

Preschool is a full-day proposition

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

More than 800 Springfield 3-year-olds started their school journey this year, making history as the youngest in the state to be eligible for a free, universal full-day preschool program.

Full-day classes are being offered in every elementary school in the district, as well as at Margaret C. Ells Preschool, the Early Childhood Education Center and the new Balliet Preschool. Nearly 2,000 seats for 3- and 4-year-olds combined were filled this year.

While the district had been working toward this goal for 10 years, until now the majority of preschoolers had attended half-day programs. The full-day model provides more academic time and is more convenient for working families. Approximately \$15 million in funding went into the expansion project.

“Studies show the more investment we put into a strong foundational start, the more positive outcome measurements come to our children, their families, our economy, workforce development and public safety aspects,” said Mayor Domenic J. Sarno.

Balliet, located in a former school at 111

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Balliet preschool students Armani Figueroa, Alexian Gonzalez and Charlee Longston do an activity during class.

PHOTO: KATIE MORRISON

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Full-day preschool took a team effort



DANIEL J. WARWICK

After 10 years of hard work, this year we were finally able to make free universal full-day preschool available for 3- and 4-year-old students. We are extremely proud to be the first school district in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to reach this monumental achievement.

Before this year, many Springfield families who sought preschool for their child had to pay or found

themselves on a waiting list for free programming. Some families made the difficult decision to assign a stay-at-home parent so that someone could stay with child during the day or be available to accommodate their little one's half-day preschool schedule.

This reality stood in stark contrast to families in neighboring communities. Those families were more often able to afford the expenses associated with full-time preschool or able to make other expensive arrangements.

Unquestionably, research shows how important preschool is for young learners. It provides foundational understandings and tools upon which kindergarten builds; it acclimates young students to school structures and routines; and it also teaches important socialization skills. The unavailability of preschool for many Springfield families created a disadvantage for our families and students.

That is why the achievement of free full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds is such a remarkable milestone for Springfield Public Schools. It took a decade of planning because many factors had to be addressed. The physical space for new classrooms had to be found, a task which meant physically walking through every elementary school in search of unused space, or identifying potential re-design opportunities. Sustainable funding had to be secured and budgeted. Preschool teachers and paraprofessionals needed

to be recruited. Curriculum had to be vetted and approved. As always, Springfield Public Schools educators and administrators rose to the colossal challenge.

I want to thank all of our elementary school principals for their commitment and teamwork. I'd also like to thank our Chief Schools Officers, the inter-departmental Pre-K Enrollment Team, and the Office of Business and Finance for their leadership, hard work and dedication to this project. The greatest recognition is reserved for our pre-school educators and the students themselves. At the end of the day, we know that nothing is more important than the teaching and learning that goes on daily inside your classroom.

Finally, thank you to the families of the nearly 2,000 3- and 4-year-old children attending school for the first time this year. I wish your student a very strong start to their Pre-K – 12 educational careers.

Thank you for entrusting your little one with us. We are glad they are here.

Daniel J. Warwick is superintendent of schools.



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Brightwood Lincoln Elementary School LEEDs the way in energy efficiency

Brightwood Lincoln Elementary School has been awarded LEED Gold certification.

LEED (Leadership in Energy Efficiency and Design) is a certification program and globally recognized benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high-performance green buildings.

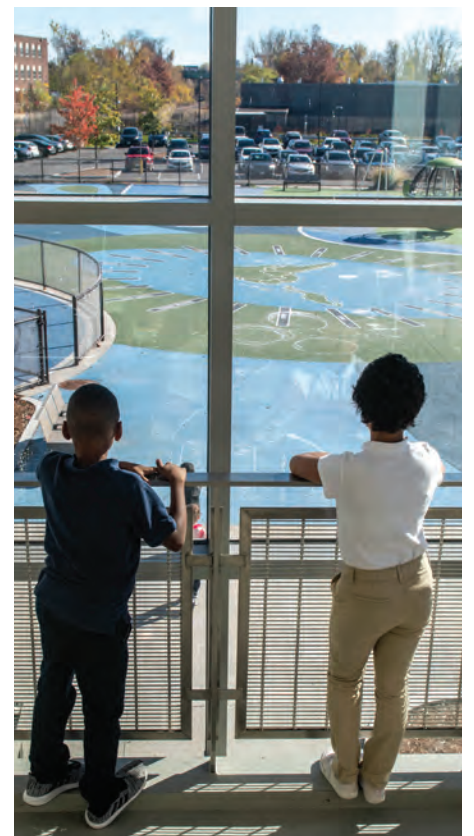
The new, combined 150,500-square-foot school, located at 255 Plainfield Street, was completed in 2021 and replaced two neighborhood elementary schools that were both more than 100 years old. The design achieved LEED Gold certification by implementing practical and measurable strategies and solutions aimed at achieving high performance for the building. The building delivers on LEED's promise to make the world a better place and revolutionize the built environment by providing everyone with healthy, green, and high performing buildings. The program emphasizes the use of local solutions to make a global impact on the environment.

