

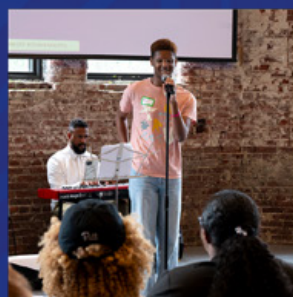
PittEd

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
SUMMER/FALL 2026

40th Anniversary
Office of Child Development

10th Anniversary
Justice Scholars Institute

5th Anniversary
Genius, Joy, and Love



Pictured on the cover are moments of connection from the Office of Child Development, Justice Scholars Institute, and Genius, Joy, and Love program, which are each celebrating milestone anniversaries this year.

PittEd

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MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

This issue of PittEd commemorates three significant and meaningful milestones in the School of Education: the 40th anniversary of the Office of Child Development, the 10th anniversary of the Justice Scholars Institute, and the 5th anniversary of the Genius, Joy, and Love program. Together, these anniversaries tell a larger story about who we are as a School of Education: a community defined by an enduring dedication to educational excellence, social transformation, and extraordinary impact.

For more than 115 years, the School of Education has prepared educators, researchers, leaders, and advocates to advance learning, strengthen communities, and contribute to a better future. Our collective impact is not defined solely by anniversaries or institutional milestones but by the everyday work of people who put our mission into practice. It is reflected in teachers who inspire and affirm young learners, researchers whose scholarship deepens understanding and informs practice, mentors who expand pathways of opportunity, and programs that support children, families, schools, and communities in meaningful and lasting ways. Across generations, these contributions have created a legacy of transformation that continues to shape lives both within and beyond the university.

In this issue, we are pleased to highlight several examples of this work in action, including:

- Students whose work is contributing to healthier communities and more responsive systems of care (Pg. 8)
- EdD alumni who are extending the reach of learning, leadership, and inquiry beyond the traditional classroom setting (Pg. 24)
- Faculty whose work affirms the strengths, creativity, and possibilities of neurodivergent thinking (Pg. 28)

These stories illuminate individuals and programs that exemplify possibility, purpose, and progress. They embody our mission to ignite learning and create opportunities where others may see barriers. Their work reminds us that meaningful change begins when people recognize and nurture the potential in others.

At Pitt Education, we remain steadfast in our commitment to preparing and supporting the people who make that change possible.

That is the power of education.

With best regards,



Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher
Renée and Richard Goldman Dean
University of Pittsburgh School of Education



Achievements, accolades, and actions across the School of Education

#1

A Decade Ranked #1—and Counting

The School of Education was ranked the **No. 1 public institution in Pennsylvania** by *U.S. News & World Report* in the 2026 Best Education Schools report. This is at least the tenth year in a row that Pitt has held the top position among publics in the state. Additionally, the School of Education was ranked No. 26 among all public institutions nationally and No. 35 nationally among all institutions. The school also rose to No. 17 for the educational psychology area among all institutions. More than 260 graduate colleges of education were evaluated for the ranking on nine different categories including quality assessment, research activity, faculty resources, and student-to-faculty ratio.

Building Bridges for Equity



Associate Professor **Lori Delale-O'Connor** received the 2025 Bridge Builder Award from YWCA Greater Pittsburgh in recognition of her commitment to equity, justice, and community-engaged work with women of color. Delale-O'Connor is the interim director of the school's Center for Urban Education and chair of the Department of Educational Foundations, Organizations, and Policy. Her work focuses on the connections between families, communities, and schools, with an emphasis on creating more equitable systems for young people.



Reading Education Goes Online

The School of Education will re-launch its **Reading Education master's and certificate programs** in a fully online format in fall 2026. Designed with flexibility for working educators, the online programs offer a pathway to earning the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Reading Specialist Certificate. Additionally, it provides post-baccalaureate credits for teachers to earn their Level II teaching certificate from PDE. The standalone certificate is 24 credits and the master's degree is 30 credits.



Advancing Equity Research

Assistant Professor **Josh Bleiberg** is a recipient of the 2026 National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship. He is one of 25 scholars from around the country who were selected from a pool of nearly 500 applicants. The fellowship awarded him \$70,000 to complete an education policy project titled "Interrogating the Color-Blind Justification for State Takeover of School Districts." The study will use comprehensive national data of every state takeover from the 1987–88 to 2025–26 school years to evaluate whether these actions perpetuate racism by removing democratic control from Black communities.



Academic Journal Earns Top Spot in Scholarship Index

The *Early Childhood Education Journal*, led by School of Education Professor **Patricia Crawford**, has achieved the No. 1 spot for citations in Google Scholar. Since Crawford became editor in 2020, the Netherlands-based journal has steadily improved its position in the scholarship index. Faculty members **Johanna Higgins** and **Michelle Sobolak** are also part of the journal's editorial board.



Going for Gold

The School of Education's Exercise is Medicine On-Campus (EIM-OC) program was recognized as a Gold-level program by the American College of Sports Medicine. The school is one of 81 institutions around the world to be recognized. Led by faculty advisor **Zachary Wilson** and student interns, the program promotes health and wellness among the full Pitt community by offering training and activities.

TRULY

EXCEPTIONAL

Photo submitted by Alyssa Chestney



Alyssa Chestney earns national recognition from Council for Exceptional Children

■ BY JUNIOR GONZALEZ

Alyssa Chestney, a Pitt student minoring in secondary education, has been named Outstanding Student of the Year by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), an international organization dedicated to improving educational access and success for students with disabilities and exceptional learning needs.

Chestney was honored at an award luncheon in March 2026 during the CEC's National Convention and Expo in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Chestney's path to CEC wasn't a straight line. When the student chapter at Pitt launched in the spring of 2025, Chestney saw something that bridged both sides of her academic identity, her pre-physician assistant coursework and her secondary education minor.

"It encompassed both a healthcare and service aspect for me, which I absolutely love," she said.

She says her School of Education minor in secondary education (which was recently renamed teacher education) gave her a window into the school-based challenges faced by students with exceptionalities.

As the CEC at Pitt chapter's fundraising chair, Chestney spearheaded awareness efforts and helped establish the club on campus. The CEC chapter ran a popcorn sale last year that brought in nearly \$1,500 and held a pop culture and neurodiversity trivia night, local restaurant fundraisers, film screenings by neurodiverse filmmakers, and a headshot event outside the Cathedral of Learning that drew students and community members.

JoVonne Tabb, the chapter's former faculty advisor and visiting assistant professor of practice at the School of Education, nominated Chestney for the award. She said Chestney's persistent fundraising efforts reflect a rare kind of dedication.

"There's no 'this is what they did before,'" Tabb said. "Alyssa's starting relationships all from scratch."

The CEC at Pitt chapter has already grown to more than 100 members.

Club President Emily Wilmoth attributes much of the growth to the chapter's decision to open its doors to students of all majors, not just those studying education.

"It is a space that was left untapped," Wilmoth said.

Chestney is a prime example of the benefits of including students from outside the School of Education.

"Eventually when I am practicing as a physician assistant (PA) in pediatrics, I'm going to have that interaction with kids and know how to better treat them because I can understand their perspective," she said.

Tabb agrees.

"She's going to be a PA that knows the educational realm, the things that students with exceptionalities should have. She's going to be ahead of the game," Tabb said. ■

“SHE’S GOING TO BE A PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT THAT KNOWS THE EDUCATIONAL REALM, THE THINGS THAT STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES SHOULD HAVE. SHE’S GOING TO BE AHEAD OF THE GAME.”

JoVonne Tabb



August 20, 2025

▲ New Student Orientation

Incoming students to the School of Education gathered at David Lawrence Hall for New Student Orientation.

October 15, 2025

▼ White Cane Day

Faculty from the Visual Impairment and Blindness program partnered with the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children (WPSBC) for the first White Cane Day Celebration outside the Cathedral of Learning. Students made their way from WPSBC a few blocks away to the Pitt campus, where they were met by Pitt faculty and the Pitt Band for a celebration to raise awareness.



October 24, 2025

Pitt Homecoming ▶

Along with University-wide festivities, the School of Education held its own homecoming reception at Posvar Hall, which included refreshments and networking between current students and alumni.



November 12-15, 2025

ASHE Conference ▶

The landmark year of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), which was celebrating its 50th annual conference, was led by Renée and Richard Goldman Dean Eboni Zamani-Gallaher as ASHE president. Her leadership led to a remarkable conference in Denver, Colorado, with more than 40 sessions led by School of Education scholars and a memorable keynote address from President Zamani-Gallaher.





February 17, 2026

▲ Chancellor's Distinguished Awards for Staff

Two School of Education staff members—Jorden King, assistant director of student and career services, and Shallegra Moye, director of educational enrichment and transition programs—received the University of Pittsburgh 2025 Distinguished Staff Award. King was recognized for exceptional early career achievement and Moye, excellence in mentoring.



March 26, 2026

Transfer Student Celebration ▼

Transfer students joined staff from the School of Education's Student and Career Services team, as well as Renée and Richard Goldman Dean Eboni Zamani-Gallaher for a celebration and candid discussion about being a transfer student, the transfer process, and how to better welcome these students into the Pitt community. The event included games, food and refreshments, and networking opportunities.



