Gaston County Schools

STORYBOOK

Our Students
Our Teachers
Our Alumni

Their Stories
2022
In 1979, Jimmy Carter was in the White House, "Laverne and Shirley" was the highest-rated TV show, and the Oldsmobile Cutlass was the best-selling car in America. That was 43 years ago, and while a lot has changed since then, one thing has remained the same at Rankin Elementary School in Mount Holly.

Meet Francina Burris. Back when people were driving around in Oldsmobiles, she took her place in the driver's seat of bus number 126. The transmission was manual, and there was no air conditioning. When she drove the bus off the lot for the first time, it marked the beginning of a four-decades stint that has resulted in her becoming a disciplinarian, role model, and second mother to an estimated 1,600 children.

“My friends told me the school needed a bus driver and they talked me into it,” said Burris, who thought about working as a truck driver, but says driving a bus comes pretty close. “I always wanted to be on the road.”

In addition to driving a bus, she worked in the school cafeteria for 20 years. Although she has retired from the lunch line, she is still up every weekday morning bright and early, preparing to start her day at 6:30 with a 17-mile route.

“They are my kids while on my bus,” said Burris, who expects the students to behave and follow the rules. “Some say I am mean, but I am not mean. You have to be stern, and sometimes, you have to show tough love.”

Burris’ influence reaches far and wide. She is recognized around town and often has people stopping her to see how she is doing and share a story. The question she is asked most often is “Do you remember me?” Today, she has students on her bus who are the grandchildren of some of her first bus riders.

“I feel like I am doing something good for the students,” she said. “I have always said they are our future and that one day they might be my doctor or my lawyer.”

Burris is one of the most dependable school bus drivers in Gaston County. She has been rewarded for perfect attendance year after year. “The only time I am out is if I am sick and can’t make it,” she said. “I know the kids are counting on me.”

So, after all these years, is retirement from the driver’s seat in the near future?

“As long as I have good health and keep passing the DOT test, I am going to be a bus driver,” said Burris. “It has been my calling. To be at the same school for 40 years, it is important to me.”

She’s been caring for students for more than 40 years
Pinewood Elementary has the Principal of the Year and the Teacher of the Year

It has happened before, but it doesn’t happen very often – the same school has the Gaston County Principal of the Year and the Gaston County Teacher of the Year in the same school year.

Pinewood Elementary’s double winners are Tyler West and Staci Nezezon. West is the Gaston County Principal of the Year, and Nezezon is the Gaston County Teacher of the Year for 2021-2022. We asked Mrs. West and Mrs. Nezezon to offer some words of wisdom for this school year. Below is what they had to say.

Staci Nezezon
Gaston County Teacher of the Year

In everything I do as an educator, wife, mother, and community leader, I try to look on the bright side of life. I believe positivity is infectious, and we have to put aside all of the noise and negativity and keep students as our primary focus.

Noted educator Rita Pierson said, “Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connections, and insists they become the best they can possibly be.”

As teachers, our purpose is to help students grow and achieve at a higher level. We have to realize what sparks their curiosity, and we have to understand how they learn. And, we must have positive relationships with our parents because they are a valuable ally and resource for our students’ success.

Tyler West
Gaston County Principal of the Year

Challenges are inevitable, but we can take care of everything that comes our way with perseverance, teamwork, and resilience.

My advice for school personnel is to discover what unites you with your colleagues. Find out how you are similar, what you share in common, and how you can work with each other so that when difficult times come, you will have people around you to guide you, support you, and befriend you.

There are three words that are important to me in my role as a school leader: growth, steadfastness, and unity. I encourage my staff to:
- Do everything they can to ensure that our students grow and thrive;
- Remain steadfast in the belief that public education is important for our children and our community; and
- Collaborate, come together, and make the best out of every situation.
A vision that has been several years in the making is reality now with the opening of the Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences. The healthcare-focused high school welcomed its first students in August. Operated by Gaston County Schools and located on the Gaston College campus in Dallas, the school is designed especially for students interested in the medical field.

“Because of our outstanding partnership with Gaston College, Belmont Abbey College, and CaroMont Health, we are able to offer a specialized high school program to help meet the growing demand for people to work in the healthcare industry,” said principal Beverley Bowman. “This new school provides students with a pathway to obtain the education, knowledge, experience, and connections necessary for a successful career in healthcare.

Students are able to earn a high school diploma and an associate degree from Gaston College. Academics focus on biotechnology, health information technology, human services technology, and nursing.

In addition to high school and college-level coursework, students participate in job shadowing experiences and gain hands-on learning through CaroMont Health, conduct undergraduate research, and prepare themselves for post-secondary education and/or going directly into the workforce. Further, students can take advantage of many resources available through Gaston College that enhance their academic experience and engage them in the college campus setting. Students may decide to transfer to Belmont Abbey College where they can obtain a bachelor’s degree in biology, biochemistry, psychology, social work, or related areas.

The Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences is the second Early College for Gaston County Schools and Gaston College, making Gaston County one of the few communities in the state with two programs. It is housed in the Comer Engineering Technologies Building and operates separately from the Gaston Early College High School, which opened in 2012 and is located in the Lena Sue Beam Building.

