



A PROGRAM OF **THE FUND**
FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE



PROUDLY PRESENTS THE

Heart ^{OF} _{THE}
School
AWARDS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 20, 2026 | 5:30 PM
HIPPODROME THEATRE

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The Fund for Educational Excellence

* Heart of the Schools Event Committee

† Heart of the Schools Board Committee

Heart of the School Awards Selection Committee

WELCOME TO THE

2026 HEART OF THE SCHOOL AWARDS BALTIMORE'S CELEBRATION OF CITY SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Heart of the Schools! Tonight, the Baltimore community comes together to celebrate ten extraordinary principals selected from 118 nominated school leaders. Five will be named Honorees for the outstanding work they do in their schools every day and five will be named Awardees and join the prestigious Red Jacket Club. We thank you for joining us tonight and adding your support for these amazing people!

Created in 2016 to support the principals of Baltimore City Public Schools, the Heart of the Schools is excited to continue shining a spotlight on the work they do and the amazing outcomes that are possible for children through their leadership. Principals have the tremendous responsibility – and opportunity – of creating the culture of their schools. When they succeed, it bolsters teacher effectiveness, parent engagement, and student achievement. We know this from research, and importantly, we have seen it clearly in the many schools we visit across our city.

In reflecting on the past ten years, the most heartening evolution in this work has been how schools have embraced the ethos of the Heart of the Schools – valuing their principals, elevating successes, and sharing positivity. The Heart of the Schools has become a conduit for schools to celebrate their successes, which is immensely powerful.

While tonight we celebrate the 2026 Top 10 principals, the Heart of the Schools is a year-round initiative focused on celebrating, recognizing, and honoring every principal in Baltimore City Public Schools. To date, the Heart of the Schools has provided nearly 300 grants to schools in support of pressing needs, processed over 30,000 “Share Some Love” notes of appreciation, and is coalescing community to celebrate strong school leaders. Find examples of these projects, events and activities and a list of Supporters at www.heartoftheschools.org.

On behalf of all the amazing people involved in this work, thank you. Let's continue to recognize the power of strong leaders, the transformational work they make possible, and their critical role in the fight to provide opportunities every student deserves.

Kevin Leary, Paul Wolman, and Roger Schulman



The Heart of the School Awards is part of a year-round effort to support and celebrate Baltimore City Public Schools principals. This special night recognizes exceptional leaders who have created school communities where: students are inspired to learn and grow; teachers are valued, supported and recognized; parents feel welcome and included; and student achievement is improving. The Heart of the Schools is a program of The Fund for Educational Excellence, and is supported by a collaborative of dozens of businesses, foundations, individuals and nonprofits.

About The Fund for Educational Excellence

The Fund for Educational Excellence is an independent nonprofit organization working to close the equity and opportunity gaps for all students in Baltimore City Public Schools. We believe that a strong public school system is the foundation for the health and success of Baltimore.

Founded in 1984 as Baltimore City’s only education fund, The Fund works as a trusted partner with the school district, students and parents, funders, advocates, and local nonprofits. This unique position allows The Fund to identify educational needs and complex issues, offer honest insight, develop creative solutions, and collaborate with a diverse group of community stakeholders to implement effective change. Our work offers a range of support programs and resources for Baltimore youth from early childhood through post-secondary education.

Board of Directors of The Fund for Educational Excellence

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- Betsy Nelson (Emeritus)
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- Justin A. Redd
- Roger Schulman
- Neill Thupari
- Linda Way-Smith

THE PROGRAM

10 Year Presentation

Opening

Breana Ross, WBAL-TV

Welcome

Roger Schulman, President and CEO of The Fund for Educational Excellence

Remarks

Dr. Sonja Santelises, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools

Presentation of Honorees

Emily Augustine - Clay Hill Public Charter School

Introduced by Alexis Suskin-Sperry, Assistant Principal at Patterson Park Public Charter School

Monique R. Harding - Woodhome Elementary/Middle School

Introduced by Jael Samuel, Mentor of Monique Harding

Kedra S. Jacox-Paige - Matthew A. Henson Elementary School

Introduced by Julius H. Paige, Son of Kedra Jacox-Paige

April Myrick - Patterson High School

Introduced by Christopher Battaglia, Principal Emeritus

Tanisha M. Sheppard - George Washington Elementary School

Introduced by Medea McCray, 4th Grade Teacher, SFCC Chair and Ariel Watson, 5th Grade Teacher, New Teacher Mentor at George Washington