April 17, 2026

Feel Good Friday at Trees Hall

As finals week loomed large, students and staff in the exercise science program came up with a unique event to lift students up. The "Feel Good Friday at Trees Hall" event included baby goats brought in by Assistant Professor of Practice Zachary Wilson. In addition to the goats, the event included a board for students to leave notes of gratitude and outdoor games.



April 20, 2026

◀ Ballroom Dance Class

The return of the Minor in Dance at the School of Education brought a revitalized ballroom dance class taught by Associate Professor of Practice Sally Sherman and instructors Gretchen Hurd and Michelle Dawson. The class proved so popular that it doubled from 25 students to 50—and still filled up.

April 30, 2026

School of Education Spring Commencement

The annual spring commencement was held at a brand-new venue, Victory Heights Arena and Sports Performance Center. The ceremony provided inspiring moments, including the hooding of new doctoral students, including Mandy Austin, by her dissertation chair, Professor Cassie Quigley.



From Pantry to Prevention

Pitt students bring nutrition education, and a whole lot more, to Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood.

■ BY JUNIOR GONZALEZ

On Wednesday mornings this past spring, something different was happening at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA. The fitness classes upstairs had just wrapped up, and as members filtered downstairs, they were met with the aroma of freshly cooked sweet potatoes, a friendly face at the front of the room, and a recipe card waiting on each seat.

For seven weeks, the community room at the Homewood Y became a classroom of sorts, led by three graduate students from the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Together, they ran Pantry to Prevention, a weekly nutrition education and cooking demonstration program designed, built, and funded almost entirely by themselves.

"Being able to promote health through conversation, collaboration with my team, and interaction with the Homewood community was honestly such an amazing experience," said Simon Rocktashel, a master's student in clinical exercise physiology. "I'm super proud to be part of Pantry to Prevention."

Simon was joined by classmates Caylee Mackey, also studying clinical exercise physiology, and Ameya Deshpande, a MS in Health and Wellness Management student.

The small-but-mighty group worked the entire academic year together to make the program a reality.

Meeting a Community Need

The program grew out of a two-semester course sequence taught by clinical instructor Anne Hays.

In the fall, students learned the theory and mechanics of health program planning—conducting needs assessments, building budgets, and developing a marketing plan. In the spring, they

implemented what they built. Hays launched the class in 2021, and each year, the students pick something new.

"It's never the same class twice," Hays said. "The beginning parts are always the same—find the organization, do a needs analysis, brainstorm. But the end products are so vastly different."

The course has been paired with the Homewood-Brushton YMCA since the start, a partnership Hays developed through Pitt's community engagement center.

She says the Y is an ideal collaborator: open, gracious, and genuinely invested in student learning and meeting community needs.

In previous years, students' projects centered on other aspects of health, such as physical activity. This year, after pouring through community health data, CDC census figures, and the Homewood Comprehensive Community Plan, the student trio landed on nutrition as their focus.

The data pointed to elevated rates of obesity and diabetes in the neighborhood, and the students noticed something else too: a Giant Eagle mobile market parked outside the Y every Wednesday, offering 50% off fresh produce to anyone who wanted it.

"There's a food desert situation in Homewood," Hays explained. "There's not a great place for somebody who doesn't have a car to buy groceries. And that's why the Giant Eagle food truck got started, to try and address that." The students saw an opportunity to bridge education and access in the same room, on the same morning, and "Pantry to Prevention" was the result.

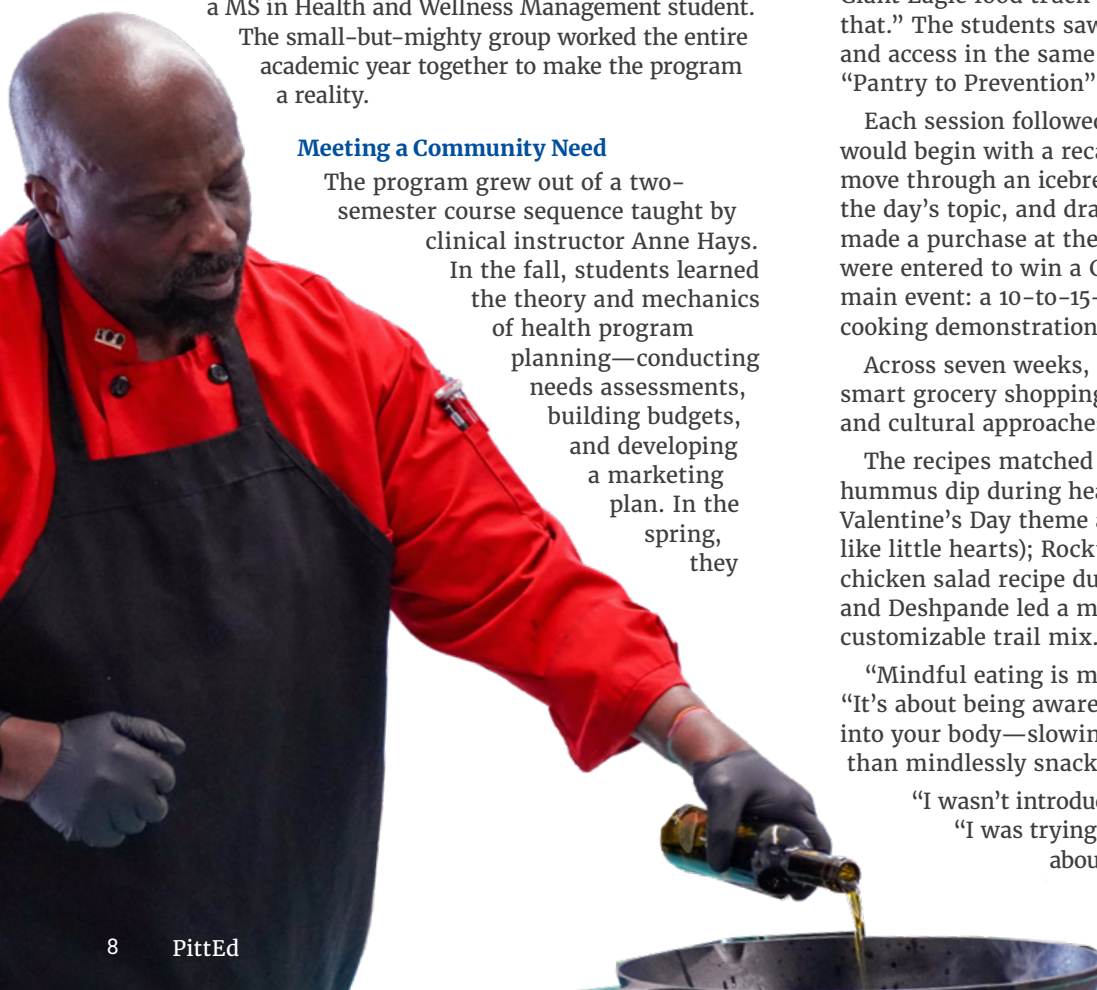
Each session followed a consistent structure. Students would begin with a recap of the previous week's goals, move through an icebreaker discussion question tied to the day's topic, and draw a raffle winner. Participants who made a purchase at the mobile market after each session were entered to win a Giant Eagle gift card. Then came the main event: a 10-to-15-minute lesson, followed by a live cooking demonstration.

Across seven weeks, the topics covered heart health, smart grocery shopping, macronutrients, mindful eating, and cultural approaches to nutrition.

The recipes matched the lessons—Mackey made a beet hummus dip during heart health week (complete with a Valentine's Day theme and stress ball giveaways shaped like little hearts); Rocktashel demonstrated an easy chicken salad recipe during a session on macronutrients; and Deshpande led a mindful eating class centered on a customizable trail mix.

"Mindful eating is more of a lifestyle," Deshpande said. "It's about being aware of what you're actually putting into your body—slowing down, being intentional, rather than mindlessly snacking while watching TV."

"I wasn't introducing a new diet," Deshpande added. "I was trying to restructure the way people think about food."



A Culturally Aware Approach to Nutrition

One session that stood out featured a guest chef from the Community Liver Alliance, one of the program's sponsors. The chef, who had lost significant weight and managed a diabetes diagnosis through overhauling his diet, cooked sweet potatoes in a cast iron skillet and spoke candidly about his father's death from heart disease. He shared his love for Black cuisine and comfort food, noting that making some simple changes can go a long way. The room, according to Talia Gasbarro, the Homewood Y's healthy living coordinator, was full.

"I think the fact that you all had somebody that looked like them gave them reassurance," Gasbarro said. "And when they could see a different way to cook something they're already eating—that was a good takeaway."

“YOU DON'T HAVE TO STICK TO TRADITIONAL DIET ADVICE. YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CULTURE, HAVE YOUR TRADITION AND YOUR WAY OF PREPARING THINGS, AND MAKE IT SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY.”

Ameya Deshpande, a MS in Health and Wellness Management student

At the end of each session, participants filled out a brief exit survey, answering what one thing they took away from the day, and whether they felt safe and included. Some also headed outside to the mobile market, recipe card in hand, to shop for ingredients they'd just seen come together in the cooking demo.

