



# GATES CHILI

## CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Fall Newsletter 2023

## Gates Chili serving free, nutritious meals *every day*

Gates Chili cafeterias have always been full of hustle and bustle, especially during mealtime, but this year, they're also full of free, nutritious meals for kids, thanks to a new federal and state partnership.



That partnership is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a program that allows every Gates Chili student to receive a free breakfast and lunch at school every day in the 2023-24 school year.

"The availability of free meals for all students is certainly a proud moment for our school district," said Superintendent of Schools Christopher Dailey. "It removes barriers that hinder success and reflects our commitment to equity, inclusivity, and the well-being of our entire school community."

"Students perform better in school when they have had a healthy breakfast and nutritious lunch," said Janice Phillips, director of school nutrition. "We are thrilled to be able to provide this resource at no cost to families this school year."

Gates Chili qualified for this program due to its percentage of free and reduced meal recipients—more than 56% of students districtwide. While free meals are a certain advantage for families who traditionally qualify for free and reduced meals, the availability of free meals has also been an asset to district parents like Kathy Phelan. Her family has never qualified for free or reduced meals, but her three Gates Chili students always buy lunch at school, so she has always needed to budget for those meals in addition to groceries. Having access to free meals at school has had a major impact on her family.

"When you consider that the price of groceries is already inflated, paying for lunches for three kids every day can be almost as much as a monthly car payment," she said. "With a family of seven at home, it's such a relief to not have to budget for lunches."

School meals also come with an added health benefit, meeting several nutritional requirements, and making them a great option for any family. Each meal is packed with protein, whole grains and fresh fruit or vegetables. The cost-free meals, coupled with the nutritional value, has resulted in a major spike in meals served already this year. In just the first

two months of school, there was a 47% increase in meals served year over year. For students like middle-schooler Liam H., it's not about the nutritional value or the bottom line; it's about the food.

**“ The food is great and I just love it,”**  
**Liam shared. “The pizza is my**  
**favorite; the sauce is so good. I get**  
**breakfast almost every day too. ”**

Families do not have to complete any forms for their student(s) to receive free meals at school. However, families are strongly encouraged to complete the Income Eligibility Form, which is tied to other important benefits for students. These include fee waivers for advanced placement exams, dual-credit tuition assistance, state funding and more. State funding helps offset costs that keep local taxes reasonable while providing great programs and services for students.

To learn more about free meals and/or complete the Income Eligibility Form for other benefits, go to [gateschili.org/FreeMeals](https://gateschili.org/FreeMeals).



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## Letter from the Superintendent



Dear Gates Chili School Community,

The 2023-24 school year is already proving to be 'one for the books!'

As you saw from the cover of this issue, we are so proud to provide free breakfast and lunch to every student every day in every cafeteria! This program is already having

a transformative impact on our school community, with participation in meals already skyrocketing.

Meanwhile, in classrooms throughout the district, students everywhere are taking part in exciting opportunities designed to maximize their academic learning and help them feel part of our great community. Our wide variety of offerings in academic, arts, athletics and more continue to be a point of pride for our district.

All of these opportunities and experiences are the direct result of your continued support and partnership. Thank you for

working with us to support students and each other as we aim to create a better future for our Spartans.

As you'll see in the pages of this quarterly newsletter, we have so much to celebrate but only 12 pages in which to do so. For even more news and updates throughout the school year, be sure to check out our monthly district e-newsletter. You can find all issues of our various newsletters at [gateschili.org/newsletter](https://gateschili.org/newsletter).

I look forward to seeing you at district functions this fall and winter—be sure to check the back cover for a list of upcoming events!

Go Spartans!

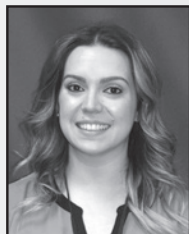
Christopher J. Dailey  
Superintendent of Schools



@GatesChiliSuper

## New additions to the Board of Education

The Gates Chili Board of Education welcomed two new people this fall; Tanya Srbinovski as its newest Board of Education member and Alannah Griner as its student representative.



Tanya Srbinovski



Alannah Griner

Srbinovski was selected by the board to complete the term of Michael Bailey, who stepped down from his role in August. Srbinovski is a lifelong resident and 2003 graduate of Gates Chili and currently lives in the district with her husband and two children. She is a first-generation Macedonian American and is passionate about education and supporting all students and families in the GC community.

