path to where she is today, Sanderson also gives great credit to her fifth grade teacher at Greenville Christian Academy, Alberta Potter.

"She taught me compassion for the child," Sanderson said. "When I had her in the fifth grade, I knew I was loved and cared for. I knew she wanted the very best for us in the way she treated us with respect. I've always aspired to be like Ms. Potter, that teacher who really cares for her students."

Sanderson works now to keep that care for students and a desire to connect with them at the forefront of the philosophy she brings into the classroom every day.

"I want to be able to understand the human connection with my students. To be able to know about them more than just that they're my student in third period," Sanderson said. "I want to know their likes and dislikes, to understand their learning styles. That's what has always grounded me, to have that human element as a big part of my teaching."



EARLY COLLEGE

story & photography by lucas simonds

Innovative program entering its third year

A high school unlike any other in the county, the Pitt County Schools Early College High School is now entering its third year and is stronger than ever.

The innovative program offers students the chance to earn not only their high school diploma, but also an associate degree or two years' worth of college credits to transfer to a four-year school.

Better yet, this all comes at no cost to students accepted into the program.

Based on the campus of Pitt Community College, the school works in partnership with the college to allow students to take college level courses alongside their high school curriculum.

The early college is open to students from any area of the county, and rising freshmen from all middle schools are welcome to apply.

"We're looking for students that want to change their lives forever. We feel that's what we do here by offering this opportunity," said principal Wynn Whittington. "We're looking for students who are motivated, who want to experience something different."

In particular, the early college is focused on helping students who might not otherwise have the chance to attend college.

"We are looking for students who are the first generation in their family to attend college, students who are somewhat economically disadvantaged," Whittington said. "Right now, 97 percent of our students are first generation college."

Rather than only taking students who already earn high grades, the early college is a place to help students grow academically, Whittington added.

"They don't have to be an academic rock star or a straight A student to be here. For every straight A student we have we have two that aren't," Whittington said. "We've got students that came out of middle school with a 2.0 GPA and now they're successful here. We attribute their success to the fact that we're small and can provide them with additional support."

Starting with 75 students in 2015, the early college brought on another 75 in 2016 and again in 2017 for a total of 225 students.

Designed as a five-year program, the school will have a maximum of 375 students by the time the first class reaches graduation.

This small size, with average classes of 18-19 students, allows for strong support from teachers and is one of the strengths of the school that helps students succeed, according to Whittington.

"We like that it's small because we're really



able to build relationships with our students and get to know them on a level where we can support them not just academically, but socially, emotionally and physically," Whittington said.

The results of this atmosphere of support speak for themselves in the performance of the students so far, according to Whittington.

"Things have been very good here. Last year, we were an A school by the state standards, we exceeded growth, and we're on track this year to do it again," Whittington said. "Out of 150 students, 101 made the principal's list and/or the A-B Honor Roll. All of our sophomores are taking college classes as well, as many as six over the course of the year. It's been wonderful so far."

While the early college may lack many of the extracurricular activities available at other high schools, more are becoming available each year, and an added benefit is that the students have a direct role in how the school develops in those areas.

Students in the first year of the program had the chance to pick the school's mascot and design the logo and motto to accompany it. They chose the wolf as their mascot, and a growling wolf face now adorns the school sign along with their motto, "Different breed ... same pack."

The school has added extracurricular activi-

ties at the request of students, including the Teen Christian Association, Student Government Association, Science Olympiad and yearbook committee. Students are also able to take part in some Pitt Community College groups, such as the college student government association and the drama club.

Looking to the future, the sky is the limit as to what activities may be offered, according to Whittington.

"It will really be driven by student interest and who we can get to be the advisor for the club," Whittington said. "If students want to start a club, they're responsible for finding an advisor and organizing the meetings. Our philosophy is that they take ownership ... it gives them an opportunity to lead."

Now operating out of one modular unit on the college campus, the early college is preparing to add a second unit as it grows, and work is underway with Pitt Community College to construct a permanent building.

Looking to the future, Whittington is excited to see the early college and the partnership with Pitt Community College continue to grow.

"The college has been a phenomenal partner with the school system and our school," Whittington said. "I would put this partnership up against any other early college in the state."



Wahl-Coates Elementary School will become Pitt County Schools' School of Arts

story & photography by angela harne



the Art of learning



The school will highlight visual arts such as pottery, oil and watercolor painting and other media, music in the form of band, orchestra and chorus, and drama through theater and dance.





Pitt County Schools is launching four themed elementary schools. Wahl-Coates Elementary School will become Pitt County Schools' School of Arts.

"The curriculum will be a collaboration with regular education. Arts will be included in regular education and vice versa. There will be overlap. We won't be teaching in a box," said principal Marty Baker. "We don't want our students sitting all day. We want them moving and active so that they love to come to school. We will follow the state's curriculum, but will enhance the learning experience."

The school will highlight visual arts such as pottery, oil and watercolor painting and other media, music in the form of band, orchestra and chorus, and drama through theater and dance, Baker explained.

"Students will get exposure to instruments. They will learn to read music that is complex and abstract, which will teach them to listen," Baker said. "We want our students to have as many choices as possible."

Becoming a School of Arts was an easy choice for Wahl-Coates due to its close proximity to East Carolina University. The school already partners with the university's art and theater programs to offer enrichment programs to its students in grades 3-5, beginning piano lessons and storybook theaters.

The school also already offers orchestra, which is a mandatory class for students in grades 2-3, and in 2017-18 the school will launch a theater class for its K-5 students.

"We have found our orchestra students to be more engaged. They listen better and to each other. They are also training their ears to listen to harmonize. This is all a byproduct of the arts," Baker said.

The orchestra teacher offers an encore class twice a week to students to learn how to play strings, read music and understand beat patterns, Baker explained.

"It incorporates physics and the laws of motion. It blends the two, which is amazing. We are the only school that offers this, and the only school that has an after-school piano lessons program," Baker said, adding starting in 2017-18 Wahl-Coates will also take on the distinction as the only elementary school with a theater program.

In P.E. classes, students at Wahl-Coates receive more than the fundamentals of basketball. Students learn tumbling, dance and about movement from Brian Dildy, the school's P.E. teacher and 2016-17 Teacher of the Year. He has been hosting a tumbling show at the school for the past 19 years.

"Dance is important and something you can do every day of your life — old or young," Dildy said, adding he is excited that, as a School of Arts, Wahl-Coates can build on a foundation it has already established. "School should be a fun place to be, where our students can come and learn, and we need to make learning fun."

Music teacher Dawn Wilson is also enhancing the arts within Wahl-Coates and the community. Her students perform four times a year in the Greenville Mall's food court as part of Chick-fil-A's Family Night. All proceeds from the shows go directly to the school.

"The arts and art integration is my passion. My class is not just about music. I incorporate science, geography, patterns, vocabulary and dance. I want to bring the arts into all classrooms. Subjects are no longer compartmentalized. They are all intermingled, reaching a visual kinetics," Wilson said.

The arts are important, Baker said.

"Music and fine arts stimulates learning. It also exposes children to new experiences," he said.

story & photography by angela harne

HELEN BAGWELL

Great role models with good hearts led the way

Twenty-year-old Helen Bagwell has faced more tragedy and tribulations than most face in a lifetime.

At age 11, she lost both of her parents. Bagwell and her younger brother, Habatmu, were placed in an Ethiopian orphanage.

"It was not easy," Bagwell said. "When my mom died, I went on a downward spiral to a dark place. It was tough years, but when I got to know God, I was not down for a long time. God gave me His heart. God changed my life."

Holding onto her faith, Bagwell prayed for a bright future for her and her brother.

Her prayers were answered.

In October 2013, Mike and Lisa Bagwell of Greenville adopted Helen and her brother. The couple had a daughter near Helen's age.

"I was scared coming to America. I spoke little English. It was tough," Helen said.

Within a month of her arrival, her parents enrolled her at D.H. Conley High School, and she quickly felt at home.

"I was so excited to go to school. I know that may sound weird, but the nights were so long,

"I was so excited to go to school. I know that may sound weird, but the nights were so long, and when my alarm went off in the morning it was the best sound of my life."

and when my alarm went off in the morning it was the best sound of my life," Helen said. "Summers were hard for me when there was no school. I would have my dad take me, and we would sit in the parking lot."

America gave her the opportunity to change her life, Helen said.

"I had great role models who had good hearts and wanted me to be successful. Success takes hard work, but if you are willing to work hard, your steps will turn into success," she said. "I love America. The opportunities laid out are amazing, but you have to take a chance and put forth effort. People want things without effort."

Upon entering Conley, she knew success was her only endgame, and she was willing to put in the effort.

"My counselors and teachers had my best interest. They wanted me to learn and catch up. My ESL classes were really helpful to learn the culture and learn English," Helen said. "I could see the staff working hard every day. I soon realized that they're working hard for my success."

Her counselors encouraged her to get involved with extracurriculars. She joined the women's soccer team and ran cross-country. She missed states by one point when she earned a personal record, completing 3.1 miles in 20 minutes.

She also joined Conley's Bible Club after her art teacher encouraged her to do so.

"Bible Club was great. I loved hearing the word of God before class," she said. "I would pray for everyone. We are called to share love. Christ says everyone deserves

grace. Be graceful. Be like our Father, and love everyone. You can't hate people because they are different from you. This nation was founded on Christianity. Without Him, our lives would be miserable."

Helen strived to spread grace through Rachel's Challenge, which promotes anti-bullying.

"Just saying 'hi' to someone can make a world of difference. You don't know what someone is going through at school, home or work, but you can save a life just by saying 'hi.'"

High school can be challenging for some, Helen said. She knew of classmates who had contemplated suicide.

"I met a girl my junior year. Kids were picking on her, and she was miserable. It broke my heart. I started talking to her and sharing my clothes with her. She became happy and began to smile. Now she smiles all the time," Helen said.

Giving and receiving is what life is all about, she said.

"Being mean — the outcome is nothing. Being nice, you receive a great benefit," Helen said. "You are not promised your next minute, so why be rude and have a bad attitude? Being nice gives you a peace of mind. It only takes one person to say 'hi,' give a high-five or make a phone call to save a life."

Her junior year, Helen was named the D.H. Conley Viking of the Year. She graduated in 2016.

"I always loved Conley, and I would have loved to go to college there and work there," she said with a smile.

Helen is now a student at Pitt Community College majoring in business administration and is working to start Shine A Light, a Bible Club for college students. She wants club members to give back to the community through community service efforts, like road clean-ups or visiting senior citizens at retirement homes.

Helen is unsure what her future holds.

"I believe I could be a counselor. I counseled girls in Ethiopia to stand up for themselves, be strong and to believe in themselves. I would tell them, 'You need to respect yourself because if you don't no one would,'" she said.

She is also considering a career in nursing to continue to give back to others.



DEMI SMALLS

A perfect school works on developing the whole child

One South Central Class of 2017 graduate realized in her junior year she was not working at her highest potential.

Demi Smalls of Winterville was a straight-A student enrolled in academically and intellectually gifted classes. She was a member of STAND, LINK Crew and the National Honors Society and participated in Battle of the Books.

Despite her high achievement and active-ness in extracurricular activities, Smalls felt that she still was not fully engaged.

In spring 2016, Smalls was recommended by teachers to take the class Innovation I, which allows students to work independently and “reconnect with their natural curiosity, what they are interested in and self skills,” according to South Central’s instructional coach Elizabeth Martin.

In Innovation I, students have 12 weeks to work on a project of their choice and must present what they learned through a Think Tank. Innovation II allows students time to create a blog or electronic portfolio, and in Innovation III students complete an independent study where they learn project management, must volunteer off-campus and host a TED Talk-style presentation.

“I went from memorizing to having my curiosity piqued. I was asking questions and asking the ‘why’ behind assignments,” Smalls said.

In Innovation I, students are asked to pick a subject they are passionate about and create a project around it.

“My passion is education,” Smalls said.

Smalls is no stranger to the public school system. She attended Pitt County Schools most of her K-12 years, minus second grade when she lived in Connecticut. Her educational career began at W.H. Robinson and took her to Creekside Elementary School in first grade. She returned to Robinson her

third grade year, but spent fourth grade at Sadie Saulter and fifth grade at Elmhurst. Her middle school years were spent at A.G Cox Middle School, and she spent her high school years at South Central.

South Central only has four counselors for its 1,770 students. Smalls approached former principal Julie Cary about starting a Safe Way Keys program, where counselors and selected teachers would wear key-chains around their necks alerting students that if they had a problem and needed to talk to someone confidentially they could go to them.

“I was floundering myself. Mentally, I was super stressed. I was having problems at home, but we are trained, even if you’re having a rough day, to focus, and unless you have a breakdown, you must make an appointment with your counselor,” Smalls said. “Why not utilize our teachers, who ultimately are on the ground with us?”

