

SPECIAL *Daily Reporter* SECTION



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

HANCOCK COUNTY 2024



HANCOCK COUNTY EDUCATION

EDUCATION CONNECTIONS



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In this 2024 edition of Community Connections, we take a look at some of the people and programs that support and enhance the education and experiences that Hancock County's public schools are able to offer our public-school students.

We will check in with the good work being done by each of the four education foundations, and we will take a look at how grants help improve classrooms. We have spotlighted positive programs such as BOSS (Building Our Social Skills) and Unified Champions. We will also take a look at the IREAD debate.

While we only have room to spotlight a tiny fraction of the good work being done in and around our public schools, we invite our readers to share other stories with us by emailing dr-editorial@greenfieldreporter.com.



Pictured: A third grade class at Fortville Elementary. **TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER**

IREAD READINESS

Statewide testing looks to modify reading requirements

By LACEY WATT | DAILY REPORTER
lwatt@greenfieldreporter.com

HANCOCK COUNTY — A skill introduced as early as mother's reading their babies to sleep is now up for debate at the state level, and whether these new requirements for children will better help them in their lifelong journey of reading.

According to an article posted by the Indiana Department of Education

(IDOE), one out of five students are still struggling to read by the end of third grade. Statewide, 81.9% of students show proficient reading skills, only a 0.3% increase from the 2021-22 school year. After COVID, the state saw an approximately 6% drop in reading scores.

In order to help raise that percentage and strengthen reading skills of students across the state, Indiana Senators introduced legislation, Senate Bill 1,

that would focus on requirements, additional resources and possible retention to help ensure that students are prepared and pass the IREAD-3 exam before heading to the fourth grade.

According to the IDOE frequently asked questions page, IREAD-3 is "a reading assessment that measures foundational reading skills through grade three, including students ability to read and understand grade-level text. IREAD-3 was developed in accordance

with the 2010 Indiana General Assembly passage of Public Law 109, which required the evaluation of reading skills for all third grade students to ensure they can read at grade level prior to fourth grade."

Some of the major changes listed by SB 1 would be requiring schools to administer this test to both second and third grade, whereas currently schools can choose whether they want to opt in and include second graders testing.

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SB 1 would also require schools to provide a summer school option for second graders who do not pass, but does not require that the student attends. If the student were to fail the IREAD-3 exam again in the third grade and summer school, then they would be held back.

Exemptions can be made for those students who have disabilities or are English learners, and legislation is working on an appeals process for students who may have special circumstances.

State Senator for District 28 Michael Crider said that he decided to co-author SB 1 because of how it's been a big topic of conversation for roughly a year or so, really trying to determine really what is the best path forward for all students.

"There are several components to the bill that I like," Crider said. "At the point we're at now, the only concern I have around the bill is the retention piece."

Dr. Lisa Lantrip, superintendent of Community School Corporation of Southern Hancock, said that if a child does not pass, there is a conversation with the parents on whether they

would hold back the student or pass them with additional support for the fourth grade.

Lantrip said these types of decisions are done with parents, having conversations and looking at data and all possible options in order to help move the student forward. Lantrip said that an amendment to SB1 she believes is strong is the inclusion of the parents and having the appeal process if it were to pass.

Lantrip said the best intervention is weekly and daily assessments to see if students are retaining what has been taught. If students retain the information then they can move on, but if not, Lantrip said they assess the situation and see if they need to reteach or provide an intervention tutor to help get the student back on track.

The intervention groups are small groups or one-on-one individual work with targeted skill instructions based on the frequent assessments. Lantrip said they also have a Helping One Student To Succeed (HOSTS) program which is also given to second and third grade students and is divided into three components: phonics, comprehension and reading fluency. They also

offer summer school programs.

"You can't wait until third grade to introduce or intervene," Lantrip said.

Dr. Vince Edwards, principal of Fortville Elementary School in the Mt. Vernon Community School Corporation, said that they too provide additional targeted interventions if a student does not pass the test when it is scheduled to be given in March, allowing students who do not pass initially another chance to retest.

"We appreciate the larger reading initiatives that the state has put forth in the past couple of years, such as providing funding for schools to offer summer school instruction for at risk students, focusing on early identification of at risk students in K-2, and requiring instructional practices and interventions to be aligned to the science of reading principles," Edwards said.

When it comes down to the time to administer the tests, Edwards said that there is staff training beforehand to ensure there is correct proctoring, test securing and integrity. These trainings also include providing accommodations for students with disabilities or who are English learners.

Testing anxiety may also come into the equation when students are taking the IREAD-3 exam.

Lantrip said that students can show stress because they genuinely want to do well on a test and they think too hard about it, and for other students stress comes into play because they struggle with the content.

