



Report to the Community



November 2021

Teachers are Heroes *Like Never Before*

Since March of 2020, teachers have shown they are real American heroes. *Like never before*, teachers reimagined their classrooms, continuing to make vital connections with their students. They taught from their makeshift home offices, or in a classroom *alone*, to three dozen students via computers and cell phones. They taught in their classrooms *with* a dozen students in their room: and another dozen students sitting at their kitchen tables, living room couches or bedrooms.

They maintained connections with their students – that relationship that is so vital to teaching and learning – by creating two classrooms. The in-person classroom, which always required lots of preparation and planning, came with a new challenge. How do you stay socially distant and get to know a student, despite a mask covering up so much of their face? The virtual classroom necessitated unprecedented planning. How do you teach a child to write if you can't place your hand over theirs? How do you conduct a science experiment when the student doesn't have the equipment at home? What does a teacher do if that at-home child is sharing the internet connection with siblings, and sometimes also having to 'watch over' those younger siblings? How do you engage an at-home student in a lively exchange about how to solve a math problem? How do you discuss a book or a history lesson?

The challenges seemed insurmountable ... yet teachers found a way. They learned how to create on-line lessons; how to develop and troubleshoot technology (theirs and their students). Most of all, they created a learning atmosphere for their students, while helping them with the myriad of challenges that everyone faced during the pandemic. They figured out what their students needed outside of school: a listening ear, activities, food, books, a caring heart and so much more. They cared. They learned. They did what they always do – they taught.

With the help of you, our community supporters, the Muscogee Educational Excellence Foundation (MEEF) continued our mission: to *recognize and reward exceptional teachers*. In this first-ever Report to the Community, you'll read how teachers overcame challenges; what inspires them; the stories of what the support of the community means to them; and how – despite a world-wide pandemic – these teachers still do what they do best. **They teach.**



The Muscogee Educational Excellence Foundation was founded in 1996 with the mission of advocating for excellence in education by recognizing and rewarding exceptional teachers. We believe there's nothing more important to our community's future than strengthening our public schools. We strive to enhance the quality of our educational system by focusing on those who have the most direct impact on our students – teachers. With a significant financial investment in, and a passionate advocacy for teachers, MEEF has evolved into one of the leading advocates of excellence in public education in our region.

To help support exceptional teachers, visit our website at meefofcolumbus.org.

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Teachers did the seemingly impossible. They overcame challenges. They reached out and did whatever it took to connect with their students. Like never before, they did what they always do best. They were teachers – amazing teachers.

—Dr. David Lewis
MCSD Superintendent

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An Unprecedented Year

The pandemic changed just about everything in our schools.

And when it did, teachers adapted. They showed resilience and flexibility. They found the resources they needed to be there for their students. Because that's what exceptional teachers do.

Through the generosity of MEEF donors, MEEF spent this time supporting teachers. We provided tangible proof of our appreciation with monthly gifts and financial incentives through our Teacher of the Year and Harvard Fellows/Buntin Scholars programs (the MEEF masks and umbrellas were a big hit early on!). We cheered teachers on with notes of encouragement and appreciation. We listened to their stories – the stories teachers wanted to tell of how they were reaching and teaching our students. We shared their stories via MEEF's e-news and social media. We know you join us in celebrating these extraordinary teachers, and the exceptional work they do for our community's children.

“ You can't know how much we appreciate the kindnesses that MEEF has shown me and my fellow teachers this year. It is so nice to feel appreciated as we journey through the unprecedented challenges of these past months.

—Rachel Potenza
Dawson Elementary
Buntin Scholar 2022

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Harvard Fellows 2022

Harvard Fellows/Buntin Scholars

Program expands to impact learning for more students

The Harvard Fellows program focuses on educational excellence by offering innovative and exceptional teachers an opportunity to grow in their profession. Since the program's inception in 2012, 62 MCSD teachers have been selected to spend a week at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Project Zero Classroom program HF's attend is in sync with MEEF's mission and helps increase our teacher's capacity to improve learning for all children.