Cary supported Smalls’ initiative, who entered her idea at SPAZZ Fest, which is similar to ABC’s “Shark Tank.” She placed second.

In addition to Safe Way Keys, Smalls developed a “perfect school” concept that centers on smaller class sizes to build personal relationships.

“Curriculums would be “less cookie cutter,” Smalls said.

“Your classes would tie into your passion. There would be no suspensions, no ISS, no tardies. There would be no lecturing and no standardized testing. You can learn more when you’re not memorizing things,” she said. “Students would learn valuable lessons, like how to balance a checkbook.”

The “perfect school” would track student success through quantitative data, Smalls explained.

“Not just numbers, but emotional aspects, like a student’s personality. The perfect school

works on developing the whole child. I think teachers would love to work in a perfect school,” she said.

Smalls completed Innovation I and II. By her senior year, she was the only Innovation III student at South Central. She volunteered at the Third Street Education Center three times a week and assisted students through



a tutoring program. She hosted her TED Talk presentation in May 2017.

“I have grown a lot since I started the class,” said Smalls, who earned a four-year fellowship to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

She plans to major in special education.

“No matter one’s circumstances, they deserve an education. Everyone deserves someone to be patient with them and give them attention,” Smalls said.

Martin is proud of Smalls.

“It is an honor for me to be part of the process with our kids and to see their transformation,” Martin said.

‘I went from memorizing to having my curiosity piqued. I was asking questions and asking the ‘why’ behind assignments.’



CREATE GREAT

The **LEADER** in Me!

story & photography by angela harne

Stokes School is a model Leader in Me school for the district. In its second year, Stokes is in a transformation process that is benefiting students and preparing them for their futures.

‘We want our students to understand their strengths and talents so they can find the leader within them and understand their greatness.’

- JENNIFER JAMES

Stokes School is a model Leader in Me school for the district. In its second year, Stokes is in a transformation process that is benefiting students and preparing them for their futures, according to principal Jennifer James.

The Leader in Me program redefines what school greatness means, represented through three overlapping circles: culture, academics and leadership. Stephen Covey’s “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” is a powerful framework used by Leader in Me schools to teach students essential leadership skills.

“We want our students to understand their strengths and talents so they can find the leader within them and understand their greatness,” James said.

Students in grades K-8 have many leadership opportunities at the school from car duty and morning announcements to serving as a school greeter, tour guide or on safety patrol.

As a Leader in Me school, each classroom tracks its data in reading and math.

“Students quickly learn that their success makes their class successful, which makes the school successful,” James said.

Second grade teacher Ashley Causey added, “Students sense their self worth. They take ownership of themselves and have pride in our school. They want to lead and they want to help, which is building their confidence — a life skill.”

Stokes is a rural school, in which 60 percent of the student population receives a free or reduced lunch.

“We are hoping to break the cycle. We want our students to know ‘my life doesn’t have to define me. Change starts within me,’” James said, explaining it starts with Leader in Me’s circle of influences. “Poor choices are within the circle of control. We want a student to understand that a mistake doesn’t define him, but he must own it and talk to me about it. There will be consequences, but he can set goals so it doesn’t happen again.

“We don’t want to tear a child down. We want to build them up with love and respect. Each day is a new day. We want to speak life into our kids. Some of our kids have baggage,” James said.

The mindset change within students and how tasks are now approached through Leader in Me is a “win-win,” according to fourth grade teacher Kimberley Gilbert.

“They realize ‘what I do matters. I have a role.’ When I ask them a question, they all raise their hands, not just one child. They are realizing that they don’t have to be afraid to answer, and that is part of building their con-

fidence,” Gilbert said. “Students are self-monitoring their behaviors and think in a positive way. They use proactive language, and choose how to respond. There is the circle of concern, which you can’t control, and the circle of influence that you can control — focus on yourself versus what others are doing.”

Since Leader in Me launched two years ago, administrators have seen a decrease in office referrals.

“Students strive to model good behavior. It is a competition,” Causey said.

James added, “Teachers have positive behavior charts, and our students are so proud of themselves. There has been a growth in their mindset. They know it is OK to fail. They must own it, and fix it.”

Most children are afraid to fail, James said.

“We are taking the fire and sting out of failure. We are all growing, and have to own our failures. Some of these habits, students are putting into practice for the first time because they hadn’t been taught them before, but we are building a community of lifelong leaders — effective, productive citizens,” Gilbert said.

Leader in Me is also developing 21st century workers, who are learning to listen and problem solve effectively and work cooperatively and collaboratively.

“I understand that life isn’t always fair, and you have to think about your actions and be proactive to make the right choice,” said rising sixth-grader Emma Grace Harris.





THE AHA! MOMENTS

story by
lucas simonds

Getting students excited about learning, while also preparing them for a bright future, is the goal of a new theme program at Eastern Elementary School.



Getting students excited about learning, while also preparing them for a bright future, is the goal of a new theme program at Eastern Elementary School.

One of four open enrollment elementary schools in the county rolling out a new theme this year, Eastern students will have the chance to focus in on learning in science, technology, engineering and math, also known as STEM.

To do this, school staff have been training on how to incorporate STEM lessons into their classrooms each day and how to tap into the students' interests.

"The old way of learning is an instructor at the front of the classroom, they provide instructions, and then the students do it," said Eastern Elementary principal Robert Johnson. "With STEM, the hope is that learning can be more student-driven, so that it's them exploring things and asking questions, and through that having more authentic learning."

The goal is to not only introduce the students to new and important concepts, but also to do so in a way that keeps them excited about learning.

"You're building on their interests, so they're going to be more actively engaged in what you're doing," Johnson said.

While the school will be adding a special STEM lab and a dedicated facilitator to help lead the program, the main goal is to weave the new type of instruction into every classroom in the school.

"What we see it as here, myself and my staff, is just making sure that in every classroom we have that more student-centered approach," Johnson said. "We want to make sure we're looking at things through a different lens than we are now."

Rather than replacing the core curriculum, Eastern staff will focus on combining and presenting the information in new ways.

"It will be about how we can intertwine our science and social studies curriculum within reading or within math to give it more real world applications," Johnson said.

Ultimately, these real world applications are the end goal of the new STEM theme. Staff hope to help their students connect what they are learning to their life outside the classroom.

"We want them to be able to tap into their creativity more, which allows them to be more engaged," Johnson said. "A lot of times now students will ask you, 'well, how does this apply to life outside of school?' So, if you can make that connection for them, then they'll buy into the learning. At the end of the day, they're who we serve, and we want to prepare them for the real world."

Looking farther ahead into the future, staff also want to prepare their students for whatever careers they might one day pursue.

"We're preparing students for jobs that aren't even created yet, so we've got to look outside of what we grew up in, and that's difficult for us as teachers," Johnson said. "We didn't get technology in our hands until we were teenagers, and now these kids have it when they're two."

"The world is different for them, so we have to adapt to the times and find a way to connect with students and make learning meaningful for them."

While introducing students to concepts in science and technology plays a role in this, teaching students how to work together and solve problems is just as important.

"We aspire to have more student collaboration, especially with younger students, they're very much looking within themselves and it's all about me, but if you can make it about the group and the greater good of everybody, it's powerful some of the things they can come up with," Johnson said. "When you get in the real world, you have to be ready to work with other people, and that's the biggest hang-up here at the elementary level. Pushing them past that comfort zone is where I see STEM taking us in the future, to be more collaborative and open to other people's ideas."

Eastern staff have been busy over the past school year, undertaking many hours of professional development courses with the East Carolina University College of Education to prepare for this new style of teaching and learning. Johnson and members of his staff have also paid visits to schools in the county and around the state that have implemented STEM programs to glean new ideas about how to make Eastern's program successful.

While the extra work has been taxing at times, seeing the look on the face of a student that has finally grasped a new STEM concept or has arrived at a new way to solve a problem will make it all worthwhile.

"We get into education because we get excited about that 'aha!' moment for students," Johnson said. "When you see them doing this type of project-based learning, you see it so much more and that excitement builds for educators as well. I'm excited to see where this takes us in the next few years."

"It's going to take a lot of partnerships between Eastern and the community to make it successful for our students, but I'm excited to see not only where it takes our students, but where it takes our staff and our community."

'We get into education because we get excited about that 'aha!' moment for students. When you see them doing this type of project-based learning, you see it so much more and that excitement builds for educators as well.'

- ROBERT JOHNSON



DOS MUNDOS

story & photography by angela harne

Belvoir Elementary's unique dual language program

Belvoir Elementary School enters its third year of Dos Mundos in the 2017-18 school year.

Dos Mundos teaches students Spanish and English through a 50/50 program, where students learn both languages, alternating between a Spanish-speaking classroom and an English-speaking classroom. The classroom setups mirror one another. The student's desk is located in the same location of each classroom, and the school supplies are set up identically — the only difference: in one classroom everything is identified in Spanish, while the other is solely English.

Three years ago, the school opened the program to 48 kindergarten students. With their parents' permission, these students will continue the dual-language program through the fifth grade.

Each year, the program is opened to another set of 48 kindergarten students. By the 2020-21 school year, students in grades K-5 will be enrolled in Dos Mundos.

Ainsley Harris teaches the English side of first grade, while Dania Ordonez teaches the Spanish side of K-1.

"Belvoir has a high Spanish-speaking population that we wanted to target. School administration found the program, and teachers willing to teach and launched Dos Mundos," said principal Alison Covington.

Spanish teacher Tatina Barquero hails from Costa Rica. She teaches Spanish to students in grades K-5, whether the student is enrolled in Dos Mundos or not.

Ordonez and Carolina Licona are from Honduras, and Marcela Mejia is from Colombia. Licona teaches the Spanish side of the Dos Mundos kindergarten program, and Mejia teaches first-graders. Briley Carol teaches the English curriculum to kindergarten students.

Ordonez taught English to students in Honduras for five years. When she heard about Belvoir's initiative, she knew she wanted to be a part of it.

"The United States has a different education system. It has been a great adventure, and challenging," she said. "I am amazed to see the students' effort to learn two languages. By the fifth month of school, they are speaking Spanish. It is wonderful."

Harris volunteered to teach Dos Mundos.

"It is a different type of teaching challenge that has bettered me as a teacher. This program is so beneficial to kids," she said, adding she is learning Spanish with her students. "Watching an English student speak in Spanish to a fluent Spanish-speaking student or a Spanish-speaking student speak and read English, you know their confidence is growing."

More than 50 percent of the student population at Belvoir School is Hispanic. Dos Mundos is not bridging a gap, but rather is serving as a continuation of learning, Harris said.

When a Dos Mundos student reaches the fourth or fifth grade, they will be bilingual and bi-literate, meaning they will be able to speak and write in both English and Spanish, Covington explained.

"There are so many benefits, advantages and more job opportunities to being bilingual and bi-literate," Covington said.

Ordonez added, "We need to be connected with more than one language."

Parents

are appreciative of the educational opportunities made available to their children also.

"Our parents are grateful and amazed their baby is bilingual," Harris said.

Ordonez added, "Our parents see it as a challenge their child needs and want to be in-touch."

Assisting their children with homework in just English-speaking classes can be a daunting task, let alone in a foreign language, but Dos Mundos provides online programs to assist, and all of the materials are user-friendly with photos, Covington explained.

Dos Mundos also stresses the importance of collaboration.

"Our Hispanic students help our English students and vice versa," Harris said.

Ordonez added, "There is a connection between classes. There is a bond. They are in this together. The cohorts are also in this together."

Covington said, "You have work together through life ... Dos Mundos is not just a curriculum, but culture."

Students in Dos Mundos look forward to coming to school.

"I like learning new stuff, like animals and places in English and Spanish. It is fun to have both languages. I like a challenge," said rising second-grader Kimiya Sutton.

Rising second-grader Francisco Correa once only had the opportunity to speak English and Spanish at home. Now he can do both.

"I really like our centers where we write or read or spell, and I like my teachers," he said.

Rising first-grader Mason Brown is improving his Spanish reading skills.

"I can talk in some Spanish and count in Spanish, but I'm working on reading," he said, as he showcased a piece of art his made that read "Yo puedo leer sobre los reyes." "That means 'I can read about the king.'"

Classmate and rising first-grader Kenneth Villeda's artwork stated, "Yo puedo leer sobre los leguetas."

"I read about lions," Villeda explained, adding he enjoys learning in both languages. "It is fun working in English and Spanish, and I like my teachers. They are nice and friendly."

Belvoir is the only school in Pitt County that offers a dual-language program.

"Enroll your child for an opportunity they can't get anywhere else. As a parent, you can give your child the world and watch them be successful. Adding another language can be so beneficial. I want to put my child in this program," Covington said.

GLOBAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

Elmhurst students embrace new languages, cultures

Worlds are colliding at Elmhurst Elementary School, where students have the chance to learn about a new language and cultures while keeping active and learning with their whole brains.

Elmhurst is one of four open enrollment elementary schools to have introduced a new theme for instruction. With the theme of "Global Health and Wellness," staff at Elmhurst hope to provide a unique experience for students through two main avenues.

The first, encompassed under "Global," is lessons in Spanish and the cultures of Spanish-speaking countries with Spanish teacher Maggie Elias.

"Our goal is to promote oral communication and learning about other countries," Elias said. "Children here understand that the Spanish-speaking world is diverse, and that's the cool thing about 'Global.' It opens their eyes a bit more, geographically."

Elias travels around to each of the school's classrooms, meeting with each for one 40-minute class period per week. The goal is that, by the time they leave the school, students will be able to read and write in Spanish fluently. The school media center is even adding a range of Spanish books in different Advanced Reader levels, meaning students will be able to earn Advanced Reader points in both languages.

Under "Health and Wellness," staff promote healthy activities in a variety of ways. Students can earn rewards for bringing healthy snacks to school or walking laps around the school's walking track, and a garden helps kindergarteners learn about growing their own healthy produce. The school is also partnering with East Carolina University and other organizations to bring in guest speakers to talk about exercise, health and life skills, including many East Carolina University athletes.

All together, the goal is to help students perform to the best of their abilities, according to principal Colleen Burt.

"When you eat healthy and you stay hydrated and you exercise you're more able to learn," Burt said. "If we can provide all of this at school, then we can help them get the most out of their education."

Tying everything together is the concept of whole brain teaching, a unique method of keeping students engaged and active in the classroom.

"It's all based on brain research and delivering short chunks of information based on their attention span," Burt said.

The length of the chunk goes up by one minute per year, meaning five-year-olds are



'We have high engagement. The kids are in charge of their learning, they're in charge of teaching each other. It's more student-led, and they love it.'

- AMY SLOAN

taught in five-minute segments, while nine-year-olds are taught nine minutes at a time.

"We teach in chunks and then have the students teach each other and collaborate," Burt said. "Then there's a lot of gestures, and the kids teach those to each other. It's all about keeping students engaged and active."

A major part of this change in style has been bringing in ball chairs, wobble chairs and other ways for students to move while they learn without distracting each other.

"Their movement is less distracting and they're able to focus more," said first grade teacher Amy Sloan. "You can tell when a child is starting to get a little unfocused because they start to move a little more, but it seems to really help them stay engaged in the classroom. You barely notice it and they're very in-tune to what you're doing."

In Spanish lessons, both sides of the theme come together in a fun way.

"Everything works together," Elias said. "When they're learning Spanish it's constant movement. They're out of their seats dancing and gesturing."

Outside of the weekly lessons, Elias also works with P.E. teachers to incorporate action words from Spanish into P.E. classes. "We do a lot of action verbs, so we'll talk about what we're doing and they'll utilize Spanish in their activities," Elias said. "They're building on Spanish through P.E. and dancing. I'm trying to hit every learning modality there is with language."

Seeing all of these new ideas come together in the classroom has already been very rewarding for teachers.

"We have high engagement. The kids are in charge of their learning, they're in charge of teaching each other. It's more student-led, and they love it," Sloan said. "You can see the difference between a lesson where you use whole brain teaching and one where you don't. Your kids learn so much more with whole brain teaching."

On top of all of this, Burt and her staff remain committed to keeping a strong sense of family alive at the school.

"We're a small school but one big family," Burt said. "Everybody is family here. When people walk in that's what we want them to feel. You know everybody's name and the relationships are easy to build because we're a good size."

AVID

story & photography by angela harne

Advancement Via Individual Determination

'We are trying to get our students in the habit of being organized and thinking ahead at a young age. Students learn how to keep a calendar and see that they have control over their success.'

- ALLISON SETSER

H.B. Sugg and Sam D. Bundy elementary schools are the only elementary schools in the district that serve as an Advancement Via Individual Determination or AVID school.

The schools are housed on a campus neighbored by Farmville Middle School and Farmville Central High School — both AVID schools — making the Farmville schools the only in the county to house an AVID feeder program, ac-

A mural of a Dogwood tree lines the hallway that joins the K-2 and 3-5 schools. Each leaf on the tree is the logo of college as a subtle reminder to students opportunities abound.

"We realize that all students do not have to go to college. Some will become farmers or plumbers, but they need to use our community college as a resource," Setser said, referring to the recently opened Pitt Community College Farmville Center located in the heart of downtown. "They can grow Farmville. They can stay here, and still get an education by learning a skill or trade."

AVID was piloted in Sam D. Bundy Elementary School's fourth grade classes during the 2016-17 school year. Six teachers guided 125 students to a new way of learning.

"We are trying to get our students in the habit of being organized and thinking ahead at a young age," Setser said.

"Students learn how to keep a calendar and see that they have control over their success. The kids are excited to know where to find their study guides and they know where their homework is."

Each student in the AVID program receives a binder, planner, dividers, pencil pouch and tabs. The binder is organized in the same manner for each child using a color coding system.

"We are seeing the benefits," Setser said, explaining more teaching is occurring in the classroom because there is less waiting for students to locate items.

AVID teacher Blair Phillips added, "When I tell students where to place an item in their binder, and then later ask them to take it out, they know exactly where to go. I don't hear, 'I lost it' or 'I can't find it' anymore, so we can move quickly and forward."

Her students are better note takers, which is helping with quiz and test results, and they are far better organized, Phillips said.

"AVID helps teachers be organized, too," she said.

Students set weekly goals and must complete a reflection writing piece to explain how they met their goals or why they did not — another attempt to plan for their futures, take responsibility for their actions, and stay organized and on track.

H.B. Sugg Elementary School also partners with Farmville Middle School to expose its K-2 students to AVID through a mentoring program. Middle school students come to the elementary school and read to the students and assist with their writing skills.

"Our students see the middle school students as leaders," Setser said. "We want to build continuity between Farmville's schools."

In the 2017-18 school year, Bundy's fourth and fifth grade students, approximately 350 students, will participate in the AVID program. The ultimate goal is for students in grades K-5 to participate.

It costs approximately \$30 per student for the AVID materials. School staff strives to provide the needed materials to each student on the first day of school.

"Not all of our students can afford the materials, and we want them all to have the same three-inch binder and same materials," Setser said. "The district is invested in us."

The Farmville Board of Commissioners also allocates funds toward the AVID program. In year one, the town donated \$500 to the pilot program, and in the 2017-18 fiscal year budget allocated \$4,000 to the program.



ording to Allison Setser, the principal of H.B. Sugg and Sam D. Bundy elementary schools.

Several elementary schools throughout the district were assigned themes, including arts, global health and wellness, STEM and fast track. Setser wanted her school to also participate, so she pitched the concept of becoming an elementary-based AVID school to Superintendent Ethan Lenker, which was approved.

AVID teaches students organizational skills from responsibility and how to take notes to how to start thinking about their futures. The program exposes students to a multitude of career options and colleges.

WELCOME HOME

Wellcome Middle's house program builds relationships

Students are making connections across grades and helping each other succeed at Wellcome Middle School.

The school's house program splits the student body and faculty into one of four "houses" that meet regularly and work together to earn points toward a prize at the end of the year.

Both students and teachers are assigned to one of the four houses — Animus, Magnus, Veza or Huruma — through a random selection process.

The teachers and students in the houses then meet regularly throughout their time at Wellcome and work to build relationships that can help everyone to be successful in school.

"The house system allows students to form relationships across grade levels. Everyone in the building is in a house and they're all intertwined," said Principal Kim Harris. "It also provides for faculty involvement with students on a different relational level, positive peer pressure and mentorship."

Each house meets together during House Fridays, a time once a month to work on building those relationships and learning skills outside the classroom that students will need in life.

"Each adult in the house is paired up with 10 to 12 students in a small group, and they might work on character education or other social-emotional skills," Harris said. "It's also when they have peer mentors and work with each other."

Outside of their regular meetings, the houses also now serve as groups for school activities, such as assemblies.

"The kids really like it. Typically when you have an assembly you're placed with your current class, but we try to do things now that, any activity you have, they get to participate through their house," Harris said.

Students are especially eager to be with their houses for activities because there is almost always the chance to earn house points toward a big reward.

"They earn points in the house system in this yearlong competition," Harris said. "They really get into earning points for their houses."

Points are awarded for a wide range of activities both in and outside of the school and are designed to keep students interested in all aspects of their education.

"Points are earned through academics, athletics, community involvement and parent involvement," Harris said. "Staff have ways to earn points by visiting other classes, coming to events students have. It's kind of like buy-in for everybody because everyone holds everyone else accountable for the points."

At stake in the competition is the now-coveted house cup.

can also earn points for going out and doing community involvement and things outside of school," Harris said. "It's about making an all around whole child."

Given the competitive spirit of most students, good sportsmanship is also a major focus in the race for the house cup.

"We teach them to be good competitors," Harris said. "There's a right way to support your group and to be respectful to others as well, and we work on that with them."

Helping to build the group support within the houses, each has a unique color, motto and key virtue that they focus on.

In Animus, the purple house, the focus is on leadership with the motto "Excellence is a Habit!"

Magnus, the blue house, focuses on community with the motto "Loyalty and Integrity Forever."

Veza, the gold house, is all about connections with the motto "I Shall Find a Way or Make One."

Rounding out the group is Huruma, the red house, which focuses on compassion with the motto "Live Well, Laugh Often, Love Always."

These unique features of each house help to build the sense of pride and community among the house members and help to give them a sense of identity outside of their academic or athletic performance.

"This gives everybody a sense of belonging," Harris said. "You don't have to make straight A's to be a part of the house system. You don't have to be athletic to be a part of the house system. Everybody brings their own uniqueness to the program and can help their house earn points. They all put a lot of work into it in their own ways."

While it adds extra work on top of the already busy schedule of running a school, seeing the excitement of the students that comes from the house program makes it all worth it, according to Harris.

"They are very eager. They are always asking when the next House Friday is, and you have some explaining to do if you reschedule a house event," Harris said. "Everyone from the students to the teachers puts a lot of work into this, and it's great to see the results."



"At the end of the year they can win this big house cup," Harris said. "They can have bragging rights throughout the year as they see their totals, and then there's the big prize. It's fun to see the competitive spirit."

The drive to earn points not only keeps students engaged and eager to come to school, but it can also motivate them to work harder at their studies.

"Kids get points for good grades and for doing homework. Academically there's a lot of ways that you can earn points," Harris said.

Combined with points for community service and other activities outside of the classroom, the system is another way to work toward creating well-rounded students.

"They encourage each other and ask what they can do to earn more points because they

story by lucas simonds

AP CAPSTONE PROGRAM

J.H. Rose is one of the few schools in the state to offer program

'It exposes students early to what a college-level course is like in both research and writing ... they really have an opportunity to learn the skills of presentation, explaining what it is they've learned in the process of what they're studying.'

Students at J.H. Rose High School have a unique opportunity starting this year to better prepare themselves for college and life after high school.

Rose is one of the newest schools in the state to offer the College Board's AP Capstone Program for the 2017-18 school year. Only 14 other high schools in North Carolina offered the program the previous year.

The program is focused on helping students develop skills in research and collaboration that will be vital to their future success.

In their junior year, students may now take the AP seminar course, which includes a team project and an individual, research-based essay. In their senior year, the AP research course is all about an individual research project, requiring them to not only write an academic paper, but also defend their research in a formal presentation.

Students who take these two classes along with any four other AP courses can then graduate with a capstone diploma to show their extra effort and readiness for college.

Neither the AP seminar nor the AP research course is tied to any particular subject, meaning students are free to dive deep into any topic they would like to research. This is one of the many highlights of the program for principal Monica Jacobson, who is excited to offer this new opportunity to students.

"I like the flexibility of the program. We're not telling the students this is what you have to focus on. It's allowing them to pick an area they have an interest in or learn more about something they think they might be interested in," Jacobson said. "It also promotes our AP program as a whole. They have to take those four other AP classes, so it again gives our students the opportunity to explore and develop more rigor in their coursework."

For school counselor Christa Monroe, the chance to help better prepare students for college is invaluable.

"It exposes students early to what a college-level course is like in both research and writing ... they really have an opportunity to learn the skills of presentation, explaining what it is they've



learned in the process of what they're studying," Monroe said. "It gets them prepared early for what to expect once they get to college."

The courses provide experience on both sides of the spectrum between individual and group work, both of which are needed in college and in the working world, according to Jacobson.

"The collaboration is a big component of it," Jacobson said. "They do that in the seminar course, but then it becomes more individualized as they go on."