By the time the program ended in late March, 40 people had attended at least one session. The audience skewed older, and many were existing Y members whose fitness classes had let out just before the program started.

However, they were, by every account, eager to engage.

"I honestly was surprised to see how receptive they were," Deshpande said. "They came up with their own ideas on how to restructure their diets, on the spot. It wasn't like we were professors just lecturing content. We were having discussions. And a lot of them just came up with stuff and were super energized about it." Gasbarro saw it from the other side of the room. She



recalled one Y member in particular—someone whom she knew was experiencing food insecurity—who attended multiple sessions.

Gasbarro also reflected on a dimension the students intentionally built into their curriculum: a lesson about cultural approaches to nutrition. In a community where cooking traditions run deep, and where much of the food culture has roots in survival and resilience, the students didn't try to prescribe a wholesale overhaul. They offered perspective.

"You don't have to stick to traditional diet advice," Deshpande said. "You can have your culture, have your tradition and your way of preparing things, and make it sustainable and healthy."

Experiential Learning Leads to Results

The program's outcome data told an encouraging story. Ninety-six percent of participants reported learning at least one new thing—surpassing the students' goal of 90%. Attendance and food samples distribution grew week over week, starting modestly and peaking at 24 samples distributed in the final session. Nearly 70% of post-program survey respondents reported high levels of confidence in healthy cooking skills.

The students funded the program on a lean budget: \$500 from the School of Education and \$500 from the Community Liver Alliance, supplemented by in-kind produce donations from the Giant Eagle mobile market and gift cards the students secured through old-fashioned canvassing.

"They wanted more, so they went and knocked on Giant Eagle's doors," Hays said. "Endless stops, begging for gift cards, walking around the community, into the libraries, and taking their weekends to do that."

For the three students who ran Pantry to Prevention, the experience helped them realize the impact of their work.

Mackey, a former Division I distance runner who has long understood the link between nutrition and performance, found her sense of purpose renewed. "By seeing participants engage with the material and take ownership of their health reminded me of why this work matters," she said.

Rocktashel reflected on the program's reach. "When communities are given the right tools, knowledge, and access, meaningful change can follow," he said.

And Deshpande, who wants to eventually become a director at a health and wellness facility—ideally serving underrepresented communities—said the experience confirmed something.

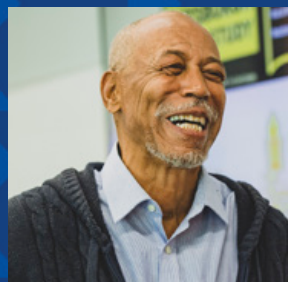
"We were happy to at least impact one person," he said. "But I think we impacted a lot more than that." ■





Sustained Commitment, Extraordinary Impact.

Photography by Junior Gonzalez





40th Anniversary Office of Child Development

A Mission that Outgrew its Origins

Established 40 years ago, the Office of Child Development makes the world better for families by leaning into its groundbreaking university–community partnership model.

■ BY GREG LATSHAW

In the 1980s, University of Pittsburgh psychologist Mark Strauss was growing increasingly frustrated by the attention surrounding the Better Baby Program. Run by Glenn Doman of Philadelphia, the program claimed that exposing infants and toddlers to reading and math flash cards could increase their intelligence.

“Parents came into our lab every day asking about this flash card thing, which was a complete joke and a farce. It was a money-making scheme,” recalled Strauss, then an assistant professor.

Strauss said there was—and continues to be—no evidence that early exposure to educational materials such as flashcards boosts a children’s brain growth. To refute the idea with science, he regularly gave media interviews to dispute the idea, appearing on NBC’s TODAY show and a science TV show hosted by Walt Cronkite, as well as in numerous local and national newspapers, even though it was discouraged at the time for junior faculty to speak to the press.

The experience made him realize the divide between the world of academics and the community.

“It struck me how academics were so far separated from the community. We had all this good information that wasn’t getting out,” Strauss said.

He teamed up with another young Pitt faculty member, Carl Johnson from the School of Social Work, to organize a conference on popular issues in child development and the media.

The conference was a success. To continue the work, Strauss and Johnson established a new “facilitation office” in 1986 that was charged with continuing this type of information-sharing with the community. The office—which they named the Office of Child Development (OCD)—would highlight faculty experts from different areas across Pitt and would encourage collaboration.

“We noticed there was a lot of expertise in the child development field but very little interdisciplinary connections across those disciplines. The units were really quite isolated,” recalled Johnson.

Initially based in the Office of the Provost to give it a university-wide position, the OCD received \$200,000 in seed funding from the Heinz Foundation and Buhl Foundation.

From these beginnings, the OCD was born. And soon, the office transformed into something much bigger and more impactful than its architects Strauss and Johnson imagined.



From Facilitation to Transformation

Forty years later, the OCD has grown into an expansive university-community partnership that has improved the lives of tens of thousands of children, youth, and families across Western Pennsylvania and internationally.

The OCD's impact is far-reaching. Its work has supported babies in Pittsburgh's inner-city neighborhoods and in government-run orphanages in Russia. It has addressed housing challenges such as lead poisoning and homelessness, provided resources for pregnant teenagers and mothers experiencing maternal depression, and helped parents who are Black navigate complex conversations about race and racism with their children. Across the region, the OCD has also worked to strengthen reading and literacy in schools.

"What really surprised us was the need in the community. It drove the office far faster than we imagined," Johnson said.

The OCD quickly pivoted from being a facilitator of work to being the implementer of groundbreaking work in child development.

Now employing over 45 staff members, the OCD is based in the School of Education and offers seven divisions and services to support the whole family, encompassing early childhood partnerships, evaluation and research, family services, literacy and learning, and positive racial identity development.

"It isn't something we do alone," said Sharon Ross, interim executive director of the OCD and associate professor in the School of Education. "We have a diverse network of over 57 partners, comprised of organizations and sectors across early childhood education, school districts, and community organizations. Together, we promote thriving in children and families in the region and beyond."

One Foot in the University, One in the Community

The Office of Child Development quickly outgrew its original purpose as a facilitation unit, according to Bob McCall, its initial director.

"At the OCD, we were not intended to house programs or run them," he said. "We were intended to be a facilitator,

The OCD provides services for children, youth, and families in Pittsburgh and around the world.

Photo submitted from the University of Pittsburgh



“THE OFFICE WAS ALWAYS DESIGNED TO HAVE ONE FOOT IN THE UNIVERSITY AND ONE FOOT IN THE COMMUNITY.”

Ray Firth, former Policy Director at the OCD

to bring people together, to encourage them to come together, to create an interdisciplinary program, and then those participants would go off and do it. However, when we got a grant, people would say, ‘Hey, if we needed an independent organization to convene us, we certainly need an independent manager to run this project now that there is real influence and money to manage.’”

The OCD would fill that role. The office’s grant portfolio quickly grew, spurred on by what local communities needed.

McCall immediately realized he needed help managing community relations. Within his first month on the job, he hired Chris Groark to provide policy and community relations services—and she went on to serve as co-director with him for 25 years.

Groark recalls the early challenges with the public. “I was trying to get into communities and talk with them about what was needed,” she said. “We were not welcomed. Because we were the University of Pittsburgh and there were some faculty who had screwed up before us. They’d go in as the professional, the expert, try to do some stuff, and then leave or disappear. Our whole approach was very different from that. We made a point of listening to them and made a sustainability plan for all our projects.”

Groark said the OCD hired staff from the community. People who had been in jail were hired for crime prevention work in communities. People who were receiving welfare support were hired for work that involved home visits.

“The office was always designed to have one foot in the university and one foot in the community,” said Ray Firth, a former policy director at the OCD.

Guided by its reciprocal, community-driven approach, the OCD’s grant portfolio soon expanded to about \$7–8 million annually. In the years since, OCD has received more than \$250 million in grants. The greatest proportion comes from government health and human service agencies, including the federal Early Head Start program.

Eventually, the Office of Child Development left the Provost Office. For several years, it was located in the University Center for Social and Urban Research, before finding its permanent home in the School of Education.



A Lesson that Travels the World

Community needs took the OCD all the way to Saint Petersburg, Russia.

From the late 1990s through the mid-2000s, the office worked with several Russian government-run orphanages—known as “baby homes”—to improve the quality of care. Led by Groark, the team observed that the caregivers rarely talked to the children, avoided eye contact with them, and quickly shoveled food into their mouths. The attitude was “impersonal,” McCall recalls. This was despite many of the caregivers having children of their own, whom they did not behave this way with.

After extensive observation, the OCD team found that the caregivers were avoiding getting too close to the babies because they did not want to get attached to the children because they would soon leave for adoption or to go to the next institution.

“We gave them permission to love these children like they love their own. It was very non-scientific in that sense but actually grounded in the research and extensive technical evaluation the project received,” McCall said.

This simple attitude adjustment made a profound difference in the lives of the children. After the intervention, the babies saw measurable gains in social, behavioral, and mental skills on standardized testing measures. In response, the Russian parliament, the Duma, passed legislation to implement these changes across orphanages.