In early 2020, MEEF was gifted an amazing opportunity by a local group of community leaders who wanted to fund a new part of the Harvard Fellows program, naming it in honor of one of MEEF's founders, past Superintendent Dr. Jim Buntin. We are delighted that MEEF's program is now the **Harvard Fellows/Buntin Scholars**. The vision of these generous donors was to close the gap for MCSD schools that do not have a Harvard Fellow. Working closely with MCSD, six elementary school teachers were selected as part of our first class of Buntin Scholars. Partnering with other Harvard Fellows, this cadre of teachers will be better equipped to be teacher leaders, working within their schools to enrich and create new learning opportunities, knowledge and expertise.

Most importantly, this professional development enhances instruction for students to help them think more critically and creatively. It helps teachers assess student work in ways that deepen learning. The summer learning experience was postponed in 2020 and 2021, but will resume in 2022 on the Harvard campus, where MEEF will fund an expanded class of almost 30 teachers, whose professional careers will be changed forever by this exceptional professional development.



Vanessa Ellis

Veterans Memorial Middle
Harvard Fellow 2018

Teaching a class virtually and in person, while masked and socially distanced, was a challenge for all teachers. Vanessa Ellis' normal classroom demeanor has her flying around the classroom where students follow her every move, as they know she's likely to break into a rap about whatever topic they are studying. "Fortunately, I videotaped some of the lessons, rapping about social studies topics for my students, which they loved. It was using a different format, but it was still Mrs. Ellis teaching. I got the chance to demonstrate to students that there are hard things you've got to overcome and we did it together. The pandemic became a life lesson for all of us."



Buntin Scholars 2022 with the Lunch Bunch

MUSCOGEE EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOUNDATION HARVARD FELLOWS *Buntin Scholars*

Harvard Fellows 2019



Robert Harris

Jordan Vocational College
and Career Academy
Harvard Fellow 2016

Robert Harris is an automotive mechanics teacher at Jordan Vocational College and Career Academy. In a way he never imagined, Robert says Harvard's Project Zero prepared him for teaching in the pandemic. "I pulled out all my books and notes from Harvard and called some of my fellow HFs to brainstorm. I taught my students who were in the class – in this case, the automotive lab – to help teach those kids who were virtual. They not only mastered the material, but helping teach it, participating in their own learning, was a much more meaningful experience."



Carmen Estes

Fox Elementary
Harvard Fellow 2017

Carmen Estes, Fox Elementary, noted that teachers themselves had to do a lot of learning. “We had to learn new things and new ways of teaching. In some ways, it was a good lesson for us. We teach flexibility and resourcefulness to our students, so with the virtual classroom we had to put that flexibility and resourcefulness to the test.”

Teachers frequently tell students, “It’s okay to make mistakes, that’s how you learn.” For Carmen, the virtual classroom showed her students exactly that. “Teachers had to be okay with making mistakes in front of their students and I think it’s helped us as we are back in person. Students saw that we were trying to get better. It made kids trust us even more. That’s a great lesson for teachers and students.”

