

It’s Back To School Time For Gaston County Schools

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GASTONIA, N.C. – It’s back-to-school time in Gaston County! On Wednesday, August 14, approximately 30,000 students (pre-kindergarten through high school) and more than 1,900 teachers return to class in Gaston County Schools to begin the 2024-2025 academic year.

Students, parents, and school employees are looking ahead to the new school year with enthusiasm and optimism. It is the goal of all teachers and employees to provide quality opportunities for students to learn, grow, and thrive at the district’s 56 schools. Elementary schools operate from 7:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m., and middle schools and high schools operate from 8:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. Parents should check with their child’s school for the exact schedule as start/end times for some schools may vary.

With the start of the new year, Gaston County Schools is welcoming a new superintendent. While Dr. Morgen Houchard’s official first day as superintendent was February 19, he is beginning his first full academic year of providing leadership and guidance for Gaston County Schools, which is the tenth largest school district in the state.

Houchard said, “I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to serve as superintendent, and it has been a pleasure over the past six months getting to know more about our schools, meeting teachers and employees, and working with staff to determine our vision for the future. My pledge is to do all that I can for the students, teachers, employees, and families in Gaston County Schools.”

Houchard added, “As we work together to bring about positive change, I am confident that we will move forward, make our schools even better, and be able to celebrate many successes. I am so appreciative of the hard work put forth by everyone associated with Gaston County Schools, and as a school family, I know we can achieve all that we set out to do to help children discover, learn, and grow in the year ahead.”

A proven leader in K-12 public education with 30 years of dedicated experience, Houchard has worked as a classroom teacher, school assistant principal and principal, and central office administrator. He joined Gaston County Schools in April 2016 after working in Mitchell County Schools for 22 years. Before being named superintendent, he served as the executive director for auxiliary services and interim executive director for human resources for Gaston County Schools.

BACK-TO-SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

Here is a look at five back-to-school highlights for Gaston County Schools:

Career Exploration Center

Gaston County Schools is opening a Career Exploration Center, which is the first of its kind for a school district in the state. Students in grades 5-12 will be able to visit the center and gain hands-on knowledge of different careers through simulation, demonstration, and virtual reality. Plus, students will be able to connect with local businesses to see how what they experience in simulation/virtual reality format translates to real-world job opportunities.

The center encompasses three classrooms and a commons area with various stations, including an Anatomage Table where students, who may have an interest in the medical or veterinarian fields, can learn about the anatomy of humans and animals using impressive 3D technology; a SIMSpray unit that is used to train students virtually on how to paint/powder coat vehicles, buildings, exteriors and interiors, and various items; and two units that simulate what it is like to be a welder. Additionally, there is an area for students to learn about being a utility line technician with students wearing 3D goggles to get an understanding of what it is like to stand in a bucket truck while working on utility lines.

Most impressive are three simulators that teach students about truck driving and operating heavy equipment such as tractors, backhoes, and dump trucks, and a simulator that looks just like an ambulance. Students can climb aboard the ambulance simulator to understand what it is like to work as an EMT while other students watch via a monitor to see what is happening inside.

Brett Buchanan, director of Career and Technical Education (CTE) for Gaston County Schools, says ‘exploration’ is the key word in the new center’s name. He envisions it being a place where students can visit and be introduced to possible career options. “It is important for students to be exposed to careers early on so they can begin thinking about what is available to them in the workforce right here in Gaston County,” said Buchanan.

Farm-to-School Gardening Program

Gaston County Schools’ farm-to-school program started two years ago with the help of the Gaston County Cooperative Extension Service’s master gardeners. Since then, the gardening project has expanded significantly, and it gained statewide attention for producing tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, zucchini, peppers, and other vegetables that are harvested, prepared, and packaged to be served to students in cafeterias when school is in session and as part of the summer meals program.