Students are chosen to attend the Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences through an application and lottery process that is conducted each spring. The school opened with ninth and tenth graders, and as it grows, it will have students in grades 9-12.

What is the Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences?
The new Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences is a collaborative effort for Gaston County Schools, Gaston College, Belmont Abbey College, and CaroMont Health. It is intended to develop a workforce to meet the growing demand for healthcare professionals in Gaston County.
Through our partnership with Gaston County Schools, CaroMont Health is proud to invest in the next generation and the future of our community. From sponsoring educational events to internships and scholarships, we make caring for our neighbors our first priority.

Some investments can change the world.

Daughter of retired Springfield principal takes seat at the same desk

Although it has been more than 15 years since Dan Potts retired as the principal of Springfield Elementary School, his daughter, Miranda Buchanon, says the only thing that has really changed about the principal’s office is the chair behind the desk. And, if anyone would know, it’s Miranda.

Currently serving as a first-year principal at Springfield Elementary, Buchanon said being the principal at the same school as her father is a surreal experience, but one that she is enjoying.

“With my family, there was no way around being in education,” she said. “Education is the family business. I come from a long line of teachers, but I never imagined I would be a principal.”

Buchanon started out as an art teacher and quickly realized she could make a bigger difference at the administrative level.

“Within the first few years of teaching, I really saw where I wanted to make a difference in the whole building,” she said. “I was on the School Improvement Team, and I served in a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) role. By doing those things, it really showed me the impact you can have schoolwide in a leadership position.”

So, when Buchanon was named the principal at Springfield, she reached out to her father, who served as the principal for nine years, to share the news.

“Miranda has always been someone who takes charge and teaches others. It’s just who she is. For her to become an educator didn’t surprise me,” said Potts. “The nicest thing about being at Springfield is that both of us grew up here.”

Buchanon sees the value in serving in the community where she was raised and said getting to know the people of Stanley has been one of the best parts of the job.

“I remember when Dad was the principal at Springfield, just thinking that he knew everyone in this town. We’re a close-knit community. He had so many connections with families, and when they saw him out and about, they would always smile and wave. I’m getting to experience that myself now.”

When asked what she learned from her father about his time at Springfield, Buchanon said there are two really important lessons.

“You school should look family and child-centered,” she said. “I remember Dad purchasing a lot of artwork for the hallways during his time here so that was one of the first things I did, too.”

Buchanon also wants to keep the community feel of Stanley running through the halls of Springfield. “Dad always led from a heart of service, taking care of the staff and the families here,” she said. “That will remain my number one priority, too. We want to have a true family environment at Springfield every day.”

In addition to wanting to strengthen the school’s sense of family, Buchanon said supporting students is just as important.

“The best part of being a principal is knowing that I am helping students prepare for the rest of their lives,” she said. “They can be anything they want to be, and through education, we give them the gift to achieve all of their dreams. That’s the best thing we can do for them, and I learned that from my Dad.”
Student takes on statewide leadership role as SGA president

Today, Gaston Early College High School student Nathan Vasquez is the Student Government Association president for all community colleges in the state. One day, his leadership service might result in him working and living at The White House.

While becoming President of the United States may be a lofty goal, Vasquez is already getting experience. His initial involvement in the Student Government Association (SGA) at Gaston College fostered his interest in leadership, public service, and elected office.

Capitalizing on his involvement with SGA, Vasquez interviewed to represent the 17 community colleges in the western portion of the state. His outstanding interview led to him being chosen to represent all community college students in the state as president of the North Carolina Comprehensive Community College Student Government Association (N4CSGA).

"I was thrilled to hear I had been appointed to serve as president," said Vasquez. "It is an honor to represent my school, Gaston College, and this community in a state leadership role."

Vasquez is the student representative on the state board for the North Carolina Community College System and attended his first board meeting in October. Among his priorities are finding ways to increase enrollment at community colleges and attracting minority students to attend community college.

Currently a real estate broker, Vasquez will graduate in May with a high school diploma and an Associate of Science degree from Gaston College. He remains undecided about what four-year college he will attend, but his long-term goals are to get a four-year degree, go to law school, and become a real estate attorney.

And, who knows? A productive career in politics also may be in his future.

Project gives opportunity for students to learn important skills

Ashbrook High School student Eli Poulsen found an Eagle Scout service project that will have a long-lasting and meaningful influence at Webb Street School.

Poulsen and Webb Street principal Chris Mills worked together to create a food pantry that will serve as a teachable moment for students and allowed Poulsen to complete his Eagle Scout project. "One Can Make A Difference" is the name of the food pantry that is run and operated by students in the vocational training classes.

"I was looking at service opportunities at Ashbrook High School when Dr. Rebecca Wilson (principal) told me about the food pantry," said Poulsen. "Once I had a conversation with Mr. Mills, it was very motivating to know how this idea could contribute in so many ways."

The food pantry is used by the school district’s social workers. When a need arises, they place an order online, and students at Webb Street work to fill the order. The process resembles an online grocery store experience where people order and clerks do the shopping for the customers, who go to the store to pick up their groceries.

Poulsen designed what he called a can storage unit, and volunteers helped build and install 41 of them. The units are used to shelf and organize the cans based on contents. Each unit has a label such as "black beans" and "green beans" to identify the items. The labels also include a picture symbol to accommodate for diverse learning needs. Students match up picture labels from an order that correspond to the items on the shelves and then place them in a box.

