



Union Township Update

Volume 2

DOING WHAT'S BEST FOR KIDS!

October 2020

Return to Learn and the New Normal

"You cannot replicate students' smiles," said Union Center Elementary (UCE) Principal Patrick Fuller, stating one obvious, current difference with past school year openings. "With everyone wearing masks, I miss all those smiles."

Union Township School Corporation (UTSC) carefully reopened schools this fall after much thought and planning. *(To view the entire 50-page plan, please go to www.union.k12.in.us).* Masks, socially distanced classroom arrangements, enhanced cleaning, some students opting for virtual learning, changes to lunch customs, quarantines for those exposed to the COVID-19, and an overall heightened awareness of the virus has made this school year a special year. "Most students are happy to be back in school and willing to follow new health safety rules," Mr. Fuller smiled. Approximately 20% of all UTSC students have opted for virtual learning.

UTSC was able to purchase web-cameras over the summer for each classroom. Students whose families opted to have

their children stay at home can virtually attend each class with their teachers each day and can be part of the activities and discussions. Teachers and students in the classrooms are quickly learning to interact with the students at home. "We believe that the best learning occurs when students are in the classroom,"



JSE students are all masked up.



explained Assistant Superintendent Jack Birmingham. "However, we know that we are in extraordinary times. I am glad that we can offer a good option to parents and students who are concerned about being exposed to COVID-19. Our goal is to have each student back in the classroom at the appropriate time."

The comprehensive **UTSC Return to Learn Plan** includes protocols for quarantining of employees or students who are exposed to the virus as well as protocols for those who have COVID-19 and those who have recovered. Virtual students receive at least 5 hours of instruction in grades 1-5 and at least 6 hours of instructions in grades 6-12. If a student is not available during an hour or more during a school day, he/she may review the lessons missed since they are recorded and available online. Daily attendance is taken and recorded for all virtual and in-person classes.

"We are grateful to the taxpayers who voted for the 2013 and 2020 School Operating Referendums," Superintendent John Hunter said. "The outstanding community support allowed us to be flexible when we faced this pandemic providing us the opportunity to offer good educational opportunities for all students."



UTSC classrooms have web cameras allowing virtual and in-person students to be taught at the same time.

The **Union Township Update** is a communication tool from the Union Township School Corporation to the taxpayers of Union Township. It presents topics of importance about the schools for the Union Township taxpayers so they may gain insight into how their public schools are being effective and efficient.

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The Superintendent's Corner

By
John Hunter, Superintendent of Schools



"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

Charles Dickens uses this quote in *A Tale of Two Cities* to depict that prosperity cannot be matched with despair. These words are relevant today. While I am thankful that our community has supported our schools once again, COVID-19 has certainly created challenges for all of us. Our personal and professional lives have been tossed upside down. In the midst of this upheaval, I see people coming together. Families have reunited and have begun to do things together in the home when outside activities are not available. Our school staff is working harder than ever to provide for our students both attending school in person and those attending virtually. It is our desire to return to all in person school sooner rather than later.

I must recognize the efforts and support of our Union Township community. We are fortunate to have support in our community and we are grateful and do not take it for granted. The results from the spring operating referendum were astounding – 81% in support! These dollars will assist us in maintaining programs for our kids. This year, we added a social-emotional learning component to our elementary program. (See *article below*). It was made possible due to our referendum success. To all in our community, THANK YOU!

This fall, we will be breaking ground on the renovation of Union Center Elementary (UCE). We are currently purchasing our bonds and will be breaking ground in early October. An increase in the assessed valuation for Union Township coupled with competitive bids will allow renovations to the thirteen classrooms as well as add four additional classrooms, which we thought might need to be a future project. When school closes next summer, we will be tearing down the front wing at UCE and will open the new classrooms to students next fall 2021.

A thriving community has excellent schools as a core building block. Our community members can be proud of the students and schools they support. I appreciate the continued support of the community for our schools as we strive to provide for

Every Student, Every Day!