"My administration is proud of the tremendous advancements the City of Springfield has implemented as part of our Master Climate Action and Resiliency Plan," said Mayor Domenic J. Sarno. "Superintendent Daniel Warwick and I want to thank PBRM Director Patrick

Sullivan, Capital Asset Construction Director Peter Garvey and their respective teams for their efforts in achieving this important goal. The city of Springfield's active participation in the design process demonstrates my administration's strong commitment to environmental sustainability, through building healthy, high performance and green schools. We are honored to receive the LEED Gold Certification for our new state-of-the-art Brightwood Lincoln Elementary School."

"We are especially pleased that the Brightwood Lincoln Elementary School has achieved a LEED Gold certification," said Superintendent Daniel Warwick. "The project team has helped and guided us to building a state-of-the-art elementary school for our students, teachers and staff. Our goal will always be to improve our community by providing a comfortable, safe and efficient school facility that will help lower emissions and enhance the quality of life for all, especially our students and teachers."

The project was completed in collaboration with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA), which has partnered with the City of Springfield and other Massachusetts communities to support the design and construction of educationally appropriate,



Students Mason Gray and Alina Davila enjoy the new environmental-friendly features at Brightwood Lincoln.

PHOTO: KATIE MORRISON

flexible, sustainable and cost-effective public-school facilities. Sarno said that during his tenure, the MSBA has partnered with the City to invest more than \$700 million into upgrading, renovating and building new school buildings.

Putnam pipeline creates electricity



Bobby Williams and Dave Bennett are Putnam graduates now working for M.L. Schmitt.

PHOTO: KATIE MORRISON

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Electrical contractor M.L. Schmitt, Inc. understands the importance of staying connected to a pipeline of young talent.

That's why the near century-old company, which specializes in industrial, commercial and residential construction projects, has been supportive of Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy. In addition to hiring graduates, M.L. Schmitt has also provided donations to the school.

In partnership with Exposure and local electrical manufacturers Legrand and Fidelux Lighting, the company donated low-voltage and line-voltage training kits, a variety of light fixtures, blueprints, surface raceways, disconnect switches and more to Putnam's electrical shop.

"As a small local company, entering our 100th year in business, we value giving back to our community," said Peter Coppez, president of M.L. Schmitt. "It's important that we help nurture our local students because they are our future."

Putnam teacher Charley Jackson, a master

electrician, was thrilled to learn about the donations.

"I share my work experience and testimony with my students, and it really helps them with their desire to learn," Jackson said. "Our visit from M.L. Schmitt and the donation of supplies really encouraged our students to keep pushing."

More donations are expected to arrive in January.

"We yearn to show students how the trade they learn in school can give them successful careers," said Coppez. "We believe donations, along with visits to the Putnam electrical shop, encourage students to work harder and make goals to join the men and women working in the electrical field today."

A number of Putnam graduates are employed by M.L. Schmitt, including purchasing officer Bobby Williams.

"Without our young, upcoming electricians, we won't have a future workforce of skilled tradesmen and women," said Williams. "It's important we help our community."

Book project a labor of love for Warner educators

BY AZELL CAVAN

Terrie Holly, a paraprofessional at Warner Elementary School, and Todd Allegretto, a K-2 reading intervention specialist there, were always friendly enough towards one another whenever their paths crossed in the teachers' lounge, library or hallways. But the pair had no idea their interactions as colleagues would lead to a deep-seated friendship, a published book and hopefully a legacy of hope and inspiration for many Springfield youth.

It began with Holly's dream of putting her life on paper – a stapled-together memoir of her experiences growing up in Springfield's Riverview Projects. "Just something I could leave for my grandkids because life has changed so much from the days of my childhood, and I wanted them to know what life was like in a time when kids didn't grow up so fast," she recalled.

