

# Community Connections

*Within our growing, diverse community, we sow the seeds of opportunities to raise prepared, resilient students.*



## Gervais pre-kindergarten education gets a boost

**T**he Gervais School District has more Preschool Promise seats than any other individual program in Marion and Polk counties. Preschool Promise is funding from the state of Oregon to make preschool free to low-income families. Just two years ago, the district had 18 Preschool Promise slots, but this year it has an astounding 47!

"I'm proud our district is making it a priority for preschool to be available, effectively saying it doesn't matter what your income status is, we are going to do what we can to support your young learner," said Dr. Creighton Helms, director of student services, which oversees early childhood learning for the Gervais School District. "We could most certainly have fewer Preschool Promise slots and allow more for private pay so we could generate income that way. But it would deny those families to get their 3- and 4-year-olds into preschool." The preschool at Gervais School District is entirely funded through grant programs. The same couldn't be said for



the daycare, which closed this year. "The amount of staff we needed to employ to stay within legal numbers (for daycare staff to child ratios) amounted to significant costs that were taking away from K-12," Helms said. "As difficult of a decision as it was, we realized our mandate really is K-12 and we need to be the best stewards of our money." As a result, the Gervais Early Learning Center is no more, and that building now houses the department of student services.

"We have autism specialists, speech language pathologists, and others who never had an office space before,"

Helms said.

The revamped preschool is 20 feet away, outfitted with nine teachers, making the student to teacher ratio just under 1 to 7. Each of the three classrooms has a bilingual Spanish speaker, and another teacher is fluent in Ukrainian.

Gervais Preschool is a full-day program from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., with nap and rest times built in. This year's classes are mixed ages for the first time.

"What we've found in the socialization part of mixed ages, the older kids start acting as mentors and examples and tend to behave to show the younger ones, 'this is how we do it' and the younger ones see it and want to emulate it," Helms said.

Helms pointed out the importance of preschool is greater than ever due to higher standards for incoming kindergarten students.

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## Gervais School District launches STAR Team

**I**n an effort to pursue more trauma-informed practices, counselors and behavior specialists from across the Gervais School District are banding together to form what they're calling the STAR Team. The concept for the STAR Team originated at the end of last school year, when teachers were asking for more support surrounding how to work with dysregulated students in the classrooms.

"Teachers understand the concept of a trauma-informed classroom, but if you have a child in the classroom and they're truly dysregulated, it's different than just having professional development about it;

you want a toolkit of things that you can actually use to leverage the situation in real time," said Dr. Creighton Helms, director of special services for Gervais School District.

Teachers will do their very best to support every student in need, but these challenging moments are complex and teachers can only do so much when they have a room full of students ready to learn and a curriculum to teach.

"I know they genuinely care about their students,

*continued on page 4*

## Gervais School District raises thousands at Oktoberfest

Cheers - or "prost" - to the Gervais School District volunteers who took time to serve at this year's Mount Angel Oktoberfest.

Led by Gus Munoz, Caryn Davis, Angelica Albee, and Fenya Aman, the Gervais School District hosted a food booth for the fourth year in a row at the nearby festival, dishing up nachos and chili to festival-goers. "Putting on the booth is no small task and they lead the way with helping in any way they could," Aman said about her colleagues.

She said the idea to host a fundraiser for the school district came from former middle school teacher Cheryl Blanchard.

"She thought it would be better to have staff commit

to four days versus 2-3 weeks for a cookie dough fundraiser or something like that," Aman said.

The volunteers brought supplies and food from the chef's store, and some was donated.

During the four-day Oktoberfest, the booth was manned by mostly staff or former staff, but high school students and some parents also volunteered.

Funding from the booth, which usually raises around \$5,000, is split between clubs, district schools and cohorts that signed up to volunteer for the booth.

"Overall it is successful," Aman said.

"There are always things we can tweak and new ideas that come in, which is a good thing."



## Gervais High School students receive more direct college and career support

Gervais High School introduced a new counseling role this year in the form of a college and career advisor. Sophia Ferreira fills this new role that was created to help guide students in finding opportunities for the next step after high school. For Ferreira, she said she specifically wants to create a culture in which college is a possibility.

"I find resources, but mainly I believe in them, that college is for everyone," Ferreira said. "I feel it's important to help expand their minds and open them up to what is out there." A section of the school library has been transformed into a career center, with new computers, shorter shelves for better visibility and a modern look.