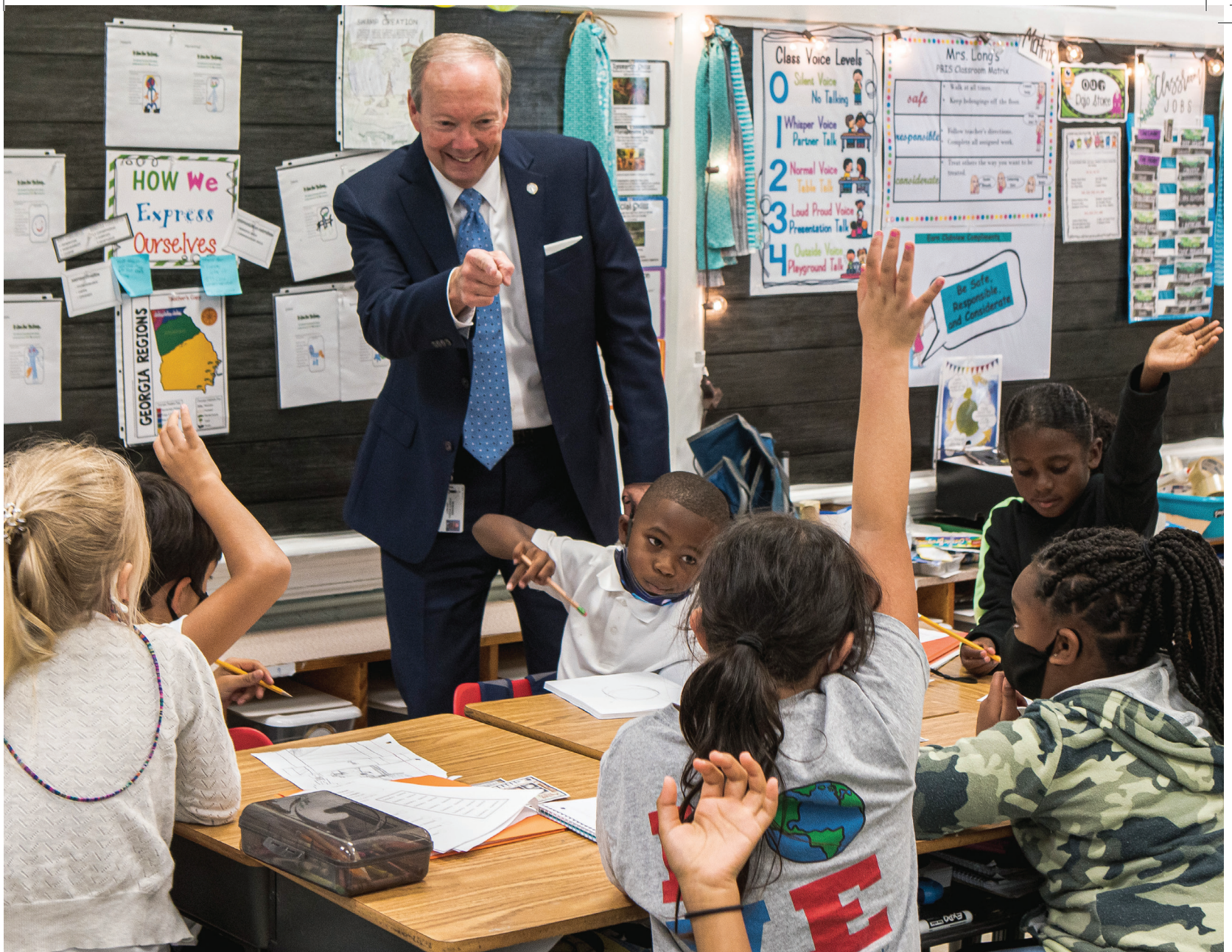


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As we worked to help our students adapt, there were other lessons they learned. During the pandemic, our kids witnessed struggles everywhere. This was a ‘real’ lesson that was happening all around them. As teachers, we had to demonstrate that the only way we would outlast this was by helping one another, working together. Our students learned this lesson and it’s one they’ll use forever.