The OCD team also brought this work to orphanages in China, Kazakhstan, and Latin America.

“The project changed the nature of those orphanages and the care those children received,” McCall said.

A Place that Shapes People

The ripple effect of OCD is evident in former employees who’ve taken the lessons they learned and applied them to other organizations.

Junlei Li, former director of the OCD’s division of applied research and evaluation, is now the Saul Zaentz Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

He counts himself as a “graduate” of the OCD—crediting his seven years working there as a training ground for how to run a practitioner-led organization that operates with “a clear sense” of what children, families, and communities need.

“All of my professional work and all my teaching at Harvard today are centered on the lessons that I learned from the Office of Child Development,” Li said.

Roger Fustich, former director of administrative operations, said the OCD was a special place because everyone had tremendous knowledge, combined with a love and desire to help children and families in the community.

“The same compassion that carried over into the constituents was also very evident in the organization itself. The people cared for each other,” Fustich said.

Laurie Mulvey, former director of the service demonstration division, led several teams who, in partnership with community providers and families, promoted quality prevention, child development, and family support services throughout Allegheny County.

“It’s a very mission-driven place. Almost a magical place with a magical mission,” Mulvey said.

Sheila Beasley, who held a training and outreach director position within family support, said it’s incredibly gratifying to know that babies supported by OCD programming have grown up great and have started families of their own.

“It’s the greatest gift to witness the impact,” Beasley said.

Where Literacy and Equity Meet

Today, the OCD vision is to support a world that is just, rooted in love, and where all children and families have the resources, support, and relationships needed to thrive.

The 3Rs Initiative—which stands for reading, racial equity, and relationships—was created several years ago in partnership with The Pittsburgh Project, a youth advocacy organization.

The initiative brings high-quality, racially affirmative picture books into elementary schools. Children experience more joy when seeing characters who look like them and reading about stories that are uplifting and relatable, said Marla Woody, an educational consultant and former reading specialist at the Urban Academy in Pittsburgh’s Larimer neighborhood.

She says “The Me I Chose to Be” by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley is a prime example of celebrating self-love and potential for Black and brown children.

“It’s important for kids to see themselves in the books, which can be a mirror or a window that they are looking into,” Woody said.

Tiffany Sanchez, now an instructional coach at Pitt’s Gismondi Neighborhood Education program, used to be an



Children enjoying a community pop-up festival organized by the OCD

instructional coach who supported teachers at the Urban Academy in using the 3Rs books in their classrooms.

“That was the first time I was able to be an unapologetic Black educator on purpose specifically. It gave me the confidence to say, ‘I’m a Black educator and educating Black children is very important to me,’” Sanchez said.

The 3Rs initiative has also extended into central Pennsylvania, as OCD staff have facilitated annual workshops for several years for the community members of the Catherine Hershey Schools for Early Learning.

“We want our teachers and staff to feel confident—not only hearing the content but truly understanding how it applies in their daily work serving children and families,” said Patrick Eckelmann, learning and development manager for the organization.

Helping Students Love Who They Are

Another OCD project, the Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E.) program, is celebrating its 10-year anniversary this year.

“Black children are often receiving subtle and overt messages that they are not as beautiful, not as intelligent, not as lovable, not as worthy as other children. Those messages start very young in ways we don’t always see,” said Medina Jackson, current director of the P.R.I.D.E. program.

To change that narrative, the P.R.I.D.E. program has offered many programs. It has a Parent Village for teaching parents, professional development training for teachers, pop-up art festivals in city neighborhoods, and produces research and educational materials including past speaker series, podcasts, and articles.



Photography by Nick Conti



Rhonda Hall, director of family and community partnerships for the Office of Child Development

Photography by Nick Conti

Doreen Glover from Family Resources' Hill District Family Center says parents have benefited from the sessions, whose topics have covered being happy in one's own skin, parenting while Black, and the power of dance.

"Hopefully what the parents learned will trickle down to their children," Glover said.

Cicely Hanner, a teacher and STEAM coordinator in grades K-5 at the Urban Academy, has welcomed P.R.I.D.E.-sponsored artists into her art classroom to teach lessons on affirmation. The students have created mosaics with tiles and beads, a woven story quilt about themselves, and a snow globe with water inside.

The art lives in a space affectionally known as their "PRIDE land."

"They were able to help our students love being the Black child that they are," Hanner said.

Carrying the Work Forward

The next chapter is beginning at the OCD. Betsy Levine Brown will become the next director on August 15, 2026.

Levine Brown is poised to carry on the legacy of

the initial co-directors McCall and Groark, who were succeeded by Shannon Wanless after their retirement. Wanless, an associate professor in the School of Education, is now director of the University Center for Social and Urban Research.

What began as a small facilitation office grew into a national model for sustained university-community partnerships. For decades, the OCD's work has been anchored in relationships with Pittsburgh communities, state, local, and federal government agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

The collaborations have improved lives, with effects that ripple outward into the world.

A few years ago, Groark and her husband were attending a wedding in Clarion County, Pennsylvania. Seated next to them was a family with two cute young girls. Groark found out they were adopted from an orphanage in Russia that the OCD had improved years earlier.

"We changed a lot of lives that we probably won't even find out about," Groark said.

Years earlier, Mark Strauss spoke out against empty promises for child development that promised quick fixes.

This helped build the Office of Child Development, an institution that has endured and helped improve the lives of countless people. ■

Racially affirming children's books from The 3Rs initiative





Elizabeth Levine Brown

Meet the Next Director

Following a national search, Elizabeth “Betsy” Levine Brown has been appointed as the next executive director of the School of Education’s Office of Child Development. She will also serve as a professor in the school’s Department of Health and Human Development.

Levine Brown joins Pitt from George Mason University’s College of Education and Human Development, where she was a faculty member since 2011. Levine Brown’s commitment to education and community impact began early in her career through Teach for America. She taught at elementary schools in Brooklyn, New York; Washington, D.C.; and Maryland.

She is the author of nearly 40 peer-reviewed publications, with work appearing in journals such as *The Teacher Educators Journal*, *Journal of School Health*, *Early Childhood Development and Care*, and *Teachers College Record*, along with numerous book chapters, technical reports, and manuscripts. Levine Brown also leads several multi-million-dollar grant projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, addressing youth mental health and violence prevention.

The appointment also marks a return to Pittsburgh for Levine Brown. She earned her PhD in applied developmental psychology from the School of Education in 2011 and holds a BA in psychology and educational studies from Colgate University, a MAT in elementary education from American University, and an MA in psychology from Washington College.

THE OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Office of Child Development is organized into six divisions:

- Family and Community Partnerships
- Early Childhood Partnerships
- Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education
- Evaluation and Research
- Literacy and Learning
- Family Foundations: Early Head Start



Photo from the University of Pittsburgh

Sean Russell Jr.
on the campus of
Stanford University
in California.

10th Anniversary
Justice Scholars Institute

Believing Bigger

Photo submitted by Sean Russell Jr.

For 10 years, the Justice Scholars Institute has raised expectations and re-shaped access to college for 500+ students from Pittsburgh Public Schools. The program is changing lives and transforming schools through their work with a dedicated network of teachers.

■ BY GREG LATSHAW

When Sean Russell Jr. enrolled at Stanford University, he occasionally had his moments of imposter syndrome. Did he truly belong there? Could he keep up academically?

He was also a long way from home—over 2,600 miles from his public high school, Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy in the city's Homewood neighborhood.

But once Russell, a bioengineering major, began his classes and joined extracurricular activities, he realized he did belong at Stanford. Soon he was thriving. Despite completing a very challenging major, he pursued his interest in writing on the side, penning a script about an allegorical tale of fame and the perils of labeling people that was a finalist for a film festival in Los Angeles, California.

"I learned a lot about how sometimes life is just about opportunities and how we utilize them. There's not a lot that separated me from anybody else," said Russell, now a fourth-year student who is planning to attend grad school and later work in the medical industry.

When he began his college search, Stanford wasn't on Russell's radar. He planned to apply to local and regional universities until Sean Means, his history and social studies teacher at Westinghouse, encouraged him to think bigger—much bigger.

Eventually, Russell applied to 19 colleges across the country, also getting into Harvard, Yale, and the University of Michigan. Along the way, his argument and rhetoric teacher, Angela Flango, helped him fine-tune his college essays, as she was part of the village of educators at Westinghouse, which also included statistics teacher Vincent Werling.

"The teachers, they really do want the best for you. It's important to have faith in their judgment. If they're believing in me, why shouldn't I believe in myself?" Russell said.



A Pathway to Possibility

Russell is one of many students from Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) who have participated in the Justice Scholars Institute (JSI) program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Now in its 10th year, the college preparation program has altered the academic trajectory of students in urban schools by showing them that college or a trade school is within reach.

The JSI program allows students at Westinghouse, Pittsburgh Perry Traditional Academy in the North Side, and Pittsburgh Milliones University Preparatory School in the Hill District to take Pitt's college courses in high school at no cost. The 14 courses offered in the program—which mirror Pitt's undergraduate classes—include applied statistics, argument, biology, introduction to social justice, U.S. history, African American history, and 20th-century African American literature.