The chance to hone in on an interesting topic and learn independently is just as valuable, Monroe said.

"They're going to gain skills in independent learning, understanding the process of research, and being able to narrow down for themselves their area of interest," Monroe said. "It's going to require them as they move into research to narrow down their thought processes and things that they're interested in. It's going to give them those skills early on. They're learning the ability to collaborate, but in that, also working independently."

Just as a student might find an interesting topic they could pursue into college, they may also discover something they thought was interesting is not what they want to pursue, Monroe added.

"While it may be something they plan to further their education in, it may also be something to help them decide maybe not," Monroe said. "They may think now they want to go into one career, but this could help them realize that isn't for them."

Alongside this, the courses give the students the chance to learn skills in solving problems and thinking in new ways that will be valuable no matter what course they take in life, according to assistant principal Lorenzo Lee.

"This gives the students the opportunity to think critically. We're not necessarily teaching them what to think, we're teaching them how to think and giving them an opportunity to explore through inquiry and making sure they can think critically," Lee said. "They can experience solving real-world problems ... it will all depend on their interests, but they could, for instance, research the cure for a particular disease and have the chance to defend their research."

In the medical field in particular, but also other areas, staff hope the courses might tie into existing opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience outside of school.

"We have the Brody research program that some of our students have been involved in, and that would be an awesome opportunity for some of them, especially some of those students who want to go into the medical field," Monroe said. "It's already there, so it's just a matter of maybe connecting the dots for them to take it that step further."

Within the school as well, students will have the support of Rose's existing AP program and instructors to guide them in their learning, no matter what area they choose.

"We have a big faculty and we have a strong AP program already, so no matter what area they decide to do their research in, there will be somebody on staff that can assist them," Jacobson said.

The AP Capstone program is open to all students starting with the AP seminar course in their junior year.

ON THE FAST TRACK

Head start program available for South Greenville students

Students have the chance to get a head start on learning each year with an innovative program at South Greenville Elementary School.

The Fast Track program is available during the summer to any students that wish to take an early jump into the subjects they will learn the next school year.

The 30-day program starts two weeks after the end of the regular school year and features not only regular days of instruction, but also multiple exciting field trips.

The goal of the program is to give students something to do over the summer that will help them head into the next grade full ready to learn, according to Principal Lakeesha Lynch.

"They come back and they start in their new grade level, so if they were in first grade at the end of the school year, they start out in second grade in Fast Track with their new curriculum," Lynch said. "Research shows that students regress over the summer, especially if they don't spend any time reading over the summer. So, this helps them retain that information so that the teachers don't have to spend the first month of school re-teaching what they learned at the end of the last school year."

Keeping learning going like this helps students learn more each year rather than needing to re-learn the same materials, and, ultimately, helps them perform better on tests, according to Lynch.

While academics are the focus of Fast Track, days during the program still function much like regular school days, with time for a variety of classes to round out the experience.

"They have the reading, math, science and social studies, but we also focus on character development and the overall child," Lynch said. "We have art classes, we have character education classes, we have physical education classes to make sure they stay physically active. It really focuses on the whole student."

Unlike the regular school year, the Fast Track program features weekly field trips to provide experiences the students might not get otherwise, which are an important part of learning about the world.

"Experiences help us make connections, increase our vocabulary and level the playing field," Lynch said. "You can't truly make connections and understand some things unless you've had the experience."

Field trips also help to make sure Fast Track students do not feel as though they have been deprived of a summer break.

"I don't think any child feels like their summer is taken away," Lynch said. "We go on a field trip every single week. Although they were in school, I don't think they felt like they were truly in school because they had so many experiences."

Far from simply fun activities, however, the field trips all play a part in the learning experience as well.

"Each trip is something we're able to incor-

'Research shows that students regress over the summer, especially if they don't spend any time reading over the summer. So, this helps them retain that information so that the teachers don't have to spend the first month of school re-teaching what they learned at the end of the last school year.'

- LAKEESHA LYNCH

porate into the curriculum," Lynch said. "Last year when we went to see 'Finding Dory' they came back and did a writing activity about it to focus on writing skills. One week we went to the beach, and that focused on science and ecosystems."

The Fast Track period is also a time to help students learn more about technology by weaving it into classes in a new way.

"We really focus on incorporating technology into the curriculum, and not just for remediation like it is often used," Lynch said. "They are able to use technology to create different things and learn in new ways."

So far, students who have taken part in the program have had overwhelmingly positive experiences.

"It has been awesome. We have been able to have very small class sizes and to focus on

individual student needs," Lynch said. "The students have really seemed to enjoy it."

The program can also be a great benefit to parents, who can have a hard time finding things for their children to do over the summer.

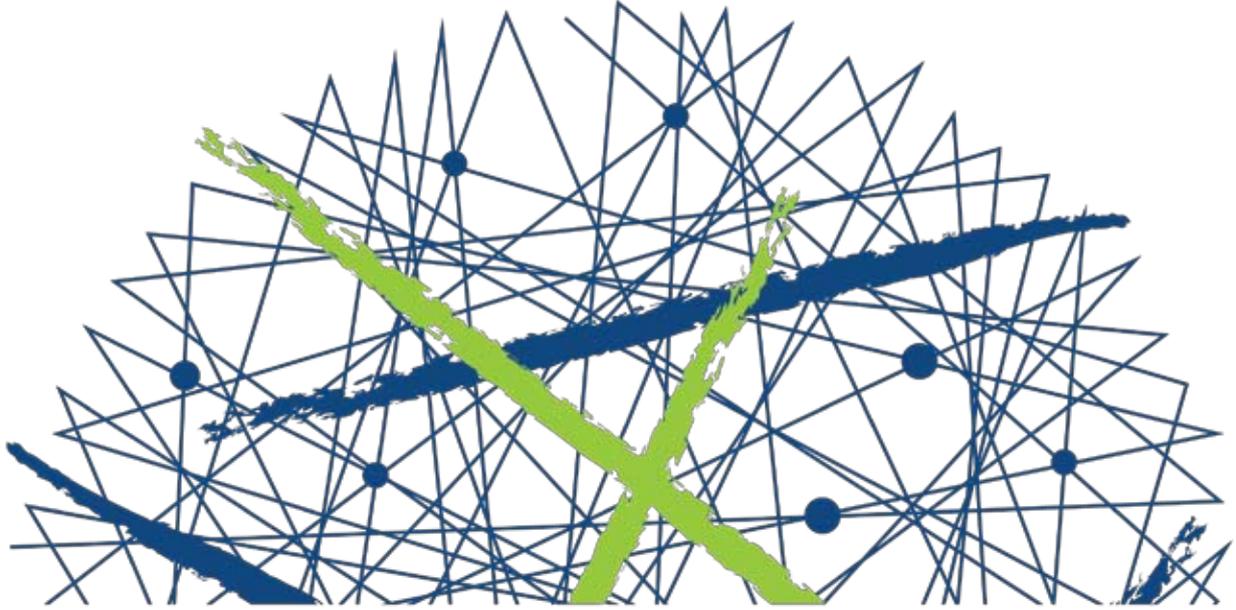
"It gives them something rather than sitting at home or at a daycare all day. They're learning still, but they're also having fun," Lynch said. "It's the best of both worlds."

Along with the Fast Track program, Lynch and her staff have been working on a revamped positive behavior interventions and supports program to help make the learning environment at school as healthy as possible all year.

"We had an extremely high suspension and referral rate, so we've really tried to focus on positive reinforcement," Lynch said. "Students get a weekly reward from a special 'store' where they can select fun things. They also get monthly rewards and nine-weeks rewards. The monthly rewards are things like a school dance or a movie with popcorn, while the nine-weeks rewards are even bigger, something like an East Carolina University basketball game."

"Referrals are down, which means suspensions are also down, and that's great because they can't learn if they aren't here. So, it's been good to see the progress there."



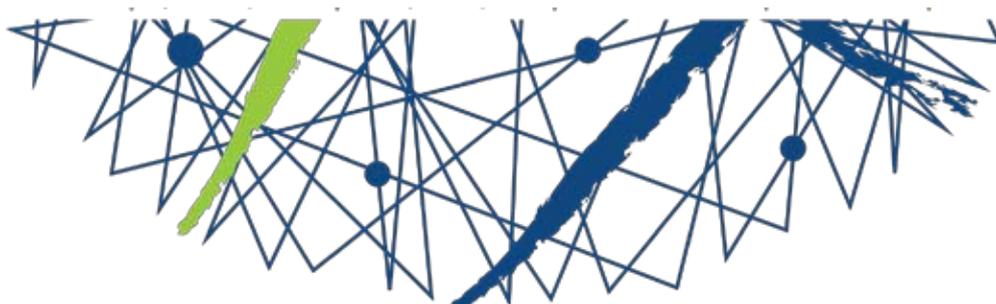


WE MAKE Connections

story & photography by lucas simonds



A program pioneered at South Central High School has now grown into a series of countywide offerings reaching all the way down to elementary school to provide stepping stones into the wide world possibilities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math or STEM.



In 2008, students at South Central formed a team — the Falconators — to take part in the FIRST Robotics Competition, an international program in which high schoolers build robots and pit them against each other in an arena to complete tasks such as traversing difficult terrain and obstacles, collecting balls and tossing them at targets or climbing ropes.

From that beginning, the program has since expanded in Pitt County to two teams — Pitt Pirates and Boneyard Robotics — open to students from all public high schools in the county, as well as private and home school students.



While the program centers around designing, building and operating the robots in competition, members of the teams are also tasked with other duties such as marketing and fundraising or safety compliance, rounding out the experience with a wide range of skills applicable in many areas of life.

This is ultimately the goal of the program, to equip students with skills they can use not only in the pursuit of STEM careers, but in any professional setting and in any career that might be possible in the future.

"We don't know what jobs these kids need to walk into 10 years from now. So, instead of teaching them set skills or facts, we're teaching them how to think creatively, how to be innovative and how to go outside of the box," said FIRST N.C. President Marie Hopper. "It's these students who will create the next big

companies, invent the next big gadget. These are the students who will find the answers to Alzheimer's and cancer. They're developing skillsets for the future jobs we don't know will exist ... it's so much more than just robots."

Talking to students who take part in the program, that phrase comes up again and again, and it is clear the message and the importance of what they can learn from robotics has sunk in.

"It's not all about robots," said Sid Agarwal, a South Central graduate and former captain of Pitt Pirates. "I've also learned how to manage people ... We work with a big group, so trying to keep everyone together has taught me a lot. I also make the gearboxes for the robot, and prior to this I had no idea how to do that. It's an amazing feeling to learn what we learn here, and I know for sure I want to go to college to be a mechanical engineer."

Others, such as Ayden-Grifton High School student Daphne Meyer, agree that they enjoy learning new technical skills through robotics.

"I'm awful at technology, but I learned how to use Solidworks, which is the program we use to design the robots, and I learned how to use a wrench, a nail gun, it's nice," Meyer said. "It's made me a lot more interested in going into a STEM field when I'm older. I'm waiting to narrow that down, but I find science very interesting."

Alongside this, the chance to make new friends and learn to work as a team is equally valuable.

"My favorite part about all of this is the connections we make. I've been in this since the sixth grade and I've made a lot of friends that I never would have made otherwise, from other schools here and also from Raleigh, Houston, Israel, from all over the place," said D.H. Conley student Todd Stancil. "And, you keep those connections because you have this thing in common through robotics."

This combination of teambuilding and learning new skills is what makes the robotics program so valuable to students, according to Ann McClung, a program mentor.

"They build a core relationship with others who have similar interests, we're a family," McClung said. "They also learn about STEM careers and realize how fun it can be. And it helps improve their skills in the classroom as they rise to the challenge and improve themselves."

Ultimately, this experience is good not only for the students, but also for the society and economy they will become a part of after school, McClung added.

"It's all about getting these kids engaged because eastern North Carolina needs what we're doing," McClung said. "The biggest monetary contributors in eastern North Carolina are pigs and turkeys, and it's very important to get these kids thinking about how they can still be involved in agriculture but they can be the one programming a tractor or analyzing satellite data or figuring out what chemicals work best on the crops ... we need to get all of these young minds ready so that

they can be a part of supporting the new information and technology economy."

Looking outside the high schools, in the years since the robotics program began in Pitt County, a series of feeder programs have been developed to start students even earlier down the path toward STEM.