"I look at the list and match the picture to what is on the shelf," said Berenice Aguirre-Alcantar, who is one of the students in charge of running the food pantry.

Teacher Susie Rutherford is happy that the opportunity presented itself after her students were unable to experience off-campus job opportunities due to COVID-19.

"They understand our food pantry is a volunteer job, and they’re not getting paid, but they know the skills they’re learning can translate to them getting a job in the community," said Rutherford.
Snip of the ribbon marks the grand opening of Belmont Middle School

School representatives and community leaders stood ready with scissors in hand. It took just a few snips followed by a boisterous round of applause. The ribbon was cut and the new Belmont Middle School was declared open.

More than 300 people attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony in August for a time of celebration as students, teachers, and parents got a first look at the brand new campus. It also was an opportunity to reminisce about the school’s past and look ahead to a new era for excellence.

“We are very excited about the opening of our school,” said principal Susan Redmond. “With this new building comes a modern environment for quality teaching and learning. It is a very special place that will inspire great pride and enthusiasm in the Belmont community for many years to come.”

The new Belmont Middle School is an investment of approximately $40 million. The building features more than 40 modern classrooms, various instructional spaces, science labs, administrative offices, teacher workrooms, conference rooms, a large cafeteria/multipurpose space, gymnasium, and other areas. It is designed for 1,000 students.

Unlike the historic school building on Central Avenue that served the community for eight decades, the new, 78-acre campus has its own athletic fields and plenty of space. There are more than 200 parking spaces, and the traffic lane can accommodate 100 cars. The sports complex includes a multipurpose football field with a six-lane track and baseball and softball fields.

The contemporary, two-story structure is stately in appearance, thanks to the contrasting color of bricks, numerous large windows, and state-of-the-art design that rivals any new school facility. The building, which maximizes the use of natural light and is energy efficient, has more than 155,000 square feet of space.

The color scheme provides an inviting look for the school’s interior. A shade of Kelly green is the primary color found throughout the building with hints of light green and navy blue as accent colors. Signage throughout the building and graphics featuring historic pictures and inspirational words are eye-catching.

At the heart of the school is the library/media center with many academic and enrichment resources. The spacious classrooms are designed to support collaborative teaching and learning. Flat panel screens, oversized whiteboards, instructional technology, and other features transform the classrooms and captivate the students’ attention through highly visual and interactive elements.

Another significant feature is the gymnasium complete with a spacious lobby, locker rooms, concession stand, and weight/wrestling areas. The gymnasium is a stand-alone space that is connected to the main building by a hallway and outdoor courtyard area.

Belmont Middle School is the third new school campus for Gaston County Schools in the past five years. The construction project was paid for through the school bonds that were approved by voters in 2018.
Students at Cherryville High School got to hear firsthand how taking courses in the school’s Public Service Academy can lead them down a promising career path.

Teacher Ray McMillan invited three Class of 2021 graduates to speak to the emergency medical technology class about their time in the program and how it helped them prepare for a job right out of high school with Gaston Emergency Medical Services (GEMS).

Ashlyn Beattie, Trae Costner, and Jessica Johansen agree that McMillan’s experience as a former paramedic inspired them to seek their emergency medical technician (EMT) credentials. Now, they are enrolled at Gaston College, working on an associate degree and receiving on-the-job training through GEMS.

“Not all high schools offer classes where they teach you to become an EMT,” said Costner. “I was unsure about what I wanted to do after high school, but the emergency medical technology program sparked an interest that I would have never imagined.”

Like Costner, Johansen plans to become a certified paramedic. She said the program made it possible for her to get a job after graduation and provide an important service to the community.

“For Beattie, working with GEMS is the beginning of her future aspirations. “I want to be a flight paramedic,” said Beattie. “Working as an EMT gives me hands-on experience that will help me achieve my career goal.”

Now in its fourth year, McMillan is working to recruit more students for the EMT program, which is part of the Public Service Academy. The Academy introduces students to career options in public service sectors such as police, fire, public safety, emergency medical care, government, criminal justice, and education/teaching.

“I was unsure about what I wanted to do after high school, but the emergency medical technology program sparked an interest that I would have never imagined.”

— Trae Costner
Hawks Nest STEAM Academy earns N.C. STEM School of Distinction title

Hawks Nest STEAM Academy is recognized across Gaston County for its concentrated emphasis on science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics. Now, Hawks Nest has gained attention at the state level, earning the North Carolina STEM School of Distinction title.

The N.C. Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education began recognizing schools in 2014 for outstanding efforts in STEM education. Hawks Nest is one of only 17 schools statewide to earn the STEM model school designation.

STEM Schools of Distinction are recognized by the Department of Public Instruction for exemplifying outstanding leadership and challenging students to think creatively. With a focus on teamwork, teachers and staff help students develop the ability to reason and embrace essential STEM attributes they need to be successful in today’s society.

Hawks Nest STEAM Academy opened in August 2016 as the only elementary magnet school in Gaston County with a focus on STEM. Becoming a statewide model school was a priority since the school’s beginning.