Presentation of Awardees

Bettye M. Adams - The Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School

Introduced by Kirsten M. Adams, MD, Daughter of Bettye M. Adams

Darrin Brozene - Baltimore Design School

Introduced by Allie Brozene, Daughter of Darrin Brozene

Denita R. Plain - James McHenry Elementary Middle School

Introduced by Ashanti Porter, Principal at Leith Walk Elementary/Middle School

Craig L. Rivers - Carver Vocational Technical High School

Introduced by Natalie Preston Rivers, Wife of Craig Rivers

Cheyenne Zahrt-Wallace - City Neighbors High School

Introduced by Daschall Grade, Student Behavioral Support Coordinator at City Neighbors High School

Closing

Paul Wolman, Co-Founder of the Heart of the Schools

Celebration-Food and Drink

THANK YOU

CITY SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS

Bettye M. Adams+
Danielle Adams
Erita C.Adams*
Sheila Adams
Federico R. Adams +
Mary Ancinec
Yvonne Anderson
Noraida Ankobia
Gary Argiro
Calandra Arrington
Emily Augustine
Shawnette Avril Williams
Ladaisha Ballard
Dr. Sherelle Barnes
Nneka Barnett
Seantae Beard
Ulrica Berry
Mark Bongiovanni *
Heather Bradley
Kelvin Bridgers
Caitlyn Brooks*
Sidney Brooks
Amanda Brown
Lauren Brown
Lisa Brown
Darrin Brozene+
Jabari Bush Thweatt
Lori Bush
Kamala Carnes +
Armanda Carr
Shavon Carter
Rosiland Cauthen
Miguel Cervantes del Toro +
Helene Coccagna
Samuel Coffey
Towanda Cofield
Krystal Cornish
Brigette Cottman
Benjamin Crandall
Davalyn Cunningham

Nicholas D'Ambrosio
Tamika Daniels *
Dr. Laura D'Anna
Danielle Davis
Kimberly Davis
James Dendinger +
William Dyer
Theodosia Edwards
Joseph Eldridge
Mashonah English
Luis Espinoza
Tiffany Etheridge *
Rashida Ford *
Dr. Katrina Foster +
Dwight R. Freeman +
Mark Gaither *
Coralbeth Garcia
Greta Goodwin
Erica Gravette
Dr. Tanya R. Green
Dr. James Gresham *
Stephanie Groce
Tiffany Halsey +
Cindy Harcum *
Monique Harding
Olia Hardy+
Tieast Harris
Darryln Harrison
Danielle Henson
Dr. Latoya Hewitt-Gayle
Kimberly Hill *
Justin Holbrook *
Debra Holt
Matt Hornbeck *
Brittany Horne
Shalonda Howze
Emily Hunter *
Mavis Jackson
Tetra Jackson
Venus Jackson +

Kedra Jacox-Paige
Nina Johnson
Brian Jones
Nichelle Johnson-Walker +
Peter Kannam *
Bernarda Kwaw
Luis Lima
Dr. Tanyaneka Lipscomb+
Elena Lokounia
Kerry-Ann Malcolm
Aleesha Manning +
Marc Martin *
Traci Mathena
Keisha Matthews-Traynham
Monica McClain
Jessica McLeod
Nakia McLeod Jones
Gabrielle Miele
Troy Mitchell
Ashley Moore +
Zulema Moore *
Dr. Benjamin Mosley *
Ninia Mouzone *
Rita Mullally
April Myrick
Stephanie Novak Pappas +
Lucas Oliveira
Baba Olumiji
Cathy O'Neil Chiavacci
Erika Parker
Melanie Payne
Brandon Pinkney *
Tenerra Pitts
Denita R. Plain
Ashanti C. Porter +
Natasha Pouncey *
Tracey Pratt
Kate Primm
Candace Purcell-Nixon
Tonya Redd +

Dr. Yetunde Reeves
Amanda P. Rice *
Lorraine Richardson
Rhonda Richetta
Craig L. Rivers
Dr. Jonatham Roque
Malcolm Rowe
James Sargent
Mark Sawyer
Tanisha Sheppard
Qiana Simmons
Steve Skeen *
Dr. Jermaine Skinner
Dr. Brynn Smith
Pamela A. Smith
Dr. Sedrick L. Smith
Lashella Stanfield-Bacon
Ryan Stokeling
Kristin Taylor
James Thurman
David Verdi
Dr. Denisse Villaran
Karen Walker
Anitra Washington
Dr. Charlene Whilby
Aisha Wickes
Amelia Wile
Tiffany Williams
LaWanda Wilson
Tammatha Woodhouse *
C. Perry Woodland
Bridget Wrightson
David Wunder
Keting Xiao
Eugenia Young
Cheyanne Zahrt +

* **Past Awardee**

+ **Past Honoree**

THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL AWARDS

2026 AWARDEES

[Click here to view recent media appearances for each awardee.](#)

BETTYE M. ADAMS

Three words: Performance, Culture, and Excellence. Principal Bettye M. Adams has developed a school full of "Runners" (as coined by Ron Clark), at The Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School – staff who will go the extra mile to ensure their students have what they need to succeed. Whether that is reimagining and investing in its infrastructure and programming for students and parents to elevate its standing in the community or celebrating its Centennial anniversary this year, with a Ripken Foundation STEM Center, a Maggie McIntosh auditorium, and a Baltimore Ravens gymnasium. Students are provided with experiences in the arts, both in-school and out – Principal Adams accepts nothing less than the best for her students. She is also proudly developing a cohort of instructional leaders. Her school has seen the highest MCAP math growth for Black students across the district, second highest math growth for economically disadvantaged children, and second highest ELA growth for students with disabilities. All this translates into a school that is closing in on their fourth star, which no doubt is coming soon!