—Kimberly Evans
East Columbus Magnet Academy
Harvard Fellow 2019

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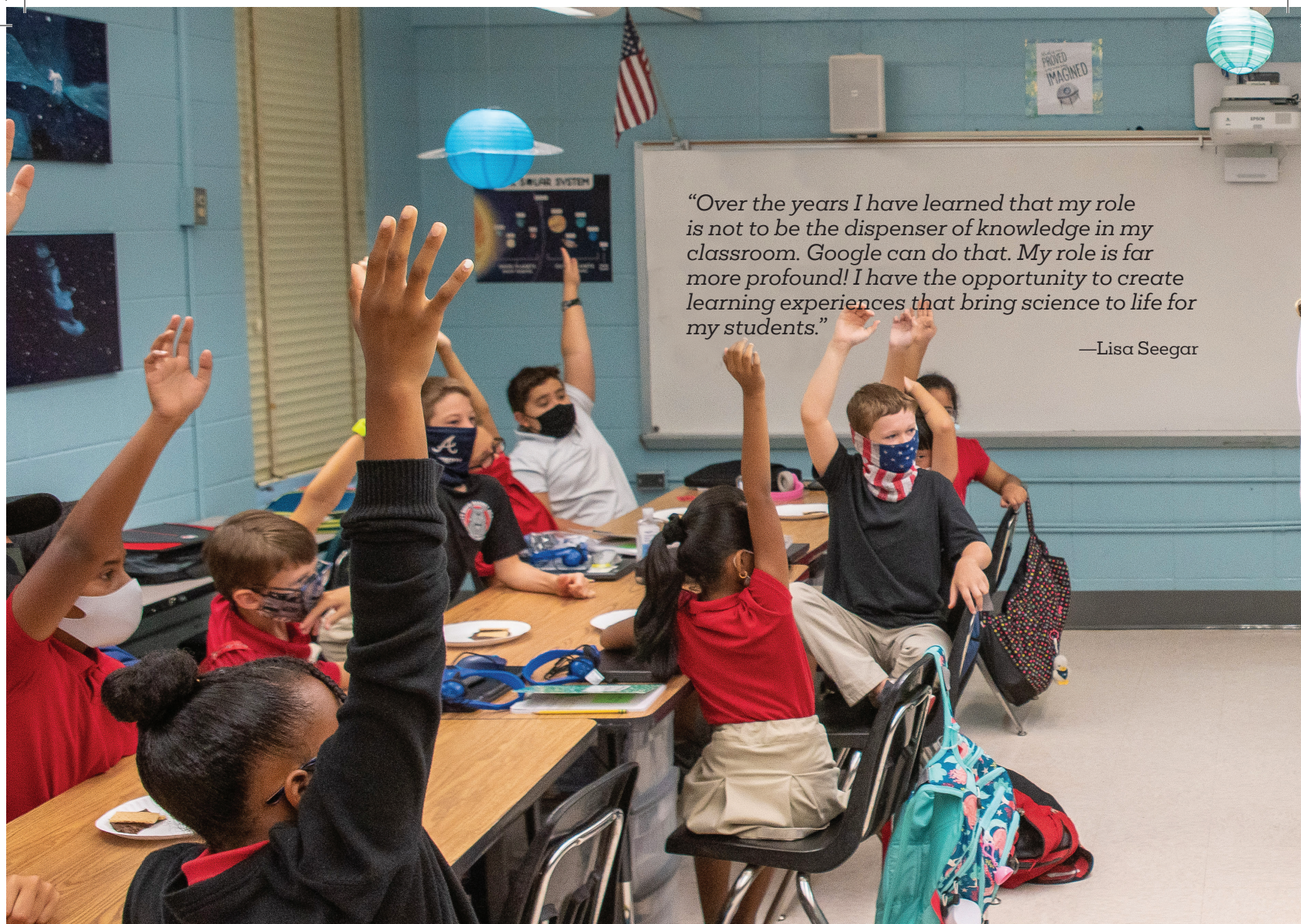
Leadership Makes the Difference

Dr. David Lewis embraces MEEF's mission of *recognizing and rewarding* exceptional teachers. As MCSD Superintendent, Lewis is aware of the incredible support our community has for teachers and the role MEEF plays in that support. "What MEEF does for our teachers is magnificent. There's no other school system in the country that does the Teacher of the Year (TOTY) program like MEEF does. The Harvard Fellows, and now Buntin Scholars program, is remarkable in that it makes exceptional teachers into teacher leaders, impacting thousands of our students."

Lewis notes that MEEF tells the stories of exceptional teachers – and the students they teach – in ways that are meaningful and appreciated. "The way MEEF constantly extols our teachers makes them feel respected and valued. Teachers deserve recognition for the amazing job they do every day in our schools, and we are grateful that MEEF supporters show their appreciation in so many ways."

“David Lewis' leadership, his commitment to excellence, and his vision of making our school system one of the finest in the country is extraordinary. He has great respect for teachers, and from what I hear and see, it's a mutual feeling. He is an integral part of our community, partnering with any organization that wants to be involved in, and support our school system. His leadership has been critical to the continued success of our entire region.”

