

# GATOR GAZETTE



Giffen Memorial Elementary School Newsletter

Fall 2021

## A note from Principal Brown ...

Hey Giffen Gators and Families! We are so happy to have all of our students and staff back in-person for the 2021-22 school year! We sure missed seeing everyone's beautiful faces in school last year. We spent much of September and October establishing routines and getting back into the swing of things while still implementing our COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. It has been a transition for most, but a

welcome one that I myself couldn't wait for. Welcome back, Gators!

As the school year continues, our focus continues to be strengthening academics and lifting student voices. We strive to be a welcoming and loving environment for all of our children so that they feel safe and encouraged to do their best and reach their maximum potential. Our commitment remains strong to

*(Continued on page 3)*



## SAVE THE DATES!

### NOVEMBER

- 17 Virtual We are Giffen Family Art Night, 5-7 p.m.
- 19 College Friday
- 23 School picture make-up day
- 24 NO SCHOOL, Parent-Teacher Conference Day
- 25-26 NO SCHOOL, Thanksgiving Recess

### DECEMBER

- 2 Virtual Families Learning Together meeting, 5 p.m.
- 4 Conversations with the Coordinators, 12:30 p.m.
- 15 Virtual PTA meeting, 8 a.m.
- 17 College Friday
- 23-31 NO SCHOOL, Holiday Recess

### JANUARY

- 3 Back to school!

## ONE SCHOOL, ONE BOOK

This year, our entire school will be reading "We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices," a treasury of poems, stories and art that offers hope and encouragement to children in these challenging times.

Each student will receive a copy of the book, read the book in their classroom and engage in projects and activities that explore some of the book's topics and themes. We're excited to introduce a book that encourages our students to raise their voices and look forward to the rich conversations it will evoke through discussion, questions and written expression.



## Attendance matters

Students benefit in many ways from being in school: in their academic and social-emotional growth, and in the supportive relationships they build with peers, teachers and staff members.

Attendance matters in a student's success starting as early as kindergarten.

Missing even two days every month causes students to fall behind. By sixth grade, chronic absence is a leading predictor that a student will drop out of high school. By ninth grade, regular attendance is a better predictor of graduation than eighth-grade test scores.

Students are expected to be in school every day unless they are sick, have a medical appointment or have a religious reason. If your student is absent, you must provide a written excuse for every absence or late arrival. The excuse must be signed and dates and reasons for the absence or lateness.

Being on time for school is part of having good attendance! Missing 5-10 minutes of class might not seem like much, but it adds up. Every time your child comes in late, they start the day playing catch-up. Help your child be successful and get them to school on time. Giffen is committed to working with you to help your student have great attendance!

## FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL FLAX-LEIGHT

Each morning as I look out over Rensselaer Street, I see the frost linger a little longer on our corner of the South End. Winter is bringing chilly mornings, but it is still warm inside our building.

Students have finished celebrating autumn with harvest activities and Trunk or Treat. They practiced estimating with candy corn and examined the natural cycle of pumpkins, all the while filling the halls with their creative stories and their artwork: delicate drawings showing the natural changes occurring in the sensory garden and trees shedding their leaves. In nature, it is a time where growth is stagnant. The blossoming delayed until the frost breaks.

Here at Giffen, it is the season of learning, the season of growth. Our students are both shouldering the hard work and experiencing the joy of new learning. Please take the time to celebrate and share this growth each day with your student. We are working hard to create the best learning environment for our students. Although it is the frozen time of year when families linger a little less outside at arrival and dismissal, please stay in touch with our school community, and do not hesitate to reach out at any time.



*Fifth-grade teacher Tiffany Moore served up an order of mathematics with an extra large side of fun for students during the "Decimal Diner" on Oct. 21. Each year, Mrs. Moore creates what she calls a "classroom transformation" to celebrate student's hard work during a particular unit.*



# WELCOME, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL DICKSON!

Giffen Memorial Elementary School has a new assistant principal this year.