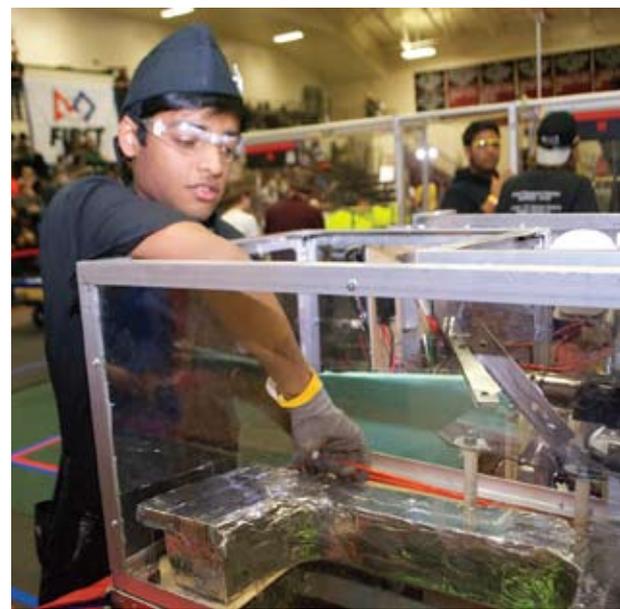
Programs such as Robox Sumo and FIRST LEGO League introduce key concepts to middle schoolers that can later be developed in FIRST Robotics. In Robox Sumo, students build robots out of cardboard and attempt to push competing robots out of a circle. FIRST LEGO League utilizes LEGO Mindstorms kits to complete challenges in a competition. This is now being expanded with more LEGO Mindstorms kits and programmable Sphero robots being provided in elementary and middle schools.

This is all part of an increasing effort throughout the county to train students how to solve problems and think technically and collaboratively, according to Tim DeCresie, the director of digital learning for Pitt County Schools.

"What we have to train them to do is to be problem solvers," DeCresie said. "Through that ability, it opens up any job, even ones we don't know about yet ... they have to be able to collaborate as well as work independently and do their own research because the answer won't be in a book."

These efforts also tie in with Project MERC, a summer program designed to help under-represented groups become more involved in STEM. This again feeds into the idea, that more than anything, students need to learn how to think and find answers for themselves to be successful.

"Their solutions they come up with are more powerful than being told how to approach a problem. It's good that we're all encouraging to find answers to questions they come up with," said Jed Smith, the organizer of Project MERC. "If they don't have the skills to be able to assess a problem and come up with solutions then we're not really preparing them for what they're going to see."



A.G. COX MIDDLE SCHOOL

A.G. Cox Middle School strives to promote inclusion and respect. It is the only school in the district with a Peer Helpers program, which partners middle school students with students with special needs.

"It is an incredible program," said assistant principal Linda Brantley, explaining Peer Helpers is an elective class, and their teachers nominate the students selected. "The students model appropriate behavior and social skills. They help the students with schoolwork and games. It is an amazing social and academic program."

A.G. Cox's student population during the 2016-17 school year had 96 exceptional children — 22 of whom were in contained classrooms.

Peer Helpers makes students more empathic, according to Brantley.

"It is neat to see our students in a different role. They are good motivators," she said. "Our special needs students look forward to seeing their peer helper. Students tend to listen better to their peers than to teachers at times."



Exceptional children teacher Sarah Williams added, "If an adult spoke to the student about something there may be a breakdown, but if a student does it they are more receptive. It is amazing to watch."

The Peer Helpers assist in classrooms, Adaptive PE classes and inclusion music classes.

"In Adaptive PE, students model activities for them and make modifications as needed. In our inclusion music classes, they perform world drumming where our students sit side by side," Brantley said, adding

the program has truly been beneficial to students. "Our special needs children have made incredible, flexible growth because of their peers."

Social skills have also increased.

"They will be walking down the hallway and give each other a high-five," Brantley said. "Our peer program is my favorite thing in our school. We promote inclusive environments and friends stick up for each other."

Rising eighth-graders Griffin Brantley and Trace Baker served as Peer Helpers for the past two years, and both are glad they were selected.

"It looked like fun, and they needed friends," Baker said of the special needs children.

Griffin added, "We are able to stick up for them, and I've made a lot of friends through this program."

One friend is rising ninth-grader Adrian Lewis, who is autistic.

"I like my friends and school and look forward to seeing my peer helper," Lewis said with a huge smile.

AYDEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

"We are truly a community school. We strive to foster a home and school relationship, bridging the gaps with our parents. We want our parents to know they can reach out," said principal Cornelia Cox.

Katie Eure, the mother of first-grader Lilly Beth, 7, knows the staff at Ayden Elementary School truly care about her child and the other students in their care.

In early 2017, Lilly Beth was playing on the playground. She did not feel well. Her classmate noticed Lilly Beth was not acting like herself and told their teacher assistant, Christy McLawhorn.

McLawhorn is one of

the school's first responders. The school's first responders know CPR and can act as the school nurse's aides to assist with asthma attacks, nose bleeds, insulin shots, allergic reactions and more.

Lilly Beth could feel her heart beating in her chest and ears, she told McLawhorn.

She was taken to school nurse Shelly Merrill, who determined Lilly Beth's heart rate was 240. It should have been less than 100.

Her mother was immediately contacted and transported her daughter directly to their pediatrician.

"This was a life or death situation. They saved her life," Cox said.

The next few weeks were a tailspin. Lilly Beth saw a cardiologist, who began to monitor her heart. Eure worked with Merrill and established a "plan of action" for her daughter. Approximately 10 percent of Ayden Elementary students have a medical action plan.

A pulse oximeter machine was purchased immediately following Lilly Beth's first episode.

She had another episode at school.

"It was worse this time," Eure said.

Lilly Beth's

teacher Tammy Foster noticed Lilly Beth's symptoms were similar to someone with supraventricular tachycardia or SVT. Foster has SVT.

Lilly Beth was transported to the emergency room this time and diagnosed with SVT.

Her third episode occurred at school when she was reading a book. EMTs were called on-site. She underwent surgery Feb. 28, 2017 and returned to school March 6, 2017.

"The staff has been amazing from the janitors to the principal," Eure said, adding the way the staff handled her daughter's situation only solidified her decision to stay at Ayden Elementary School.

Lilly Beth attended a Christian preschool, and Eure debated keeping her child in private school. She choose public school, and before the first day of school when she read a Facebook post from the principal asking for prayer over Ayden Elementary School's classrooms it "blew her mind," she said.

"There is a big line between school and church, but to know Mrs. Cox is a God fearing woman praying over the school and her students, I knew I made the best decision," Eure said, adding she will soon be moving to a new school district in Pitt County. "There is no reason to switch schools. This is where we belong. This is my family. This is home."



AYDEN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Ayden Middle School's STEM lab is opening doors for students who want to pursue a career in science, technology, engineering or math.

"We want to teach our students skills for their future; Number one being the ability to work together. Partner work is required," said principal Jeff Theus.

The lab is open to students in grades 6-8. It features various stations, including sustainable agriculture, energy power and mechanics, electricity, CNC manufacturing, logic and reasoning, robots, computer graphics, chemical math, horticulture, applied physics and heat/energy. Partners spend four weeks at each station.

At the sustainable agriculture station, students observe seed growth and conduct pH, nitrogen and erosion tests. The energy power station teaches students about renewable energy. On the mechanics side, students learn how to connect wires, like for a police car siren.

Watts and voltages are taught at the electricity station, and at the CNC manufacturing station, students review programming specs, including one for boat lifts.

Logic and reasoning deals with puzzles and problem solving, and the robot station focuses on programming a system that results in the robot moving.

The computer graphics station allows students to create animation, and at the chemical math station students create silly putty and golf ball tees. Students are also creating packaging material used in toys for CMI Plastics, an Ayden-based plant.

The horticultural station allows students to grow plants and lima beans. At the physics station, students work with magnets and lasers. The heat and energy station teaches students how peanuts can be used as fuel.

"The kids work independently, and the teacher acts as the facilitator. He will start them thinking, but won't tell them the answer," Theus said.

Students are learning "how to work with others — soft skills — cooperation, communication and problem-solving," according to STEM teacher Jason Wade.

Interested in the science field, rising eighth-grader Jaisha Smith found the STEM class "cool."

"We are always doing something. It is not boring. It is difficult, but I like a challenge," said rising eighth-grader Gabe Munoz.

Rising eighth-grader Mackenzie Clark added, "We learn something new every day."



AYDEN-GRIFTON HIGH SCHOOL

Students are individuals. Not all will take the same paths, but it is the hope of the staff at Ayden-Grifton High School that each will reach their fullest potential.

Connor Brown, a class of 2017 graduate, took advantage of the numerous opportunities his Charger family offered.

"Charger staff are passionate, and we have a good community around us. We are a community school, and our local of-

ficials and leaders have an active role at our school," Brown said.

A member of the JROTC, Brown served as vice president of both the Student Government Association and National Honors Society, and was one of the school's first graduates of the LINK Crew, a peer mentoring program that assists students with the transition from middle school to high school and provides a chance to volunteer in the community.

In 2016, during the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, the LINK Crew conducted area cleanups, held supply drives and painted homes.

The school's JROTC is heavily involved in the communities of Ayden and Grifton. Cadets participate in local Veterans Day ceremonies, volunteer at the Veterans Home in Kinston and host local care package drives for troops overseas.

Brown earned a four-year Army ROTC scholarship. He will attend Vanderbilt in fall 2017.

For rising senior Marissa Borden, the road to success was not as easy.

She skipped class a lot her freshman year, and eventually was kicked out of school. Borden had chosen to come to Ayden-Grifton High School, an open enrollment school, but, having been kicked out, had to return to her home school.

She would later be suspended from that school.

Borden returned to Ayden-Grifton High School her junior year and begged principal Chena Cayton to allow her a second chance.

"I woke up and was doing better. I stopped being stupid," said Borden, who had struggled with a drug addiction and went to rehab to straighten herself out. "If I didn't get that second chance, it would have been bad. Dr. Cayton had faith in me. She had hope in me, and I think I'm making her proud."

Borden is now enrolled as a dual enrollment student allowing her to earn high school and college credits. She has already secured a \$1,000 Visions scholarship through Pitt Community College.



BETHEL SCHOOL

Bethel School is the heart of the community, according to principal Jeremiah Miller.

Alumni remain connected to the school either as members of the community or as staff at their alma mater.

Alumni Shelley Tripp and Kelli Peel now teach at the school they attended, and at least one teacher per grade level resides in Bethel.

Then there are teachers like Elaina Wingfield, an English and social studies teacher who commutes two hours each way from her home just to teach at Bethel School.

"Once you come to Bethel, you want to stay at Bethel — you become Bethel," Wingfield said. "The administration is very supportive of its teachers and different ideas and approaches in the classroom."

In addition, Bethel residents are invested in the school.

"Whether they have a child here or not, the community supports our school through sports or community events," Wingfield said.

The school hosts an annual Community Day, which includes school beautification projects.

"All of the community comes to help. They value our education," said rising seventh-grader Cadence Mundell, the 2016-17 Student Government Association secretary.

Local churches are also huge supporters of Bethel School. Bethel Baptist Church and Bethel United Methodist Church members deliver backpacks filled with food every Friday for students to take home over the weekend to ensure they are fed.

"Hungry kids can't learn," Wingfield said, adding most teachers have a stash of snacks ready for students Monday morning when they arrive following the weekend.

The staff truly cares about their students and their successes, Miller said.

"Bethel School is Pitt County Schools' best kept secret," he said. "We have a low student to teacher ratio, and our teachers have relationships with all of their students. They know them personally and academically, and communicate well with their parents," Miller said.

Wingfield added, "I teach middle school,

but I know first graders and their whole family. That is what is great about being at a small school, I can get to know my students and their families. At a school with 700 students that is impossible."

Bethel School's average class size is 17. The student population, preK-8, is approximately 300.

"It is easier to learn one-on-one and get individual help," said rising ninth-grader Samuel Tripp, the 2016-17 Student Government Association vice president. "Bethel is a great school. The work may be dull, but our teachers make it fun. We are not just sitting at our desks. We are having fun and learning."

Staff aims to provide a variety of opportunities for students during school and after hours, Wingfield said.

"We want our students active and engaged and ready to learn," Wingfield said.

The school offers middle school sports and a variety of clubs and electives, including LEGO Club, Math Masters, Battle of the Books, band, chorus and orchestra, art club, SGA, Go Grow and more.

Bethel School is also an open enrollment school, meaning students who live in another school boundary within Pitt County may choose to attend.



C.M. EPPES MIDDLE SCHOOL

Makerspace classes provide hands-on instruction and teach students how to problem solve. C.M. Eppes' maker space opened in the 2015-16 school year in the media center, expanding instruction and technology.

There is a direct correlation between the school's STEM program and the makerspace. Eppes' Go Grow and AIG students utilize the space for innovation and creation. The innovation class also utilizes the space with hands-on learning stressing life skills, while building the students' self-esteem.