Meanwhile, Griner was elected by her peers to serve as the student ex-officio member of the board for the 2023-24 school year. The creation of the ex-officio student role was the result of a vote by district residents in May 2023. Griner, a senior, is dedicated to ensuring students are represented in decision-making. She is involved in several clubs and activities including SAVVY and the high school's School Improvement Team (SIT). After graduation, she plans to pursue college to study forensic science.

## GC community tackles code of conduct revision

Nearly 50 members of the Gates Chili school community are meeting monthly this school year to revise the Gates Chili Code of Conduct and Character.

Last year, the district announced it would be partnering with the Children's Institute for this project, which would incorporate restorative practices into the code of conduct. Restorative practices focus on three main things: repairing harm, building relationships, and creating a sense of community. Research indicates that schools practicing restorative approaches experience reduced disciplinary issues and increased academic success.

"This collaborative effort isn't just about rewriting rules; it's about shaping a nurturing community where everyone belongs," said Christopher J. Dailey, superintendent of schools.

The committee's work will result in a document that will remove barriers to equity and establish clear and consistent expectations for student behavior. That finished document is expected to be ready for Board of Education review in the summer of 2024.





# Building Brighter Futures

## Capital Project Update

Construction on the district's next capital project could begin before the new year!

The first phase of the project is currently in its final stages of approval with the New York State Education Department (NYSED). This phase includes work at Gates Chili High School, Gates Chili Middle School and the Gates Chili Administration Building.

Since voter approval in February 2022, architects and design teams have been meeting with various stakeholder groups and planning for upgrades and enhancements throughout the district. After NYSED approval, local bidding for the project will take place and construction could begin as early as December.

The first area crews will tackle is relocating the district office to the high school. That work is expected to last into next fall. Once district office staff are fully transitioned to the new space, crews can begin converting the current administration building to classrooms, along with a concession area and public restrooms for Spartan Stadium.



At the same time as the district office construction, high school family and consumer science (FACS) classrooms will be relocated to a newly renovated area on the north side of the building. With construction on the new FACS area expected to begin in early 2024 and last through the summer, FACS classes will be temporarily moved to a different part of the building.

Meanwhile, upgrades and enhancements to technology classrooms at both the high school and the middle school will begin this summer. In addition, crews will be adding restrooms near the Gates Chili Professional Learning Center, which was opened last year. Work on music classrooms at the middle school is expected to kick off in early 2025.



The second phase of this project includes work at Florence Brasser Elementary School, the creation of a multipurpose turf complex near the middle school and general building upkeep such as upgrades to heating and ventilation units and other regular maintenance. Current work on this phase includes continued meetings with stakeholder groups until the project is ready to submit for review and approval at the state level in early 2024. It's expected construction on that phase could begin as soon as fall of 2024.

The entire project is expected to be completed in 2026.

## *New signs* to ease navigation on main campus

Gates Chili's main campus will soon be easier to navigate! As part of the district's ongoing efforts to improve navigation and provide clear information to staff, families and visitors, the district is installing a series of new signage on its main campus.

As part of these upgrades which will happen sometime in December:

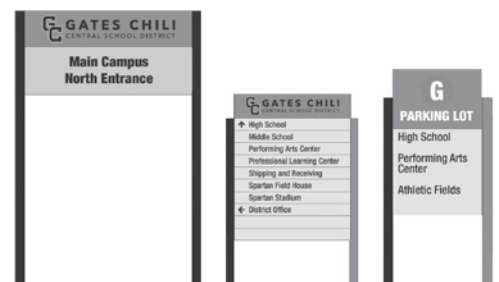
- Entrances to campus will be outfitted with new signs and renamed North Entrance (Wegman Road near transportation), West Entrance (Wegman Road near the Administration Building) and South Entrance (Buffalo Road)

- Directional signage will be installed throughout the campus to help staff, families and visitors navigate to important landmarks such as the Gates Chili Performing Arts Center, Gates Chili Professional Learning Center and Spartan Stadium, to name a few
- Parking lots will be renamed and will feature new signs to enhance clarity and help staff and visitors determine the best place to park for the corresponding point of interest

While the upgrades to the main campus are the initial focus, improvements to elementary school

signage are also in the works and will be installed at a later date.