***"... I hope to open them up to opportunities they never knew of or give them ideas of what they can do. I want to see them grow and learn that they are capable of anything."***

— Sophia Ferreira, College & Career Advisor.

"The library is one of the areas students utilize a lot: before school is open, during lunch and when we bring guest speakers," Ferreira said. "I'm very thankful for our maintenance crew and librarian who moved books and made adjustments for the change. The kids seem to love the new look and appreciate being in this space."

Though she doesn't lead a class, Ferreira does arrange for guest speakers from various colleges and businesses to visit advisory classes.

"Tuesdays are Industry Tuesdays, when students can chat with different industry professionals on how they got to that job," Ferreira said. "Thursdays are College Rep Thursdays.



We schedule a time to give students the opportunity to hear and ask questions."

Ferreira's position is funded by a seven-year federal GEAR UP grant (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs).

Ferreira has some background working in education, but it's her personal connection to Gervais that is potentially what will make her most successful. Although a Woodburn High graduate herself, she did spend part of her high school years at Gervais, and now is raising her children in the school district. She said she couldn't do this work without support from counselor Andrea Oropeza and the administration team for believing in her ability to help students succeed.

"My goals for this position is to learn with (students) as much as I can and give them the information they need," she said. "Most importantly, I hope to open them up to opportunities they never knew of or give them ideas of what they can do. I want to see them grow and learn that they are capable of anything."



## Gervais Elementary School kicks off school year with busy schedule



Targeted reading interventions use the Really Great Reading curriculum.

If the first month of the 2023-24 school year is any indication, it's going to be a busy year of positive growth at Gervais Elementary School.

First of all, the school welcomed eight new classroom teachers, a new physical education teacher, two specialists, six instructional assistants, a student advocate and an assistant principal. Mixed with the veteran staff, the new team is enthusiastic about serving Gervais students.

One way they're supporting students is through targeted reading interventions using the Really Great Reading curriculum. Students form small groups to receive instruction at their reading level. This tactic was used last year and proved to be effective, so further gains in reading are expected this year.

GES is also providing English language development interventions to every student, because all students are language learners. Students are placed in level groups to provide the most meaningful intervention using the EL Achieve curriculum. Individual education plans are added for those who need it, and prove to be effective in helping each student learn and grow.

Outside the classroom, the school held a fun Spirit Day assembly, has continued the momentum of its successful after school clubs (70% of students participate) and has started a partnership with the Woodburn Public Library. The library's bookmobile visits the school every Thursday afternoon. Mike Jansen with the library delivers a broad selection of books, movies and other materials the students can check out. There are even some books he gives away. Students can also sign up for a library card with the bookmobile.



Woodburn Public Library's bookmobile visits the school every Thursday afternoon.

## Meet Gervais Middle School's new secretary:

Sasha Chesnokov



Anyone who has been to Gervais Middle School this year has likely noticed a new face in the school office.

Sasha Chesnokov is the new school secretary. Not only is she new to the role, but she's new to working for school districts in general. Her experience is in clerical work and medication aide work.

Chesnokov is delighted to be part of the Gervais team as a Gervais High School alum. She's also excited to be part of a district team that includes her mother-in-law, who works at the elementary school.

***"I am familiar with the close knit community Gervais has. I really wanted to work somewhere with beliefs and core values that align with my own."***

So far, her experience on the job has been, in her words, "nothing short of amazing. The middle school is the smallest school in the district so the staff is like a small family - as Principal Johnson says, 'small but mighty.' Everyone is so kind and helpful."

This year, Chesnokov said she hopes to learn more clerical skills and patience, while also growing relationships in the community.

## STAR Team

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but they are not social workers or counselors, so their toolbelt is limited," Helms said. "So they're asking 'how can you increase the size of my toolbelt.'"

Over the summer, the counseling team collaborated on how to become coaches for teachers so they feel empowered to manage these kinds of scenarios, whether it's an elementary student throwing a tantrum or a high schooler exhibiting oppositional defiance. The team rebranded itself as the team that helps Students Thrive with Advocate Response - or STAR.