"The brain doesn't work if you succeed. When you lose, the brain works. If you fail, the question becomes 'why didn't we achieve?'" said Charles Payne, the instructor of the innovation class, where students must build miniature vehicles that operate by a balloon, construct cornhole boards, wire lamps and build grills. "They must determine the problem and find a solution."

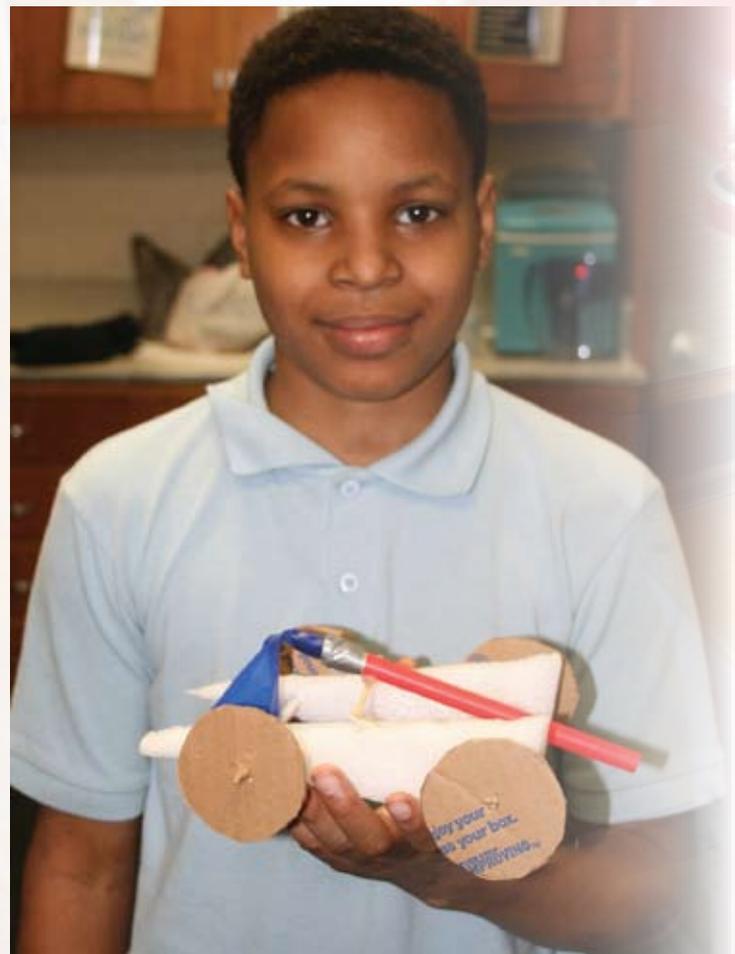
The maker space features 3D printers, a MakerBot digitizer, a green room and an iMAC.

"Our students are using real world skills. They must create an innovative solution to a problem — locally or nationally. It must be something they are passionate about," said media coordinator Amelia White. "It is awesome how big their ideas are."

Students must pitch their creation to their teacher, and then complete research work before creating a mini model of their idea.

Educators are preparing their students for 21st century jobs.

"It is phenomenal what I see. Kids are interested in learning. They are naturally inquisitive, and the makerspace opens up their minds," said principal Charlie Langley.



CHICOD SCHOOL



Chicod School is rich in history, and staff strive to celebrate the past and teach students to do the same.

The school, which was built in 1929, hosts an annual History Day.

"There is a long and proud history here. Four generations attended our school, and now some teach here. This is a true community school," said principal Mike Pollard. "To have a history program is just another piece of the fabric. We value history, and our own."

In celebration of History Day, the school participates a nationwide contest, in which eighth graders must select a topic, create a thesis statement and spend the school year researching the topic to defend the thesis.

"The topic selected is based on the student's interest. If a student says they want to research the plague, that is such a broad topic, so I'll ask them, 'What about the plague interests you?' 'What aspect of it — the science and technology, the geographies, politics, religion?' There are numerous vantage points," said eighth grade social studies teacher Jennifer Attardi.

Once the topic is narrowed down, the student must then submit a paper, design an exhibit or create a documentary, drama or website.

"This project teaches students not just how to read, but primary sources, documents and historical impacts," Attardi said.

The 2016-17 theme, "Taking a Stand in History," required students to select a person, organization or event and explain how it changed history through someone taking a stand.

One student selected to focus on the Civil Rights Movement, in particular the children's march.

"Children got the message out about protest plans through the radio on 'Jive Talk,' like today's Snapchat," Attardi said. "Children protested and left school and were arrested. It is cool a teenager wanted to study how kids could effect change."

Other topics included the Hippie Movement, and how it affected the Vietnam War and voting rights and Helen Keller and her stand for the deaf and blind that led to the Human Rights Movement, which resulted in the Disability Act.

Two students tackled personal subjects, including Agent Orange, which touched the lives of one student's family member, and the World War II Japanese internment. One student's great-grandfather's neighbor lived in the stalls or housing quarters.

"This is a higher level of thinking. Extended learning. Commitment is needed," Attardi said.

Schools across the district also participate in the History Day contest. The local competition is held at East Carolina University. The state competition is held in Raleigh. Many of Chicod's exhibits and websites have won.

CREEKSIDE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

BURST is a reading intervention program at Creekside Elementary that focuses attention on first graders to ensure they become proficient readers by the end of the school year.

The program, which in the 2016-17 school year targeted approximately 70 students, provides students the opportunity to focus on their reading and writing skills twice a day.

BURST aligns with the state's Reading 3D program, which assesses K-3 students' reading progress.

"We serve the neediest first grade readers and then second graders, if there is a need," said Michelle King, a Title I teacher at Creekside, who conducts BURST with Kristy Romanga. "BURST is an intensive reading intervention."

King and Romanga, along with the student's teacher, monitor the student's progress. The BURST students work in small groups with King or Romanga 30 minutes a day. The students are given the opportunity to read aloud and practice their writing skills.

"Reading and writing are connected," King said.

Creekside launched BURST five years ago and since has seen the benefits of the program.

A first grader who went through BURST excelled so much he competed in Battle of the Books as a fifth grader, King shared.

"It is rewarding, as a teacher, to see a low text level reader come in and watch them grow over the period of a year," King said. "When they come in, they don't perceive themselves as a reader, but they do by the end."

Romanga added, "Their confidence rises."

Parents are also asked to commit to BURST. Each day students are expected to read to their parent at home.

First-grader Walker Hardee, 6, reads three books to his mother each night. He enjoys reading, especially about animals, he said.

"BURST has been amazing for Walker. We moved to Creekside from another school because he didn't read in kindergarten. Be-

ing here, and in this program, he has made tremendous progress. He feels super accomplished that he can read on his own," said Walker's mother, Brandi Walling.

Farrah Owens' children, Rylie and Drew, both participated in BURST.

"My daughter, Rylie, is in second grade. She has been in BURST for two years. The supplemental support that she gets through BURST, along with her coursework at school, has made a tremendous difference. We also starting tutoring last January and continued throughout the school year. She has grown with her ability, confidence and her love for reading. We have recently caught her at night in bed with a flashlight and book," Owens said. "Drew is in fifth grade. He received BURST service in the first grade. He has made a tremendous amount of progress in reading. He is a member of the Battle of the Books team. He reads all the time."

BURST strives to ensure students do not fall through the cracks and are given the tools to succeed.



D.H. CONLEY HIGH SCHOOL

Garnering the highest end-of-course scores in the county, and a consistently increasing graduation rate, which sat at 91 percent in 2016, principal Don Marr believes D.H. Conley High School is home to success stories.

An open enrollment school, Conley touts the relationship its teachers have with students, the large array of elective courses and a growing ag program.

Agricultural students raise chickens, which produce brown and blue-green eggs that are sold for-profit to benefit the program. These students cultivate the courtyard, maintain flowerbeds and grow produce, including blueberries.

Through its CTE program, students learn auto, computer and nursing skills. Others can become certified in fire safety and volunteer with a local fire department or obtain a job while in school.

The school is home to a Makerspace, which allows students to create using 3D printers and a green room.



"Our students work independently, and more and more classes are utilizing the space," said media coordinator Vanessa Sasser.

The Makerspace area is housed in the media center.

"The media center is still the hub of the school, and we are reaching more students.

We still provide traditional book checkout, but students now come here to complete projects, conduct research or just for pleasure," Sasser said.

Conley's Parent-Teacher-Student Association is also very active. The association offers teacher grants, assists with the purchase of supplies and more.

E.B. AYCOCK MIDDLE SCHOOL

Educators in the public school system realize parents have many options when it comes to their children's education. Whether public, private, charter or home-schooled, the staff at E.B. Aycock have seen an influx of students recently.

Students have the opportunity to attend school for a day and shadow a student to determine if they wish to enroll at Aycock.

"Most who tour our school come here. We have many transfers," said academically and intellectually gifted or AIG teacher Stephanie Woolard.

Rising eighth-grader Luke Metzger is one of Aycock's private school transfers. Spending grades K-6 in a private school setting, Metzger entered Aycock as a seventh grader and has since excelled, according to Woolard.

"Luke is a straight-A student. He goes above and beyond always. He is an AIG student and competes in most AIG competitions. He is also on the soccer team ... the team captain, which is typically given to an eighth grader. He also plays the piano and trumpet," Woolard said.

Metzger toured E.B. Aycock when he was in the fifth grade and chose to attend "mainly" because of the opportunity to play sports, Woolard said.

"It has been a posi-

tive experience," she said. "Luke is a phenomenal artist and one of the best writers in our school. He amazes me every day. I am so proud of him and the way he has adjusted. He is very humble, smart, polite and respectful. He is the type of student who makes my job enjoyable. He is joy to teach. Luke is that rare student, the whole package, who gives 110 percent in all he does."

E.B. Aycock soccer coach Daniel Niece added, "Capt. Luke performs well on and off the field. He is respectful and has a great skill and ball control. He even faked me out in practice. He leads by example."

Rising eighth-grader Hayden Humphreys also transferred to E.B. Aycock from a private school. He came in as a sixth-grader in the 2015-16 school year.

"It was like being in a whole new world. It took me a little while to adjust, but I loved every minute of it," Humphreys said. "The teachers are the best ... and the students are friendly, and always willing to help."

Like Metzger, Humphreys also plays sports and encourages his classmates to participate in extracurriculars.

"Take every chance you can (to get involved). I have made friends, who I otherwise would not talk to, if it was not for sports," Humphreys said.



FALKLAND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Falkland Elementary School is piloting Restorative Practices, a program designed to build bridges between the school and community, teach students to be accountable for their behavior, build relationships, teach social and emotional skills and develop proactive measures for discipline.

"We are a community school in a unique situation. We are basically isolated, which has its pros and its cons," said former principal Shammah Barrett.

Launched in the 2016-17 school year, Restorative Practices taught students how to express themselves, problem solve, make wise decisions, handle conflict through mediation and learn that actions have consequences.

"Our children are excited, and their behavior has improved greatly. The relationship piece is huge. All children need a positive adult in their life," Barrett said. "This program is also teaching students how to cope with their emotions and get a handle on their anger. It is a mindset and culture shift. The discipline is with the students, not to them."

School counselor Marshica Watson added, "Discipline (referrals) are significantly lower. There is a difference in how students handle situations. They now talk with 'I' statements about how they feel versus getting mad and shutting down. It is helping with communi-

cation. Students are verbal versus physically aggressive."

Teachers are embracing the program, Barrett said.

"They are seeing the benefits with students. They are responding positively," she said.

Watson added, "Students are communicating and working together rather than picking on one another. They are learning teamwork and collaboration."

The program is a whole-school initiative where not only are teachers learning new techniques, but students are also taking on leadership roles to serve as peer mentors.

Fourth- and fifth-graders were selected as peer mediators. The students attended a 12-hour training to learn how to help resolve conflict, remain neutral and the importance of confidentiality.

"Having peer mentors is a benefit. It allows students to listen and open up to their peers. Children are more susceptible to listen to their peers versus an adult," Watson said.

Another key component of Restorative Practices is building a partnership between the parents and school. Barrett plans to expand parent-meeting opportunities.

Restorative Practices ties into Falkland's distinction as a Positive Behavior and Intervention School or PBIS green ribbon school,

which recognizes the school's incentive program for positive behavior.

"PBIS is the hand, and restorative practices is the glove on the hand," Watson said.

The school also runs Girls Enrichment Mentoring Support or GEMS for its female students. GEMS promotes self-esteem, positive attitudes and teaches the girls hygiene practices. The goal is to launch a similar group for male students, Watson said.



FARMVILLE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

Farmville Central is looking more and more like an early college, even though it's not one. The image is fine for principal Brad Johnston.

"Our students have the opportunity to earn college credit and save thousands of dollars on college tuition. And with the Pitt Community College-Farmville Center here, it only expands options," Johnston said.