In addition to taking college classes in their high schools, students also complete college visits, college prep workshops, and a culminating project that includes writing a 15-page paper and presenting research posters at a symposium.

The research papers address a variety of topics. The usage of prosthetic devices, the impact of epilepsy, and the stigmatization of pregnant women with substance abuse are some of the topics students recently explored.

Means has taught courses at Westinghouse in the JSI program since 2017. He challenges his students and doesn't sugarcoat his lessons, which draw heavily from current events, American politics, and examples of injustices and

inequity—topics that generate fierce discussion about forms of structural racism that persist in the City of Pittsburgh.

"The discipline has to be there. We can't coddle them," Means said. "I don't want them to think the world is going to give them anything. I want them to always think, 'I have to go get this, it's not just going to come to me.'"

Means says it's been gratifying to see Russell come so far out of his shell in college.

"When he first came in, he was so quiet and reserved," recalled Means. "I still take him to and from the airport every time he comes to town, and now he won't stop talking."

Proof of Impact

Since 2016, 539 students from PPS have taken college courses while in high school through the JSI. Sixty-one percent of these students have enrolled in college—including at Pitt, Penn State University, Robert Morris University, Slippery Rock University, Temple University, Coppin State University, La Salle University, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, and multiple Pennsylvania Western University institutions. They've pursued a variety of majors, everything from nursing, education, and pre-med to business. One student, who went to the Community College of Allegheny County, is now training to become a pilot.

The seeds for the Justice Scholars Institute were planted by founder and director Esohe Osai, an assistant professor in the Pitt School of Education.

College prep day at Alumni Hall on Pitt's campus

Photography by University of Pittsburgh





Teachers, community partners, and team members of the Justice Scholars Institute

A former high school teacher in Detroit, Michigan, Osai wanted to develop a program to support students who were passionate and capable but lacked AP courses and college readiness services in their schools.

“My big life question was how do you prepare them for adulthood?” Osai said. “I knew the schools I wanted to go to were the schools that had the most African American and low-income youth in their buildings in the district. It’s not a coincidence that these schools are the schools that have the least access to courses, the least investment in the rigorous programs that would help students to be prepared for college.”

After Osai completed her PhD from the University of Michigan, she joined the Pitt School of Social Work and worked with Professor John Wallace. The JSI program began with the inaugural JSI course introduction to social justice, which was the first dual-enrollment social work course offered at a school in Pennsylvania.

“For myself and the teachers, we see the students transform in ways that are beautiful,” Osai said.

The JSI program partners with the Pitt College in High School (CHS) Program, a concurrent enrollment program in which students earn college credit and high school credit at the same time.

CHS courses save students money. They result in actual college credit, whereas AP class credit acceptance varies by college. It normally costs money for high school students to take the course, but JSI covers those costs in full for PPS students.

“We make sure they are the same as on campus, so it’s not a watered-down version of the course,” said CHS Director Michael Giazconi, who oversees the over 50 CHS courses offered at Pitt.

The PPS teachers participating in JSI receive training from a Pitt faculty member who supports their courses.

Giazconi said JSI stands out because of the impressive academic wraparound services offered to students taking the courses.

“I wish we could have Justice Scholars in the almost 200 schools we work with everywhere. They would make all students more successful,” Giazconi said.

Raising the Bar Across Pittsburgh Schools

Tracey Armant, a senior program officer at The Grable Foundation, a Pittsburgh nonprofit that supports children and youth development, said the JSI program is a “poster child” for what they seek to support. The program introduces students to educational opportunities they otherwise wouldn’t have and cultivates a collective of dedicated educators who improve their teaching practice.

Along the way, JSI dismantles stereotypes of the underachieving student of color in a chronically under-resourced city school.

“The notion that there is excellence and brilliance in some of the schools that we sort of forget about is one thing that is near and dear to my heart,” Armant said.

At Perry High School on the North Side, the JSI program has grown to about 80 students taking college courses each year.

Teacher Vicki Ammer teaches a college biology course through the program, covering biochemistry, genetics, and cellular systems. She says some students are graduating with a whole semester of college credits through the program, eliminating a huge financial debt.



JSI alum
Sean Russell Jr.



JSI alum
Demir Frison



JSI alumna Aneiah Barnett-Travis



JSI alumna Maiesha Mohiuddin

“What it really boils down to is kids get exposure to a college course in a protected environment where we can steer them toward where they need to be, whereas the AP course is a one-and-done shot on the exam,” Ammer said.

Perry Principal Molly O’Malley-Argueta said the JSI program is “raising the bar for teacher practice and student expectations.” The school has experienced gains in academic performance in subjects outside the JSI program as well.

“It’s a great program, and I want to continue to strengthen it at Perry High School,” said O’Malley-Argueta, who plans to add a mathematics course in the future.

James Fogarty, executive director of A+ Schools, an education intermediary that supports children and families to succeed in school, said the JSI program has improved college-going rates at high schools. He said the rate would be higher, if not for the impact of the Covid pandemic.

Fogarty credits the program for “giving students something to strive for, and for building a culture of academic excellence.”

“I can’t overemphasize enough the ways the School of Education, with JSI’s support, have made it really easy for College in High School courses to be integrated into the schedule. It’s hard to overestimate the importance of that,” Fogarty said.

A Community That Stays with You

Led by Osai, the JSI team also includes Program Manager Erica Roberts and Research and Evaluation Coordinator Jackie Spiezia. There are 14 partner teachers across Westinghouse, Perry, and Millions and several retired teachers serving as community partners—including

Sharon Brentley, who retired in 2022 after teaching history at Perry for over 20 years.

“Classes were Tuesdays and Thursdays for 80 minutes,” said Brentley of her former JSI social justice course, “and it was like, ‘Where did the time go?, because the bell was ringing and we weren’t even done’ with conversations and discussions.

“I loved teaching the course,” she recalled, “and students could not wait for the next class.” So many students enrolled in the class that they ran out of desks and had to borrow chairs.

Demir Frison, the class president and valedictorian of Perry’s class of 2024, is a JSI alumni who is now majoring in finance and accounting at the University of Pittsburgh. A former football player, he plans to work in wealth management with ultimate ambitions of being a financial advisor for professional athletes.

He said one of the best parts about JSI is that he’s still receiving support even in college. The program team still checks in with him regularly and will meet up with him for lunch.

“They still check on me, keep me on track. People who will stick with you are real rare,” Frison said.

The same is true for Maiesha Mohiuddin. The Westinghouse graduate graduated from Pitt this past April and is on the pre-med track with the goal of working in emergency medicine, “something fast-paced” in the hospital setting.

“When you’re in this program, they constantly check on you during your time in college,” Mohiuddin said. “It’s comforting as a first-gen student to know that if I do need something, they are there.”

10 years

of changing lives

2016

Year JSI program started

14

Total courses offered across schools

539

Number of students
in the program

61%

Percentage of students
enrolling in college

3

Number of Pittsburgh Public
Schools partnering with JSI

\$557,525

Potential tuition saved by
students in 2025-2026

The Power of “Why Not Me”

This continued support is a key feature of the JSI program. Many alumni of the program also noted how taking the courses changed their life trajectory.

Aneiah Barnett-Travis just wrapped up her sophomore year at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, where she is studying accounting. She plans to work for a Big Four accounting firm and is interested in forensic accounting.

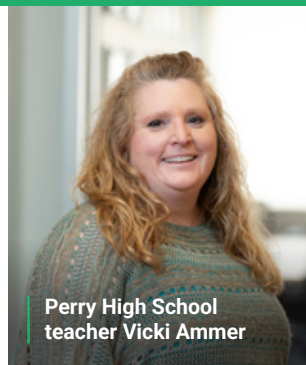
“If I didn’t join Justice Scholars, I don’t know, life would probably be different for me. I wasn’t initially thinking about going to college,” Barnett-Travis said.

Isis Philibert is the founder of ICEY Aesthetics, a downtown Pittsburgh beauty salon specializing in lash extensions, full-body waxing, lash lifts, brow lamination, and tints. A graduate of Duquesne University with a background in entrepreneurship and innovation, she transformed her hustle of doing women’s lashes while completing her bachelor’s degree into a full-time business.

“Sometimes college doesn’t seem attainable depending on where your zip codes are at. All of that is completely dependent on you and how much work you put into your education,” Philibert said.

What’s next for JSI?

The team is developing an app that uses generative AI and career inventory tools to help students further explore their possible selves. Additionally, they are increasing their focus on non-college pathways for students who don’t aspire to a four-year education.



Perry High School
teacher Vicki Ammer



Westinghouse teacher
Sean Means

For Russell, who is attending Stanford, his life began to change when—encouraged by his teachers at Westinghouse—he started asking the question, “Why not me?”

Why couldn’t he put himself out there? Why couldn’t he accomplish what he put his mind to? If others could do it—why couldn’t he?

Why not me?

That mindset led him to Stanford, where he is receiving a full ride through the prestigious Gates Foundation Scholarship.

His Westinghouse teachers and supporters at JSI are thrilled to see him succeed.