"Any test that's high stakes, any test, you put a level of anxiety on kids that is very high," Lantrip said. "It doesn't matter if they are second and third graders or if they are seniors taking their SAT test, those tests are high-stakes tests, high-stakes tests create anxiety not just for the kids but for the teachers, for the parents as well."

In order to help combat the stress and test anxiety, Lantrip said breaks are given which can include water, snacks and movement breaks.

Meg Welch, principal of Weston Elementary for the Greenfield-Central Community School Corporation, said students have the opportunity to take practice tests allowing the students to become more comfortable with the format, decreasing anxiety in some students.

"As a staff, we keep standardized

testing days as normal as possible. Teachers welcome them as they do every day letting them know they are valued and an important part of our building,” Welch said. “We also ensure each student has had breakfast and their basic needs are met. Many of our teachers ask their families to write letters of encouragement to their student(s). This is a nice little surprise on the morning of testing.”

Devon Marine is in his first year as director of elementary education for Greenfield-Central Community School Corporation and said that they don’t necessarily prepare students for specifically IREAD-3, but they are more focused on the foundational reading skills that all K-3 students need, which will be assessed on the exam.

Marine said that they have opted-in for second graders to test to use it as an early identifier while also allowing students that don’t pass another opportunity. If a second grader were to pass, then they wouldn’t be required to take it in the third grade.

Crider said that as SB 1 makes its way over and moves through the House there

is continued attention toward the retention aspect of the bill.

“I think it’s a decision that should be kind of the last resort and really in consultation with the families involved,” Crider said.

Crider said that there has been a lot of discussions around various proposals over the years, and that almost every year they change something. Crider said that he believes they need to adopt a policy that is fairly agreed upon and have that policy in place to where they can measure whether it is giving the results desired.

“I think our educators are doing a terrific job. We increasingly have students who don’t necessarily fit within that cookie cutter — that many of the students do,” Crider said. “We just need to make sure that we’re listening to our educators as much as possible and try to come up with the right public policy that achieves the goal that we all want of having students that can read, and do math and have an opportunity for success.”

To follow SB1 as it moves through the House, visit iga.in.gov.



Pictured: A third grade class at Fortville Elementary. **TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER**

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BUILDING A CHAMPION-MINDED COMMUNITY

By LISA DEFILIPPO
For Daily Reporter

Great communities are built upon the fundamental idea that each and every member is valuable and that each part makes up the whole, and Hancock County's dedication to serving individuals with developmental disabilities is a testament to why its communities are growing and thriving.

A frontrunner in spotlighting awesome athletes with special needs is, of course, the Special Olympics, a hugely successful program that positively impacts communities across

the globe — and here in Hancock County. In addition to the yearly games, Special Olympics has a new program called Unified Champion, bringing differently abled and traditionally abled Greenfield-Central students together to foster and promote the inclusion of all students within our community.

“The word community is the key here,” said Robin LeClaire, student services director for Greenfield-Central School Corporation (GCSC). “We need more community in our world. Greenfield is a community, and to have Greenfield schools show inclusivity and unity in a way that

celebrates all of our students and the assets they bring is what makes us special and unique.”

“Unified Champions partners Special Olympians (students with cognitive disabilities) with Unified Partners (general education peers) and promotes social inclusion through various activities, culminating in the annual Game Day,” explains Amy Swartz, who serves on the district team for Unified Champion. “Greenfield-Central students in K-8 are selected to be inclusion leaders within their schools. Students work throughout the year on the four pillars: inclusive youth

leadership opportunities, Unified Sports, whole school engagement, and collaborative fundraising.”

Each of the schools select youth leaders in different ways, but most have staff nominate student leaders based on attendance, grades and behavior. Students who are selected set good examples within the classroom, on the playground and within the building as a whole. These students seek out other students who might need a friend and are always looking for opportunities to help others.

“Students meet all year long with each other,” explained Swartz.



Area Greenfield-Central students participate in the 3rd annual Special Olympics held at the Greenfield-central High School football field May 15. TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER



TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

JB Stephens Elementary student Matthew Rinecone participates in the 3rd annual Special Olympics held at the Greenfield-central High School football field May 15.

“Schools are required to hold at least 12 practices, but many schools meet more than that so relationships are built and strong prior to Game Day.”

Students learn how to do various track and field events throughout the year to prepare for the big day, and the intermediate and junior high students help lead the required practices, plan and lead a Unified Champions Week at their school, and help plan Game Day.

“One of the ways we have grown this year is Maxwell Intermediate School took a team to the Unified Robotics competition and won! They also earned Best Teamwork and Best Spirit Award!” said Lynnea Case, United Champion district team leader. “In addition, on December 13th, 2023, the Greenfield-Central Junior High [as part of Unified Champions in the Middle] hosted a Unified Champion basketball game where students with and without disabilities played a modified game against the staff.” Funds raised from the game helped support the program and count toward the school’s fundraising goals.