"Principal Adams is a visionary leader who inspires teachers through a clear sense of direction and purpose. She values her staff, recognizes their strengths, and provides ongoing support so teachers feel empowered and respected."

-School Staff at
The Historic Samuel
Coleridge-Taylor
Elementary School



DARRIN BROZENE

At Baltimore Design School, Principal Brozene ensures all his students and staff are connected, which can be challenging when leading a school with grades 6 through 12. He expanded a Champion Team of school leaders, each of whom oversees one grade in the school (Mr. Brozene leads sixth grade), which allows for the development of a tight-knit community. This structure also leads to opportunities for intensive support (for both staff and students) and deep data analysis. The results are clear, with double-digit decreases in chronic absenteeism each year since COVID, the growth of their career pathways (adding at least one staff member per pathway under his leadership) and steady increases in math and ELA MCAP scores as well as AP scores. His kindness permeates the building, creating an atmosphere where students and adults are thriving.

"Principal Brozene leads by example. He builds relationships, fosters collaboration, and creates space for growth both professionally and personally. He understands that schools thrive when educators are respected and students are inspired, and he works intentionally to cultivate that environment every day...Simply put, he leads with heart. And that heart is felt in our classrooms, our hallways, and the confidence of the students we serve."

-School Staff at Baltimore Design School





DENITA PLAIN

Principal Plain knows how important it is to give every child a reason to be excited to be at school, starting with engaging instruction. She has worked hard to build a school culture where everyone believes in this vision, and the data shows she is succeeding! James McHenry has made

significant growth in both ELA and mathematics, has seen chronic absentee rates drop by more than 20 points (including winning the Mayor’s attendance competition three times) and has grown their Gifted and Advanced Learning program from 19 students two years ago to 118 students today. The enrollment is trending in the right direction and there should be no confusion as to why – great things are happening at James McHenry!

“What truly sets Principal Plain apart is her passion and presence. She is visible, engaged, and deeply committed to her school community. She celebrates growth, notices effort, and holds high expectations paired with compassion. Because of her leadership, James McHenry is a stronger school, our students are better served, and our community is thriving.”

-School Staff at James McHenry Elementary/Middle School

CRAIG RIVERS

Emanating calm and kindness, Principal Rivers has an uncanny ability to bring peace to turbulent situations. Perhaps this explains his career trajectory, as the school district has entrusted him with rebuilding cultures in three large high schools where his steady leadership brought focus and student-centered presence. Now at Carver Vocational Technical High School, Principal Rivers leads with compassion, ensuring that all members of the school community – adult and student alike – are treated with respect. He has also built a strong partnership with The Movement Team, establishing bonds with the community and supporting his students holistically, both inside and outside of his building.



“Since Principal Rivers became principal, the culture of the school has changed in clear ways. Students are more engaged and take more pride in their school. Staff feel trusted to do their work. There is a sense of calm and purpose throughout the building. This did not come from slogans or top-down mandates. It came from steady leadership, follow-through, and respect for the people who make Carver what it is.”

- Carver Vocational Technical High School Partner

CHEYANNE ZAHRT-WALLACE

Principal Zahrt leads a school where student voice isn't a buzzword, but core to the experience for each young person. Students have the space to create their own student-run clubs, are trusted as young adults, have opportunities to express themselves, and get to engage in meaningful internships to grow in a self-directed manner. This ethos extends to staff, who regularly co-collaborate across departments on units and help identify and design changes in programming. This all stems from Principal Zahrt, and City Neighbors High is reaping the benefits – a 95% graduation rate, an increase of 30 percentage points in MCAP ELA scores, increased AP offerings and dual enrollment courses. It's no wonder CNHS was the first high school to receive an 8-year charter renewal – amazing things are happening!