The Board of Education appointed W. Nichol Dickson to that role during its Sept. 23 meeting. Ms. Dickson started at Giffen on Sept. 27.

Ms. Dickson, who is certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in early adolescence mathematics, spent most of her 26 years in education as a math teacher at Rosa Parks School in Orange, N.J. While in that role, she also supported Americorps participants, coordinated the school's small learning community efforts, served as a mentor teacher and coordinated after-school programs and enrichment.

More recently, she was an instructional supervisor at Pleasant Valley Elementary School in Schenectady. She also wrote curriculum for Rosa Parks School and Green Tech High School.

Ms. Dickson is currently pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership at Russell Sage College. She holds a master's in educational leadership from Montclair State University, a master's in criminal justice from Rutgers University and a bachelor's in criminal justice from Syracuse University.

She joins the administrative team of Principal Jasmine N. Brown and Assistant Principal William Flax-Leight. She replaces Jared Fox, who became principal of Eagle Point Elementary School this summer.



## Giffen gratitude

We extend our gratitude and thanks to ...

- ... Our families for helping to get our students off to a great start of the school year
- ... Our community partners for their continuing support of our students
- ... Carol Bolan and Liz Richards Hart for their assistance with our school closet

## Principal's message *(continued from page 1)*

developing cultural competence – the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures – among our staff. We also recognize and continue to empower student voices around their educational experience, social equity and justice.

Giffen is still a school in receivership. This means we continue to work toward our goal of delivering rigorous, standards-based instruction with maximum student engagement. As a community school, we encourage parent and community engagement through enriching opportunities for students and families alike. I encourage you to reach out to me if you would like to participate on our Community Engagement Team or Community Schools

Advisory Board to contribute how we may improve the educational experience for our students; your input and feedback is critical to our growth as a school community.

We look forward to seeing you on Nov. 24 for our Parent Teacher Conference Day. There will be more information forthcoming for this virtual opportunity to discuss your child's progress for the first quarter.

While I am sure I will see most of you in the upcoming weeks, whether it is at arrival, dismissal, home visit, virtual conference, or in the grocery store or nail shop 😊, I wish you and your families a happy, healthy and safe holiday season. As always, please reach out if there is anything we can assist with.

# SEEN AROUND GIFFEN



Thanks to our community partners at Regeneron and the Albany Housing Authority, Giffen Gators were able to enjoy a safe and fun "Trunk or Treat" on Oct. 27. The event featured games, goodies, costumes, all manner of goofy characters and of course lots of treats!

## Please return "Wonders" books to school

At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the City School District of Albany sent home the hard cover, grade-level "Wonders" anthology book so that all elementary students would have access to the curriculum. The district passes these books on to new students at the start of each school year.

Families, if you have any of these "Wonders" hard cover books at home from previous school years and your children are no longer using them, please have your children return them to school.

All of our students have the necessary books for the current school year, and we want to minimize the purchase of replacement texts to the greatest extent possible as we look ahead to future years.

## Giffen fourth and fifth grades will be phone-free

We are writing to share exciting news – our fourth- and fifth-graders will be in phone-free classrooms to improve teaching and learning.

We will be using a system called Yondr to achieve this goal. Yondr has been used across the world in over 1,000 schools, as well as at concerts, comedy shows, businesses, camps, weddings and special events of all kinds. The goal of these spaces is to encourage people to engage with each other and their surroundings.

We believe that cell phones can be very useful. We have also found that learning and social behavior improve drastically when students are fully engaged with their teachers and classmates and not distracted by their phones.

The Yondr Program employs a simple, lockable pouch that stores a cell phone. Every student will secure their phone in a personally assigned Yondr pouch when they arrive at school. Students will maintain possession of their phones and will not use them until their pouches are opened at the end of the school day. Students are required to bring their Yondr pouch to and from school each day and are responsible for their pouch at all times.