One day, Holly casually, but excitedly mentioned her dream of writing her life story to Allegretto, pulling out her phone to share with him all that she had written already.

Immediately, Allegretto was gripped by a quote that Holly had written about her life: "It's not where you live, but how you live that matters."

"I thought 'wow, this is a powerful story,'" Allegretto said. "So, when she asked me if I had any feedback, I didn't hold back."

It was the beginning of a collaboration that would eventually result in a published book, entitled "Growing up in Riverview Projects," a far cry from the stapled-together memoir Holly had originally imagined.

"Todd was so generous with his time. He asked me questions that he thought readers might have, and he made me delve deeper into subjects. And he pushed me to publish it," said Holly.

An avid reader and lover of autobiographies, Allegretto said guiding Holly through the writing process brought him joy. "I think Holly's story can touch students whose lives and situations are similar to her childhood," he said. "And I have so much respect for her courage in sharing it."

Though the two educators experienced very different childhoods (Holly was born in Florida and Allegretto was born in Rhode Island) and may seem to have very little in common, both agree that they are bonded by the human experience.

"You can find something in common with any other person if you look hard enough," said Allegretto. "For example, Terrie and I are close in age and we both love our jobs."

A wife, mother, grandmother, sister, aunt and friend to many, Holly said the accomplishment of publishing her family's story is a labor of love that she hopes will positively impact young people throughout Springfield and beyond.

"I will always treasure the memory of the Riverview Projects in my heart," Holly writes in her book. "It was a great community that had affordable housing that helped large families who were struggling while on the welfare system to raise their families ... We cared about education; we had a great support system, and we had a village."



Terrie Holly and Todd Allegretto joined together to publish a book.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN POLANCO

Perfect fit as a family (engagement) man

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

When the opportunity arose to work with families at the district level, Jose Escribano was eager to throw his hat in the ring.

Escribano, who previously served as principal of Brightwood Elementary School, assumed the role of the district's chief of Family and Community Engagement in April. In an ongoing effort to best serve families and students, the Parent and Community Engagement Center (PACE) was divided into two branches—Family and Community Engagement (FACE) and Student Assignment Services (SAS).

"I was doing a lot of family engagement at the school level, so when this position opened, I was excited," said Escribano. "I've always loved

building a family atmosphere between schools and the community."

As he progresses in his new role, he hopes to further engage the community to support all Springfield students. Escribano, who is fluent in English and Spanish, is skilled at making strong connections, providing resources to those in need and launching powerful initiatives that change the dynamics of the community and its members. He is continuously searching for people and resources that help make the city a more positive environment for its students and their families.

Recognizing the importance of social media to actively engage students and their families, FACE has launched its own online presence with a very active [Facebook page](#). As part of his job, Escribano

is constantly visiting schools throughout the district.

"We're finding out about community and school events and participating in as many as we can, and we're trying to let people know what's going on," he said.

Escribano has dedicated his career to working with youth in urban communities. He holds a master's in education with a concentration in school adjustment counseling and mental health counseling. Before entering education, he worked as a social worker for the Mass. Department of Children and Families.

In addition to his professional career, Escribano has volunteered his time, skill and talent to various organizations including Project Coach, school dances, city-run parades and several sports teams.



Jose Escribano visits the Brunton Elementary School garden, meeting Kamai Norman and students.



Jose Escribano is district's new chief of Family and Community Engagement.
PHOTO: KATIE MORRISON

Preschool is now a full-day proposition

PRESCHOOL from page 1

Seymour Avenue, is offering 13 new preschool classrooms, and all are at capacity. The school's principal is Jessica McCloskey, who previously served as assistant principal of German Gerena Community School.

"It's an exciting opportunity, being able to provide the youngest members of our city with the space to gain developmental skills," McCloskey said. "Learning through play is huge. I think it's great to get them in here and interacting with their peers. Beautiful things are

happening in the classrooms."

McCloskey said the first day of school was monumental for a number of reasons. Not only was it her first day as principal, but she was working to roll out a new school and a new district initiative. On top of that, it was a thrill to see the eager faces of the students.

"It's always exciting in general, but the kids were so excited to come in and get started," she said. "For the 3-year-olds and even a lot of the 4-year-olds, their entire school career is just beginning, so it's extra special for them."