“They have a fundraising goal they need to meet, and each building does it a different way,” explained Swartz. “[The junior high hosts the basketball

game.] Greenfield Intermediate School will sell friendship bracelets made by Unified Champions for \$1 during the first week of March during Unified Champion Week. They will also be having a competition where students will put money in the bucket of a teacher or staff member they would like to see get pied in the face during a convocation on March 9th, featuring Craig Tornquist, a comedian who is the Director of School Assemblies for Special Olympics of Indiana. JB Stephens Elementary has an annual Penny War to meet its fundraising goals.”

This year’s Game Day will be held May 13th at the Greenfield-Central High School football field from 9 a.m. to noon. “We brought it to Greenfield in 2018 and had our first Unified Champion Game Day in May 2019,” explained Swartz, who also serves as secretary for FUSE and is an employee of GCSC. “After a short hiatus due to COVID-19, we brought back Game Day in 2022. This year’s Game Day will be the fourth for our district.” Last year’s event brought over 50 Special Olympians and over 130 general education athletes while more than 30 kids participated in the junior high basketball game.

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“We would love to see Game Day grow into an annual event community members attend to cheer students on,” said Swartz. “We would also like to continue to grow the junior high program and eventually see the Champions Together program expand at the high school.”

Game Day is only possible with fundraising and sponsorship, and funds are used to meet annual fundraising goals set by Special Olympics, as well as to purchase T-shirts, food, and equipment for Game Day. To donate or to find out more information, contact Lynnea Case at lcase@gcsc.k12.in.us or send checks to Greenfield-Central Schools and include “Unified Champion” in the memo.

“Looking at people through an asset-based mindset and heart is what Unified Champions is all about and it is what Greenfield-Central has been about with our longstanding motto and mission: Learning for All and All for Learning,” said LeClaire. “We are an inclusive district that embraces all students despite learning differences and this event [Game Day] celebrates that.



TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

Greenfield-Central High School cheerleaders support students participating in the 3rd annual Special Olympics held at the Greenfield-Central High School football field May 15.

“This program allows our students with learning differences to be a part of a fantastic event that builds confidence and collaboration skills while celebrating what makes each child unique,” added LeClaire. “Our Unified

Champions general education students get a chance to make a difference in the lives of others and get to see and celebrate what makes us all alike instead of what makes us different. They gain leadership skills and all

those involved develop pride for our school, district and community. The impact is bringing people together and building lasting friendships, bonds and a team spirit that will last a lifetime.”

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TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

Weston student Quinton Conniver participates in a field event. Greenfield-Central students take part in the Special Olympics held at the Greenfield-Central football field May 15.



TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

Area Greenfield-Central students participate in the 3rd annual Special Olympics held at the Greenfield-Central High School football field May 15.

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BOSS IS BACK

Much-needed after-school program returns to Hancock County

By LISA DEFILIPPO
For Daily Reporter

A new (again) program has come to Hancock County as of September 2023 and impacts the hearts and lives of our community's special learners. BOSS, or Building Our Social Skills, is a program developed by FUSE, Families United for Support and Encouragement, and was created to help students in grades 3-8 who struggle developing social skills. Launched originally in 2017 thanks to a \$25,000 Impact grant from the Community Foundation of Hancock County, the BOSS program was implemented and gaining traction until Covid restrictions halted it just 18 months in; but thankfully, BOSS is back and ready to help fill the gap for our children who struggle with social skills such as making friends, understanding emotions, and handling conflict in relationships.

Having good social skills is important for the success of all members of a community, and schools are instrumental in shaping those skills. Good social skills can positively

influence academic performance, behavior, social and family relationships, and participation in extracurricular and community activities, just to name a few.

"This program is so important, because social skills are a very important skill to success in life," said BOSS lead instructor Dianne Grannan. "It's a unique and special program in that it provides another opportunity for students to be involved in an afterschool club that they can enjoy and experience success. We

try to meet the students where they are and increase the skills they have and learn new skills."

BOSS instructors will work through lesson plans that include topics such as Friendship Skills, Introducing Yourself, Conversation Skills: How to Start a Conversation, How to End a Conversation, Reciprocal Conversation, Listening Skills, Teamwork, Understanding Emotions in Ourselves and Others, just to name a few, and in the fall semester, they tackle Halloween Safety and Christmas: Gratitude and Appropriate Responses to Receiving a Gift.

Interested families must fill out an

application and skills rating form, as well as have a skills rating completed by a school or private medical or therapy professional. To be eligible, students must show needs in at least three of the instructional areas, which include: communication, non-verbal communication, being part of a group, expressing your feelings, caring about yourself and others, problem solving, listening, standing up for yourself, and managing conflict.