“One of our main goals is to make sure our school is a place where students thrive. They’re growing academically because of our efforts to take a whole-school approach to the STEM curriculum and integrating the arts,” said principal Tammy Mims. “There are so many good things going on at Hawks Nest, and I am very proud of the work that is being done by our teachers and our students.”

Wile the COVID-19 pandemic led some people to slow down from their daily grind, Ashleigh B. Curry decided she would use her extra time to be productive. The Hunter Huss High School graduate, who lives in Gastonia and has a full-time job as a company benefits coordinator, sought a creative outlet to keep herself busy. So, she began writing.

When she started, she didn’t stop. Coming up with dozens of ideas, she used writing as a way to express herself, something she is familiar with doing on screen as well.

Curry, who said she always knew she wanted to be an actress and has been in shows on Netflix and Investigation Discovery, penned a story about the lives of real-life female, African-American baseball players Toni Stone, Mamie Johnson, and Connie Morgan in the 1950s. She said the idea came to her from a single scene in a movie.

“I was watching ‘A League of Their Own,’ and there was one scene where a black woman threw a ball back to a character,” Curry said. “You don’t know anything about her or see her again in the movie, so I did some research and found out about Mamie.”

Curry pitched the idea to friends, who thought they could make it into a screenplay and create a production out of it. Curry, who had never considered herself a writer or producer, only planned to act in the movie. But instead, she ended up playing the role of Mamie Johnson while also serving as the writer, director, and producer of the film.

Although she first said no to directing the eight-minute film, Curry ended up changing her mind because she wanted to tell the stories of the three women.

“I didn’t know I would ever end up doing this,” she said. “I used to write stories when I was younger, but I had gotten away from it because I never thought people would be interested in what I had to say. When my friend asked me to be part of a PSA (public service announcement) she was directing, I made it seem like it was fun, and I thought, ‘Well, why not?’”

And now, a year later, Curry has gone from having Zoom rehearsals to attending premieres in Charlotte and Gastonia with her friends and family to see the film for the first time.

“We wanted to share this story with other people,” she said. “I thought maybe extend the invitation to 50 people. That turned into 100 people and then 250 people. It was amazing that so many people showed up to see it. The whole time of the screening, I couldn’t sit down. I was just watching them watch the movie.”

As for the message to take away from the short film? Curry wants to remind viewers that just because it’s 2022, it doesn’t mean a movie set in the 1950s can’t still apply to their lives.

“History repeats itself,” she said. “You have to understand where you came from to know where you’re going. These women went through so many different obstacles – racism, sexism, finding a balance in raising a family and doing what they loved, but they achieved their dreams.”

“I know it sounds cliché, but you can’t give up,” Curry said. “You’ll succeed if you keep pushing.” And this hometown woman certainly has.
A RUNNING EFFORT

Five-time state champion aims to achieve more at Duke University

A career in dentistry and a spot on Team USA are on the mind of Highland School of Technology senior Lauren Tolbert. For more than three years, the accomplished student-athlete has won a handful of awards and championships in cross country and track and field. Now, Tolbert’s winning ways are leading her to Duke University.

“Duke has always been one of my top choices,” said Tolbert with a smile on her face. “We know they have a strong academic program, and their track team won the ACC championship last spring. So, I believe Duke is the right place for me to continue my education and pursue my dream of making it to the Olympics.”

Tolbert has already made a name for herself on the local sports scene. As a junior, she captured the 1A individual cross country state championship, and her time of 19:15.05 set a state record. The win made her the first cross country champion for Gaston County Schools since South Point High School’s Glenn Sparrow captured a state title in 1978.

Last spring, she was named the 1A Female Most Valuable Performer for winning individual state championships in the 400-meter run and 800-meter run. In addition, Tolbert won individual track championships in 2019 in the 400-meter and 1000-meter races. After claiming state championships in track and field, Tolbert showcased her talent at the national level. She earned a second place finish at the Nike Outdoor Nationals and gold medals at the AAU Club Championship and AAU Junior Olympic Games.

“Lauren has unbelievable, God-given talent. She has amazing drive, sets goals, and goes after them,” said Highland track coach Marcella Robbins.

Tolbert is a champion in the classroom, too. She works hard to maintain an A average and wants to graduate with honors. Her plans at Duke include pursuing a degree in biology or other related field, going to dental school, and specializing in oral surgery.

“Lauren is one of the most determined, humble, kind, and hard-working students that I have ever had the privilege to teach,” said health sciences teacher Angela Garner. “Not only is she amazing as a runner, but as a person, too. She sets a goal, works daily to achieve it, and then pushes herself to be even better.”

So, as Tolbert runs toward a promising and bright future, what’s next for her? “I will be training for the state and national competitions in the spring of 2022, and I am looking forward to graduating in June,” she said. “Then, it will be off to Duke University to see what I can achieve there.”

Willer earn scholarships to run cross country at East Carolina University

Zachary and Nicholas Willer

Sometimes when people see Stuart W. Cramer High School students Zachary and Nicholas Willer, they do a double take. The brothers are identical twins, and it’s not just their looks that are shared. Their winning ways are, too.

In the 3A west regional and state cross country championships as well as most other running competitions, the brothers have been separated by mere seconds. Zachary finished two and a half seconds ahead of Nicholas to win the state title, becoming Gaston County’s first boys state champion in 43 years.