A summary of the parking lot and entrance changes can be found on the map available at [gateschili.org/Map](https://gateschili.org/Map).



## Disney unveils innovative *sensory room* to empower students

Tucked inside Walt Disney Elementary School is a tranquil oasis. The 360-square-foot room is illuminated by a plastic cylinder filled with water and hundreds of bubbles that cause its color-changing lights to shimmer and flicker as they float to the top. There is a hint of lavender in the air and soothing melodies play softly in the background.

This sanctuary is Disney's new sensory room. The space is specially designed to meet the needs of Gates Chili students in the elementary 6:1:1 classrooms, which are based at Disney. Recognizing that these students' learning and sensory needs are unique and specific to those on the autism spectrum, Occupational Therapist Alecia Steeves, District Autism Specialist Adam Mattice and Principal Dr. Daniel Zdanowski launched the project last school year.

"Often times, school and school-related demands can be overwhelming to students with autism. These students learn in unique and specific ways," said Mattice. "Students do not always process sensations and the world in the same way as people who are not on the spectrum. Students on the autism spectrum require additional sensory modification and adaptations to support their learning and sensory processing."

The sensory room will provide just that, helping students who may experience sensory processing challenges manage stimulation and stress. Additionally, it will be a safe, supportive space to build on the skills students are learning in the classroom and in occupational therapy.



To read more about the sensory room, go to [gateschili.org/SensoryRoom](https://gateschili.org/SensoryRoom).

## Family event celebrates *cultural diversity*

Lion's Park in Gates came alive on Oct. 5 during the English as a New Language (ENL) Family Picnic, marking an annual tradition that celebrates the rich tapestry of cultures within the community.



The event showcases the importance of cultural inclusivity and provides a platform to share their unique heritages. For this

yearly tradition, Lion's Park transformed into a cultural melting pot, where the aromas of diverse cuisines filled the air. Families from various backgrounds and nationalities congregated, each bringing a dish from their homeland. The picnic tables were laden with an array of international flavors, displaying the rich culinary heritage of the ENL community.

Kaci Smith, ESOL teacher at Paul Road, described the event as, "a heartwarming and diverse gathering, with 48 families and over 150 attendees."



The event was not just about savoring delectable dishes; it was a celebration of culture in all its forms. The event featured a fashion show, where students took the runway proudly donning attire representative of their respective backgrounds. The runway transformed into a vibrant display of colors, fabrics, and styles, offering a visual feast that mirrored the diversity of the community. The fashion show celebrated clothing and also symbolized the pride that students take in their cultural backgrounds. It served as a unique opportunity for them to educate

their peers and other families about the significance of their attire, sharing stories and traditions that often transcend generations.

One Armstrong Star who attended with his mom shared, "My mom was so happy to bring Nepali food so other people could try it, and I liked trying foods from other countries too."

Emily Reale, ESOL teacher at Neil Armstrong, added, "This is a cherished tradition from the picnic, having families bring traditional dishes from their home countries. It gives us all a chance to taste foods from around the world!"



## Elementary schools host festive *fall celebrations*

The fall season brought a wave of excitement and community spirit to Gates Chili elementary schools as they hosted a series of vibrant fall parties. From cider and donuts to pumpkin painting and pony rides, each school offered a unique celebration that brought families together for a memorable autumn experience.



Disney Dragons gathered for Fall Family Fun Night on Oct. 26, where the scent of cider and donuts filled the air. The evening was a joy as children painted pumpkins and enjoyed pony and wagon rides, creating cherished memories with their loved ones.

Meanwhile, Paul Road Panthers enjoyed Harvest Fest, offering an array of activities and fun including yummy treats, spending time with therapy dogs and a pumpkin carving contest. Students also took part in a scavenger hunt, gaga pit, dance party and fall crafts.

Armstrong Stars also held their own fall event called the Autumn Extravaganza, which featured a trunk or treat experience, donuts and cider and engaging activities for students. From pumpkin painting and gaga pit fun to lively music, the school's celebration was a vibrant tribute to the season.

