

# Garfield Heights City Schools

## Community Newsletter

Every Child | Every Day | Together.



### Superintendent's Report



**Dr. Richard D. Reynolds**  
Superintendent

Dear Garfield Heights City Schools Community,

The 2023-2024 School Year is officially underway, and with a strong focus on continued enhancement and achievement for the upcoming year, the Garfield Heights City Schools will position itself for success inside and outside the classroom and with community partners. This edition of the GHCS newsletter will feature some of the important back-to-school stories that demonstrate our successful kickoff to the year, along with spotlighting a handful of creative learning experiences and new individuals in key roles in our district.

#### 2023-2024 School Year Underway!

Students and staff returned to the Garfield Heights City Schools on Monday, August 21st, and the excitement demonstrated throughout the district is leading some to refer to our terrific start as a true **Bulldog Revival!** Board of Education members were present, and so were smiling students, inviting instructors, and some new administrators to welcome our students back. The first full day of school for kindergarten students was Monday, August 28th and they were warmly greeted by incoming William Foster Principal Ms. Lynnette Stevens.

The first day of school culminates a variety of preparatory activities to help ready our staff and community for the upcoming year. Some of those included our Teacher Convocation on Wednesday, August 16th and our 2nd annual Back-to-School Rally in the High School lot on Thursday, August 17th. This event has become one of great excitement, partnership, fun, and collaboration. The GHCS sincerely thanks entities such as the Cleveland Food Bank, The Cuyahoga County Public Library, the Cleveland Clinic, the City of Garfield Heights, and local businesses for donating items, and participating in this awesome family-oriented community event.

#### Thank you to Parents, Staff, and Community!

The GHCS successfully reconfigured its elementary buildings for the start of this school year, and this was made possible by the support, patience, and understanding of our parents for a new concept with significant intended impact. Thank you for all you did to ensure success with your students! Aligning all instructors, staff, and students by grade level will be the catalyst to ensuring that students are learning similar lessons from similar instructional

approaches in the same building. Teachers of the same grade level will be in one building, collaborating more effectively, and learning together rather than in separate buildings. The GHCS will keep the community posted on the progress being made with our elementary reconfiguration.

#### Stay in the Game Room Donated at Maple Leaf!

The Cleveland Browns have found a way, once again, to make the back-to-school time even more fun and meaningful for students with their efforts to help make the Stay in the Game Room an available incentive for students throughout the district. Located in an unused classroom at Maple Leaf, students can visit the Stay in the Game Room for coming to school regularly, as the initiative implies. Exceeding attendance standards, good behavior, and a positive attitude are monitored by teachers at all buildings, and then a stop at the Stay in the Game Room becomes a reward. Thank you to the Cleveland Browns for their promotion of staying in school, with their Stay in the Game program!

Join us on our Bulldog Revival Journey!

Sincerely,

Richard D. Reynolds, Ph.D.  
Superintendent



**Superintendent Dr. Richard D. Reynolds at Elmwood Elementary with students on the first day of school!**



# Board Brief

## Board of Education Report: 2023-2024 School Year



**Nichelle N. Daniels**  
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Legislative Committee  
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**Millette King, M.Ed., L.S.W.**  
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**Heather Morrison**  
Member  
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**Ashley M. Thomas, M.Ed.**  
Member  
CVC Board Rep  
Policy Committee

Dear Garfield Heights City Schools Community,

The start of the 2023-2024 School Year is underway, and on behalf of everyone on the Board of Education, we thank our entire learning community for the support and love demonstrated to make this back-to-school season successful, superior, and safe. The Board recognizes that for elementary families, change is never easy, and that in the midst of reconfiguring our classrooms and buildings to accommodate PreK-K-1st grade at William Foster, Grades 2 and 3 at Elmwood, and Grades 4 and 5 at Maple Leaf, a significant alteration in operations was undertaken. Only from the vision of Dr. Reynolds and our district leaders, aligned with our devoted staff's belief in this process, and the support and patience of our families, has this process unfolded smoothly and successfully. The Garfield Heights City Schools truly believes that this reconfiguration will have lasting, long-term, and positive results on the district's youngest learners. We look forward to reporting to the community on the anticipated successes aligned with this reconfiguration.

The Board of Education thanks the strong relationships which exist with our community partners to enhance the learning experience for our students and our staff. The full scope of the strength of those relationship was on full display during the recent Back to School Rally, which took place just prior to the start of the 2023-2024 school year. Those in attendance witnessed hundreds of families attend this free event in order to obtain school supplies, have a snack, participate in fun games, grab a donated book, have their face painted, a haircut, and even receive food. The Board of Education thanks the many partners who participated, including the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, Cleveland Clinic Health Systems, the Cuyahoga County Public Library, the City of Garfield Heights, and many local vendors who donated or volunteered their services to make the kickoff to the 2023-2024 school year special and meaningful to our families. The Board extends its heartfelt gratitude to our vendors, our partners, our community businesses, and others who complete the learning relationship.

Thank you to our families for your continued support.