Prior to the state contest, Zachary finished one second ahead of Nicholas at the western regional meet. Earlier in the cross country season, it was Nicholas who earned first place in the Gaston County meet and the Big South 3A conference championship.

While there is a rivalry between some siblings, Zachary and Nicholas say they are not competing against each other, but rather they focus on the athletes on opposing teams.

“We support one another,” said Zachary. “We are cheering no matter who finishes ahead of the other. If I see Nicholas doing well during a race, it motivates me that much more.”

The two brothers have a good relationship. They played other sports such as soccer and swimming together before making running their primary focus.

“We started running laps in middle school soccer for conditioning,” said Nicholas. “Our coaches saw how well we ran and asked us to give middle school track a try, and the rest is history.”

With the cross country season complete, the Willer brothers can now concentrate their training on indoor and outdoor track and field. Both of them compete in the 1600 meters, 3200 meters, and 4x800 relay events.

However, running is not their long-term goal. Both realize it would be great to be a professional distance runner, but they know a good education is what awaits them at East Carolina University where they have earned cross country scholarships to help pay for their studies.

“We’re majoring in biomedical engineering,” said Nicholas. “We hope to develop prosthetics for the medical field.”

Both Nicholas and Zachary credit the Career and Technical Education (CTE) classes offered through Gaston County Schools and their teacher, Meredith McMillan, for their interest in biomedical engineering.

Now, their futures will take them to East Carolina to further their academic and athletic aspirations. Together, they hope to continue being a friendly force in competition and sharing more championship moments.”
Atlanta Braves find a ‘hero’ in Gaston County Schools

What's it like to be recognized by the World Series champion Atlanta Braves? Just ask Tryon Elementary's Renee Smith.

Smith, the school's speech language pathologist, was named one of the Braves' Community Heroes for 2021, a distinction that honors her efforts to establish a program for students with disabilities.

In 2018, Smith co-founded the Exceptional Community Heroes program in Atlanta to recognize people who have taken action to help others.

Last June, the Braves hosted Smith and her colleagues in a suite at Truist Park, provided customized jerseys, recognized them on the field while a video played on the jumbotron, and interviewed them for a TV broadcast. It was a surreal experience as the Braves brought attention to an organization that is still very dear to her.

While living in the Atlanta area, Smith and two colleagues, Lauren Marks and Susan Keeney, formed their organization after realizing the need to provide social and recreational resources for adults with disabilities once they graduate from high school or age out of the public school system. The program offers opportunities for participants to engage with their peers and the community through volunteerism, social gatherings, and learning activities.

"In our work, we wanted to be a voice for students who need support," said Smith. "Absolutely."

While Smith reluctantly admits that tennis – not baseball – is her favorite sport, Smith says she believes in the Braves and always felt like they had what it took to go all the way to the World Series. Now, when you ask her if she is a Braves fan, her answer is quick and simple. "Absolutely."

"We are very appreciative of the recognition from the Atlanta Braves, and this is a great opportunity to focus on the students." Through its foundation, the Atlanta Braves started the Community Heroes program in 2016 to recognize people who have taken action to help others.

School leaders for the future

Fourteen teachers have been chosen for Gaston County Schools’ new partnership with Gardner-Webb University that will help develop the next generation of school leaders.

The teachers are involved in a 20-month program of study, completing 36 credit hours and obtaining a master’s degree in school administration. They will progress through the coursework together as a cohort with a blend of online classes and in-person meetings. The classes focus on topics such as executive leadership, resource management, curriculum development, and research and assessment.

With the degree in hand, the teachers will be candidates to take on administrative positions in Gaston County Schools such as assistant principal, dean of students, curriculum/academic facilitator, and lead/content teacher. According to Superintendent of Schools W. Jeffrey Booker, the school district is taking steps now to prepare promising educators for leadership roles.

Dr. Booker said, "We estimate that more than two-thirds of the school administrators in Gaston County Schools already have 20 or more years of service, which means they can retire sometime in the next 10 years. This is why we must act now to identify, train, and develop school administrators. We have to invest in our workforce today so our schools will have leaders tomorrow."

The opportunity for teachers to earn a master’s degree from Gardner-Webb is offered through the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy. Tuition is free for the teachers who are chosen for the program; participants have to pay for books, which are about $200 a semester. Through the partnership, Gardner-Webb and the school district will split the cost to pay for the participants’ tuition, which is estimated at $20,000 per teacher.

“Sometimes, teachers have an interest in becoming a school administrator and show promise of being an excellent one, but they do not have the financial resources to pay for a master’s degree,” explained Dr. Booker. “This partnership takes the financial burden out of the equation so teachers can work toward fulfilling their educational career goals.”

Dr. Booker concluded, “We are extremely grateful for Gardner-Webb University’s commitment to helping us train and develop future school leaders. This new program is a win-win for Gaston County Schools and Gardner Webb University; and we look forward to seeing how it benefits our teachers, our schools, and our community.”
Promoting global education and teaching go hand-in-hand, according to W.C. Friday Middle School teacher Jennifer Bumgarner.

The English teacher, who was one of 71 individuals chosen to participate in the Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms program, says she has a strong conviction that teachers and students should be more globally minded in the classroom. It is important for students to have an understanding of the world beyond their home community, according to Bumgarner, who stresses that a global perspective will benefit them in life.