Supporting Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness for All

Belinda Black has a new and challenging task before her this year as an elementary teacher of Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness at John Simatovich Elementary (JSE) and Union Center Elementary (UCE). She has been a long term substitute teacher at JSE and teacher of 2nd and 4th grades in Lake Station. Social and emotional learning (SEL) helps children and adults understand emotions, set positive goals, feel empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Mrs. Black visits each elementary classroom once per week as she travels between JSE and UCE. "I am just getting my feet wet as I teach kids that emotions are normal," explained Mrs. Black. "My goal is to connect with each child to help them use the emotions they feel in a positive way. I want to help them understand their emotions before they face frustration. SEL provides the foundation for safe and positive learning, enhancing the students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life."

SEL is a current emphasis within Indiana. It is aimed at correcting alarming statistics such as 33% of students being overweight, a 22.3% increase to the Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline since 2014, and 33% of high school students statewide reporting being sad or hopeless in 2018. SEL has been shown to increase academic learning by 21% in national studies. "I want to help my students understand what they are feeling and reach their full potential in the future," Mrs. Black said with a smile.



New Faces and Some in Different Places

Wheeler High School (WHS)

Emily Owens, Mild Intervention Teacher, is glad to be at WHS.

"I am lucky to be back where I can help students pursue the many opportunities they have," she said. "I graduated from Valparaiso High School and Valparaiso University in International Studies. I spent my post-graduate time in youth development and education before pursuing a 10-month Fulbright teaching grant in Malaysia. Upon returning, I was in community-based social work, but quickly realized how much I missed engaging with students. The climate here is certainly student-centered. WHS is a unique place." WHS Principal Dan Klimczak is grateful to have found Emily. "Emily comes to us with some unique life experiences and great energy," he said. "She will be a good addition to our staff."



vibrant learning environment." Principal Klimczak was equally enthusiastic. "Hiring Mrs. Hostetler was a 'Home Run' hire this summer," he said. "With her experience at UTMS, her background and training, and the fact that she is a WHS graduate, I feel very confident that she can build a strong program for our students."

Union Township Middle School (UTMS)

Sean Cunningham is the new sixth grade

math teacher at UTMS. He will have good communication with the seventh grade UTMS math teacher, Kristen Eleftheri, since he married her this past August. Mr. Cunningham comes to UTMS



after five years teaching at Joy Elementary School in Michigan City. "Joy Elementary hated to lose Sean," said UTMS Principal Joshua Goeringer. "He came to us very highly recommended." Mr. Cunningham sees a difference coming to Union Township Schools. "While there was good parent and community support in Michigan City, there is no comparison to what I find at Union Township," he explained. "The parents are involved with making sure their students do well here, and with more than 80% support of the recent school operating referendum, I can see the difference. I am adjusting to different grade level coming from elementary experience to the middle school. Communications and relationships with students and parents are important to me."

Kaelyn Miller, the new sixth grade language arts teacher, is in her first year of teaching. However, she coached volleyball



at Washington Township Middle School last year. "I am glad to be able to coach at UTMS," said a smiling Mrs. Miller. "My students are energetic. They are concerned and motivated to learn. My teacher team is awesome and helpful. They have given me advice about curriculum and class management as well as some great advice about the balance between family and teaching. I am excited to have my own children come to Union Township Schools." UTMS Principal Goeringer likes the fact that Mrs. Miller brings a sense of humor and the ability to coach. "Mrs. Miller will help us in a variety of ways," he said. "I am glad to have found her."

Aaron Gibson, the new seventh grade language arts teacher, comes to UTMS from Merrillville High School where he taught 11th and 12th grade English. "I wanted to find a place where my wife and I could become part of the community," Mr. Gibson said. "There is a family feeling here. Reality is meeting my expectations.