"What we're really trying to do is create a culture and climate where every teacher feels like when there is that moment, they might have one or two things they're willing to try to keep that child in their classroom a little bit longer," Helms said. "If we can nurture the relationship between child and teacher, and if they trust their teachers in a way that they might not trust now, instead of being disruptive, they may have the courage and the ability to be more vulnerable."

While mental illness isn't new to the world, what is new is a rise in suicide ideation among teens, anxiety in preteens and sleep deprivation and sleep disorders for both, which cause a host of other health issues.

"Most of them have grown up in the age of smartphones, and at the same time there was Covid, so it was


harder to balance when you're on your device versus face to face," Helms said. "All of a sudden, you have the scales tipped very heavily toward screen time and isolation. That's a tricky thing to navigate."

The STAR Team is going through very targeted training that will engage teachers to actively create trauma-sensitive classrooms. While it sounds like a lot of extra work for teachers, Helms made it clear that they and the counseling team are passionate about doing what's right for the students.

"We have to expect a lot from ourselves and sometimes that means reimagining what a job does or how much effort a job should have applied to it," he explained. "Yes, this is hard work and it's going to take a lot of time and effort and coordination, but if this was my own child, wouldn't I want all these adults expecting a lot of themselves in order to take care of my child?"

The STAR Team consists of 10 members, including counselors, licensed clinical social workers and others who specialize in behavior management.

"For the size of our district, I can say quite confidently that our superintendent has truly prioritized social-emotional learning in a way that many other districts of our ilk have not," Helms said, pointing out similarly-



**Gervais School District**

### STAR Team Members:

**Gerardo Jimenez**, LCSW and Counselor (elementary school)

**Jasmin Enciso Anaya**, Student Advocate and Behavior Support (elementary school)

**Aloha Yoshinaga**, Counselor (middle school)

**Fenya Aman**, Student Advocate and Behavior Support (middle school)

**Laura Zurita**, CSW and Counselor (high school)

**Andrea Oropeza**, Counselor (high school)

**Andre Brown**, Student Advocate and Behavior Support (high school)

**Jill Woodard**, District Psychologist

**Jeanne Doyle**, Early Childhood Behavior Specialist

**Kalynn Dees**, Administrative TOSA (elementary school)

sized school districts often have half the number of counseling positions. "I think that's because she recognizes the importance of the whole child education. It's more than just seeing them as scholars or academics."

To learn more about the STAR Team's work, you can read the book "Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma Sensitive Classroom."

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## Gervais pre-kindergarten education gets a boost

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"The bar has been raised and the expectation of rigor for 5-year-olds is remarkably different than it was 10-20 years ago," he said. "Kindergarten used to be half days and even voluntary. Now it's a full day of instruction, transition and supervision, while they're learning reading, writing, math, science and music. You have 5-year-olds who are still building stamina to go through a day without taking a nap. ... So preschool is truly instrumental in having them ready for

these expectations of what it means to be kinder ready."

The structure as well as the socialization opportunities in preschool can set students ahead in many respects.

"If we can build that early, they're more likely to be successful when they begin kindergarten, so when they have to learn reading, writing and math, they're not also balancing that with learning to share and to follow the routines and structure around a school

environment," Helms said.

With nearly 60 students enrolled in its preschool, Gervais is clearly a preK-12 district.

"We don't start our focus at kindergarten," Helms said. "We genuinely start our focus in terms of learning and development at age 3 and really apply intentional strategic efforts in helping these 3- and 4-year-olds get off to their best start."





# School Board UPDATE

October 2023

The following is a message from Superintendent Dandy Stevens that was recently posted on the district website.

Dear Gervais Constituents,



We would like to take a moment to update you on the recent discussions that took place during our September school board meeting and the listening sessions on Oct. 4 and 5.

During the September board meeting, we had the privilege of hearing a presentation from Patinkin Research

Strategies, which recently conducted a post-bond survey from July 10-12. The results of this survey are instrumental in shaping the district's future plans and we wanted to share some key insights with you. A recording of the meeting is available on the district's website at <https://www.gervais.k12.or.us/district/school-board/all-agenda-links/> or at the corresponding QR code. The presentation begins at 1:18 minutes into the recording and is 40 minutes long.



## Overall Post-Bond Survey Results

The survey results indicated that the community has a positive perception of our district's facilities, though it is important to note that the district facility assessment revealed an urgent need for repairs. We were heartened to learn that the community holds a positive view of the education provided by our district, and taxpayers are supportive of our spending trends.