1. Glickman preschool teacher Natasha Purrier reads to students Yolianiz Mejias-Crespo and Wolfgang Valentin. 2. Balliet preschool students Alexian Gonzalez and Charlee Longston do an activity during class. 3. Balliet teacher Kerrie Mancino reads to her preschool class with Levi Rosario on her lap. 4. Balliet preschooler Knox Smith smiles while constructing train tracks in Kerrie Mancino's class. 5. Glickman preschool student Jenavese Baez is having fun in class.

PHOTOS: KATIE MORRISON





Artistic ability shines through in murals

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Wouldn't it be incredible if all school buildings could reflect the beauty and diversity within?

That wish is now a reality at German Gerena Community School, thanks to a stunning new mural adorning the school entrance.

"It brings the school to life," said Gerena Principal Cynthia Escribano. "It's so inviting and just breathtaking. For our students to walk in every day and think 'I was a part of that,' it's special. They're so proud. Their little hands helped create it."

The mural was completed as part of Fresh Paint Springfield, produced by the nonprofit Common Wealth Murals. The idea of community-engaged murals is to allow communities to share, reclaim or rewrite the stories of their public spaces, promote civic pride and create intentional visions of what the future could hold. It is also intended to open people up to the possibilities of what else they can achieve as a community.

As part of the Fresh Paint mural festival in September, public paint parties were held at both Gerena and the Mason Square Library. Community members, including Gerena students and parents, worked alongside professional muralists to help paint. Other large-scale murals were completed throughout the city, which included recreating two historic Nelson Stevens murals.

"The City and I are happy to continue to support the Fresh Paint Springfield mural festival that began in 2019," said Mayor Domenic J. Sarno. "Simply put, these murals bring a welcoming vibrancy and creativity to our downtown."

The artists behind Gerena's mural are part of Colectivo Morivivi -- an all-women artistic collective that has been producing public art since 2013. Their concept for the school was built on the idea of learning through the senses, and the imagery represents the act of exploration through the five senses. They incorporated butterflies and hummingbirds to connect with the school's other mural,

located on the Main Street side of the building, which was facilitated over the summer by School Committee member Maria Perez and former assistant superintendent Lydia Martinez-Alvarez and assisted by Fresh Paint.

Students at DeBerry Elementary School also had a hand in creating a public art project through Common Wealth Murals. Though the mural isn't on school property, it is just a short walk away, at the 2020 Laundromat. It was made possible by the laundromat and matching funds secured by Sen. Adam Gomez from an economic and community development grant. Springfield resident and muralist Gaby Sepulveda designed a fanciful mural of a waterpark built from laundry machines and run by animals. DeBerry students who are now fourth-graders participated in a painting session last spring.

"The hope is that they feel even more a part of their community," said DeBerry teacher Aleyda Torres. "They left their handprints — literally — and they can eventually show it to their kids and grandkids."



1. Fourth-grade students from DeBerry Elementary show off their contributions to a new mural at 2020 Laundromat. 2. The mural at the entrance of Gerena was designed by Colectivo Morivivi. 3. Gerena students work on the mural on the Main Street side of the building. 4. DeBerry students Angelys Marrero and Zavian Cintron work on the mural during a paint party. 5., 6. and 7. Community members help out during Gerena's paint party. 8. DeBerry students enjoy the painting process. 9. Gerena's mural concept highlights the five senses.

PHOTOS: KATIE MORRISON, CHRISTIAN POLACCO AND ISABELLA DELOLLIO PHOTOGRAPHY

Positivity is all business for fourth-grader

BY AZELL CAVAN

When she was in third grade, Claireese Silva became troubled whenever a friend felt anger, disappointment, anxiety or fear. “I noticed that most times they didn’t tell anyone, not even the teacher. They just kept it inside and that made me feel sad and I wanted to make them feel better,” she said.

Now in fourth grade at Indian Orchard Elementary School, 10-year-old Claireese has started her own small business, a company called This and That, which manufactures, packages, and distributes positive affirmations. Most times, the “positive message,” as Claireese calls them, are imprinted on keychains. But her company has also made door hangers. And with her big sister, 11-year-old Amilia, coming on board soon, the company will start making inspirational bookmarks.

So far, Claireese has made more than 100 keychains, selling many but also giving some away. She said her most popular keychains are the ones with butterflies and the ones that say, “Mental Health Matters.”

Claireese admits the success of her business has come as a bit of a surprise. “It still feels a little weird but whenever I make a keychain and someone likes it, it makes me so happy,” she said.