The weekend prior, Brasser Bears transformed their school for the annual Apple Dumpling Festival on Oct. 21. The festivities included a bounce house, a thrilling gaga pit, various games, delectable treats, and even a visit from a firetruck. The day was marked by laughter and camaraderie as families indulged in fall-themed activities.



## Panthers take a *proactive step* in fire safety education

Fire education took center stage at Paul Road Elementary School as young learners embarked on a journey of knowledge and preparedness.

To empower students with essential life skills, the school hosted a comprehensive fire safety program, equipping them with the knowledge and tools to stay safe in the face of potential emergencies.

With the help of school staff and local fire experts from the Gates Fire District, students learned about the fundamentals of fire safety. The program, which is available in all Gates Chili elementary schools, focused on the importance of prevention, preparedness and quick thinking in fire-related situations. Interactive sessions gave students the opportunity to learn about the importance of fire alarms, how to safely use fire extinguishers and the critical stop-drop-and-roll technique.

Students completed the program feeling empowered, with an increased sense of responsibility and awareness of fire safety in their daily lives.



## REMINDER FOR ELEMENTARY FAMILIES

Progress reports are coming soon! Gates Chili will share your student's progress report in the SchoolTool Parent Portal on Monday, Dec. 4. Please take a moment to log in to the SchoolTool Parent Portal before that date, to ensure access. For more information on portal access, go to [gateschili.org/ParentPortalAccess](https://gateschili.org/ParentPortalAccess).



# GCMS Outdoor Club to serve as *Eclipse Ambassadors*

In a few short months, parts of North America will experience one of the rarest and most spectacular happenings in nature: a total solar eclipse. Students in Gates Chili Middle School's Outdoor Club are busy preparing for the event after having been named Community Eclipse Ambassadors!

The designation awarded by the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC) makes GCMS Outdoor Club one of 50 organizations to serve as ambassadors tasked with exciting and educating the community about the total solar eclipse on April 8, 2024. And there's much to be excited about.



When the eclipse passes over Mexico, the United States and Canada, Greater Rochester will be in the path of totality. In a total solar eclipse, people who are in the path of totality see the moon completely cover the sun, causing what seems like night in the middle of the day for a short period of time.

While total eclipses occur on a regular basis, they most often happen in places where people don't live, so no one sees them. To be in the path of a total eclipse is an event that happens about once every several hundred years!

While the district will be closed on the day of the eclipse, the Outdoor Club Eclipse Ambassadors will be busy in the leadup to the once-in-a-lifetime event. They are already hard at work on several outreach and education efforts, including holding a station dedicated to the eclipse at the Fall Family Fest on Nov. 9. The group is also planning an Eclipse Fair on Wednesday, Dec. 6 from 6:30-8 p.m. at the middle school. The event is free and open to the public.

Additionally, the Eclipse Ambassadors will have a dedicated section of each month's district e-newsletter where they will share resources, interesting facts, information and/or activities about eclipses. Stay tuned for more!



## Reviving a Gates Chili *'tradizione'*

The spirit of *tradizione* came alive once again as the World Language Club at the high school hosted the Whatsa Matta for You Bocce Ball Tournament fundraiser on Oct. 17. The event brought students and staff together to raise funds for Prime Time, the all-night party that follows Senior Ball.

The bocce ball tournament holds a special place in the hearts of the Gates Chili community. This long-standing tradition was established by former Italian teacher Franca Cinelli, who dedicated three decades to teaching Italian at Gates Chili High School. Cinelli's love for the game and her passion for fostering cultural connections made her the driving force behind this unique event.

"What was cool about [the tournament] is that it wasn't just the kids in the Italian club playing, the whole school



got involved and then the teachers too," Cinelli recalled. "You know, people came out that wouldn't normally come out to do things and they were very creative in getting a name for their team...and it brought around camaraderie."

Cinelli's retirement in 2017 put the tournament on hiatus. That is, until last year when Gates Chili alumnus and English teacher Vanessa Arena-Amesbury revived the cherished tradition. Having fond memories of

playing in the tournament both as a student and a staff member, Arena-Amesbury saw an opportunity to rekindle the community's love for bocce. The return of the bocce ball tournament was met with enthusiasm and anticipation. Nearly 20 teams of student and staff members took to the bocce courts last year, battling through three rounds of spirited competition. This year's competition attracted an even larger number of participants, with more teams registering to join the event.

