

A Special Place to

Grow

Willie Ross School for the Deaf • Annual Report 2024

Growth

Comes in Many Forms

There are many ways to measure growth, and for a small school community like Willie Ross, those increments of growth have a large impact. Many of the students we receive into our school are referred to us by public school systems or parents find us after newborn screening where they discover hearing loss for their son or daughter.

While every story is different, the trendline has been upward in all that we provide– we have a stable and upward growth in our student body that is served on both our Longmeadow main campus and in our mainstreaming classes embedded in the East Longmeadow Public Schools. Our Outreach program, where we serve students in public schools, has grown dramatically over recent years. And, most recently, our early intervention programs and our early education programs are experiencing unprecedented growth.

But growth comes in many forms– the academic and social development of a child in our care and even among our staff members. In this year's annual report we hear from parents Richard and Nadiya LaBelle about the success of their child Mickey, and our Early Learning Coordinator Amy Platt explains that since joining the staff at Willie Ross she has experienced professional and personal growth.

We like to think we are in the business of helping all who come through our doors succeed in our school and in life. A growing school and students, and staff, who see our community as a place to grow is what makes Willie Ross such a special community.

We thank our staff, parents, students, supporters and donors for all they do to help us continue the upward trend line in the important work we do.



Lucy K Lewis Ed. D
Acting Board Chair



Bert Carter
President & CEO



Early Learning and “Endless Possibilities”

How Amy Platt went from public school teacher to Early Learning Coordinator

Amy Platt was working in the public school system when she noticed a job opening on Facebook at the Willie Ross School for the Deaf.

“As an Educational Team Leader for Out-of-District programs in two different public school districts, I have worked with the staff of WRSD since 2018. I have always been impressed with how supportive the staff are to the children and to each other,” Amy says.

Not long after seeing that Facebook ad, Amy was interviewed and hired.

In her current position as Early Learning Coordinator, Amy says “I love being able to show parents the endless possibilities and potential that their child has at Willie Ross School. Our Pre-K teachers and staff are building the very foundation of social and academic skills for our youngest scholars. They come to school every day eager and ready to learn.”

Amy says her position at Willie Ross is particularly fulfilling as, she notes from working in the public school system, a student may be the only one with hearing loss in a school. That can be isolating and create barriers for learning. “At Willie Ross, I see the students helping each other and growing together. They are all Deaf or Hard of Hearing, so there is a huge sense of camaraderie and support that they may not get in a typical school environment. Willie Ross School gives the students a total communication world that focuses on their specific needs and removes some of the barriers to learning,” Amy says.



Amy sees the impact on the children served every day, and notes that the work has changed her. “Working at Willie Ross School has made me a more confident person by giving me the opportunity to work with students and staff that truly care about each other. As a hearing person that now wears hearing aids for a bilateral mild/moderate loss, the staff have been overwhelmingly supportive as I continue to build on my skills. Total communication and ASL immersion have quickly developed my second language skills,” she says.

And about her colleagues she says, “The staff are an amazing group of people. They work tirelessly for their students and also support each other everyday with friendship, mentoring and kindness along the way. The culture that has been established is one of strength and pride....never give up....always strive for your goals....never stop learning!”



“The staff are an amazing group of people”

For Parents Richard and Nadiya its about their child having a “regular experience”



For Nadiya LaBelle and her husband Richard, it was during newborn screening that they learned their son Mikael, “Mickey,” was deaf. Like so many parents receiving the news, Richard said the couple immediately thought “what is the next thing we need to do” in addressing their son’s hearing loss.

Richard, a native of Springfield, and Nadiya, who was born and raised in Kiev, Ukraine, before moving to the area, moved quickly to have Mickey fitted with hearing aids at six months old.

Mickey was in another school for the deaf setting for many years until enrolling at Willie Ross in 2021 when “we felt that it was in his best interest to make the move at that point,” Richard said.

While the couple was aware of Willie Ross through the early intervention program they utilized, when the time came to look for a new school, they were initially reluctant. “At the time, we saw them as offering mostly sign language education and we were looking into more diverse options,” Nadiya said.