Claireese said she uses a laptop to search for “positive messages” and a software program to design the keychains. Next, a special machine cuts the key chain into the shape and size she has designed.

Enith Silva, the sisters’ mother and a family liaison at Daniel Brunton Elementary School, said she and her husband fully support the girls’ business venture and saved up for the machine that makes the keychains.

“I think my daughters are an example of what so many kids in our city can and are doing,” she said. “I want all students to understand that we don’t have to be a product of our environment. If there’s something we don’t like, then we can make a difference in our own way.”



Claireese Silva shows off her key chains to teacher Renee Lussier at Indian Orchard Elementary School.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN POLANCO

Perfect attendance is a twin achievement

BY AZELL CAVAN

The one school day that Gabriella Carrasquillo, now a freshman at Springfield Central High School, had a fever high enough to miss school, schools were closed for an educator professional development day. With that coincidence, she was able to maintain her perfect attendance record. Not for just that school year, but for every year since pre-school. It’s a record held by both Gabriella and her twin sister, Lauren.

The sisters, who are both honors students, believe their perfect attendance has played a major role in their academic success. But they say perfect attendance is not a requirement for everyone who wants to do well in school.

“I think it’s more about the effort that you put in. Not everyone can be in school every day because sometimes things happen and you might have to be out, but as long as you are trying your best every day and keep up with your work, and ask for help when you need it, you will be fine,” said Gabriella.

The twins’ mother says the girls are lucky to be blessed with good health and have not had to stay home due to illness. Attendance, she said, became an important focal point for her and her husband when Gabriella and Lauren were little. “We both missed a lot of school and we both struggled through school,”

said Kim Carrasquillo. “We wanted our children to do better than we did.”

For the Carrasquillo twins, going to school every day is so much more than just academics. “I love being with my friends,” said Lauren. “It’s a big reason I like to be in school every day. And we both really love weekends and holidays.”

On those days, the twins like to watch Netflix, hang out at the park, or go to the movies with friends. After school on weekdays, they usually attend dance or swim class before settling in for homework and dinner. “We keep pretty busy and it’s not all school,” said Gabriella.

Both girls agree that some days they need that extra motivation to get out of bed and start getting ready for school. “I think that’s normal to sometimes feel like you just want a day off,” Lauren said.

So, what is the advice that a pair of sisters with an 11-year perfect attendance record might give those students having a hard time finding the motivation to go to school on some days.

“Well, nothing really major,” said Gabriella. “I’d just remind them to keep moving and eventually they will get to the point where they feel better. And they should also know that there’s always somebody around who can help them through those times.”



Sisters Gabriella and Lauren Carrasquillo have a record of perfect attendance.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN POLANCO



Students Wilfred Lopez and Tyler Gilbert learn to work video cameras in Aretha Sanders' video production class at the Springfield High School of Science and Technology.



Aretha Sanders works with student David Acevedo in her video production class.

PHOTOS: KATIE MORRISON

Career change a positive production

By MEAGHAN CASEY

Aretha Sanders calls her decision to go into teaching “destiny.”

“When I was 14, I wrote in my paper ‘when I grow up, I’m going to be a teacher and a coach,’” she said. “I wanted to be the person who cares, the person students can talk to, because their social/emotional needs really matter too. I wanted to help the whole student.”

Understanding that students need at least one caring adult in their lives, her motto is: “If you can’t reach them, you can’t teach them.”

Sanders, who left a career as a news photographer and videographer, has been teaching at the Springfield High School of Science and Technology for 12 years. She teaches

video production and also introduced a new journalism class this year.

Sander’s innovative approaches to integrating technology in the classroom have been recognized by New England Public Media (NEPM) and public media giant GBH. She was chosen to be a part of a distinguished cohort of GBH-NEPM Educator Ambassadors for Massachusetts. She is one of 24 educators advising the media organizations on a broad range of topics and providing feedback on educational content development and teacher engagement.

Sanders often utilizes PBS Learning Media, a collection of free, curated, standards-aligned videos, interactives, lesson plans and more. She said she has been enjoying meeting

monthly with fellow ambassadors to share resources and best practices.

A product of Springfield Public Schools, Sanders’ career path started to take root while attending Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy.

“I joined an after-school club making videos and fell in love with it,” she said. “I felt like a storyteller.”

Since then, Sanders says she has dabbled in her own projects, such as making documentaries, but her students come first.