Means, his former social studies and history teacher, admits the examples of the kids who didn’t finish the program stick with him more.

“If a kid reads this, I want them to know that we believe in them,” Means said. “I know we didn’t give them everything they needed, but we tried. As long as I have breath in my lungs, the door is open for my kids. The door is never closed.” ■



Genius scholars
presenting at a
closing ceremony



5th Anniversary Genius, Joy, and Love

Nurturing Joy and Love in Teachers

The School of Education invites Pittsburgh students to explore the education profession and see themselves as future teachers.

■ BY GREG LATSHAW

Now entering its fifth year, the School of Education's Genius, Joy, and Love (GJL) program is diversifying the teaching profession by growing the pipeline of future educators of color.

Each summer, a cohort of 11th- and 12th-grade students from Pittsburgh Public Schools completes a four-week summer program hosted on campus in Wesley W. Posvar Hall.

The curriculum, delivered by School of Education staff and faculty, is meant to be a gateway into the teaching profession. The students—known as Genius Scholars—complete a mini-college experience with academic readings, campus visits, field trips to community sites, and wellness and creative activities.

"Genius is inherently in our children, so we devote our time to ensuring they embrace this fact," said Shallegra Moye, who as director of educational enrichment and transition programs at the School of Education serves as the program facilitator and director. "What makes the Genius, Joy, and Love scholarship academy unique is that it provides critical education theory and development that may not be found in teacher preparation programs."

Created by former Renée and Richard Goldman Dean Valerie Kinloch, the GJL program is





meant to boost interest in the teaching profession among high school students of color.

Amid a nationwide teacher shortage, persons of color make up a small percentage of the teaching workforce. They account for 6% or less of public school teachers in Pennsylvania according to Research for Action and 20% or less of public school teachers in the United States, according to the Learning Policy Institute.

Elijah Warren, now a student at Slippery Rock University majoring in health and physical education, participated in Genius, Joy, and Love for the third time this summer as an intern. He first participated in summer 2024 after graduating from Pittsburgh Millionaires 6-12 and came back the following summer to be a mentor.

“The program always sticks with me,” Warren said. “Whenever I’m presenting or teaching my class, I always remember to go up and be my full self—leave everything on the plate. I don’t think about being nervous or shy. I try to be myself and bring that confidence and try to bring that out of other people around me, hoping they feed on my energy as well.”

The GJL program—which received the University of Pittsburgh’s Partnerships of Distinction Award in 2023—helps Genius Scholars envision themselves as college-ready educators.

Program alumni have attended college at Pitt, Slippery Rock University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Western University. Some have majored in teacher education while others have pursued degrees in nursing and business.

The Pittsburgh Promise helps identify students to participate in the GJL program and provides scholarship support for students to attend college. Supporters William and Debbie Demchak have provided the primary funding to offer the program and volunteer their time to support it.

Moye said GJL prepares its participants to succeed by recognizing and celebrating their natural abilities and by deepening their knowledge of the history and foundation of education.

Each day, the Genius Scholars reflect on “Our Deepest Fear,” which is a passage from the book *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson that speaks to how embracing one’s potential is freeing and inspires others. Through the course of the program, they develop and deliver presentations; engage in discussions with national and local education leaders such as Chike Akua, Tony Mitchell, Vannessa Davis, and Tyler Gregory; and give a final presentation on an action-oriented solution to a pressing education challenge they identify.

As the demand for teachers grows, the GJL program lays the groundwork to meet the need.

“I want to work in a public school setting and am considering a master’s in education,” Warren said. “The program is very beneficial. You meet great people. I still talk to them, they’re some of my best friends.” ■



THE MEANING OF THE NAME

Pitt’s Genius, Joy, and Love summer program helps high school students explore becoming K-12 educators.

Genius

Recognizing students’ intelligence and potential

Joy

Making learning fun, memorable, and meaningful

Love

Building supportive relationships in education

SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS OF COLOR

Teachers of color make up:

6%
or less of public school
teachers in Pennsylvania

20%
or less of public school
teachers in the United States

Sources: Research for Action and Learning Policy Institute.



Photo submitted by Matthew Roberts



Matt Roberts
outside the
Alexandria
Seaport
Foundation

Learning Beyond the Classroom

Meet three alumni who bring learning to life in out-of-school spaces.

■ BY GREG LATSHAW

Learning happens everywhere, not just during the school day.

School of Education Professor Tom Akiva notes that roughly 80% of a child's waking hours are spent in informal learning environments.

The larger learning ecosystem also includes time spent at home, in after-school and summer programs, playing sports, and with their peers and the community.

"To improve education, we need to expand our views of education to include all the places where learning and development occurs," said Akiva, who helped author a new report on out-of-school time programs for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

To address this critical dimension of learning and development, the School of Education offers the nation's only Doctor of Education (EdD) with a major in Out-of-School Learning. The program prepares educators to support youth across a wide range of settings.

In spaces far beyond the classroom—from boatbuilding workshops to dance studios to museums—Pitt EdD alumni are reshaping what learning looks like for young people. They are changing not only what young people learn but who they become.

Pursuing One Degree of Change

Helping young adults reimagine their future through the craft of boatbuilding.

On a typical day, **Matt Roberts** (MEd '10, EdD '24) hears the buzz of saws, the thump of hammers, and a distant foghorn. The floor gently sways beneath him. His workplace, the Alexandria Seaport Foundation, sits on a barge along the Potomac River in Virginia. In the distance, he can see the dome of the U.S. Capitol.

Roberts is program director of the nonprofit, which offers a six-month boatbuilding apprenticeship for 18- to 23-year-olds disconnected from school or work. Many participants have faced trauma, housing instability, or involvement with the justice system.

"We always say the woodworking and the boatbuilding are just the vehicles for teaching them life skills and workplace skills," Roberts said.

After 20 years as a classroom teacher, Roberts joined the organization in 2025 and now designs its curriculum. Apprentices earn \$14 per hour and learn from skilled volunteers while building boats, practicing workplace readiness, and developing life skills.

"First and foremost, this is a safe place for people who have kind of been failed by the system," Roberts said.

Learning begins with small projects—a stool or birdhouse—before advancing to wooden skiffs. Math, science, physics, and art come alive through the work.

"There is an entire high school curriculum in a single wooden boat," Roberts said.

After completing the apprenticeship, the apprentices are placed into jobs with a variety of local organizations. Some pursue jobs in the trades and join the carpenters' union.



"Our goal is to get them into good-paying jobs. We're training them for a career," Roberts said.

Drawing on his EdD, Roberts applies improvement science and emphasizes transformation.

"It was only one degree of change while here, but it amounted to a huge change five, ten years down the road." ■





Ayisha Morgan-Lee at the Hill Dance Academy Theatre

“GROWING UP IN PITTSBURGH, IT WAS RARE TO SEE ANY DANCERS OF COLOR IN THE STUDIO OR TEACHING. I WANTED TO MAKE SURE THERE WAS THAT OPPORTUNITY, PARTICULARLY IN MY HOMETOWN.”

Ayisha Morgan-Lee (EdD '20)



Choreographing Possibility

Leading a dance studio specializing in Black dance forms and traditions

For two decades, **Ayisha Morgan-Lee** (EdD '20) has been creating space for young people in Pittsburgh to see themselves reflected in the arts. As founder and director of the Hill Dance Academy Theatre (HDAT), she has built a community-centered studio dedicated to preserving and advancing Black dance traditions.

Located on Bedford Avenue—the birthplace of August Wilson—the studio centers Black dance traditions, histories, and culture, offering training in ballet, African, jazz, modern, hip-hop, theater, and tap.

“Growing up in Pittsburgh, it was rare to see any dancers of color in the studio or teaching. I wanted to make sure there was that opportunity, particularly in my hometown,” said Morgan-Lee, CEO and artistic director of the studio.

HDAT teaches students ages 3 to 18, pairing dance training with classes in nutrition and theatre. “It’s more than just dance education. We want them to have a knowledge of the arts,” Morgan-Lee said.

In 2021, the studio expanded by purchasing the former St. Benedict the Moor Center. HDAT now has 31,000 square feet of space across three different buildings. The campus includes a performing arts center and a residency retreat space to host visiting artists.

“It has become bigger for us than we can ever imagine. We’re teaching kids not just how to dance but how to keep a community arts center vibrant,” Morgan-Lee said. ■

Curating a Calling

Following a path to a museum leadership role

For **KT Todd** (EdD '22), the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh is more than a workplace—it’s a laboratory for creativity, curiosity, and reimagining how children learn outside the classroom.

“It’s definitely my dream job, and I absolutely credit the EdD program and [my former professor and advisor] Dr. Kevin Crowley for connecting me to it,” Todd said.

In this role, Todd gets to co-design, study, and evaluate the museum’s interactive exhibits and other experiences. The work includes evaluating exhibit prototypes, developing accessibility services, leading a multi-million-dollar portfolio of research projects with other museums, and overseeing the museum’s professional development program.

Todd leads a research agenda grounded in equity and out-of-school learning, collaborates with partner organizations, and oversees professional development programs. They also value building a strong, mission-driven team.