We are encouraged by the effects of this system in learning institutions. Yondr surveyed over 900 school partners to measure the effects of creating phone-free educational environments.

We will start using Yondr sometime during the winter. Please be on the lookout for more information!



### Basketball with Books

Saturday morning Basketball with Books is coming back!

Please be patient with us as we take the necessary steps to keep everyone safe. It is our goal to make this program kid-friendly and parent-dependable.

The program will be held Saturdays from 9 a.m.-noon and 20 students will be able to participate. Stay tuned for more info.

## READING WITH YOUR CHILD

Reading books to children stimulates their imagination and expands their understanding of the world. It helps them develop language and listening skills and prepares them to understand written words.

Make time each day to read to your child. If you have more than one child, find a book everyone will enjoy. When you make time for reading, you send an important message that reading is worthwhile.

Ham it up! Change your voice to sound like the characters. Use expression in your voice to show excitement, mood changes and more.

Read it again! Go ahead and read the same story again and again. The favorite story may speak to your child's interests.



*During National Coding Week in September, fourth graders in Shannon Pinkowski's class showed off their programming AND math skills using robots shaped like bees! Students worked in teams to predict the distance between points on a path, then together they determined how to program the "Bee Bot" to travel to and reach each destination. At every stop, students solved a math problem before they and their Bee Bot moved on.*

# CLASSROOM SPOTLIGHT

**Third grade with Mrs. Bustelos, Mr. Faulkner and Ms. Johnson** is off to a magical start! Our students are doing a great job following our schoolwide expectations to Be Safe, Be Respectful and to Be Responsible. We have been working hard to learn routines and procedures for each class. Students are working on writing text evidence using two details from the text. Our mathematicians have worked on place value strategies, adding, subtracting and rounding. We are now working on multiplication arrays and equations. We enjoy reading and sharing our thinking every day! In science, we have been studying pumpkins, estimating pumpkin seeds, engineering and so much more! We're so thankful for support from students and families.

**Mrs. Simon's third grade** class is learning all about multiplication and adding and subtracting into the thousands place, and the use of place value. We have been writing in response to our reading and using text evidence in our answers. In science, we have been learning about magnets and using our investigations to further explore and develop our skills. We participated in an awesome activity thanks to our community partners at Regeneron. We learned about and created a windsock, a sink-or-float activity and the components of the blood within our bodies. Our class really enjoyed the visual that was given of the different components and the use of candy to demonstrate the parts. Keep up the GREAT work, super third graders. We are only just beginning our adventure TOGETHER!

Fifth grade is off and running! **Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Lentini's class** has been working hard to build their community with schoolwide expectations. We are learning about growth mindset and setting goals. We are busy in science lab learning about mixtures and solutions. Students enjoy working with their lab partner on experiments and answering questions based on their experiments. In math, we have been working with decimals and place value. We now are heading into multiplication and division strategies. We are impressed with the math thinking that our mathematicians are engaging in. Our math transformation turned our class into a decimal diner! Students and teachers enjoyed the 1950s-themed math day! (See photos from the day on page 2.)

*Giffen Gator News (GGN) , has been running since May 2021. The news is hosted by our very own Giffen students under the guidance of Ms. Castle, Mr. Huntley, and Mr. Stone. GGN covers various topics including the daily weather, upcoming Giffen events, national and historical days and times, as well as exciting moments around the school. A recent exciting moment happened when, just outside our window, an eagle resting its wings rested on a car, then took a slide down the driver-side door to check itself out in the mirror! The GGN airs once a week on Fridays at 9 a.m. and is played in students' classrooms. Pictured from L-R are Mr. Stone, Malia Grant and Eric Ka.*



## WHO'S WHO AT GIFFEN

**Mrs. Brown**, principal • **Ms. Dickson and Mr. Flax-Leight**, assistant principals  
**Mr. Huntley** and **Mr. Johnson**, home school coordinators • **Ms. Boyd**, community school coordinator