Richard says, “Based on Mikael’s specific need we initially thought that it was too focused on sign language and wanted his primary communication to be verbal, but I believe the benefits of a diverse communication platform has been shown.”

WRSD employs a Total Communication approach in their school programs, utilizing American Sign Language, spoken and written English, spoken English in combination with sign support as well as any and all augmentative communication tools deemed appropriate by a child’s IEP team in order to achieve the best outcomes for each student.

Nadiya adds, “What made a difference is that they have a campus within the East Longmeadow Public Schools that allows kids to be mainstreamed. Right now, Mickey is mainstreamed in math, science and the elective classes like art and health. He takes part in three after school clubs– Robotics, Math and Student Council– with the support of the sign language interpreter. Next year Willie Ross plans to mainstream him in English as well.”

Now 12 years old and in sixth grade, Mickey is flourishing.

“He lives the life of a regular 12-year-old boy, he loves animals– we have a 15-year-old cat who adores him. He likes traveling, reading, playing his Nintendo. Academically his school just confirmed placing him into an accelerated math program next year when he enters 7th grade and we are very proud of him.”

In many ways, the transfer to Willie Ross has Mickey’s parents appreciative of the school environment and the mainstreaming relationship with East Longmeadow schools. Nadiya says, “We are grateful to Willie Ross School for the Deaf, Mountain View Elementary School and also Birchland Park Middle School teachers for their support. The accommodation would not be possible without the Springfield public school system that supported Mickey’s placement in the specialized setting.”

Remembering George Balsley II

WRSD's First Deaf Board Chair



*W*illie Ross School for the Deaf was deeply saddened by the March 2025 passing of our Board Chair, George H. Balsley II. George was WRSD's first deaf Chair of the Board in the school's history and a pillar of the deaf community throughout his career. Chosen by the school to be honored prior to his passing, WRSD posthumously honored George at our annual Gala in April.

In addition to WRSD, George was involved with many organizations serving the deaf, including D.E.A.F. Inc.; Institute of Human Centered Design; Western Massachusetts Association of the Deaf; and Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing; to name a few.

George became a registered architect in 1987 after graduating from Boston Architectural College, the only deaf architect in New England and New York at that time. He worked in the field of architecture for over 40 years in the areas of residential, educational, commercial and healthcare design, working with

clients such as Clarke School for the Deaf, Rhode Island School for the Deaf, Gallaudet University, St. Mary's School in Buffalo, and Pennsylvania School for the Deaf.

Using his lifelong experience with deafness, George created a new specialty called "Designing for the Deaf," a movement that calls for all-inclusive design practices. He advocated throughout his career that architects, planners and interior designers must be involved in design practices and principles that consider all abilities.

Along with his wife, Laura, George was a proud parent to two sons and grandparent to three grandsons, who are all deaf.



George's son, Alex, accepting his award at the 2025 Gala.





Legislative Breakfast

WRSD's eighth Annual Legislative Breakfast was held in the Spring, a valuable experience for our students and staff. In attendance were state legislators, Town of Longmeadow representatives, Board members, staff and students. Students helped serve the refreshments and guests were also able to tour the school.



Two Graduate from Willie Ross

WRSD celebrated the graduation of two of its students on June 7, Irina Jackson, of Quaboag, and Eiel Vazquez Martinez of Springfield. WRSD leadership, graduates and their families were present for the ceremony.





Blake Audiology Clinic Open for Public Appointments

Over the past year, Willie Ross has begun to market its Audiology Clinic to the general public. The Blake Audiology Clinic serves all ages from two years and older and offers comprehensive hearing health care and management by licensed clinical audiologists, in a comfortable, accessible setting on the Willie Ross School for the Deaf campus in Longmeadow.



Check out our video

Willie Ross, Bay Path University Partner to Provide New Early Education Space

In December, WRSD and Bay Path University jointly cut the ribbon for newly-developed Willie Ross early education classroom space in Bay Path's Theinert Hall. This collaboration between the University and Willie Ross addresses the need for more early education space, providing 7,500 square feet of space with four classrooms and several support rooms for students and staff.