“I know it’s cliché, but I’ve been able to hire incredible people... You can’t get better than that,” Todd said.

Before Pitt, Todd worked at the Museum of Science in Boston and sought a doctoral program that allowed them to continue working while focusing on museum learning. Pitt’s part-time EdD with a focus on out-of-school learning provided that opportunity—even with a monthly flight to Pittsburgh.

“I loved the in-person sessions,” Todd said. “I made really close friendships... It felt like a family.” ■



KT Todd at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh

Success is in the Eye of the Beholder

A Conversation with Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman

An assistant professor in the Educational Foundations, Organizations, and Policy department, his research explores how colleges can build more equitable learning experiences for underrepresented students—including autistic students, community college transfers, and LGBTQIA+ communities—drawing on his own lived experiences along the way.

Your research is deeply personal. What drew you to studying autistic college students?

I was diagnosed with Asperger's when I was 8 years old. Although I was a child, I felt very stigmatized, a sense that carried with me into my early college years. I decided to "come out" and talk about my autism experience during my community college student commencement speech. It was a significant moment where I felt recognized as a student leader and, thus, comfortable to disclose this part of my identity.

So what does "success" look like for autistic college students?

We learned from our national longitudinal study of autistic college student success—called PEACES (Postsecondary Education: Autistic Collegians' Experiences of Success)—that the very word "success" is in the eye of the beholder. We need to remove our own interpretations of what should matter and instead prioritize their

perspectives. Among factors that most support their success are building friendships with people who have shared interests, obtaining appropriate accommodations that meet their needs, and taking courses in their majors.

PEACES is the nation's largest study of autistic college students. What findings surprised you?

We found that while some families are indeed supportive, others might be rejecting or overcompensating toward their autistic child. In fact, survey data shows one-quarter of autistic students indicated their families are harmful.

We also found friends to be among the biggest contributors to students' success regarding their importance—often the #2 factor—contrary to popular misbeliefs about students with autism not wanting these connections or knowing how to have them. Many autistic students foster them online based on special interests in autistic spaces. Another surprising factor is that autistic college students hold high levels of self-awareness of how their autism both positively and negatively impacts their college lives.

You've developed a first-day activity in your classes in which students write on a card (anonymously) to share any learning challenges or ways the instructor can foster a successful learning environment. What inspired this approach?

I remember in graduate school thinking of how important it is for faculty to hold awareness of their students' needs. I realize that many faculty have some version of this activity and, for me, I use it as a space to account for not only individual students but also to determine larger needs across the classroom.





What can colleges do to help autistic students feel like they truly belong?

Colleges are well positioned to create spaces for belongingness but first they must have a good understanding of the needs of their autistic students. While each institutional setting may differ, some common considerations are transferable. For one, it's always a good idea to create intentional spaces for community building, whether via an autism club or group, panel, or educational event. Additionally, developing more low-sensory spaces and options during campus events may make it less overstimulating for autistic students to find connection.

Finally, you're open about being autistic yourself. How does that shape your work?

I've grown a lot more confident over the years to just be myself, and I believe people generally respond well to my vibe. I build trust with my participants because of that authenticity and ethic of care. I have a deep understanding of the communities at hand, and I also appreciate that I may not share all the same experiences and never want to come off as all-knowing. I think expressing a genuine openness to learn is always a good practice. Ultimately, I seek to present students' stories in a holistic manner. ■



BUILDING CO





CONFIDENCE, ONE REP AT A TIME

In its first year, Pitt's Exercise is Medicine On Campus program has transformed how students think about health—and themselves

■ BY JUNIOR GONZALEZ

When University of Pittsburgh student Patrick Tuinstra was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in early 2025, a nutritionist in student health services pointed him toward a program he'd never heard of: Exercise is Medicine On Campus (EIM-OC), housed within the School of Education.

It turned out to be one of the best referrals he'd ever received.

"I'm a lot more comfortable being in a gym full of people than I was before," said Tuinstra, now a third-year student majoring in urban planning. "My biggest thing is, it's hard to be your own accountability partner. This program gave me that."

Tuinstra is one of more than 20 Pitt students who found their footing in the gym—and built real confidence in their own health—through EIM-OC during the 2025-26 academic year.

The program, part of a national network coordinated by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), pairs students with exercise science interns for personalized, no-cost fitness support. The School of Education effort finished the year with a Gold Campus designation from ACSM, a growing intern cohort, and a community event that even brought some cute, furry friends to Trees Hall.

Photography by Junior Gonzalez





Students gather for an early morning jog in Oakland as part of the "Morning Miles" series hosted by EIM-OC at Pitt.

Getting People Moving

The program is a passion project of Zachary Wilson, assistant professor of practice in the School of Education who serves as director for the program.

Wilson and inaugural intern Navreen Kaur (MS '25) established partnerships with Pitt Student Health Services, Campus Recreation, and the Counseling Center to connect students who could benefit from structured fitness support with exercise science interns.

Referrals come from across campus and a range of starting points: a student recovering from surgery, someone managing a new chronic diagnosis, or a graduate student who wants to start exercising but doesn't know where to begin. What they find is a three-month program designed to build independence through fitness.

Each participant receives a comprehensive assessment covering cardio endurance, strength, flexibility, blood pressure, heart rate, and other baseline metrics. From there, interns design individualized programs built around push, pull, leg, and core movements, incorporating dumbbells, machines, and bodyweight exercises tailored to each person's goals.

In the first month, interns train alongside their clients twice a week; by the third month, clients are working out on their own, with their intern still providing programmed workouts and check-ins.

Monthly reassessments track workout numbers, but the real measure of progress is often harder to quantify but is perhaps even more meaningful.

"We target the students who need help, and when we break down a couple of barriers and establish new healthy goals with our clients, their appreciation for exercise really starts to show," Wilson said.

The Interns Behind the Program

The program's first full year was powered by a rotating cast of School of Education exercise science seniors who completed the internships as a capstone experience.

Michael Chreiman (BS '25) began his internship in fall 2025, working with 13 students and laying the operational groundwork—including a client intake process,

individualized programming templates, and coordination with campus partners.

He credits coursework from faculty members Anne Hayes and Carma Sprowls-Repcheck, as well as what he calls "Dr. Wilson's Exercise Bible," a 70-page programming resource developed in partnership with the University Club Fitness Center for preparing him for the role.

"I valued consistency over progression," Chreiman said. "If they show up, that's a win. If they get one more rep, or if they don't feel as tired after a cardio session, that's a win. It's the little things that matter."

When Chreiman graduated in December, he passed his client roster to Anthony Speciale and Jonathan Mitra, two seniors who carried the program through the spring of 2026.

"It was big shoes to fill," said Speciale, who also works as a fitness assistant at the University Club. "I watched how he engaged with the clients and got them involved. Just trying to follow his lead and carry it on the best I could was definitely important, and he definitely helped in that regard."

Speciale said the experience reshaped how he thinks about his career.

"Choosing this path for my last semester at Pitt was the best decision I could have made," he said. "Sharing my philosophies about training, getting people to realize there are ways to use your body to make it healthier, it's been so fulfilling. It's not something I plan on letting go, regardless of my profession."

A cohort of junior interns also contributed to event planning, the program's social media presence, and on-the-ground shadowing.

"Even though they spent only a couple of hours a week working in the program, they had fun making videos, shadowing the senior interns, and advocating for the program," Wilson said.

What struck Wilson most across both semesters was the interns' genuine investment in their clients.

"Whether it's them coming in to tell me with so much excitement how their clients improved or just seeing their

faces light up knowing they are making a difference—it's truly inspirational," he said. "I'm so proud of all their efforts this past year to continue to build a foundation for this program to run."

The Students Who Showed Up

The program's impact is most visible in the students it helps.

Jorge Olavarria, a PhD student in civil engineering, came to EIM-OC while recovering from knee surgery. An active soccer player before his injury, he knew he needed to return to exercise but felt overwhelmed by the prospect of figuring out a gym on his own.

"The machines are weird. You don't know how to use them properly," Olavarria said. "This program solves all of that. You get a pal who comes with you, that teaches you how to use the proper equipment, how many reps you need to do. It's exactly what you need to get started."

The results went beyond physical recovery and into the mind-body connection.

"I was really hesitant to do things after the surgery. I didn't know I was capable of what I've done," he said. "Now I realize I can do that and much more. I'm now jogging with no problem, lifting weights and stuff."

Tuinstra had a similar experience. Managing type 1 diabetes while navigating college life made establishing a regular workout routine feel more urgent but also more daunting. The program's structure and personal connection made both more manageable.

"He is easily the nicest person I've met at Pitt in my entire experience so far," Tuinstra said of Chreiman. "As long as you're committed, he's 100% committed to you."

In the spring, Speciale worked with a client who was brand new to structured exercise and came in with goals that went well beyond the gym. In his first month, the student lost nearly 10 pounds, and asked Speciale to add an extra training day to his program.

"To see how happy that's making him, to be the person guiding him through this, has been terrific," Speciale said.