Bumgarner’s involvement with the Fulbright Teachers program, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, has confirmed that belief for her. Since its inception in 1946, the Fulbright program has given more than 390,000 students, scholars, teachers, artists, and professionals of all backgrounds the opportunity to study, teach, exchange ideas, and contribute solutions to important international issues.

In a ‘normal’ school year, Bumgarner would get to network and fellowship with other Fulbright teachers at events and travel abroad to foster connections between the United States and other countries. While Bumgarner’s travels have been postponed due to the ongoing pandemic, she is excited about going to her assigned country of France when the time is right. Until then, she has enjoyed getting to know other Fulbright teachers through Zoom meetings and social media.

“I have the ability to interact with like-minded, dedicated colleagues through this program,” she said. “I was working with people with multiple degrees, who have traveled all over the world, and know other languages. Getting to see that teachers are promoting a global mindset across the country is really encouraging.”

W.C. Friday is home to Gaston County Schools’ Leadership Academy for middle school students. As a teacher-leader in education, Bumgarner understands why she must take on leadership roles and go above the call of duty. After all, she wants to model what being a leader looks like in an effort to encourage her students to develop their skills and emerge as leaders for their school and community.

Bumgarner still echoes her sentiment that got her involved in the Fulbright program. She believes teachers can learn and do so much more for their students by getting involved in new opportunities.

“In a ‘normal’ school year, Bumgarner would get to network and fellowship with other Fulbright teachers at events and travel abroad to foster connections between the United States and other countries. While Bumgarner’s travels have been postponed due to the ongoing pandemic, she is excited about going to her assigned country of France when the time is right. Until then, she has enjoyed getting to know other Fulbright teachers through Zoom meetings and social media.”

“Teachers possess an inherent conviction that education is a vehicle for possibilities, achievement, and adventure,” she said. “And, we’re right. There are so many opportunities available for teachers at all levels.”

As for the lifetime of learning that Bumgarner encourages students and colleagues to embrace, she says she still has her work cut out for her. “I still need to brush up on my French language skills before I travel overseas,” she said with a laugh. “A teacher can be a student, too.”
Teacher welcomes opportunity to ‘never stop learning’

‘Never stop learning’ is a motto that applies to North Belmont Elementary’s Vanessa Hairston.

Hairston is among 26 teachers statewide who were chosen for the Kenan Fellows Program for Teacher Leadership through N.C. State University. The professional development program pairs outstanding educators with local industries so they can gain insight into how what takes place in the classroom has a direct connection to the workplace. She spent last summer participating in the “Spurring Innovation in Manufacturing” internship program at Cornerstone Building Brands in Gaffney.

“It was absolutely amazing,” said Hairston. “Not only did this experience link classroom learning to the real world, but it allowed me to reevaluate my practice as an educator based on their business model. I learned that much of what we do in education is visible in the manufacturing sector.’”

During her internship, Hairston attended accountability meetings when data analysis was discussed to assess productivity and projected goals. She also shadowed employees in human resources, operations, finance, and other departments.

“It was a great educational experience collaborating and working alongside a community business entity that treated me as though I was part of their leadership team,” she said.

Kenan Fellows are a network of teachers, who work collaboratively to advance STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education. Participants receive leadership training to drive innovation and help students gain career-ready skills.

Hairston wants what she teaches inside the classroom to be applicable to her students’ lives outside the classroom. She says they enjoy learning about concepts associated with STEM, and her goal is to convey how STEM is used every day.
What’s going on in classrooms at three elementary schools in Gaston County has captured the attention of educators from Colorado. W. A. Bess Elementary, Pinewood Elementary, and Rankin Elementary earned the prestigious North Carolina A+ School distinction, which is presented by the N.C. Arts Council. W. A. Bess joined the program in 2019, and Pinewood and Rankin followed in 2020. As an A+ School, Bess, Pinewood, and Rankin have added the arts across the curriculum.

Last fall, a group of 24 educators from the Colorado Springs School District visited Gaston County Schools to learn more about our North Carolina A+ Schools. What they saw were creative and inspiring ways that teachers are incorporating aspects of art, music, dance, and theater into their daily lessons and activities.

“It is great for them to see the amazing work being done in Gaston County Schools and find out more about the benefits of A+ learning and how children are engaged in this type of unique school environment,” said Michelle Burrows, the North Carolina A+ Schools director who arranged the visit.

By integrating art into the assignment, children gain a better understanding of their multiplication skills, said Helms. “They love the hands-on approach to learning.”

In Amanda Humphries’ classroom, third graders performed a skit using “The Tortoise and the Hare” story to demonstrate their reading comprehension skills. "After reading a variety of folktales and discussing character traits, motives, and moral lessons in the stories, students had the opportunity to showcase a folktale through dramatization," explained Humphries. “In groups, one student was the narrator of a fable while the other students did a pantomime, acting out key vocabulary words for actions and feelings of the characters.”

The hallways at W. A. Bess Elementary are lined with colorful and creative art projects with written explanations. First grade teacher Ashley McGinnis used jack-o-lanterns for her students to learn about two dimensional shapes.