Furthermore, parents of students showed strong support for the bond, even though providing more information about facility needs did not significantly alter their position or the position of others surveyed. The community demonstrated a clear preference for basic repairs, fire safety enhancements, and investments in classroom learning.

Due to the deteriorating conditions of some facilities and the recent failed bond efforts, the survey included questions to gauge the community's position on closing the district and consolidating with other area districts. It was reassuring to know from the results shared that the overall community stands against the idea of closing the district. This support is further highlighted by the fact that backing for the bond increases when compared to the alternative of district closure.

## Closure of the District

Regarding the discussions of closure and consolidation of our district with neighboring districts, we want to be clear that this was an initial discussion and no concrete plans have been set into motion. Currently, the board is not actively pursuing the closure of the district or consolidation with neighboring districts. The board is dedicated to keeping the district operational and ensuring students have a safe learning environment. However, we recognize the need to familiarize ourselves with this process should we face challenges in providing safe facilities as our buildings age.

## Listening Sessions

The October 4 and 5 listening sessions had more than 70 people in attendance, including parents, community members, students and staff. A recording of one session is available on the district's website at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FexSU1p-YHjONtVYogkEGttJ-XT4bKz7/view> or at the corresponding QR code.



## Up Next

October 18, 7 p.m. – Zoom Listening Session

October 24-25, 6 p.m. – Building Tours

November (TBD on a Friday) – Building Tours

*Check the website for more details closer to the event date.*

We are immensely grateful for your continued support and involvement in our educational community. Please know that the safety, well-being, and education of our students and staff are our highest priorities and the district is committed to remaining open and improving our school facilities. With that said, we need to better understand what projects the community will support through the passage of a bond. We encourage both supporters and non-supporters of the bond to share their feedback.

Warm regards,

**Dandy Stevens**

Superintendent  
Gervais School District

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## School Board Spotlight: Jenny Jones



The Gervais School District has a new member on the board. In July, Jenny Jones was sworn in to serve the remainder of Maria Caballero's term. Caballero had to resign from the board due to health reasons. Jones' first board meeting was in August and she's no stranger to the position. Here's more of what she had to say.

### Q: Why did you decide to join the school board?

A: I served on the board from 2017-2019. I then resigned because I went to work for the Gervais School District as the personnel clerk. I am one who likes to serve and give back, and this is an opportunity to do that, to be able to make a difference for our community, students, families, and staff.

### Q: What is your occupation?

A: I've worked in the dental field for over 15 years, but currently work for Willamette Career Academy as the registrar.

### Q: What other public service positions and/or voluntary activity have you had?

A: I'm very involved with my church. I love being able to serve, whether helping with outreach, teaching the kinder class, greeting, cleaning up, and whatever else might be needed. I love people!

Another outreach close to my heart is Royal Family Kids Camp. This camp is designed for foster kids and gives them an opportunity to be loved unconditionally, to create many special moments, and make memories that will last a lifetime.

### Q: What are the biggest challenges facing the Gervais School District right now?

A: Right now our biggest concern is the healthiness and durability of our facilities. Our buildings are old and have some serious issues that need to be addressed. Being addressed means having the financial means to do so, and we are currently not in a position to do that. This is a time where we need the community to rally together, to put action behind their words of love and growth for their community. Our kids are important, their futures are important, jobs which sustain many community members are important. We need a bond to pass if we want to be able to continue to offer our students a school within their community and jobs to many community members. Plus, I feel our school is one of the main vessels of the town.



### Q: What solutions do you think the board can take to help solve these issues?

A: Communications and partnership. Clear, precise information for our community to weigh out the pros and cons to determine what will truly be the best for our community, the families, and longevity of this community.

### Q: What do you hope to accomplish while on the board?

A: To continue moving forward. We have great leadership, leadership that wants the absolute best for our students, staff, and community. Our superintendent is working alongside an absolutely phenomenal team.

### Q: Since you're filling out someone else's term, will you seek re-election when the time comes? When would that be?

A: Time will tell. I would hope to be able to continue giving back, but like with everything, there is a season, and we will see where my season is at when that time comes.

### Q: Anything else you want readers to know?

A: I'm inspired by these two quotes: "Life is 10% what happens and 90% of how you react to it" from Charles Swindoll and "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does" from William James.