The process of transforming the space, formerly a multi-use residence hall on campus, involved the demolition of first floor dormitory rooms and bathrooms and the reconstruction of bathrooms and classrooms, along with the installation of required HVAC equipment, ceiling and lighting fixtures and safety systems to meet current code requirements.

The new space on the Bay Path campus enables Willie Ross to serve an additional 20 students as the school has experienced a growing Early Childhood program in recent years. The classrooms also provide opportunities for hands-on experience for Bay Path University students.

“

“As our early education services have grown, and with our Longmeadow campus at maximum capacity for early education classrooms, we looked for additional off-campus space to serve our students. Bay Path’s location near our own campus and willingness to envision how our program could serve their students creates a great marriage that will serve both of our institutions and our students.”

Bert Carter, President and CEO

“At Bay Path, partnerships like this one are at the heart of who we are and what we do. We are proud to offer our resources and expertise to support the vital early education work of Willie Ross School for the Deaf.”

Sandra Doran, Bay Path President



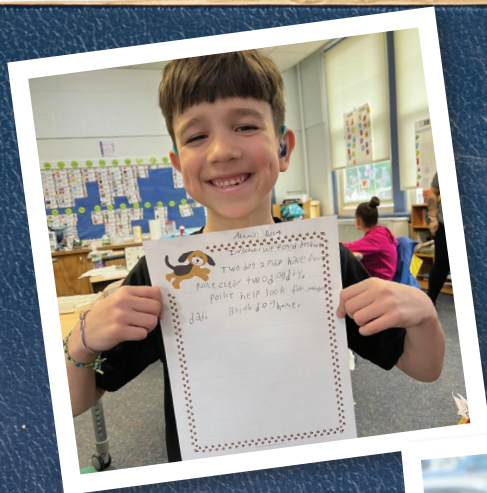
Our Year in Pictures



2024 Legislative
Breakfast



Spirit Week



Longtime leadership team member Bonnie Katusich retired after two decades of service to WRSD at the end of the 2024 school year.

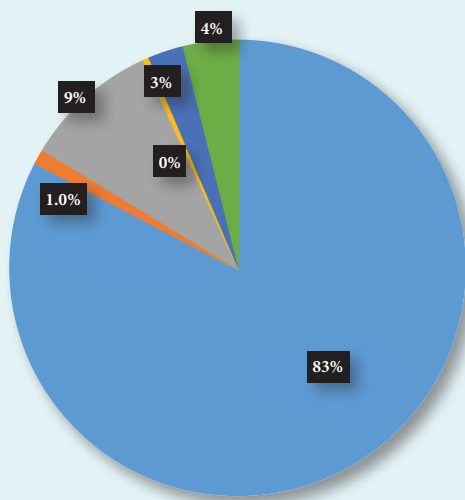


Students vs. Staff basketball game



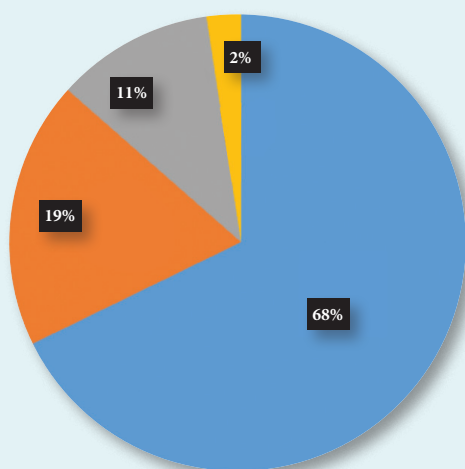


2024 Revenue by Source



- Chapter 766 Tuition (\$5.13M)
- Summer Program Revenue (\$65,000)
- Outreach Contract & Program Revenue (\$591,746)
- Outreach Sign Language Rev (\$16,498)
- Audiology Clinic (\$161,649)
- Fundraising, Donations, Grants, & Events (\$240,471)