Farmville Central offers four Pitt Community College courses on its campus, including public speaking, music appreciation, biology I and biology II.

"With the Pitt Community College Farmville Center, students are taking classes there throughout the day. It is a convenience, and opens up doors for our students who couldn't get to the main campus in Winterville," Johnston said.

Dual enrollment provides the opportunity for students to complete high school requirements while also taking college courses.

"There are seniors who don't step a foot on (Farmville Central's) campus. It is new and different," Johnston said.

Dual enrollment can start at the freshmen level if the student's test scores are eligible.

"It helps to know what the student wants to do upfront as a freshman," Johnston said. "It is dependent on the student how much they want to push themselves."

Dual enrollment enhances the high school experience, too.

"It brings more relevance to high school, and why the student is here," Johnston said, explaining over a four-year high school career students can take 10 elective courses. "How are those electives helping them in their future career? Are they directly connected? It's a matter of pushing versus wasting. Ten extra credits versus taking something that means something."

The accessibility to Pitt Community College's Farmville Center also provides students who are unsure of their future post-high school the chance to complete medical classes to earn certifications as a nurse assistant or medical records clerk.

"Those who leave high school and have no idea what they want to do can earn \$12 to \$14 an hour in medical records," Johnston said.

Within the Class of 2017, one-third of the graduates were enrolled in dual enrollment.

"We have more technology than any school in the district. We are a one-to-one school — iPads, MacBooks, ChromeBooks. That is the world we live in. Name a job where you don't touch a computer," Johnston said, adding the access is also preparing students for college. "Many classes are offered online, so our students need that experience. We incorporate it in the classroom through a hybrid model, and most dual enrollment classes are online courses, so they are getting their feet wet and are comfortable with that system of learning."

"There are benefits to the use of technology — no longer is the teacher the sole resource of information. Students can access the answer for themselves, which they will need to be able to do in life — in the real world."

Dual enrollment also prepares students for reality, he added.

"Hours at jobs vary day to day. It is not just eight to five. Most positions don't operate that way. We are preparing them for what it looks like for their first full-time job," Johnston said.



FARMVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL

The National Honors Society at Farmville Middle School aims to prepare students for their future post-graduation.

Open to seventh- and eighth-graders who garner grades of 90 or above, those inducted into the society are considered leaders within the school.

Rising freshmen Torre Lloyd and Skylar Dail were inducted in the seventh grade. Lloyd was named vice president that year, and president her eighth grade year.

Members not only serve as leaders in the school, but also as ambassadors.

"They welcome guests into the school, serve as tour guides and assist with rising sixth-grade tours," said adviser Delane Fuquay.

During the 2016-17 school year, members hosted a wax museum at the Farmville Community Arts Council and raised funds to help the school's music department and local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Members were also given the opportunity to tour North Carolina colleges, including N.C. State and Duke universities.



Lloyd and Dail treasure their time at Farmville Middle School, and appreciate the many opportunities available to them from sports to STEM and AIG programs.

"We have had hands-on learning preparing us for the real world. Our teachers have pushed us to create and think outside of the box," Dail said. "We know our teachers and receive one-on-one attention, which I appreciate. If I have a problem, I know they are there to help me solve it. I feel comfortable

with them, and appreciate their encouragement to live up to my potential."

Lloyd, who excels at math, is thankful for Farmville schools' one campus of unity. As an eighth-grader, she was able to attend a math I course at Farmville Central High School.

"I liked the opportunity to take advanced classes. This option is not available at other middle schools because of their proximity to high schools," she said.

Fuquay added, "That is an advantage of being a community school."

Anna Holloman, the parent of a rising seventh grader, has been impressed with Farmville Middle School since her son entered as a sixth grader, she said.

Her son looks forward to coming to school, and is fully engaged. He takes advantage of the school's early bird program that allows students to enter the school before class begins, is a member of AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), where he volunteers at the local elementary school, and served as the manager for football and baseball with plans to try out in the seventh grade.

G.R. WHITFIELD SCHOOL

It is a nearly paperless world at G.R. Whitfield School, where education centers on technology.

Karen Thompson, a seventh grade language arts and social studies teacher, is a recent recipient of Pitt County Schools' Impact Ventures grant, which allowed her to purchase 30 ChromeBooks and a charging cart.

Thompson and fellow seventh grade teacher Leslie Dwyer, who teaches science and math, were previously sharing a Chrome-Book cart.

"We each wanted to use the cart every day and desired our students to be one-on-one with technology, so I applied for the grant and was successful," she said. "I wanted to integrate technology into the classroom and increase professional development. With the grant, I am responsible for ensuring the technology is used in lessons in the classes and staff development in my school because this not only affects my students, but the whole school."

The benefits in the 2016-17 school year were exceptional.

"The ChromeBooks open

up what access is available to our students with access to the internet and our students are more engaged," she said.

Dwyer added, "They have constant access, and in science the videos and simulations are phenomenal. The ChromeBooks have opened doors to information that we normally wouldn't have, like new organ discoveries. A textbook wouldn't know that. Textbooks have basic facts, but not extra cool stuff. We are able to incorporate STEM, and having the computers helps us be more creative."

The access to technology is also preparing students for college and teaching them 21st century skills. Students use a program called

Canvas, a learning management system that allows students to access assignments, tests, quizzes and homework. Through the program Kahoots, students can hold online discussions, and Google docs allow students to work together.

"It has made collaboration look completely different," Thompson said.

Principal Tracy Gibbs added, "It is so awesome. Our students are learning life skills through technology."

Students also have 24/7 access to their teachers through Google Hangouts, which allows them to ask questions and garner feedback on projects.

Thompson will attend professional conferences over the summer for the next three years. The knowledge she garners will be shared with fellow Whitfield educators.

"Our goal is a digital focus to make learning more interactive while teaching our students life skills and preparing them for the workforce. Giving every child access to technology is huge," Gibbs said.



GRIFTON SCHOOL

Staff at Grifton Elementary School strive to mold well-rounded students, not only in the realm of academics and social skills, but also health conscious children.

Fifth grade teachers Brooke Kays and Ashley Stanton applied and received a scholarship through UNICEF to purchase 60 fitness bands for their students, two tablets and a charging station. The bands calculate students' steps, and the more the students move, the more they help countries overseas.

Every 10 steps equates to a food packet for countries battling malnutrition, including Uganda, Haiti and Burkina Faso. One food packet is one meal for someone in need.

"The lessons are hands-on. Our students are seeing a visual of the country and a map of the world. They are not just reading a book. They are learning that there is a bigger world outside of where they live," Stanton said.

Kays added, "They can see they are making an impact in the world."

Within two weeks, Kays' class had moved enough to earn 100 food packets.

"Our students made a world connection, and saw they could make a difference by movements," Kays said.

Stanton added, "Students quickly learned that not everyone is as fortunate as us, and



that they could help by simply moving."

The amount of steps a day became a competition between Kays' and Stanton's classes.

Stanton's class took "brain breaks," where students danced in their classroom or walked the hallways. The class would also venture outside to the baseball field for a two lap walk — some students would run five laps to get more steps.

"You don't realize how much you sit in a day," Kays said.

Movement in school is limited, too. Students only have P.E. once a week, and recess time is limited.

Despite the limitations, the students were set on making a difference and feeding

those less fortunate than themselves.

In day one of the competition, which ran March through May, rising sixth-grader Nicolas Deluna calculated enough steps to feed one person.

"We are making a difference by moving," Deluna said with a smile.

Rising sixth-grader Lailonie Moore aimed to walk 7,000 steps a day.

Kays and Stanton will continue the program going into the 2017-18 school year. Their students had the opportunity to wear the fitness bands home over the summer and compete in the Summer Challenge.

Grifton School administration hopes to expand the movement challenge school-wide.

HOPE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Administrators at Hope Middle School realize there is a short window of opportunity to reach a child and ensure they have the tools to be successful in life.

Home to the 2016-17 Pitt County Schools Teacher of the Year, Hope Middle School is stocked full of educators who are truly invested in their students' success.

"We have pride in academics, athletics and our extracurriculars. We offer an array of extracurriculars that are academically driven, and we have teachers who serve as sponsors of these clubs, who are willing to be available before and after school. The dedication of our staff is phe-

nomenal," said principal Jennifer Poplin.

Through its school improvement team, Hope Middle School shifted its focus to ensure its students are prepared for high school and are self-sufficient.

"We have a small window of opportunity to focus on independence and be academically successful," said assistant principal Daniale Stancil. "Students have to be responsible for their own learning and must be a participant in learning."

For the past 10 years, Hope, a positive behavioral interventions and support or PBIS school, has exceeded growth and is exemplifying Mustang pride.

"Our teachers are invested," Stancil said. "As a middle school, we serve as the bridge between childhood and the student's view of adulthood. Coming in as sixth graders, we try to wean them a step closer to high school. The key to

success is relationship building. Our staff builds relationships first, so our students feel safe."

Poplin added, "Our students feel supported in a positive environment made for learning."

While preparing each student for future academic success, the staff at Hope also strive to open doors so students can better determine their likes and dislikes through various clubs.

Hope welcomed the FIRST Lego League to its campus during the 2016-17 school year. The school is also home to 12 clubs, including BETA Club, Math Club, Battle of the Books, Science Olympiad, theater, Friends of Rachel, Destine Divas, Men of Purpose, SGA, FCA, National History Day, lunch club and more.

"Not every child is athletically inclined or academically gifted. Our clubs give students the opportunity to find their special interest, from creative dramatics to math and science skills to their love of reading or the arts," Poplin said.

Stancil added, "The clubs we offer are of interest to our students, they challenge them and give them a healthy ID."



LAKEFOREST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Leadership. Service. Academics. Character. These attributes make up the four pillars of Lakeforest Elementary School's National Honors Society.

The club, which is entering its fourth year in the 2017-18 school year, is open to fourth- and fifth-graders.

Members must have attended Lakeforest at least one semester before being eligible to apply. Acceptance into the club is based on grades and the four pillars.

"At Lakeforest, we recognize academic achievements, and strive for excellence. We want our students to understand that with an education they can obtain dreams, and we will give them the tools to be successful," said principal LaVette Ford. "Our honors society members serve as positive role models to our 800 students."

Club member Venedys Vazquez strives to represent herself and Lakeforest in a positive manner.

"I know the younger kids look up to us," she said.

The club has 30 members, who work collaboratively to select an annual community project, according to Lori Bowen, the school's counselor and adviser to the National Honors

a nearby city that was destroyed by massive flooding post-Matthew.

"It felt good to help those in need," said club member Shymirah Harris.

Last year, club members also assisted in a community hurricane clean-up and collected canned goods for a local shelter.

"These are excellent opportunities to become more aware of the community as a whole and get a bigger world view," Bowen said.

In the past, the club hosted Pasta for Pennies, which raised money for the Leukemia Society.

"We are big on helping others. Our school is about service," Ford said.

The honors society not only promotes service and community, but it also teaches students how to be productive leaders.

"The club gives them the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Our officers come in shy, but by the end of the school year, they are running meetings as they develop self-confidence," Bowen said.



Society Club.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, which devastated eastern North Carolina in October 2016, club members decided to host a book drive for the students in Princeville,

NORTH PITT HIGH SCHOOL

North Pitt High School has been an Advancement Via Individual Determination or AVID school since 2004 with interest among students increasing each year.

In the 2016-17 school year, more than 100 students were active in AVID, which teaches soft skills, stresses the importance of academics through dual enrollment and community involvement through community service projects and takes participants on tours of colleges.

"Our graduates are saying 'thank you' because they are prepared for the future," said assistant principal Jessica Avery. "AVID students are outpacing their peers. We want to give them the tools to be successful."

In 2016, end-of-course results showed AVID students scored 34 percent higher on the English II exam and 25 percent higher on the math I exam as compared to students not enrolled in the program.

"AVID students are leaps and bounds above high school expectations. They are vocalizing their needs and wants, leading tutorials and conducting presentations. Their public speaking ability is strong," Avery said.

AVID targets life skills from critical thinking to writing and organization to collaboration.

"They are making themselves self-sufficient," Avery said.

Taking part in the AVID program is a four-year commitment.

"AVID was the best decision I made," said rising senior Shy'Quavion Staton. "It has helped me with scholarship applications, building my organizational skills and time management. I test better and learn better, and I know my teachers are always there to help."

North Pitt's goal is to expand the AVID program school-wide.

"I believe in AVID because I see it works," said Avery, a former AVID teacher. "Test scores grow 20 to 30 points a year. There is a 100 percent acceptance rate into college, and our students received more than a million dollars in scholarships — 22 kids."

North Pitt also launched its STEM Lab in the 2016-17 school year. It is the district's second high school STEM lab.

North Pitt modeled its STEM Lab after Greene Central High School's, which is a STEM distinction school.