The BOSS program runs after school for 75 minutes one day each week for 12 weeks each semester and is offered in six Greenfield schools: Eastern Hancock Elementary, Mt. Comfort Elementary, Mt. Vernon Middle School, Greenfield Intermediate School, Greenfield Junior High School, and Maxwell Intermediate School. Enrollment is limited to eight students per site and each student must have an IEP (Individualized Education Program), a 504 plan, or a referral from a school or other related professional. There is a \$240 cost per semester, payable in full or in installments; scholarship opportunities are also available.

"The kids are very excited about BOSS — sometimes anxious when it starts — then they miss it when it's over," shared Grannan, who is

celebrating her third year as an instructor. "I first got involved because I felt students needed additional opportunities to learn and practice social skills.

"I currently work with students Kindergarten/1st grade so I love that I get to work with some of my former students and families and see their progress," she continued. "This program has given me the opportunity to work with older students and it helps me learn a new skill set."

BOSS is currently only available to Hancock County students, but FUSE is hoping that will change as word gets out and more schools jump on board. "We served over 2,100 in 2023 [across all FUSE programs], and we hope to keep growing and supporting anyone who needs our services," said FUSE Executive Director Sara Cummins. "For the BOSS program specifically, we would love to grow into other school districts and to start a program for high school students. That way we could serve students starting in 3rd grade and take them into adulthood."

FUSE was founded in 1996 by Denise Arland and Amy Borgmann, two moms of kids with disabilities, and serves families and individuals with disabilities and mental health needs by providing information, training,



GRANNAN



support and encouragement, and continues to serve all ages, all disabilities, and all counties in the state of Indiana.

“We are a staff of three and we are funded primarily by individual donors. We receive no state or federal funding,” explained Cummins. “Because of this, volunteers and donors are critical to continue our mission.

“We have two major fundraisers coming up that will help support our programs. These fundraisers help us to offer all programs at a low- or no-cost to participants. FUSE Casino Night was February 23 at Adaggios, and Strike a Difference Bowl-a-thon will be Saturday, April 27th at Strike Force Lanes.” For more information, visit www.fuseinc.org.

“FUSE does not just bring resources to those we serve, but also hope and a network of others on similar journeys,” said Cummins. “We may not all be in the same boat, but we are sailing the same waters.”

“THIS PROGRAM IS SO IMPORTANT, BECAUSE SOCIAL SKILLS ARE A VERY IMPORTANT SKILL TO SUCCESS IN LIFE.”



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GREENFIELD CENTRAL SCHOOL FOUNDATION GROWING YEAR BY YEAR

By **SHELLEY SWIFT** | DAILY REPORTER
sswift@greenfieldreporter.com

GREENFIELD — When it comes to helping a child, Ginny Brown really hates to say no.

That's why she's so elated to see a growing number of donations coming

in to the Greenfield Central School Foundation, which she leads as executive director.

First formed under the name Set a Good Example in 1986, the nonprofit changed over to its new name in 2013 when it hired its first executive director.

Brown came on board in 2015, and

the foundation has grown steadily ever since.

"Education foundations were becoming a big thing back then because they provide a way for people to give philanthropically, bringing private dollars to the schools," said Brown.

It's no secret that classroom budgets

are often tight, and that teachers often dig into their own pockets to provide what they feel would help their kids.

Brown stays busy throughout the year pursuing donations and grants to help bridge that gap by providing educational enrichment grants to teachers who apply for them.

“Basically, what we do is fun projects that would not otherwise happen,” said Grown. “I always say that if a school district or principal can pay for something, let them use those tax dollars to pay for it. What we cover is all the extra stuff that otherwise wouldn’t get funded,” she said.

While the amount of teacher requests have increased in recent years, so too have donations, she said.

When she closed applications for the most recent grant cycle in mid-February, there were \$75,000 worth of requests.

Brown and her board of directors work to dole out the funds each spring, and a second round of grants are awarded through the Wish Upon a Star program at the foundation’s annual gala each spring when guests at the gala can donate money to cover particular wishes submitted by educators.

“Nine years ago we were only given away \$8,000 in enrichment grants,” she said. “We had to say no a lot and now we can usually say yes, which is great.”

Brown said she’s driven to do what she does based on her love of kids. “If I had done things differently I probably would have been a teacher. I just love kids and making their lives better,” she said.

One of her favorite programs through foundation is Project ARROW, for which student leaders from the high school come to mentor students at the junior high.

“They come over and work with these kids and do team building. It’s always great to see students go from being very introverted to thriving,” she said. “By the time we take them all bowling at the end they’re all high-fiving each other and having a great time.”