—Jimmy Yancey
Synovus CEO, Retired



"Over the years I have learned that my role is not to be the dispenser of knowledge in my classroom. Google can do that. My role is far more profound! I have the opportunity to create learning experiences that bring science to life for my students."

—Lisa Seegar

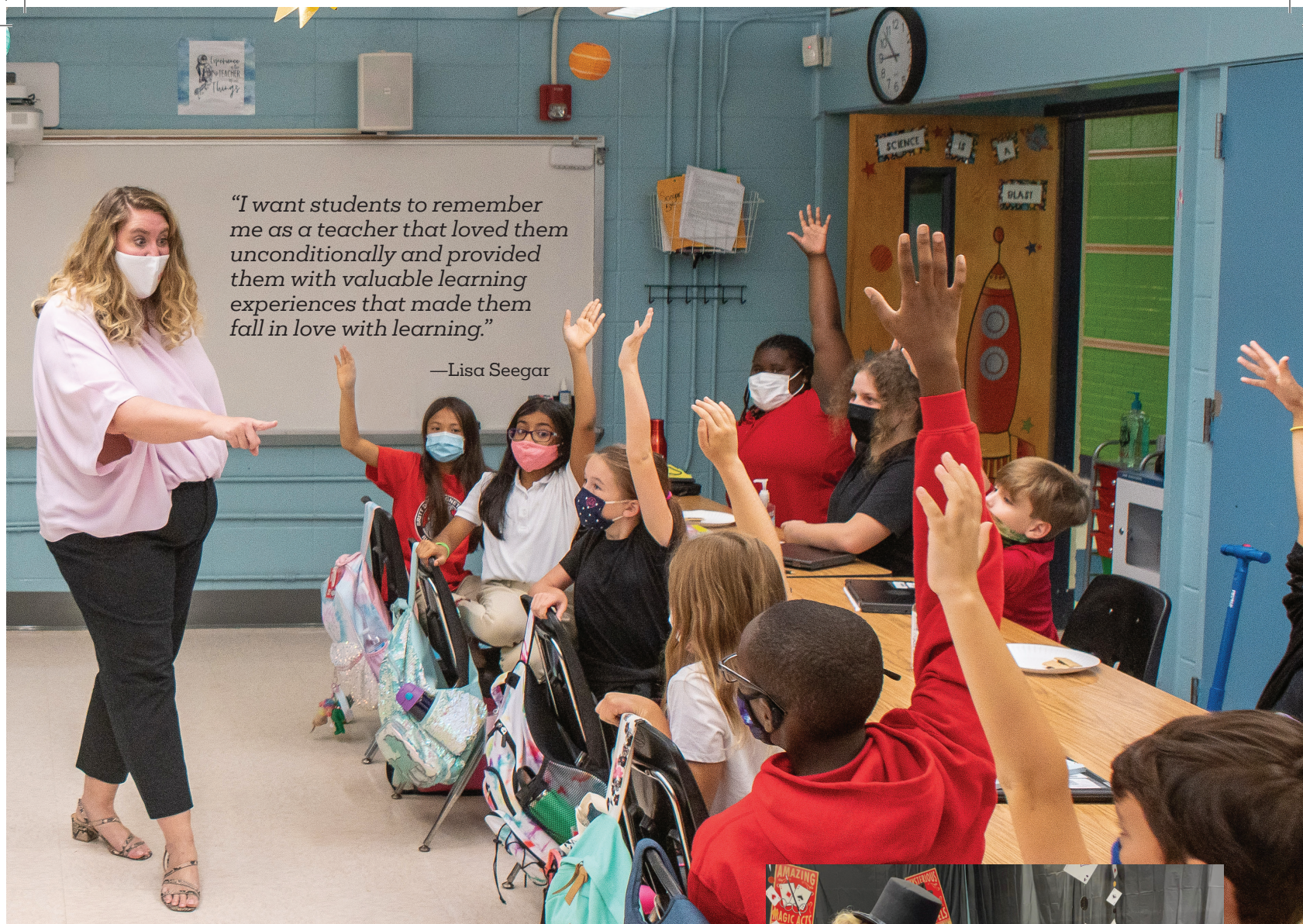
Getting Kids to FALL IN LOVE with Learning

*Lisa Seegar Named
MCSD Teacher of
the Year 2021*

Lisa Seegar, has many stories. Like the stories of all exceptional teachers, Lisa's are told through her students.

