

School Ways: NNPS Heroes

The Newport News Public Schools team is a diverse community of educators and support professionals who ensure that nearly 28,000 students receive a quality education and the resources they need to graduate college, career and citizen-ready.

While Newport News Public Schools has a rich history of student achievement and innovative programs, it is our dedicated staff who makes sure that our students are prepared for success. During the past 11 months, the NNPS team has certainly proven that they can rise above any challenge.

When the Governor closed schools in March 2020 to slow the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, our staff stepped up to ensure that teaching and learning, and vital student services continued. No one could have imagine that almost a year later, we would still be navigating the uncharted waters of the pandemic. Through all of the instructional planning, service delivery arrangements and mitigation efforts, Newport News Public Schools employees have stood up and stood out.

As you travel around Newport News, you may have noticed the “Heroes Work Here” banners that are displayed on all of our schools and worksites. These banners were hung in tribute to our staff members who work tirelessly to ensure that our students have computers and internet access, are engaged in learning, have healthy meals and receive the social and emotional support they need to thrive, while managing their own family circumstances. These banners serve as a public acknowledgement of the perseverance and commitment of our staff.

Daniel Barnhill, Shanice Porter, Mike Grounds, Lisa Bares and Lou Mahone are just a few of the many members of the NNPS team who have gone above and beyond to serve our students and our school community.

These dedicated staff members have truly made a difference. Mr. Barnhill, online learning systems coordinator in the technology department, was integral to our successful transition to virtual learning. While the school division had planned to introduce an online learning platform this school year, the onset of COVID-19 and the need to begin the school year virtually greatly accelerated that transition. Once a platform was selected, members of the technology department had to prepare quickly to support teachers and train them to use a new set of techniques in a matter of weeks.

Beginning last spring, Mr. Barnhill worked with the vendor, instructional supervisors and instructional technology coaches to ensure teachers and students would have a positive virtual learning experience. His knowledge and expertise played an essential role in configuring the online platform, and setting up courses and management protocols.

Shanice Porter, a first grade teacher at Newsome Park Elementary School, has modified some of her usual tools and activities to support virtual instruction for her students. She uses some

familiar activities adapted to the new context, including a “Mystery Bag” that encourages students to use the clues she shares to guess what’s hidden in a bag she shows them on screen. Ms. Porter has also provided hands-on learning tools for her students to use at home to further their understanding and knowledge. Across the school division, our educators are using their creativity to engage our youngest learners.

Mike Grounds, cafeteria manager at An Achievable Dream Middle and High School, has proven himself indispensable since schools closed last March. Almost immediately, when he saw his help was needed, Mr. Grounds went to work to support child nutrition staff at Deer Park and Epes elementary schools.

He also rode along on a school bus to deliver meals-to-go to locations where families may have been unable to pick up their meals. Throughout last summer and in recent weeks, Mr. Grounds has been busy moving food from one location to another and transporting tents for meal distribution sites. He has helped to ensure that thousands of students receive healthy meals during the pandemic.

When schools closed, some employees were temporarily reassigned. Transportation staff assigned to individual schools provided help wherever they were needed. Bus drivers Lisa Bares and Lou Mahone were assigned to Palmer Elementary School, where they assisted in the office and around the school before tackling the school’s courtyard which needed some revitalization. Ms. Bares and Mr. Mahone planted flowers in the beds, laid mulch, trimmed trees, and repaired the picnic tables and gave them a new coat of paint. When Palmer students return to in-person instruction, they will have a new, outdoor learning environment, thanks to Ms. Bares and Mr. Mahone.

These are just some of the many everyday heroes of Newport News Public Schools. Heroes I am proud to serve with and who deserve our steadfast support and thanks.

Dr. George Parker, III, is the Superintendent of Newport News Public Schools.