Brown said the school foundation board is currently revising its strategic plan to prepare for the years ahead.

“We need to look at the next five years and see where we need to take this, because we’ve been growing by leaps and bounds,” she said.

For more information, visit GC-schoolfoundation.com.



TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

Ginny Brown, Greenfield Central Education Foundation.

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LIVING THE DREAM

Harris Elementary music teacher hits all the right notes

By **SHELLEY SWIFT** | DAILY REPORTER
 sswift@greenfieldreporter.com

GREENFIELD — Mary Buckalew knew she wanted to become a music teacher ever since she started learning to play French horn in the sixth grade.

“My favorite part about school was going to band class and making music,” she said.

She now gets to live that dream each day as the music teacher at Harris Elementary School in Greenfield, where she teaches students from kindergarten through third grade how to dip their toes into the wonderful world of music.

“I love trying to instill that love of music in them early on,” she said.

Buckalew’s passion for teaching is a glowing example to her colleagues at

Harris, who voted her the Teacher of the Year for the 2023-24 school year.

“She’s a rock star, that one,” said school principal Sara Grulich.

Buckalew goes the extra mile in installing a love of music in her students, she said.

The longtime educator recently scored a grant from the Indiana Retired Teachers Association to purchase a new xylophone for her class.

She’s since acquired enough xylophones to accommodate half her class at any given time.

For now, half her students play the xylophone while the other half sings, but her goal is to equip her classroom with enough xylophones for every student in her class at any given time.

“It would seem silly to order half the number of textbooks for your class, so why should it be any different for



Harris Elementary music teacher Mary Buckalew. **TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER**

Harris said xylophones are a “melodic instrument” which teaches young students the ability to carry a tune while the tubano drums lined up on a shelf in her classroom teaches them how to keep a beat.

Her dream is to equip all her students with xylophones so they can learn to play music in multiple parts as an ensemble.

“Playing in an ensemble is a real skill that can prepare them for performing in a choir or band or orchestra that performs with different parts,” said Buckalew, who played French horn in her high school marching band.

“It’s important to have them learn to work as a team,” she said.

As a teenage band student growing up in Kokomo, Buckalew was leading

group rehearsals as early as her sophomore year.

Her passion is instilling a love of music in students at the elementary level, to prepare them for success as musicians later in life.

Buckalew went on to study music at Ball State University. This year marks her 19th year teaching music.

She met her husband, Dan, who teaches band at Maxwell Intermediate School in Greenfield, at a conference for Indiana music teachers in 2009. They married the following year.

Their kids are nearby throughout the day, with their daughter attending Maxwell Intermediate and their son in a third grade classroom across the hall from Buckalew’s classroom at Harris Elementary.

Buckalew discovered her passion for



teaching elementary-age kids while a student at Ball State.

“I fell in love with teaching elementary kids’ age. It fits my personality,” she said.

Buckalew has nothing but positive things to say about the music program within the Greenfield-Central schools, which she says does a great job of offering musical opportunities to students at an early age.

She considers it a personal point of pride to introduce children to musical concepts as early as kindergarten, and loves it when third-graders move on to join the band, orchestra or choir in intermediate school and beyond.

“That’s one of the great parts of being in Greenfield, is knowing I’m sending them on to really good band, orchestra and choir programs. I know

those programs are really going to enable them to excel,” she said.

Buckalew loves the fact that school-based music programs provide an outlet for students who may not be interested in pursuing other group activities like sports.

“There’s no bench in music. Everybody plays, but you really have to work as a team,” she said.

Buckalew feels taking part in a school music program can teach invaluable lessons in teamwork and leadership.

“I was leading rehearsals (within my sections in the school band) as a sophomore,” she said.

When she’s not teaching music classes, Buckalew can be found leading Zumba fitness classes at all three of the Hancock Wellness Centres through Hancock County.

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NPHS Earth Science class teacher Antranik Askander.

TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

NEW PALESTINE EDUCATION FOUNDATION GRANTS ENHANCE LEARNING

By KRISTY DEER | DAILY REPORTER
kdeer@greenfieldreporter.com

NEW PALESTINE — Sitting on one of the back shelves in the Earth and Space Science class at New Palestine High School (NPHS), teacher Antranik Askander has a seismometer set up. The active monitor measures earth quake activity in Indiana and around the United States.

“This seismometer picks up general noise, but when we get to studying earthquakes, what we’ll do is when there is an earthquake around 6.0 or 7.0 we’ll compare the data with the United States Geological survey to what we gather on here,” Askander said. “It will give us data from right here in the United States.”

The students in the class will actually learn how to read a seismometer

and understand what looks like a bunch of squiggly lines.

“They’ll understand the purpose,” Askander said. “They’ll compare the different waves on our monitor and the other and that will be real world data they can see first hand.”