“Some students used triangles and rectangles for teeth, and others used different shapes such as ovals and circles to represent the pumpkin,” said McGinnis. “It’s one of the many ways our children are using their imagination to learn the curriculum.”

This is what an A+ North Carolina School looks like on a typical day – integrating the arts into the curriculum and viewing the arts as a foundation for teaching and learning.

Research indicates that students who are engaged in the arts achieve at a higher level and also develop an understanding of and appreciation for the arts. Through their visit to Gaston County, the Colorado educators were able to see how the arts are linked to positive academic outcomes and learn strategies and techniques to use in their own classrooms.
Here is a look at some of our school renovation projects that have been completed or are underway:

**Dining Room Renovation**
- Hunter Huss High School
- Elevator Renovations
  - Ashbrook High School
  - Southwest Middle School
**Flooring**
- Hawks Nest STEAM Academy
- Lowell Elementary School
- Mount Holly Middle School
- South Point High School
- Webb Street School
**Generator Installation**
- Brookside Elementary School
- Cramerton Middle School
- Forestview High School
- Sadler Elementary School
**LED Lighting**
- Cherryville High School
- Highland School of Technology
- Webb Street School
**Libraries/Media Centers**
- Lowell Elementary School
- Mount Holly Middle School
**Life Safety (cameras, intercoms, security systems, fire alarms)**
- Bessemer City High School
- Carr Elementary School
- New Hope Elementary School
**Outdoor Drainage Improvements**
- Ashbrook High School
- Bessemer City High School
- Bessemer City Middle School
- Catawba Heights Elementary School
- Gardner Park Elementary School
- Hunter Huss High School
**Painting and Locker Renovation**
- Webb Street School
**Parking Lot Paving and Design**
- Bessemer City High School
- Bessemer City Middle School
- Pinewood Elementary School
- Springfield Elementary School
**Roofing Design**
- Bessemer City Middle School
- Cramerton Middle School
- Forestview High School
- Holbrook Middle School
- Kiser Elementary School
- Pinewood Elementary School
**Tennis Courts**
- South Point High School

**From parking lot paving to roofing work, an investment in our schools**

Students and teachers at 27 schools may have noticed something different about their campus when they returned to class to begin the 2021-2022 academic year. Crews spent time last summer taking care of various renovation and repair projects, everything from parking lot paving to roofing work. Some projects are more visible than others; it is easy to notice when a school’s interior has been painted while it might not be as obvious when a new generator has been installed.

Regardless of the visibility of the work that was done, all of the effort is a step toward providing students and teachers with even better school facilities, according to Dr. Morgen Houchard, executive director for auxiliary services. Houchard’s team is responsible for identifying necessary renovation and repair projects and working to make them happen.

Funding for the repair and renovation projects comes from the 2018 school bond referendum and funds set aside for routine maintenance.

“IT is an investment in our schools for sure,” said Houchard. “We are pleased to be making progress on addressing our critical facility needs, but there is more work to be done. We look forward to using our school bond funds to continue efforts to enhance our school buildings and make them the best they can be for our students, teachers, and the community.”

Perhaps the most visible construction project came to fruition in August with the opening of Belmont Middle School. The new school replaces the historic building on Central Avenue near downtown Belmont that was used as a school campus for eight decades. Belmont Middle is the third new school for Gaston County Schools in five years. The new Pleasant Ridge Elementary School opened in August 2017 and houses the district’s Gifted and Talented Academy for elementary school students. The larger Pleasant Ridge building was designed to facilitate the merger of Forest Heights and Rhyne elementary schools with Pleasant Ridge.

In March 2018, Stanley Middle School held its grand opening with the new facility being built on the old football field. When the new building opened, new athletic fields were built where the old school once stood. Essentially, the campus “flipped” with the building now at the back of the site and the athletic fields at the front of the property.

Now, attention turns to the next school campus construction project. In August, the Board of Education approved a resolution requesting the approval and appropriation of additional school bond funds from the county. In the resolution, the Board indicated its intention to use a portion of the next allocation of funds for the construction of a new Grier Middle School in Gastonia.
We win awards... lots of them!

Our fine arts programs receive recognition and awards in various competitions on a consistent basis. Students participate in the Mid-Carolina Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards program, and they bring home Gold Key, Silver Key, and honorable mention awards each year.

Our school choirs as well as our marching and concert bands often bring home top honors from regional and state competitions.

Our theater arts students are able to put their hard work and dedication on display during the annual Blumey Awards, a program that highlights the best in high school drama across the Charlotte region. In recent years, Stuart W. Cramer High School has earned its fair share of coveted Blumey Awards, and other schools have won awards each year.

Our fine arts programs receive recognition and awards in various regions. For actors who make it big on Broadway, their career likely began on the small stage at their hometown middle school or high school. The theater arts in Gaston County Schools is part of nearly 26,000 K-12 school-based theater programs in the United States.

Studies indicate training in acting classes improves language and memory skills. Further, creative drama enhances fluent and flexible thinking in students and also encourages public volunteerism.

The fine arts knowledge and techniques that students learn as youngsters are ones that contribute to them receiving a well-rounded education and perhaps landing a break on the big stage.

Middle school students gain experience with high school band

Three eighth-grade students at John Chavis Middle School are preparing for their future with the Cherryville High School marching band.