“My biggest reward is seeing students reaching their full potential,” she said. “It’s exciting to see some of them going on to do this professionally, and I want to keep seeing that.”

Band members give it the old college try



Springfield Conservatory of the Arts band members and director of music Marcos Carreras join American International College President Dr. Hubert Benitez at a football game.

By MEAGHAN CASEY

It’s a pretty big feat for a high school band to play at the college level. But Springfield Conservatory of the Arts band members can put that feather in their hats – and horns. The students have been playing at American International College’s hockey, football and volleyball games. They also performed during the ceremony to install Dr. Hubert Benitez as president of the college.

“American International College is very fortunate to have Marcos Carreras, director of music at the Springfield Conservatory of the Arts, as a partner in the community, along with his talented students,” said Benitez. “We sincerely appreciate Director Carreras’s dedication to his students, and in turn, their willingness to give of their time and talent. It means a great deal to the

athletic programs they support, the student-athletes on the field and on the court, and the cheering spectators. We are grateful for their enthusiasm and dedication to adding excitement and fun to every game they attend. They inspire all of us with their commitment.”

“It has been a remarkable opportunity for our students,” said Carreras. “One would be hard-pressed to find another 6-12 band that regularly plays for DI and DII programs. It is a truly unique collaboration that we are all so proud of.”

Carreras also modernized AIC’s alma mater, which was originally written in 1949, and composed a new AIC fight song.

“It has been a lot of fun for the fans to hear that one for the first time ever,” he said.

Portrait of a Graduate comes to life

By AZELL CAVAN

Earlier this fall, Springfield Public Schools announced the winners of a districtwide art and writing contest launched to provide an opportunity for students to express their perception of The Portrait of a Graduate.

“I should not be surprised by the caliber of the entries that were submitted for this contest,” said Superintendent of Schools Daniel Warwick. “But, as usual, when given a chance to shine, our students rose the occasion, meeting if not surpassing expectations. Their submissions were thoughtful, insightful and creative.”

Winners of the art contest include Adrianna Arce, Jacionna Bolden, Keylani Lopez, Salima Jackobo, Nalanys Martinez, Jayla Merced, Qamar Adan Mohamed, Angelo Rodriguez, Carielys Sanchez, Isabel Santiago, Xavier Villanueva, and Amouri. Winners of the written contest include Lauren Carrasquillo, Xyomara Hernandez, Zoe Holland, Samira Padilla, Julio Vargas, Dario Wilson, and Michael Wilson.

Julie Jaron, director of visual and performing arts, and Brian Dickey, director of secondary English Language Arts and Libraries, served as judges for the contests. As the school year drew to a close last year, Jaron and Dickey personally visited the winning students in their schools to notify them of their win and hand-deliver their prize package.

“I am especially proud of our students for their efforts in producing artwork that represents the pillars in the Portrait of a Graduate,” said Jaron. “The artwork highlights the persistence required to take an abstract idea, learn about, and develop that idea using the creative process, and as an outcome, lead others to recognize the value of the attribute they chose as the subject in their artwork.”

“The Portrait Writing Contest has been a great highlight this past year. Our students created writing that was insightful, energizing, and transformative,” said Dickey. “Traveling to each school to present the awards to the awe-struck, beaming faces of the winners, was a truly joyous moment in my career.”

For more than three years, the district has partnered with the community to develop the Portrait of a Graduate, Springfield’s vision of what students need upon graduating high school to be successful in college, career, and life. More than 2,000 community members, educators and students participated in the creation of The Portrait of a Graduate. The final document, which is available on the Springfield Public Schools website, reflects their priorities for students and includes six pillars: learn, work, lead, persist, communicate and thrive.

For the contest, students were invited to portray their artistic or written viewpoint on one of the pillars. Written entries can be experienced in the students’ own voices as a special “Story Corp” September episode of POG the Podcast.

Additionally, the art creations have been designed into posters that hang in every school and in local businesses and organizations.

The contest was made possible through a collaboration with the Barr Foundation and Great Schools Partnership. Prizes included gift cards, a winner’s certificate signed by Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno and Superintendent of Schools Daniel Warwick and an invitation to attend SPS Convocation 2022 as a special guest.