"Last year, I was picking up dinner at a fast-food restaurant. As the young lady handed me my food, she screamed. Startled, I looked at her and recognized her as a former student from several years ago. I couldn't believe her reaction. She was happy to see me—which was a first!

For the 180 days I had her in my classroom, I tried desperately to make a connection with her. She scowled and rolled her eyes from the minute she walked into my class, until she walked out. If she wasn't scowling, she was putting her head down, and I was constantly asking her to pick it back up. She maintained A's and B's in class that year, but never seemed to enjoy class, or me for that matter. That's why her reaction was such a pleasant surprise. She said she was attending CSU and majoring in education. My heart swelled with excitement for her, and I will remember the next few minutes of our conversation for the rest of my life."



"I want students to remember me as a teacher that loved them unconditionally and provided them with valuable learning experiences that made them fall in love with learning."

—Lisa Seegar

The former student went on to tell Lisa that she wanted to teach 7th grade math so that she could have an impact on someone's life—like Lisa had on hers. "She was so grateful that I had never given up on her." The young woman continued, "Every day you smiled and showed me love that I needed at that time in my life. I just didn't know how to receive it. I'm so glad that you are here now so that I can tell you what you mean to me."

Lisa says those moments stay with a teacher. "Each day, teachers fill classrooms all across America teaching curriculum, but more importantly, teaching students that are in the process of writing their life's story. The amazing thing about the power of a teacher is that uplifting the students in our classrooms doesn't just benefit that single student. A teacher's influence benefits students, families, friends, and neighbors. A teacher's impact from one positive student relationship reaches dozens, hundreds, or thousands! Teachers can change lives. Does it not get any more significant than that?"



Lisa Seegar, the MCS D Teacher of the Year 2021, teaches 5th grade Science at Britt David Magnet Academy. Seegar is a 'home-grown' teacher, graduating from Jordan Vocational High School and Columbus State University. She is a Harvard Fellow 2012.

Due to the pandemic, the 56 Teacher of the Year (TOTY) Honorees representing all MCS D schools served for two years, culminating in the virtual Teacher of the Year Gala in May 2021.

Generous Donors Support Exceptional Teachers

YOU – our generous MEEF donors make it possible to recognize and reward these exceptional teachers and the incredible impact they make in the lives of their students. We are most grateful for your support.

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For teachers, community support is crucial. Knowing the community is rallying around us, cheering us on and encouraging us, has been a beautiful thing to feel. MEEF plays a huge role in making that happen.

—Kunicko Byrd
G.W. Carver
Harvard Fellow 2022

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*Thank you for pouring light
 and love into teachers. MEEF
 has made us feel worthy in this
 most important work that we
 do – the work of teaching your
 children.*

—Wendy Sands
 Richards Middle
 Harvard Fellow 2015

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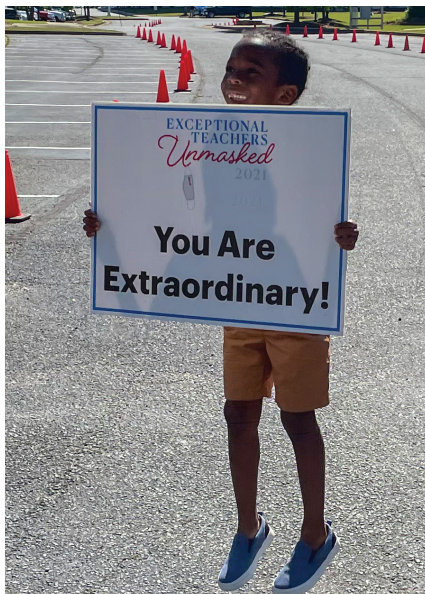
Councilor Judy Thomas

Councilor Judy Thomas served two years as the MEEF Board Chair and actively continues that service on the MEEF where she is a most generous donor. She is an ardent and vocal supporter of MCSD teachers and was a leader in the development of the Harvard Fellows/Buntin Scholars program.