In addition to the seismometer, the classroom also has a really cool telescope, one that will zero in and find a space object when asked.

“It’s an electronic telescope,” Askander said. “I can tell it to look for Mars and it will automatically find it in the sky and hold onto it.”

Askander, who also teaches chemistry, was able to purchase classroom enhancers like the seismometer and the telescope thanks to separate grants he’s received from the New Palestine Education Foundation (NPEF). The NPEF an organization with the sole

purpose of helping teachers gets the things they need in the classroom.

“I’ve received multiple grants from the foundation through the years,” Askander said. “The grants really do come in handy.”

He recently was able to purchase a new weather station for the class thanks to a NPEF grant and plans to set it up this spring. The station will give students who are in the Earth and Space Science class plenty of data to look into when trying to understand weather and patterns on earth.

“This new one is really accurate and goes through the national weather service, and that’s going to be really neat once we get it set up,” Askander said.

While he has a few smaller weather stations on his desk, getting a grant for several hundreds of dollars allowed him to get a much nicer and larger weather station students can really utilize.

“It’s nice to have a foundation because it allows me to get different pieces I need for the classroom, and that helps supplement the things we do in class,” Askander said. “A lot of time when teachers teach, we use data from outside sources, but having our own equipment, we can collect our own data, and that’s real world data that we have acquired.”

Askander, who has been teaching at NPHS for seven years, noted the NPEF really enjoys helping teachers out because, in the end, it’s the students who get to have a better learning experience.

The NPEF got its official name in 2021, but the foundation goes back to 2010. That’s when a group of community members and educators banded together to help teachers purchase needs for their classroom, Kim Taylor, board president said.

In those early days, the program was called the Southern Hancock Education Foundation, better known as SHed. The foundation was founded by New Palestine’s Randy Faunce and former district principal Mark Kern.

“I couldn’t be more proud to be part of an organization that offers so many things to our schools and to help the organization grow,” Taylor said.

Their mission is to promote and support quality public education in Brandywine and Sugar Creek Townships. The Foundation’s name was updated to its current name in 2021 to better reflect its work in the New Palestine school community, Taylor said.

In the early years, SHed was able to hand out around \$5,000 total per year to educators. The newer NPEF has grown to the point where in 2023 they had 62 grant application and handed out 47 mini-grants for a total of more than \$12,000.

“We were very excited about that figure because this has been our largest year,” Taylor said.

Nancy Workman has been teaching psychology and economics at New Palestine High School for the past nine years. During that time, she has received four different grants from the NPEF.

“The funds I have received from

those grants have benefited over 800 students,” Workman said.

This year, she sought funding for students to be able to build Play-Doh Brain Models.

“I feel this will be an innovative tool aimed at enhancing neuroscience understanding,” she said.

These types of models will provide an interactive and hands-on learning experience while also promoting Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) education at the high school level.

“Because this activity promotes STEM, I was the recipient of the Brody Strong Fund from the New Pal Education Foundation,” she said. “By combining the tactile and creative nature of Play-Doh with the intricacies of brain anatomy, my project aims to make complex neuroscience accessible and engaging for students.”

The foundation generates most of its funding through an annual gala each year as well as through donations. The Shed foundation started out with a gala raising around \$5,000 to \$10,000, but in recent years the gala has raised as much as \$40,000.

“We also apply for grants,” Taylor said. “Those grants help sustain us in a lot of areas.”

It was a grant in 2023 that helped the NPEF hire an official executive director, Shelley Swift, who will help the foundation raise money for teachers and students.

“We’re very excited about that,” Taylor said.

The funds the NPEF raises, coupled with a few grants over the past couple

of years, has allowed the foundation to maintain a steady stream of income to share with educators.

“Our goal is always to raise more money for the endowment,” Taylor said. “We’re always really working on that.”

While the foundation has come a long way during the past 14 years, Taylor noted that they want to continue to grow and reach the goals of supplying financial support to Southern Hancock teachers.

“We want to take what the folks from SHed started and continue to build on that,” Taylor said.

She credits several community members, including Kern, whose been a past president and board member from the start, as credit for the success of the foundation.

“Our board is strong thanks to so many individuals,” Taylor said. “Our thought is, what can we do as a foundation, to help teachers grow through development and help them grow their kids through the classroom either by programs or activities no matter what that looks like, but kids and times are changing.”

Taylor noted it’s great when something pops up and teachers need some assistance and know they can reach out to the NPEF for help.

“They ask us a lot, but we do have to stay within our mission which does allow us to do a lot,” Taylor said.

This year’s gala is slated for 6 p.m. Friday, April 12 and is called, the Prom of the Century. They’re asking everyone to save the date and come join in on the fun for a good cause.