2024 Expenses by Program



- Chapter 766 Tuition Program (\$4.18M)
- Outreach Program (\$1.15M)
- Administrative (\$684,839)
- Fundraising (\$149,834)

Total 2024 Revenue: \$6,213,291

Based on 2024 Audit

UPWARD *Trends*

Early Intervention Program Growth

2021

6 Babies

in Early Intervention

2024

48 Babies

in Early Intervention

New Student Growth

2020-21

60 Students

2024-25

70 Students

Outreach Growth

2021

200 Students

Served in

Outreach Program

2024

454 Students

Served in

Outreach Program

Projected Student Growth

FY25

77

Five-Year Growth

91

Ten-Year Growth

112





Our Annual Donors

\$1 - \$99

Jennifer Aiken
David & Natalia Blank
Kathleen Bourque
Box Tops for Education
Victoria Braim
Jordan Brunelle
Creating Healthier Communities
Danilo Feliciano
Christopher Gaudreau
Ms. Lynn Gervais-Jones
Hope Gibaldi
Dr. Joy Guay
Katie Hayes
Diane Higgins
Michael Kelley
Susan Kilduff Katsoulis
Zachary Kinsley-Greeley
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Duncan Knowles
Longmeadow Maternal
Association #2250
Carmen Mendez
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John & Anna O'Rourke
John D. Perez Sr
Megan Pierson
John Ramsburgh
Henry Smith
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Robert Surbrug
Melissa Weinberger

\$100 - \$499

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Atalanta Club
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Ms. Rosa Guzman LICSW, LCSW
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Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts
Mr. & Mrs. Pierre & Maryellen Guertin
Robert T. Knight
Mr. David Martel
Paul Robbins Associates
Mrs. Naomi Schoenberg
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\$1,000 and above

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Belchertown Lions Club
Chicopee Savings Charitable Foundation
Mr. Lawrence Cooley
Mr. Michael Cooley
Jeff and Frances Mary Eppinger
Richard L. Freyman Ph.D.
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Dr. William Harbison
JHB & BNB Charitable Foundation
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Mr. Russell L. Nubile
Mr. Peter Pappas
The Peabody Foundation
Dr. Edward Reiter MD
Shurtleff Children's Services, Inc
The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation
The Joseph and Anna C. Dias Jr. Family Foundation
Town Fair Tire Foundation, Inc.

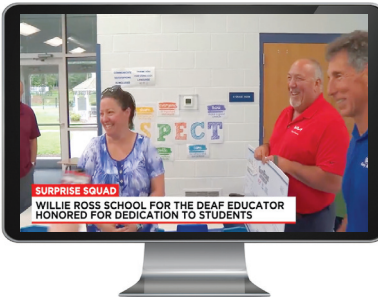
In The News



**Willie Ross School for the Deaf
graduates two students**



**Bay Path, Willie Ross partnership will
educate those educating deaf youth**



**Surprise Squad honors Willie Ross educator
for her dedication to students**



**Longtime UMass employee joins
Willie Ross School**

Daily Hampshire Gazette



**Willie Ross School for the Deaf opens new
early education space at Bay Path University**



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ARRHA Credit Union

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Stavros Center for Independent Living, Inc.

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Consilium Opus, LLC

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Bay Path University

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Ivy Velez
Massachusetts Department of
Developmental Services

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Bank of Boston

The Honorable Sidney M. Cooley, *Trustee Emeritus*,
Springfield District Court

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Laurin Publishing Company

Meredith Y. Wood, *Trustee Emeritus*
Community Volunteer/Philanthropist

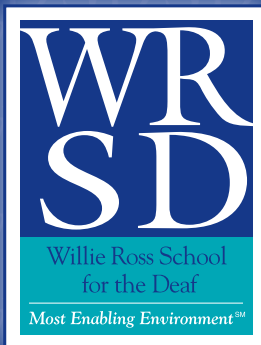
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Actor

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Peter Pan Bus Lines, Inc.

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(Retired) The Curtis Blake Center

Mark Ross, Ph.D., *Honorary Member*
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