"It was great; a lot of fun," said junior Cole G. "We're all out here just enjoying ourselves, having friendly competitive battles."

The resurgence of this cherished event symbolized the spirit of community and the importance of preserving beloved traditions.

## Brilliant lessons, flawless performances

Students at Gates Chili High School are polishing an existing club by adding some sparkle, shine and skill.

SAVVY, where the name itself means to know or understand, promotes the empowerment of its members while striving to create a sense of community within the school. This solidarity is nurtured through group discussions, community experiences and continued learning. This school year, students are taking the precious club to a new level with the introduction of the SAVVY Diamonds, a majorette dance team, and the re-introduction of the SAVVY Sapphires, the high school's step team.



Majorette dance gained popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s alongside marching bands at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Blending several dance styles including jazz, West African, ballet and hip-hop, these entertaining routines represent an expression of cultural identity and pride. Meanwhile, stepping is a form of percussive dance that dates back to early African tribes and is now practiced by people of all ages and backgrounds. It creates rhythm and sounds through a mixture of footsteps, stomps, spoken words, and hand claps.

SAVVY's added dance components came thanks to the support and advocacy of high school assistant principal Garonia Parchment-Magnussen, School Psychologist Dr. Stacy Killings, Hillside Work Scholarship Youth Advocate Nazya McCray, and Gates Chili graduate and new teacher aide Kedaja Robinson. This team of staff provide a supportive space for students to grow. For the students, these components are a way to stay connected and empowered in their school community.

"The team is like a sisterhood; when we all get together, we're laughing and getting to know each other," shared senior Chloe M. "It also keeps me on top of my grades and in step with my work."

Just like athletics, SAVVY Diamonds and Sapphires must keep their grades up to stay on the team. That accountability is what School Psychologist Dr. Stacy Killings believes is the most important facet of SAVVY. As one of the club's advisors, she makes sure that students are in good academic standing, model good behavior and are learning valuable life skills like time management, collaboration and communication.

"We're trying to equip the students with life lessons, and we hold them to a very high standard," Dr. Killings explained. "We stress the importance of being prompt, the importance of communicating, advocating for things that you want, things that you need, and the importance of working together collaboratively."

Even when a student is academically ineligible to participate, advisors provide support to keep them motivated. This fall, that motivation has resulted in a squad of 36 students from all grade levels at the high school. The club is set to hold tryouts again this winter. There is no prior dance experience required and, in addition to community, team members are a great source of encouragement.

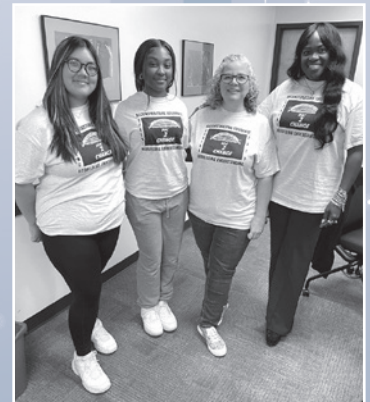
"Don't give up; just keep trying even when it's hard," Chloe explained. "I have a hard time with the dances sometimes, so I have to put in the work."

## State-level spotlight on Gates Chili

Gates Chili High School students and staff highlighted Gates Chili to a statewide audience this fall during a special webinar series hosted by the New York State Education Department (NYSED).

Students Marissa H. and Laila G. and staff members Dr. Stacy Killings and Kathy White represented Gates Chili during the series titled, Elevating Student Voice as Leaders to Advance Equity and Inclusion. During the webinar, students and staff shared their experiences planning and hosting the ROC 2 Change Student Summit on Race last spring. The group represented the high school's Multicultural International Club, which led the charge in planning that event on March 31.

"ROC 2 Change opened several opportunities to make change in our community and school," shared Marissa. "Everyone was so kind and open-minded and really sought change within our schools and community. Although the work was hard, we did our best to work through any of our differences to create a cohesive program. I'm really proud of all the work our school has done to help improve diversity, equity and inclusion."





## Embracing 'Tomorrow' with ARTS Partners' opening act

"Who's excited for 'Annie?'"