Renee Oldham,
executive director
for the Mt.
Vernon Education
Foundation.

TOM RUSSO |
DAILY REPORTER

DESIRE TO INSPIRE

MVEF executive director earns national designation, highlighting foundation's involvement

By LACEY WATT | DAILY REPORTER
lwatt@greenfieldreporter.com

MT VERNON — Renee Oldham, executive director of Mt. Vernon Education, describes herself as a wife, mom, grandma, friend, Christian and, overall, someone who just loves to learn and help others.

Having the desire to always educate herself, Oldham received the Certificate Education Foundation Leader (CEFL) designation — the first designation given in Hancock County and the second in the state of Indiana.

Oldham said that she has been blessed with many educational opportunities for different certifications

over her career, such as downtown development, economic development, innovation and more. But with this certification, Oldham said that she found this one to be extremely unique and meaningful.

For this certification, Oldham said that this certification was about different segments of the education

foundation business and was time relevant. Oldham said they would go over items such as giving policies, handbooks, marketing campaigns and more, skills she could immediately implement.

It allowed her to work with other foundations at different levels and people with expertise in a variety

of different fields, where they would brainstorm and challenge themselves in the ways they thought, “Why are they doing something a certain way and how could they do it better?”

“It’s really meaningful where you’re creating something that you’re going to take back, you’re going to share and use,” Oldham said.

Oldham said this experience has been personally fulfilling, being an advocate for mentoring and being blessed herself with people who saw things within herself that she didn’t see at first.

“Being able to share your experiences, your failures, encourage others in your class that haven’t had the luxury of being mentored to, was really personally fulfilling of giving back.”

Oldham said she was excited to take what she had gained and bring it back to the MVEF and how it will be impactful to the students.

Some current impacts the MVEF has on students is being able to help pay for all and any certification tests for CTE and vocational classes. They were also able to help buy the

equipment for the welding classes to help kids get started on learning those vocational skills.

“We want to give kids as many different experiences as possible,” Oldham said. “How do we give them real world relevant experiences?”

They also offer scholarships such as the Steve Williams Scholarship, the Jack and Bev Falkenberg Scholarship and the Stephanie Stanley Scholarship. The Community Foundation of Hancock County also helps provide scholarships, not just for Mt. Vernon but all schools in the county.

Oldham said more individuals have been approaching MVEF about legacy giving and trust planning, and they are in the process of exploring those possibilities with their new gifting policy — which even includes crypto currency.

During her approximately seven years as executive director, Oldham said that the impact that the foundation has been able to give the students, staff and connection with the community has grown exponentially.

“It’s really been a collective

village,” Oldham said. “Our staff is so genuine and so authentic and I would say that’s really the one thing that has drawn me here. That they are passionately committed to student learning.”

Oldham says she enjoys working with a staff that is genuinely caring, wants every student to be successful and makes sure that they do what they can to make every student successful.

With almost 600 employees at Mt. Vernon Schools according to Oldham, not all of them are licensed teachers. She said each employee in the system has some sort of impact and plays a role in the success of each child, making it a collaborative effort.

Oldham highlighted that it’s important to know that a student’s success doesn’t have just one standard or success doesn’t always look the same but varies from student to student.

“It’s about making everyone the best version of themselves,” Oldham said.

Oldham said to help celebrate student success, they have the Hope Award, which allows any employee to nominate students who have overcome

something that had changed the trajectory of their education. Oldham said with this award it allows them to show the student that they are acknowledged and valued.

Another way they celebrate success is with their annual Black & Gold Gala, which will be held at the Indiana Ballroom on April 6 this year. At the gala, they honor and highlight their teacher and staff of the year winners and nominees. Oldham said that, during the interview process the nominees go through for the award, she gets to have the joy of listening to others share their stories even if she doesn’t have a vote on who wins and that she can’t help but get a little teary-eyed when listening to staff talk about their work.

“It makes you feel so proud to be a part of a group that loves kids so deeply and wants to see them be successful, that has a connection with them, builds relationships with them, that encourages them,” Oldham said.

For more information on the Mt. Vernon Education Foundation and upcoming events, visit mtvernonfoundation.org.

“It’s about making everyone the best version of themselves.”





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Eastern Hancock High School teacher Emily Burris with students out in the schools barn, which has an array of farm animals.

TOM RUSSO | DAILY REPORTER

EASTERN HANCOCK EDUCATION HELPS TEACHERS CONNECT

By **KRISTY DEER** | DAILY REPORTER
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CHARLOTTESVILLE — It's the first year for a vet science class at Eastern Hancock High School being taught by agriculture teacher Emily Burris, who had the notion that it would be great for students to get real, hands-on learning by working with real animals.