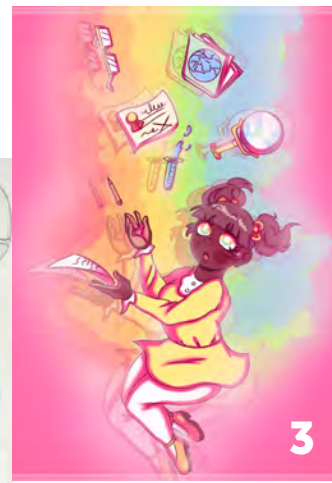
[Click here](#) to hear the winning essays in the students’ own voices.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12

Artists include: 1. Adrianna Arce 2. Amouri 3. Angelo Rodriguez 4. Carielys Sanchez 5. Isabel Santiago 6. Jayla Merced 7. Qamar Adan Mohamed 8. Salima Jackobo 9. Xavier Villanueva 10. Keylani Lopez 11. Nalanys Martinez 12. Jacionna Bolden

Taking the Central route to college football

By RICH FAHEY

Look out, college football. There are more Springfield Central Golden Eagles headed your way.

The star-studded 2022 group of players who have already decided where they will be furthering their careers next season includes one of the most decorated and record-setting players in the city's history, who added yet another major honor on Nov. 14.

Central High School quarterback and University of Nebraska commit William "Pop" Watson III was named an Army All-American in front of family, friends, teammates and Springfield officials.

The 6-foot, 180-pound Watson will wear No. 22 and play in the U.S. Army Bowl Game with some of the other top players in the country on Dec. 17 in a nationally televised game at The Ford Center at The Star, the Dallas Cowboys' practice facility.

Watson has put up gaudy numbers in his four years. He had career totals of 5,169 yards passing and 52 touchdowns with only eight interceptions. He had also rushed for 1,662 yards and 33 touchdowns, with 21 TDs this season alone.

The Golden Eagles won Div. 3 state titles in 2018 and 2019. There was no tournament due to the pandemic in 2020, and Central won the Division 1 title for the first time in 2021. This year, the Golden Eagles lost to St. John's Prep, 13-0, in the Division 1 state final at Gillette Stadium Dec. 3.

After making his commitment to Nebraska last February at halftime of a basketball game at Central, William "Pop" Watson III explained his decision to Nebraska's Hail Varsity website. "Nebraska, once I went up there, it felt like home. The coaching staff, they welcome you with open arms. It felt like the right place to be. It felt like I was right back at Springfield Central."

Watson is one of six Central players who are set to continue their careers on college fields next fall.

Central defensive coordinator Eric Panasci said the program's success is due to everyone on the school being on the same page. "We have a lot of support from the leadership of the district, including Principal (Thaddeus) Tokarz, Coach (William) Watson and the other coaches. We also have a lot of academic support and everyone just wants the best for the kids."

Panasci said the coaching staff plays an important role in helping student-athletes achieve their goals. "Obviously, as head coach, Bill Watson plays the biggest role and he's constantly in contact with college coaches. We have an open-



William "Pop" Watson III was named an Army All-American in front of family, teammates and city officials, including Mayor Domenic Sarno and Superintendent Daniel Warwick.

door policy for anyone who wants to come in."

Another Central player headed to a Division I program next fall is defensive lineman Josiah Griffin, 6-3, 235 pounds, who committed to Boston College in September, and he will join his older brother Joseph at The Heights.

"It's got great academics, it's close to home and my brother is there," he said. "That's a big part."

The decision was not easy, as he chose BC over Harvard, while Yale was also a strong contender.

His brother has already made noise on the collegiate scene. Joseph Griffin Jr., a 2022 Central grad, exploded in BC's 38-31 loss to Duke, catching five passes for 3 yards and two touchdowns.

He followed that up by catching the winning touchdown in BC's 21-20 upset of N.C. State. The freshman wide receiver has now caught 18 passes for 234 yards and five touchdowns.

In July, Central offensive lineman Jayden Bass, 6-5, 296 pounds, committed to Syracuse of the Atlantic Coast Conference, putting him on a collision course to compete against former teammates in future seasons.

Bass was on Syracuse's radar for a while and officially visited the college the weekend of June 24, just weeks after earning an offer following a strong camp performance. He had previously officially visited UConn and also had offers from many other schools.

"I came up, met with the offensive line coach, met with the

offensive coordinator and then I had a workout/camp," Bass said. "Coach (Dino) Babers pulled me to the side after and congratulated me on a full scholarship to Syracuse. Great day overall."