All the Florence Brasser third-graders' hands shot up in the air. The students were gathered in the school's cafeteria for a big surprise: They are going to experience the iconic musical about Little Orphan Annie live and in person.

The integration of "Annie" into third-grade instruction throughout the district is part of ARTS Partners, a harmonious collaboration between the Rochester Broadway Theatre League (RBTL) and area schools that proves "It's a Hard-Knock Life" without the arts!

The award-winning program, now in its seventh year at Gates Chili, infuses arts into the classroom by connecting curriculum to selected touring Broadway productions presented by



the RBTL at the West Herr Auditorium Theatre, formerly the Rochester Auditorium Theatre.

Before the curtain goes up, students will delve into "Annie" and the journey of a character in the classroom. They will explore the show's topics and its themes of optimism, belonging, facing challenges and finding value through activities like analyzing characters and

songs, writing personal narratives and reflecting on current events. Third-grade and elementary art and music teachers are all working with the RBTL to implement these specially designed lessons in their classrooms. The whole experience will culminate in December, when students will travel to downtown Rochester to see "Annie" on stage.

Middle and high school students will also get the opportunity to participate in ARTS Partners this school year. Students in grades 8 and 11 will explore themes like progress, sacrifice and art as a force for change when they take part in lessons and activities based on "Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of The Temptations" before attending a performance this winter.

## GCHS Theatre serves up *supersized laughs*

Gates Chili High School Theatre's fall production had the audience saying, "I'm loving it!"

The Performing Arts Center stage transformed into a burger joint for the one-night-only production of "Fast Food," a one-act comedy by Tracy Wells that had student-actors playing kooky customers and off-the-wall workers. Directors Heather Coughlin and Jessica Volpe set out to capture the absurd and hilarious experiences that come with a first job.

The play is a vignette-style collection of scenes that covers a slew of screwy scenarios that could happen in any fast-food restaurant: the customer who can't decide what to order, a bad first date, the ever-broken shake machine and more. The format required the actors to create distinct character arcs within each scene, allowing them to really shine in their roles.

Now that the curtain has closed on "Fast Food," GCHS Musical Theatre is preparing for its next production: "The Addams Family." The musical based on the fictional ghoulish family will take the GCPAC stage March 22-24, 2024. Check our winter issue this February for information about tickets and show times.







# BUILDING A CHAMPIONSHIP CULTURE: Spartan cheered at Buffalo Bills home opener

Kickoff at the Buffalo Bills home opener hadn't even happened yet, but the packed Highmark Stadium erupted in applause. For Spartan football player Joe G., it was the familiar sound of a roaring crowd that he usually hears from the bleachers of Spartan Stadium. This time, though, it was a much larger roaring crowd of Buffalo Bills fans.

Joe was on the field to accept the Buffalo Bills Hispanic Heritage Youth Sports Leadership Award. Bills Senior Vice President Josh Dziurlikowski and Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York President and Founder Cas D. Rodriguez presented him with the award and a custom game day ball.

They were honoring the standout Spartan linebacker/fullback/tight end for his leadership on and off the field and his contributions to the Hispanic community. The Bills present the award every year during Hispanic Heritage Month.

Joe, whose family comes from Nicaragua, is enormously proud of his Latino heritage.

"It reminds me of the importance of family and community bonds," he said. "Our heritage is a part of our identity, and it's something we cherish and pass down through generations."



Joe also shared that football is something that helps them grow together, explaining,

"Even at the hardest times, football has brought my family together to watch my games and has helped rebuild relationships."

The sport has greatly impacted his life in other ways too, teaching him lasting lessons about teamwork, perseverance and discipline.

"I have built many friendships [through football]," he recalled. "My closest friends are my teammates."

Besides being a star on the football field, Joe is an active community volunteer, helping out at his church, taking on lawn work for neighbors, coaching flag football, assisting in elementary gym classes and baking cookies for the boys' soccer team. Last school year, he was honored with the President's Volunteer Service Award.

The national program recognizes the impact of outstanding volunteers who have completed at least 100 hours of community service.

Joe is also active in the performing arts. He participates in chorus and band and had the lead role of Troy Bolton, a basketball captain who also wants to sing, in Gates Chili Theatre's 2023 production of "High School Musical on Stage!"