After receiving a grant from the Eastern Hancock Education Foundation (EHEF), Burris put the wheels in motion to order two or three goats and have them sent to the school's agriculture barn, behind the main building, next to the greenhouse.

"In the past, we've had kids who keep some of their 4-H animal projects out there, but these past few years we really haven't had too many animals out there," Burris said.

Getting the funds to get their own animals, the goats, means the students can learn about the animals year-round.

"We've got a lot of empty space in our barn and once we got this vet science class off the ground we thought, why are we not using our own facilities, so lets do this and get our own animals," Burris said.

The barn has a side for small animals and a side for large animals, but the

goats will get to use both sides with a pasture available to them during the day. Then, at night, they'll sleep in the smaller side of the barn, which Burris noted will keep them warm during cold winter nights.

In addition to the goats, they have some 4-H cows the students are getting a chance to check out every now and then, plus some barn cats.

Burris said she's thankful for the EHEF for providing the grant to purchase the goats, with this being the pilot year for the vet science class.

"The folks from the Hancock County Career Center wanted to add a vet science program because we no longer want to send our kids to other counties," Burris said. "All the administrators with the career center decided since we have the barn, we should be the ones to offer the vet science class, and now we just need to add a few more animals."

The vet science class currently has five students but is expected to grow as more students from around the county get word the program is available for those interested in animals.

Johnna Bridges is the former president of the EHEF, who stepped down at the first of the new year. She helped Burris get the funds for the goats and said the money, an estimated \$1,500

grant, was something the foundation was pleased to do and submitted the grant for goats first thing in 2024 when the new year grant cycle opened.

"We were happy to do this," Bridges said.

Bridges noted that not only will the students in the vet science class get to learn about the goats in their class, they're also going to let kids who are involved in 4-H activities spend time with the animals, too.

"Not everyone has the resources or the space to have an animal at their house, so they'll lease the goats to students who want to use them during the 4-H Fair," Bridges said. "That's the self-sustaining part of all of this."

Bridges said the goal of the EHEF is to promote academic excellence by investing in innovative educators and programs that inspire student success. The primary support includes providing grants, an estimated \$20,000 per year, for teachers and rewarding educators through appreciation efforts and programming.

"When we first started with offering grants, things were kind of basic, like teachers wanting to rearrange their classroom, but now it's very different," Bridges said. "We challenged the teachers and said, 'Hey, bring us more' and they have."

The EHEF recognizes teachers for exceptional innovation, commitment, leadership and devotion to academic excellence. Nominations are submitted by peers, students, parents and community stakeholders who deem that the educators' contributions exceed expectations.

Some of the other EHEF grants recently awarded include a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) field trip, which was awarded in the spring of 2023 with the trip taking place during fall break 2023 for middle school students. Some 40 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students, in the fall of 2023, traveled to the University of Southern Mississippi to participate in their STEM education and career exploration program with three days worth of hands-on experience.

During their trip, they visited barrier islands; observed wildlife in the Gulf of Mexico and Davis Bayou; joined biologists to capture, measure, tag and release sharks; and learned about beach and bayou ecology.

The EHEF also handed out a grant for a book vending machine, awarded in the fall of 2023 to the elementary school. This machine is really cool and teachers want one for themselves, officials said.



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Eastern Hancock High School teacher Emily Burris with students out in the schools barn, which has an array of farm animals.

The concept and goal is to increase the love of coming to school and motivate kids as well as to introduce kids to new books.

The high school recently received an Enhancing Landscapes and Student Experiences grant awarded to Sarah Williams in the fall of 2023.

The goal of this proposal was to obtain resources to enhance the landscape management course. The new landscaping class surveyed the Eastern Hancock campus to analyze potential projects for the class to complete throughout the

year to improve the school's outdoor appearance.

Students rotate turns using the tools available. Other times, the class has lacked the correct tools to complete a project. With the addition of the proposed tools and equipment, students now have the opportunity to increase their participation completing the class projects as well as further developing their skill set.

The grant allows for the class to increase the scope and size of projects, quantity of projects that can be completed in the fall and

spring semesters while the weather is ideal for outside projects. Furthermore, with the appropriate tools and equipment, the class can research, propose, and conduct landscaping service projects within the community, broadening the opportunity to apply the different landscaping skills developed by the students.

There was also the Agape Equine Assisted Learning Program with a grant awarded in the fall of 2023 for both the middle and high school essential skills students.

The funds will help students

participate in a six-week Equine Assisted Learning program through Agape in Greenfield. During each session, participants will learn about integrity, how to be grateful and what that will create, how actions and values affect lifestyle, friendship and working hard. All of these skill sets will be taught with an emphasis on leadership and teamwork.

If anyone would like more information about making a future gift to the EHEF through a bequest or other planned giving option, please contact: ehfoundation@ehancock.org