At City Neighbors, teaching and learning have the genuine warmth of enormous heart and soul. Being “Known, Loved, Inspired” at City Neighbors flows directly from Ms. Zahrt because she leads us all with so much love and compassion. The evidence? She lives it every day. We know it. We feel it. She inspires us all.”
-School Staff at City Neighbors High School



THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL AWARDS

2026 HONOREES

[Click here to view recent media appearances for each honoree.](#)

EMILY AUGUSTINE

Principal Augustine has served as the principal of Clay Hill since its creation, building the school grade by grade. Serving a school population with 50% multilingual learners (MLL), she has placed an emphasis on making her school a safe space that is trusted by families. Each year, they set a goal that every family will meaningfully engage with the school at least twice; last year, they achieved this with 99% of their families and are aiming for 100% this year. This foundational trust, coupled with a strong staff and focus on academics has led to amazing successes: 12% MCAP Reading growth; 8% MCAP Math growth; 47% of their third graders (their first class of kindergarteners) achieving proficiency in both Reading and Math MCAP; and 98% of their MLL students demonstrating growth in their English proficiency. Principal Augustine has led the successful creation of an "atmosphere of love", the founding mission of Clay Hill.

"Principal Augustine has built a school culture grounded in joy, respect, and possibility. As a founding family, we have watched Clay Hill grow from an ambitious vision into a vibrant learning community with upward momentum and a clear sense of purpose."

-Parent at Clay Hill
Public Charter School



MONIQUE HARDING

When asked how Woodhome is making such great gains in ELA, Principal Harding let us know, "there's no secret – just synergy." She believes in setting a vision for success and then unifying her team in that mission. From her first days as principal, she told her school (frequently) that they were going to achieve a third star. This was their rallying cry and helped lead to a 32-point drop in chronic absenteeism and marked gains in ELA. It should be no surprise that this year they achieved that third star! Their next big goal is to become a Blue Ribbon school. With Ms. Harding at the helm, it's just a question of how soon they'll get there.

"Principal Monique Harding embodies the true spirit of a transformative school leader...Through her unwavering commitment to excellence, she succeeded in guiding our school in the short time that she has been here to achieve three-star educational excellence, a milestone that reflects her vision, resilience, and belief in what we as a school family could accomplish together. Her approach to feedback as a tool for growth has strengthened us, especially myself, as educators and encouraged a culture where reflection is not feared but embraced."

-School Staff at Woodhome Elementary/Middle School



KEDRA JACOX-PAIGE

Principal Jacox-Paige comes from a family of educators (her mother was a principal and her father a teacher) and knew from a young age that this was her calling. She cares deeply about the success of her students at Matthew A. Henson and leads from a place of urgency; she believes with every ounce of her being that her school must serve every student because they don't get a second chance to build the foundation for success for their children – they have to get it right the first time.

Principal Jacox-Paige is succeeding in moving Matthew A. Henson forward, leading the school out of CSI status and from one star, when she took over as principal five years ago, to three stars now. The “little school with the big heart” is on the rise!

“Ms. Paige has created a culture where everyone who walks through our doors feels the love, support, and passion for education. Our school is a safe place, a warm place, and a place where children are truly seen—and that is because of her leadership. We may be the little school on Payson and Baker, but we have a big heart. That big heart belongs to Ms. Paige.”

-School Staff at Matthew A. Henson Elementary School



APRIL MYRICK

Principal Myrick leads a diverse school, with students hailing from more than thirty countries, which is a perfect fit for her background in international relations. Now in her fourth year at the helm of Patterson High School, Principal Myrick initially focused on improving the school climate, both for teachers and students, with an emphasis on breaking barriers and ensuring all students felt like they belonged to One Patterson. With success in that area, observed by the increase in attendance by more than 20 percentage points, the school is now laser focused on academics and has seen a 14 point jump in ELA proficiency. Principal Myrick clearly loves her school, and they love her right back – in fact, they've already given her their own version of the Heart of the School Award!

“At the core of Ms. Myrick’s leadership is a steadfast belief that students always come first. Every decision she makes is grounded in what is best for students academically, socially, and emotionally. She works tirelessly to ensure that all students feel seen, supported, and valued, creating a school environment where every child has the opportunity to succeed.”

-School Staff at
Patterson High School



TANISHA SHEPPARD

Principal Sheppard, the leader of George Washington Elementary School, or “GDubb” as it is now known, has a strong background in elementary education and school operations, and it shows! In three short years she has transformed the look and feel of the school while building systems that support strong instruction and student growth. She has invested deeply in teacher development, which has contributed to double-digit MCAP growth in ELA and the school earning its third star on the Maryland Report Card. Though she is the only administrator in her building and wears many hats as a result, she remains connected to her staff, students, and community, continuously bringing back ideas that strengthen teaching and learning at GDubb. Her leadership is driven by a clear belief that every decision should move students closer to success.



"Because of [Principal Sheppard]'s leadership, our students, staff, and families have been wowed by the amazing experiences happening throughout GDubb... Her impact is felt daily, and our school is better because of the doors she continues to open."

-School Staff at George Washington Elementary School



HEART OF THE SCHOOLS SUPPORTERS

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**As of May 6, 2026*



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