Joe will continue his football career after graduating at the end of the school year. Although he has not yet decided where, he plans to play at college while studying computer science or cybersecurity.



## Elementary football night of fun

Friday night lights at Gates Chili took on a special, heartwarming glow as the district's elementary families gathered for the annual Elementary Football Night on Oct. 20. Families from across the district gathered at Spartan Stadium for an evening of fun, snacks and of course, football. This new tradition, now in its second year, is a collaborative effort between parent-teacher organizations from the four elementary schools. Over the course of the event, students and their families enjoyed snacks, played games and donned school stickers to showcase their school spirit. In addition, elementary students had the unique opportunity to venture onto the field before kick-off to hold the U.S. flag and lead the Pledge of Allegiance.



# Staff Spotlight: From big rigs to big yellow buses



**Stephanie Gifford, Bus Driver**  
**Transportation Department**

Stephanie Gifford started her career as a driver traveling coast to coast behind the wheel of a semi-truck. She hauled cars and stage equipment and even had special security clearance to transport supplies for the military and NASA. Now a bus driver for Gates Chili, she's responsible for the most precious payload.

"Driving kids is way more important than anything I ever hauled in a truck," said Gifford.

After a decade driving 18-wheelers back-and-forth across the country, Gifford said "over and out" to trucking to start a family.

"I loved it, but it's a hard life," she reminisced.

Gifford spent some time out of the driver's seat, but the open road eventually called her back. She applied to Gates Chili and has been driving school buses for the district since 2011. Gifford says that trucking has helped her to be a better bus driver. And while she misses some things about her former career, there are aspects that she's happy to have left in the rearview mirror.

"Woman were not very accepted," she explained.

At Gates Chili, Gifford is not just accepted, she is valued as a leader and driving force in the transportation department. She recently began training new bus drivers, a role she has embraced.

"Stephanie is someone I can always count on to represent our department," said Matt Helmbold, director of transportation. "She has a way of connecting with people, which is especially important when you're working with kids."

"Watching somebody go from not knowing any of it and making their way and progressing. It's really great to see how quickly they learn. I'm like, 'Good for you. You did this, and you should be proud,'" said Gifford. "And knowing that I helped somebody get to be a driver, it's so great."

But of course, her favorite part of driving school buses is the students.

"You develop a relationship with them and their families. They're the reason that keeps me coming back," she said.

While Gifford drives a bus every day, the most important part of her journey is helping to steer the futures of countless Gates Chili Spartans.

## Connecting the dots to *equity*

Compassion, community and celebration took center stage at the district's first superintendent's conference day of the year on Oct. 6 as staff worked to connect the dots to equity.

At the helm of the keynote hour were Laila G. and Marissa H., two high school students who recently represented Gates Chili in a statewide webinar (see page 7). On this day, the students played the role of teachers, welcoming staff to their day of learning and introducing performances of the national anthem by Advanced Treble



Choir singers Madi P., Maddie B. and Leah M., as well as the high school's SAVVY Diamonds majorette dance team performing a high-energy routine for the first time ever on the GCPAC stage.

Students then turned it over to keynote speakers Elizabeth Devaney and Mahreen Mustafa George from the Children's Institute, who led more than 800 staff members through a presentation focused on developing a restorative mindset. Restorative practices are rooted in the idea that relationships are essential to building community.

Devaney and Mustafa George encouraged staff to continue to use

restorative skills such as curiosity, compassion, connection and challenge to build strong connections with students and each other.



After the keynote, staff collaborated with their school or department colleagues to connect the dots between the keynote presentation and their own equity journeys. They worked in small groups to look at a set of practical scenarios with a restorative mindset.

## BUDGET AMBASSADORS WANTED!

To gain valuable feedback during the budget development process, the district is again offering the Budget Ambassador Program for the 2024-25 school year budget. To apply to participate in this program, complete the form at [gateschili.org/BudgetAmbassador](https://gateschili.org/BudgetAmbassador) by Friday, Jan. 5, 2024 at 5 p.m.





## GC PRIDE Award

Gates Chili CSD is proud to recognize students, staff and community members who go above and beyond on behalf of the district and its students. The GC PRIDE Award stands for and honors professionalism, respect, innovation, dedication and excellence. Congratulations to all the recipients for September and October.