School nutrition director Angela Calamia calls the gardening effort “a work in progress” with plans to double the number of planting beds, grow lettuce and other leafy vegetables, and possibly add strawberry plants and blueberry bushes. With the garden expanding to more than a half-acre, the goal this year is to have the garden producing not just in the summer months, but year-round.

The concept of a school district having a farming program to supplement its school nutrition program is a new idea. Calamia believes Gaston County is the only one in the state that’s producing its own vegetables and herbs. Crews with Deep Roots, a Charlotte-based farming and agriculture company, are responsible for planting, tending to the garden, and harvesting. They take an all-organic approach, which ensures freshness and quality locally-grown produce.

Gaston County Schools was one of seven nutrition programs to receive recognition from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction and was named a “Summer Nutrition Champion” for producing food for its summer meals program, earning the Farm-to-Summer Award. The honor recognizes Gaston County for having a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)-certified garden that provided more than 750 pounds of cucumbers and 40 pounds of cherry tomatoes for summer meals in 2023.

Cosmetology Lab at Hunter Huss High School

An area at Hunter Huss High School that has been used as a student lounge, chorus and theater classroom, and manufacturing technology training room is now a state-of-the-art cosmetology lab. The space is where students with an interest in the cosmetology profession can get a jump start on a promising career.

In a matter of months, crews from Pinnix Construction transformed what basically was a concrete shell into a bright and modern lab with 20 hairstyling stations, hair-washing sinks, hair dryer chairs, manicure tables, and other features. A large classroom for instruction and demonstrations is adjacent to the lab, which also has a separate entrance and lobby area that will be used eventually by the general public seeking a haircut, pedicure, or facial.

The new cosmetology lab, which is part of the Career Academy at Hunter Huss High School and Gaston County Schools’ Career and Technical Education Department, is made possible through a partnership with Gaston College. BreAnne Walker, the college’s cosmetology program director, and instructors Tarsha Holmes and Tami Edwards are leading the effort to prepare students for jobs in cosmetology.

Students enter the program as juniors and complete two years of coursework before high school graduation. Then, they transition to complete two semesters at Gaston College in preparation of taking the state cosmetology exam. In addition to learning how to cut, color, perm, and style hair and provide other services that are offered in a salon, students will find out what it is like to work with clients, provide good customer service, and manage the business aspects of the profession.

W.P. Grier Middle School Construction

Construction on the new W.P. Grier Middle School is coming along nicely, and this time next year, the school will be celebrating its grand opening.

The new school is going up on the same 25 acres of land along East Garrison Boulevard in Gastonia where the existing school sits. Construction is happening in two phases – the 155,000 square-foot school is being built first on land that was used previously for the football field, and when complete, the old building will be demolished to make space for a new sports complex. Once the school opens in August 2025, it will take another year to build the football, softball, and baseball fields.

The two-story school will house 1,000 students with the ability to accommodate as many as 1,200. It will include more than 40 contemporary classrooms; various instructional, office, and conference spaces; a multi-use media center and library; a large cafeteria and multipurpose room; and a modern gymnasium, which will be located behind the main building. The site plan includes about 200 spaces for parking and additional entrances to improve on-campus traffic flow.

The cost to build the new Grier campus is estimated at $50-$60 million, a price that is higher than previous middle school construction projects because of inflation. School bonds, which were approved by voters in May 2018, will be used to pay for the new school. Beam Construction is the builder, and LS3P Associates is the architect. The school is similar in concept and design to the new Stanley Middle School, which opened in March 2018, and the new Belmont Middle School, which opened in August 2021.

New Playground Equipment

For children, one of the most exciting places at school is the playground. Over the past year, Gaston County Schools has spent time making additions and upgrades to playgrounds at 12 elementary schools: Woodhill, Brookside, Tryon, New Hope, McAdenville, Cherryville, Carr, Gardner Park, Kiser, Robinson, Page, and Bessemer City Central.

Repairs have been completed at other elementary school playgrounds as well, thanks to funding from the school bonds and PTO (Parent-Teacher Organization) groups.