Beonka Adams, Daniel Bredin, and Emily Watts attended summer band camp and spent two weeks learning music and marching with the high schoolers. They stepped up and took their place with the high school band, participating in performances at Friday night football games.

“I was nervous at first,” admitted Watts, who has family members who participated in marching band. “But I feel really comfortable now because I know that I’ve grown in my skills, and I can see how far I’ve come.”

Band director Anna Waters had the idea to involve her eighth graders in the high school program. It creates a direct link between the middle school and high school bands and encourages eighth graders to continue in the program when they get to high school.

“When I was student-teaching at a middle school, the band director let his eighth graders march, and I had never heard of that before,” said Waters. “The students loved it, and it was challenging and rewarding for them.”

Waters met with Cherryville band director Mark Ewing, who was open to getting middle school students involved. From that point on, they put the plan into action.

“From a musical standpoint, they’re playing high school level music,” said Waters. “It hasn’t been easy for them, but they have really taken on the challenge and their leadership ability has grown. The goal has been to help improve their skills, and we’ve seen that happening.”

For Adams, the experience provides an opportunity to build a good rapport with other students and begin understanding the expectations of the high school program.

“The most challenging part is keeping up with the high school students when they play because we don’t have as much experience,” said Adams. “But, getting to do this now puts us ahead for next year.”

So, what is Bredin’s advice for other students who might be interested in taking advantage of the opportunity? “I would absolutely say to do it,“ he said. “But, you have to be serious about it and be eager to learn. That’s the only way you’re going to get better at playing.”
Congratulations!

Kameron Radford was inducted into the American School Band Directors Association, an organization that advocates for quality music programs in our schools. He also was nominated for the Grammy Music Educator Award.

Kameron Radford always knew he wanted a career in music.

A product of Gaston County Schools, he graduated from Hunter Huss High School in 2004 and returned to his alma mater as the band director in 2008 after earning his degree from Appalachian State University. When Stuart W. Cramer opened in 2013, Radford jumped at the opportunity to become the high school’s first band director.

“I have the opportunity to work with the most amazing students,” said Radford. “The greatest part of my job is teaching students the skills needed to reach the highest level of excellence. Many of the skills learned in band like responsibility, commitment, perseverance, and teamwork are the same skills needed to be successful in life.”

Radford’s interest in music began at a young age. He recalls listening to music at his grandmother’s house when he was just three years old – his favorite song at the time was “Elvira” by the Oak Ridge Boys. He enjoyed learning songs while in elementary school at H.H. Beam and began developing his musical talent in middle school.

“I feel like my passion for music took off in the Southwest Middle School band room where learning to play the trumpet was the best thing for me,” said Radford. “Once I got to high school, I realized that being a part of the band was so important. It’s where I found a friend group of like-minded people who all supported each other as we worked toward a common goal.”

While in high school and college, he emerged as a band leader, serving in the prestigious role of drum major.

“My experience in high school gave me the confidence to audition for drum major my freshman year at Appalachian,” said Radford. “As the drum major, I got the opportunity to travel to three Division 1-AA national championship games, march in the New Year’s Day parade in London, and have a sideline view for our historic upset of the Michigan Wolverines in 2007.”

Radford credits his high school and college band directors, Andy Washburn and Dr. Scott Tobias, for shaping him into a successful director and educator.

“Being involved in band during a formative time is what ultimately solidified for me that education would be my life’s work,” explained Radford. “Through music education, it is my hope that I can give my students the same thing my teachers provided for me – a sense of purpose and a place to feel safe and valued.”

MEET KAMERON RADFORD

Music education is his life’s work

WE ARE PULLING FOR THEM.

Our WIX Filters brand was born right here in Gaston County over 80 years ago. We stand together, with you, to support our community. Whether it’s sponsorships, back-to-school drives, interaction opportunities or community donations, the MANN+HUMMEL team will continue our support of these future leaders of our community.

MANN+HUMMEL

WE ARE PULLING FOR THEM.
Thank you for reading the "Gaston County Schools Storybook." On the preceding pages, you learned about great things happening in our schools and got a glimpse of some of the people who are responsible for inspiring success every day.

Our "Storybook" is a different kind of publication for us, and it is much more than a traditional annual report. We think giving you an opportunity to hear from our students, teachers, alumni, and others through the written word is more significant than a booklet filled with facts and figures and charts and graphs.

Storytelling has stood the test of time. All of us love good stories, and a publication like this makes it possible for us to tell good stories about our schools. From these pages, you are able to gain a better understanding of how our public schools in Gaston County care for children and provide opportunities so they can grow, achieve, and thrive.

We would like to express our gratitude to CaroMont Health, Truist, Mann+Hummel, Beam Construction, Piedmont Lithium, Gaston College, Belmont Abbey College, Gardner-Webb University, Zaxby’s, Courage Kia, and the Gastonia Honey Hunters for sponsoring this publication. We encourage more businesses and organizations to be a part of our next "Storybook."

Again, thank you for reading, and please know that we appreciate your continued interest in Gaston County Schools.

Sincerely,

W. Jeffrey Booker, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

The "Gaston County Schools Storybook" is a publication of the Communications/Public Information Department. December 2021
Because of our great stories...

We connect. We learn. We smile!

Gaston County Schools