For all that she does to advocate for excellence in education, Judy is the recipient of the 2021 Jim Buntin Leadership Award for Excellence in Education. The award is named in honor of retired superintendent Dr. Jim Buntin, who along with Jack Goldfrank, started MEEF.

For her tireless support and dedication to recognizing and rewarding exceptional teachers, we are grateful.

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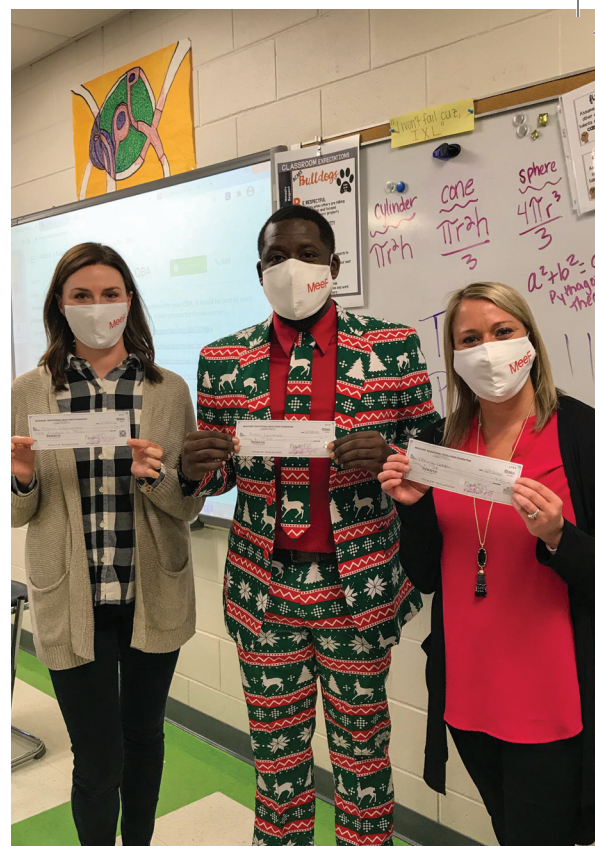


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Being a Top Ten Teacher of the Year ... and now a Harvard Fellow, I am so appreciative of all that MEEF does to recognize teachers. MEEF has given teachers some incredible opportunities and I cannot thank you enough for all that you do to make teachers feel valued.

—Steven Ring
Allen Elementary
Harvard Fellow 2022

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While we might not always know what hardships our students face at home, I believe one of my responsibilities is to create a stable learning environment where students are able to learn—and a safe haven where they can grow. When I reflect on my time in school and how I thrived on the nurturing relationships I formed with my teachers; how they pushed me to my fullest potential, it fills my heart to know that I now have the opportunity to do the same for my students ... preparing them for life beyond the classroom walls.

—Chelsie Rogers
Northside High

Top Three TOTY Honoree 2021

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“

Karlyn has a teaching mantra. “A good lesson is not one that is well taught, but one that is well learned.” This belief encourages Karlyn to keep students as the center focus of all that she does, providing learning experiences that blend content and life lessons. “When I come across a difficult piece of material, I ask students how they would like to learn the information. I have received some wonderful ideas from students. It’s true that to be a successful teacher, you must also learn from your students.



—Karlyn Mace

Columbus High

Top Three TOTY Honoree 2021

Harvard Fellow 2015

”

Since this Community Report covers more than the regular school year, we have included donors from June 2019-June 2021. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this list. However, if an error has been made, please accept our apology. If you will call it to our attention, we will gladly correct it in our next publication.

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MEEF's Report to the Community covers more than a year in the lives of MCSD students and teachers: from the last months of the 2019-2020 school year through the first months of the 2021-2022 school year.

Some of the photos in this annual report were taken prior to the pandemic, before masking and social distancing were part of standard protocols. In a few cases, people were unmasked briefly for the purposes of photography. Please be assured that all safety precautions were observed in the taking of these photos.

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