*September recipients: Marianna L., WD student; Sandra Ransom, food pantry volunteer; and Jing You-Lam, NA school nutrition worker*



*October recipients: Samantha Carpenter, MS teacher and David R., MS student*



## SAVE THE DATE

### The Harlem Wizards are returning!

**Jan. 12, 2024 at 7 p.m. in the Spartan Field House**

Trick shots and laughs will fill the Gates Chili High School when the Harlem Wizards return to Gates Chili!

The Wizards will take on Gates Chili staff and students in a basketball game sure to bring a smile to every audience member's face. Check the Gates Chili district website for ticket information in mid-December.

The event supports the Gates Chili Educational Foundation, which benefits Gates Chili student programs and initiatives.

## ANNUAL COAT DRIVE AND FALL FAMILY FEST FUN

The spirit of unity and generosity was on full display at Gates Chili's Fall Family Fest, an annual event that drew hundreds of Gates Chili students, families and community members.

The event on Nov. 9 featured more than 60 local businesses and organizations centered around health, wellness and safety. From bounce houses and gaga pits to coloring stations and free meal samples, there were many of activities designed specifically for families with children. Hundreds of folks also took advantage of the chance to get a flu shot and sign up for a U.S. passport.

Amidst the community resources and opportunities were live performances by the SAVVY Diamonds and Sapphires, Jr. Spartan cheerleaders, martial artists from Samurai Martial Arts and the Gates Chili Community Band.

The event also marked the end of the Spartan Way Coat Drive, providing coats, hats, mittens and other winter-weather gear to dozens of people in the community.



**Experience  
Belonging**  
at Gates Chili  
Central School District

Start your journey at  
[gateschili.org/jobs](https://gateschili.org/jobs)



## GATES CHILI CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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# FREE NUTRITIOUS MEALS FOR ALL STUDENTS

- Applies to breakfast and lunch served in all Gates Chili cafeterias on school days in the 2023-24 school year
- No application required to receive free breakfast and lunch
- Individual items, snacks, drinks and desserts still available for purchase

### DECEMBER

1	FBFA Craft Show and Chili Community Tree Lighting	6-8:30 p.m.
2	FBFA Craft Show	12-5 p.m.
4	UPK-5 Parent-Teacher Conferences / No School for Students UPK-5	
5	PR Band and Chorus Winter Concert	7 p.m.
6	MS Eclipse Fair	6:30-8 p.m.
6	HS Band Winter Concert	7 p.m.
12	MS Grades 6-8 Winter Chorus Concert	7 p.m.
12	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b>	<b>6:30 p.m.</b>
13	WD Winter Band and Chorus Concert	7 p.m.
14	MS Grades 7-8 Band Concert	7 p.m.
15	<b>#GCPride Day</b>	
21	UPK-5 Parent-Teacher Conferences / Half Day for Students UPK-5	
25	<b>Christmas - District Closed</b>	
22-29	<b>Holiday Recess - No School for Students and 10-Month Staff</b>	

### JANUARY

1	<b>New Year's Day - District Closed</b>	
5	MS Grades 7-8 Social	7-8:30 p.m.
9	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b>	<b>6:30 p.m.</b>
9	HS Winter Choral Concert	7 p.m.
10	MS Grade 6 Band Concert	7 p.m.
11	NA Winter Band and Chorus Concert	7 p.m.
15	<b>Martin Luther King Jr. Day - District Closed</b>	
17	MS and HS Jazz Concert	7 p.m.
18	FB Winter Band and Chorus Concert	7 p.m.
19	<b>#GCPride Day</b>	
23	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b>	6:30 p.m.
26	Conference Day - No School for Students Grades 6-12	

### FEBRUARY

2	MS Talent Show	6:30 p.m.
6	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b>	<b>6:30 p.m.</b>
9	HS Java Jazz	6 p.m.
9	MS Grade 6 Social	7-8:30 p.m.
16	<b>#GCPride Day</b>	
19	<b>President's Day - District Closed</b>	
20-23	<b>Mid-Winter Recess - No School for Students and 10-Month Staff</b>	
27	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b>	<b>6:30 p.m.</b>
29	HS Grades 10-11 Student/Guardian Night	6:30-8:30 p.m.