## Talking Finance\$

### Meet Phillip J. Oko, M.B.A., GHCS Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer



**Phillip J. Oko, M.B.A.**  
Treasurer/CFO

For this edition of the Open Line Newsletter, the Garfield Heights City Schools would like to introduce you to our new Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer, Phillip Oko. Officially beginning his duties on March 1st, 2023, Mr. Oko brings a great deal of experience to the Treasurer's Office in our school district. Most recently joining the GHCS from the Breakthrough Schools, which is one of the top-performing network of charter schools in Northeast Ohio, Mr. Oko brings a great deal of experience. In this capacity, Mr. Oko served as Assistant Treasurer, and was integrally involved in creating budgets and forecasts, helping perform the necessary payroll functions for the school community, was involved with compliance, and served as a liaison for various policy initiatives. In addition to this role with Breakthrough Schools, Mr. Oko also spent an interesting and exciting period of his early professional career working at the Ohio General Assembly. While in Columbus he worked with lawmakers, staffers, and various experts in and around public finance, on a daily basis. This particular experience with the Ohio House of Representatives has provided a stable foundation for Mr. Oko relative to the sensitive nature of public school funding, learning how to work among diverse perspectives, balancing wants and needs, and ultimately, making decisions that impact competing interests.

Along with the past work experience of Mr. Oko, he comes from a family devoted to education, with a local connection to our community of Garfield Heights. His grandmother and great uncle both lived for some time in the City of Garfield Heights, on Oak Park drive, not far from the schools. He believes that this family connection helps establish his own personal connection with the community. In addition, family members of his have also spent time as educators, including his Aunt Kathi Powers, who is the Superintendent of the Twinsburg City Schools, and his mother, who spent time in education. One might say that Mr. Oko features a unique and useful blend of professional experience and acumen, along with a family heritage that makes him the ideal candidate for the Treasurer's role.

Since being hired in March, Mr. Oko has primarily focused on helping to support the core academic programming of the district from the Treasurer's Office. He has also become primarily responsible for enhancing the utilization of the federal grant dollars that are available to the district, such as Title 1, Title 4 and ESSER dollars. He intends to continue striving for efficiency and sustainability, while continuing to establish controls that make his office run as effectively as possible. In the last 7 months, he credits the existing staff for their help and guidance in fulfilling the important duties of his role as Treasurer.

Looking to the future, the community can expect Mr. Oko to have an open-door policy with employees and the community, as it relates to matters of school district finance. He recognizes that his office deals with very important issues and matters, but he encourages communication and collaboration with all. In fact, Mr. Oko has already answered community inquiries regarding property taxes and residents' county bills. He encourages the community to email, call, or visit his office at any time to help understand the role of the Treasurer's Office.



# Real World Exposure, Fun and Creative Learning Experiences

## The 2023-2024 School Year is Underway!



**First Day of School, August 21st!**

**Back to School Rally, August 17th!**

More than 400 families turned out to energize our back-to-school excitement. Thank you to our business and community partners for your support and willingness to welcome back our students with such tremendous help, donations, and encouragement!



**Heroic Game Day Visits Maple Leaf and Elmwood!** The online game based learning platform is helping elementary students experience life skills such as leadership, entrepreneurship, digital citizenship, literacy, and more!



**Navy Four Star Division of the Fleet Forces Band Visits GHHS**  
In a ceremony of global awareness, the performers of the US Navy Four Star Division Fleet Forces Band taught lessons to Mr. Pope's classes, and performed for the entire high school student body!



**Maple Leaf Science Project**  
Mr. Zappola showed chemical reactions with a fun and interactive science project involving soda pop and Mentos candies. Our Maple Leaf students will remember this lesson because of the creative and engaging project!



Incoming Kindergarten students received their very own Class of 2036 T-shirts!



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## *District Spotlight: Lynnette Stevens*

**Incoming principal at William Foster Elementary School**



During a time where the Garfield Heights City Schools boldly pursued a significant reconfiguration of its elementary schools to better serve our children, William Foster will have the tremendous benefit from the educational leadership and compassion of incoming principal Lynnette Stevens. As a resident of Garfield Heights for the past 14 years, she sees her time as becoming William Foster's principal as a way to positively and constructively become more involved in the Garfield Heights City Schools community. This spotlight will shine brightly on Lynnette Stevens, our new principal at William Foster.

"We want to create a culture of learning for all who enter our building," says Ms. Stevens. She firmly believes that all students have the capability to learn, and that they can do so in a positive educational environment, where standards are high and love and care from the staff abound. A true learning environment involves students, families, and the staff, according to Ms. Stevens, where she intends to make creating such a climate her primary mission. During this first year, she will focus on important big-picture initiatives, including all students achieving academically according to grade-level standards. Kindergarten students will know letters and the sounds they make, and first graders will all read and have literacy skills that meet on-grade levels.

While Ms. Stevens may be new to William Foster, she is no stranger to the community of Garfield Heights, who is a veteran of educational leadership.

A Milo Avenue resident of Garfield Heights since 2009, Lynnette Stevens begins the 2023-2024 school year as her 29th overall in education. She most recently joins the Garfield Heights City Schools from the Euclid City Schools, where she spent the last 6 years as an elementary principal. Prior to that, Ms. Stevens was an elementary principal in the Akron Public Schools. Before serving as the Lake County ESC's Gifted Coordinator, she was a Gifted Education Intervention Specialist, Middle School math teacher, charter school administrator, and reading instructor. Lynnette Stevens has done it all in education during her amazing career. She received her undergraduate degree from Cleveland State University and Master's degree from John Carroll University.

In all, by the end of her first year at William Foster, Ms. Stevens deeply desires to motivate her beloved staff members to help create a positive working climate that translates into a constructive learning environment for students. She intends to have evening gatherings for parents where staff members demonstrate study skills and instructional methods that they can utilize on the home front as well.

"We will create an environment where everyone is learning, doing what is right for students and staff, and move William Foster in a positive direction," Ms. Stevens concludes. With the mindset that all children can learn, and the strong community connection that she has with the City of Garfield Heights, our district warmly welcomes Lynnette Stevens to our school family, and is excited about all that she will help to achieve at William Foster.

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