"We are seeing the excitement, especially those students who don't like math. This approach engages them at a different level," said instructional coach Nickie Clark.



NORTHWEST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Increasing parent involvement has been a mission for the staff at Northwest Elementary School in recent years.

"It is impossible to do what we do without them," said principal Catina Moore-Lakhram. "We value education and believe with a greater investment by parents the student will work harder."

Moore-Lakhram has served as principal at Northwest for three years.

"I noticed we needed more parent participation and need to create an inviting environment and highlight our children," she said.

Northwest serves approximately 400 students, only 30 of which are car riders. The remaining students ride the bus – closing the door as an opportunity to involve the parent.

Throughout the 2016-17 school year, Northwest launched several events, including Doughnuts for Dads, Muffins for Mom, Lunch with Mom, Lunch with Dad, Grandparents Day, pizza bingo, fall festival, curriculum nights with dinner, family reading night, where students were encouraged to attend in their pajamas, Painting with my Peeps, where guardians and students painted together, and school concerts featuring performances by the chorus and their first-ever orchestra.

Sarai Gutierrez, the mother of rising fourth-grader Dylan Harris, is thrilled at the opportunity to spend time with her child in his school setting.

"It is a good time to connect and it is important to be involved in your child's education," she said at the Lunch with Mom event.

Heather Jennings, the mother of rising first-grader Colton, was excited she had the day off to spend the lunch hour with her son.

"This is a great time to see his routine," she said.

Every first Thursday of the month at 7:45 a.m. the school hosts parent advisory meetings with breakfast. At this time, parents can express their concerns or ideas.

The school also hosted its first-ever school dance in March, which 300 students and parents attended.

"The parents could not just drop off their child. They had to stay, and we gave them the opportunity to attend a parent-teacher conference. The parents wanted to come. It was amazing," Moore-Lakhram said.

At the dance, parents were given the opportunity to sign up to serve on the school's academic



booster club, which will raise funds to install benches at the front of the school for car riders and grant teachers' wish lists.

Northwest has also increased its social media presence with Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts.

"We encourage all parents to follow us," Moore-Lakhram said.

The school also uses the Remind app, which is similar to the school system's Alert Now phone system. Staff are able to send out a mass text to parents reminding them about an event or important day at school.

"We want to keep our parents informed," Moore-Lakhram said.

Northwest serves approximately 400 students in preK-5 with a staff of 72.

PACTOLUS SCHOOL

Juan Castillo, the principal at Pactolus Elementary School, strives to diversify his staff so that his team reflects the student population.

The race breakdown of Pactolus' students is 39 percent Hispanic, 39 percent black and 20 percent white.

Of his staff, Castillo and a cafeteria worker are the only two Hispanics, which makes communication with parents difficult at times.

Anna Edwards of Colombia serves as the school's community liaison and works 25 hours a week.

"She has great conversations with our parents and students," Castillo said. "She helps in the classrooms, translates documents, makes phone calls to parents and adds a level of welcome to our school."

Since taking the role as principal in June 2016, Castillo has increased the number of staff who can speak Spanish to assist in overcoming the communication barrier.

"We now have four to five members who are fluent in Spanish, which is helping. Our



parents need to know what is going on at their child's school, and we need to know how they feel. Now they are able to fully express themselves and are more engaged," he said.

In an effort to keep all of his parents involved, Castillo hosts quarterly parent luncheons, workshops for parents, family events and parent question-and-answer conferences.

Pactolus also recently launched its Go Grow

program, an enrichment program for students, which has opened doors of academic growth through hands-on learning.

Irene Raphael became the school's first full-time Go Grow teacher in the 2016-17 school year. The program is open to students in grades 2-8.

"Our students are recognizing their potential through Go Grow and are being exposed to new ideas," Raphael said.

Students enjoy the out-of-the-box way of learning.

"My grades have improved, and I'm learning more stuff versus sitting in a classroom every day," said rising eighth-grader Sabrina Wang.

Rising eighth-grader CJ Brown added, "I'm expanding my mindset."

The Go Grow program helped rising ninth-grader Kara Bradley improve her study skills.

Through the program, students are also exposed to life after grade school. They take college tours, attend college fairs and learn about scholarship opportunities.

RIDGEWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Ridgewood Elementary School prides itself on molding tomorrow's leaders. Staff utilize Stephen R. Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" formula with leadership being the main focus, according to media coordinator Angie Egerton.

The school has a select 90 third-, fourth- and fifth-graders among its 240-student population who serve as leaders.

The students must apply for a leadership role and provide a narrative explaining what makes a good leader. The applications are vetted by staff, and the selection process is not always based on

academic achievement, school counselor Olivia Salter explained.

"We want to channel that student's strength in the right direction. Our leaders represent a diverse group," Salter said.

These leaders are part of various

committees and serve as helpers in various aspects of school operations, including recycling, physical education, flag duty, welcoming and events, media center, computer lab, music, art room, office assistant, pledge announcers, Buddy Bag helpers and PBIS team.

Leaders who serve on flag duty work with South Central's JROTC to learn how to properly handle the flag. Third-graders Grant Brown and Aiden Knight are both Boy Scouts and wanted to serve on flag duty.

"I wanted to serve in student leadership," Brown said.

Fellow flag duty members and third-graders Tadrien Grigsby and Owen Heath believe they are responsible and have a calling to help their peers. Heath's older brother served as a student leader and encouraged him to also participate in the program, he said.

The Buddy Bag helpers are responsible for delivering backpacks of food each Friday to the 70 students who are in the program.

The PBIS team launched in the 2016-17 school year. Classes are recognized for being responsible, respectful and safe. Every Friday, classes are recognized for achieving that week's set goals. Classes receive various "golden" awards, including the golden hula hoop, golden apple, golden hat, golden plumber and more.

Since the implementation of the PBIS team, staff have seen a 51 percent decrease in behavior infractions, according to Egerton.

The seven student leaders who serve on the PBIS team develop videos, interview students

and staff and perform skits to reinforce one of the seven habits that is a focus for that month in school, Salter said.

"We encourage our students to be leaders," she said.

Ridgewood also provides students outlets of expression through its Science Olympiad, Math Masters, Battle of the Books, Running Club, Art Club and chorus.

"We want to give our children opportunities that they typically would not have until middle school. Our kids are capable of a lot, and we want them to use their strengths," Salter said.

Science Olympiad members and rising sixth-graders Maria Talbert and Ean Behm along with rising fifth-grader Morgan Worsley love science and challenges.

"I like experiments and doing new things and having fun with my friends," Behm said.

Talbert added, "I like to challenge myself and take on something new."

Although not a STEM school, Ridgewood integrates technology into learning. Students have access to OSMO, a program that assists students in math, reading, art and problem solving. They are also able to use a green screen, robotics and K'Nex.

"The students enjoy working together, and technology enhances collaboration. They love it and are excited to learn," Egerton said.

Using the OSMO tablet, rising second-graders Kennedy Moore, Anya Kumar and Landon Ashley worked with shapes. They look forward to using the tablet.



SOUTH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

South Central High School has created an environment where art meets technology, which meets carpentry, which meets graphic design that intertwines with culinary fanfare to cultivate creativity and critical thinking.

"We have approximately 1,660 students at South Central, and we want each to aspire to grow at all levels. We want them to pick a program and excel at it," said principal Janarde Cannon. "We want to meet kids at their needs and level."

With an 83 percent graduation rate, a vast array of advanced placement courses, athletic and extracurricular options, South Central has become a hub of creativity.

From its innovations program, a byproduct of STEM, to the collaboration among the school's art and CTE teachers, students have a wide spectrum of opportunities and choices.

In the 2016-17 school year, theater students partnered with culinary students to host the school's first-ever murder-mystery dinner theater.

In an Adobe design class, students create documentaries, commercials, music videos, CD covers, posters and more. In a carpentry class, students must use vectorization, machine and math skills to properly cut out a design.

"Carpentry is coding. Students don't realize

they are doing math," said carpentry teacher Stephen Allen.

Cannon added, "They're seeing math another way, in another light. Sometimes the cookie cutter way doesn't work."

In art class, students once again access technology through an art 3D program to create.

"Students are learning to think creatively and critically, building confidence that carries into core classes," Cannon said.

Art teacher Ira Varney believes the more aspects of art that he can teach, the more students he will reach. South Central's art department highlights oil painting, mixed media, 3D printing, woodworking, casting, plaster, concrete and, in the 2017-18 school year, welding will be added to the curriculum.

"Learning hands-on builds confidence and our students shine," Varney said.

Students "flock to" South Central's CTE classes, Cannon said.

"They can be themselves through self expression," he said.

Culinary teacher Joanne Duncan added, "CTE is not home economics anymore. Classes are specialized. Students are getting real job experience, building their résumés, marketing skills and knowledge and learning to work on a team."



W.H. ROBINSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

W.H. Robinson Elementary School piloted Collaboratively Achieving Reading Excellence or CARE in 2011 to provide first graders additional reading support. CARE is now a district-wide program.

Each day, students attend CARE for 25 minutes. They are divided into groups based on their "reading level or strategies," reading specialist Debra Pangona explained.

The students read aloud and then write about what they just read.

"Watching our students' progress is fulfilling. I am amazed by it," Pangona said. "I am nervous for them when they aren't making gains, but they dig deep and are constantly problem solving. As educators, we assess the gaps and teach right to the area (in need)."

Reading builds independence, she added.

"They are excited to read, and they are successful because the books are on their reading level. What works for one child may not work for another. We want every child to excel," Pangona said.

The CARE room features more than 1,000 titles.

The K-5 school has approximately 560 students.

"Our class sizes are excellent. Our school is unique. There is a family feeling here. We are not small, and we aren't huge — we are in the middle," said data manager Charlene Hill.

Grades 2-5 have daily access to iPads and ChromeBooks, and students in grades 4-5 have access to orchestra, chorus and Running Club.



WINTERGREEN PRIMARY, WINTERGREEN INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Wintergreen Primary and Intermediate schools are the largest in the district. The two schools, which are connected, yet separated by a breezeway, have a K-5 student population of approximately 1,545.

"We are a family," said assistant principal Megan Newman. "Our students are loved and cared for the moment they walk in the door. Our staff is able to offer such love and care because they work so well together. The heart of our staff is part of our school."

Seeing children run up to a teacher and give them a hug hello or goodbye is the culture of Wintergreen, said Newman, who joined the Wintergreen family two years ago.

"We have teachers who are now teaching the children of students they taught," she said. "Alumni visit, and our parent volunteers are frequently seen in our hallways."

Wintergreen's student population is also diverse.

"We have a huge ESL population from all around the world — Japan, China, Russia, Cameroon. All of the continents but Australia are represented in our school," said instructional coach Ashley Smith. "It is amazing, and great for our students."

One class Skypes with a class in Jamaica.

"We are broadening our students' horizons. They are seeing learning occurring at another school, in real time. Learning happens everywhere, and it doesn't always look the same," Smith said.

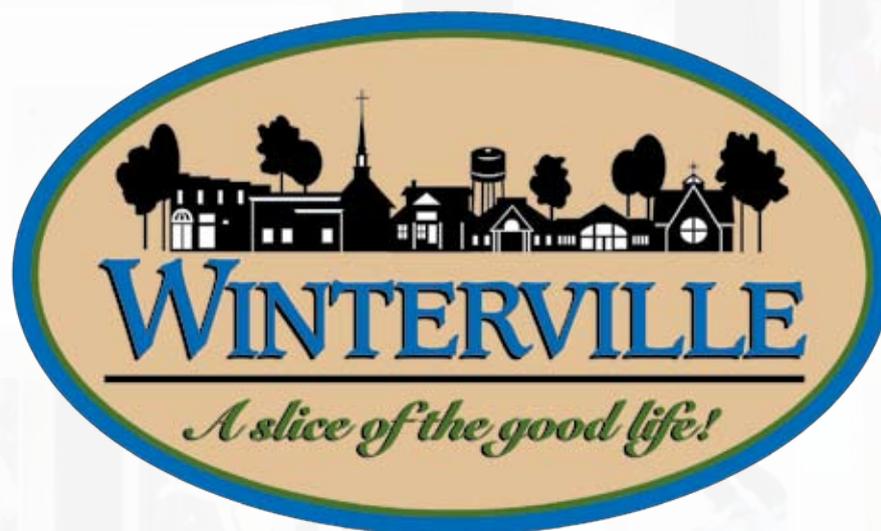
Wintergreen Primary and Intermediate each have strong STEM and music programs. Children, ages 5-8, are coding in STEM. The K-2 students receive a strong music foundation before entering an orchestra program in grades 3-5.

The intermediate school's first-ever running club launched in the 2016-17 school year, comprised of fifth graders.





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