I am finding a professional respect among the students for the staff." Mr. Gibson is married to Wheeler High School (WHS) guidance counselor



Amanda Gibson and is her assistant basketball coach. "Because my wife was already the guidance counselor at WHS, I knew a number of

the staff here," Mr. Gibson continued. "I was already halfway part of the family I was seeking." Principal Goeringer was grateful for the connection with Mr. Gibson. "With his ideas and enthusiasm, we need him on our team," Mr. Goeringer stated.

Amy Hostetler is new to WHS but not Union Township Schools. She has moved from being a language arts teacher at Union Township Middle School (UTMS) for 11 years to the WHS



Media Center this year. "I am excited about transforming the library into a true learning center where students can be active in learning and exploring their interests individually

or collaboratively," said Mrs. Hostetler. "I am in a fortunate position to have seen these students as sixth graders who have now grown into seniors. I want to be a friend and a mentor to help them succeed. I believe my Purdue degree in professional writing and literature as well as my background in advertising and technology will be very helpful in creating a

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“Every Student – Every Day”

New Faces and Some in Different Places

John Simatovich Elementary (JSE)

Lisa Chiabai comes to JSE after 10 years of experience in Portage in special education. She is JSE's mild intervention specialist for students with special needs. “I truly like the challenge of teaching students with special needs,” said Mrs. Chiabai. “It makes you think outside of the box and figure out another way for a student to learn.

There is a positive energy here at JSE. It is very supportive for me personally and for special education and my students.” JSE Principal Leigh Barnes is grateful that Mrs. Chiabai has fit in with the staff well. “With Lisa's breadth of experience at Portage and her personality, she has worked well with the staff,” Mrs. Barnes commented. “She has also become famous for her green/orange and red/white/blue face masks she tie-dyes for the students.”

Jennifer Oxendale, new 4th grade teacher at JSE, arrives with one year of experience in Griffith. She is a Purdue graduate and licensed from kindergarten through grade 6. “I previously



taught at the 2nd grade level, but I am finding that 4th graders are more independent in their learning,” Mrs. Oxendale explained. “I am enjoying my experience at JSE. The other



teachers are so open and friendly. While I would rather have all my students in class, five families have chosen virtual learning for safety reasons.” Principal Leigh Barnes said, “Jennifer does a very good job of including her virtual students along with her students in person. She really advocates for her students.”

Union Center Elementary (UCE)

Amy Hardesty-Asher has been a 4th grade teacher at JSE for 12 years and has a wealth of practical teaching experience with all kinds of students. This year, she is teaching high ability students in small pull-out groups from regular classrooms. “I have a strong interest in STEM



(Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) which integrates topics from various disciplines,” Mrs. Asher explained as she sanitized the student desks and tables for the next group of students. “I try to help students go beyond the normal classroom topics and use their abilities to go farther than just gathering facts. My focus is to get them to think about ‘What do I do with this information?’” UCE Principal Patrick Fuller is happy to have Mrs. Asher on his team. “It is

a true benefit to have such experience come to UCE,” he said. “I think she is well suited for high ability students.”



Alexandria Schooley is a recent graduate from Purdue Northwest. She is teaching 4th grade at UCE this year. “My mother was a professor and my grandmother

was an art teacher at St. Paul Lutheran School in Michigan City,” Miss Schooley said as she described how she became a teacher. “I wanted to help others. While I majored in early childhood and primary grades, I am finding I love the upper elementary grades because they know the expectations of school, but are still so curious about the world around them.” She was hired the day before school started and is happy to be at UCE. “It was a whirlwind start, but the staff and my 4th grade team were so helpful,” said Miss Schooley. Principal Fuller credits her level-headed personality and positive attitude in allowing her to be a team player at UCE.

Welcome to New UTSC Non-Certified Staff

Jeremiah Brooks – UCE Custodian
Diane Bushey – UCE Recess Aide
Jennifer Joselyn – UCE Lunchroom Aide
Gretchen Klimczak – UTMS Treasurer
Amanda Parrish – UCE Lunchroom Aide