Offensive lineman Ahmari Owens is taking the Ivy League route. The 6-5, 305-pounder committed to Columbia on Nov. 10 after also receiving offers from Maine, New Hampshire, Fordham and Merrimack.

Central senior wide receiver Kevin Jackson has signed on to become part of the University of Maine program, announcing his intentions with a Tweet on Aug. 15.

Through the first nine games of the 2022 season, Jackson had caught 24 passes for 417 yards and two touchdowns.

Bryce Gentry-Warrick was one of the best interior pass rushers in the state last fall and gave opposing centers and guards a lot to handle again. The 5-11, 285-pound defensive lineman verbally committed to Merrimack College last summer following his standout junior season.

Gentry-Warrick's strength is legendary. On lower body workout days, Gentry-Warrick squatted more than 500 pounds and pushed up 300 pounds on the bench press.

"He's a special kid," said Panasci.

The good times may not end anytime soon. The Springfield Youth Football Eagles recently captured four New England championships in different age groups and will be headed to Florida to compete for national titles.

Commerce soccer star reaches milestone

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"She knows exactly the right time to make a long run up the field," said James Samuel.

Commerce High Athletic Director Ben Masse has coached Leala Samuel at the club level and he agreed with her father on what makes Leala so special. "She's not only usually the best player on the field, she's also the smartest player on the field," he said.

He also praised Leala for her leadership, hard work and determination and James Samuel for taking the time "to help both his daughter and the Commerce program be the best they can be.

"James is a Springfield guy and just someone who cares about the city and the school," Masse said. "The players feed on that. He's also totally invested in the social, academic and athletic aspects of his daughter's life."

He also credited the Samuels with helping to turn the program around and make it more attractive to those who will come after them.

Masse said Commerce was creating a banner to recognize Leala's accomplishments and a ceremony was also planned.

Commerce played mostly Division 3 and 4 schools during the regular season, but because of its enrollment was placed

in the MIAA Division 2 tournament, losing to Wilmington 8-0 in the preliminary round.

"We were all pretty excited at being in the tourney for the second year in a row when we didn't think we would make it," said Leala Samuel. "It was exciting playing on turf under the lights."

Leala also runs both the 100 and 200 in outdoor track and hopes to play soccer in college.

Whatever happens in the future, the thrills James Samuel has had while coaching his daughter won't be forgotten.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience," he said.



Keeping it 100

Commerce star reaches milestone

By RICH FAHEY

Leala Samuel had been putting her best foot – make that feet – forward for the High School of Commerce’s girls soccer team for several years before entering her senior season.

But even she had no idea what she was capable of. “I was really just hoping to get to the 100-point mark for my career,” she said.

So she was surprised when she scored 63 goals and had 15 assists this season for career totals of 114 goals and 19 assists in leading Commerce, which finished 8-8, into the MIAA Division 2 Girls Soccer tournament for the second straight season.

Samuel vaulted past the magic 100-point mark on Oct. 6 at Forest Park when she had seven points in a win over Putnam.

After scoring a goal late in the previous game against Westfield Tech, Samuel was just aiming for 100 and took the pressure off early in the game against Putnam when, in the fourth minute, a pass from fellow senior Jayleen Toledo bounced through the defense.

Samuel chased down the pass and went 1-on-1 with the Beavers’ goalie, burying her shot into the bottom right corner of the net.

“The team was immediately all excited and congratulating her,” said Commerce coach and Leala’s father, James Samuel. “They all gave her a high five, but the game was still going so they just went back to focusing on the game.”

Commerce and Putnam played to a 1-1 draw through the first half. The Raiders then went off for five goals in the second half to pick up the win.

Toledo added a goal to go along with her assist and Xayra Serrano found the back of the net as well. Dayana Serrano made three saves in goal.

Leala Samuel has been playing soccer since she was five and has served as a coach on the field and mentor to her less experienced teammates.

She also inspired her father, who played basketball, had coached youth soccer and was a volunteer assistant basketball coach with the Commerce boys basketball team, to become the Commerce coach in his daughter’s sophomore season.

“Not too many people get to coach their child at the high-school level,” he said.

His decision also spurred him to learn more about the game and be a better coach.

James Samuel has seen his daughter’s skills expand and improve over time. “Her love for the game and her soccer IQ have both improved to the point where she can see a play and anticipate what’s going to happen.”

He said Leala also plays club soccer and on her club team she is an impactful defensive player who can chase down players, stop them from scoring and then quickly start the transition to offense.

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