A Gold Campus and Feel-Good Finale

The wildly successful year for EIM-OC at Pitt culminated in two big milestones: In early April, it received a "Gold Campus" designation from the ACSM—just one of 81 institutions with the designation, recognizing the program's demonstrated commitment to campus health promotion across programming, partnerships, and student engagement.

Then, just a week before finals, EIM-OC interns and the Exercise Science Organization came up with their most creative health event yet, co-hosting "Feel Good Friday," a de-stress event in the Trees Hall courtyard.

The event included music, food, drink, and several baby goats from Wilson's own family farm, available to hold and pet. Dozens of students, faculty, and staff took part in the event: a fitting capstone for a program made to instill healthy habits while having fun.

Wilson sees health transformations as the core purpose of the EIM-OC program at Pitt.

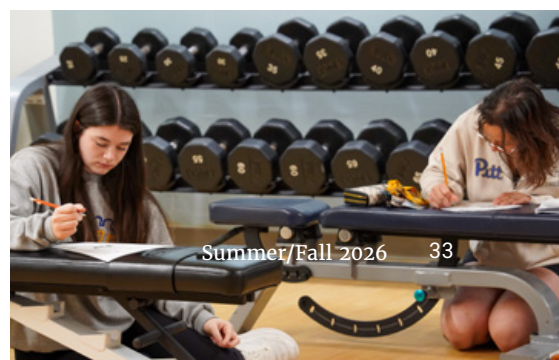
"Our students get to witness life-changing habits become instilled into their clients," he said. "Their success was their intern's success. That will forever be life-changing for all of them." ■

“CHOOSING THIS PATH FOR MY LAST SEMESTER AT PITT WAS THE BEST DECISION I COULD HAVE MADE. SHARING MY PHILOSOPHIES ABOUT TRAINING, GETTING PEOPLE TO REALIZE THERE ARE WAYS TO USE YOUR BODY TO MAKE IT HEALTHIER, IT'S BEEN SO FULFILLING.”

Anthony Speciale



Photography by Junior Gonzalez



■ BY JUNIOR GONZALEZ



Cindy Tananis (right)
with wife Nancy Mantz

Building on a Legacy of Evaluation

Estate gift to establish a program evaluation conference at the School of Education

Cindy Tananis (BS '79, EdD '00) dedicated her professional life to helping educators make meaningful decisions through access to better information. Now, through an estate gift she and her wife Nancy Mantz made to the School of Education, that mission will go on for generations.

The **Tananis-Mantz Endowed Program Fund** will support an annual conference for education leaders focused on how program evaluation and assessment can advance educational goals. As the endowment matures, additional funds will support students in the School of Education's educational leadership programs.

Tananis, a self-described "Pitt lifer," earned her undergraduate and doctoral degrees at the School of Education and spent her career at Pitt as a research associate, assistant professor, and ultimately associate professor in the School of Education's school leadership program before retiring in 2020 as associate professor emerita.

She founded the school's Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity (CEAC), an initiative that brought millions of dollars in grants to the university for projects with nonprofits, schools, foundations, and community organizations across 20 years. As a working evaluation center for the region, CEAC supported academic funding for over 70 undergrad and graduate students.

Her path into evaluation work was not linear. After graduation as a physical educator, Tananis encountered

a difficult job market. Physical education positions were often the first to be eliminated. As a result, Tananis worked in a variety of educational settings, including public school districts and residential organizations for children and adults with special needs.

She eventually landed a position as aquatics director at the Community College of Allegheny County. While there, she was asked to help collect and analyze faculty data for a Middle States Commission on Higher Education self-study and accreditation review. Then a graduate student immersed in research and data collection at the time, she "fell in love with that process."

Tananis later helped lead data collection for a multi-million dollar federal program that retrained roughly thousands of displaced steelworkers during Pittsburgh's industrial decline.

"Being able to gather good information and pass that on to good decision-makers is an important process," she said.

Mantz, a retired nurse practitioner whose 40-year career included many areas of clinical and administrative nursing that was critical to national drug trials for HIV and AIDS research at UPMC and Pitt, shares the same underlying commitment to decision-making informed by data collection.

"Pitt has been very good to both of us," Tananis said. "In looking at our legacy, we wanted to bring some resources to bear—and it seemed like the School of Education would be the best place to do that." ■

Generations of Service

Jerry Minsinger established the Minsinger Family Endowment at Pitt Education

For Jerry Minsinger (BS '75, MEd '78, EdD '86), education is a family tradition, and now, a legacy of paying it forward.

Jerry and his wife Debra recently established the **Minsinger Family Endowment** through a five-year pledge. The endowment will provide tuition and educational support for undergraduate students pursuing teaching careers, with preference given to those with financial need and an interest in urban education.

"It's a service occupation," Minsinger said of teaching. "You're helping people, as opposed to just worrying about yourself."

Minsinger worked 38 years in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, first as a classroom teacher, then as a longtime administrator in the city's South Hills region.

The spirit of service—and Pitt—runs deep in the Minsinger family. Jerry's father, Jacob Minsinger, attended Pitt on the GI Bill after serving in World War II and went on to become a teacher and principal in Pittsburgh. Now, Minsinger's son, also named Jacob, is continuing the tradition. He earned his Doctor of Education from the School of Education and provides behavioral management and curriculum support to school districts. In addition, Minsinger's daughter Chelsea is a 2016 Pitt grad from the School of Health and Rehabilitation



Three generations of educators. From left: Jacob Minsinger Sr., Jerry Minsinger, and Jacob Minsinger.

Sciences and is currently a physician assistant at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital.

Minsinger's criterion of an urban education focus stems from firsthand experience. A lifelong Pittsburgher who raised his children in the city, he's seen both the challenges and the resilience of urban communities, and the difference a dedicated teacher can make.

"People have images of the Pittsburgh schools that are not always accurate. That's why it's my priority to support them," he said.

Now 73 and still teaching—as an adjunct professor at Duquesne University—Minsinger sees the endowment as a natural extension of everything his career has stood for.

"Things worked for me," he said. "I've had a great life, and I've been blessed by my family and friends, my community, and Pitt. This is a way for me to pay it forward." ■



Colleen Morrison and Dr. David John Przekop, DVM

New Endowed Student Resource Fund

Supports graduate students in the school's visual impairment and blindness education programs

The fund is called the Colleen Morrison, Mary & Jack Morrison, Bobby Reagan, John & Lizzy Jupinko, Mary E. Morrison and Jeanne Morrison, Dr. David John Przekop, DVM Fund.



From left to right: Morrison family members include Mary Morrison (mother), Jack Morrison (father), Bobby Reagan (brother), John and Lizzy Jupinko (uncle and aunt), and Mary E. Morrison (aunt). Her sister, the late Jeanne Marie Morrison, who passed away in infancy, is not pictured.

Class Notes



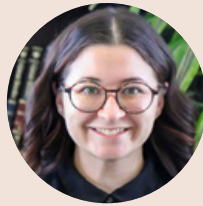
Josh Centor (PhD '16), associate vice president of student affairs and director of athletics, physical education and recreation at Carnegie Mellon University, received the 2025 Athletics Director of the Year Award by the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics.



Leigh Culley (MED '02) was appointed assistant vice chancellor for accessibility at the University of Pittsburgh in the Office of Institutional Engagement and Wellbeing.



Justin Dandoy (EdD '20) was named director of PittServes in the University of Pittsburgh's Division of Student Affairs.



Lauren DelSignore (MED '17), director of dean's executive operations at the David C. Frederick Honors College, is a recipient of the 2026 National Collegiate Honors Council Award for Administrative Excellence.



Kimberlee Eberle-Sudré (PhD '20) was appointed chief of staff to Chancellor Joan Gabel at the University of Pittsburgh.



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Assistant Professor **Osly Flores** (EdD and ADCT '17), Robert Morris University Associate Professor **Michael Quigley** (MED '06, PhD '13), and School of Education Professor **Mike Gunzenhauser** co-authored the book "Race-Conscious Caring in Educational Leadership," published by Teachers College Press in September 2025.



Nosakhare Griffin-EL (MED '08, PhD '11), co-founder of The Young Dreamers' Book Store, received The New Pittsburgh Courier Man of Excellence Award.



Patricia Hasbach (MED '82, PhD '86) is the author of the book "Prescribing Nature: A Clinician's Guide to Ecotherapy," published by Norton Professional Books.



Valerie Howard (EdD '07) was selected as a new member for the North Carolina Institute of Medicine.



Robin A. Leaf (MED '07), director of academic and department operations in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Pitt, received The Debora L. Miller Award for Leadership and Operations.



Marissa Moore (MEd '15) was named a recipient of the 2025 Iowa Department of Education Teacher of the Year in the Grant Wood region.



Silvina Orsatti (EdD '17) was elected president of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese.



Ashley Shafer (BS '14, MS '16, PhD '23), a postdoctoral associate with the school's Office of Child Development, received the 2026 Postdoctoral Leadership Award from the University of Pittsburgh Postdoctoral Association.



Haley Passione (MEd '24), a law clerk at The Employment Law Group, P.C., was named to The Pittsburgh Business Times 2026 "30 Under 30" list as a young professional making an impact on their workplaces and their communities.



Anthony Sendro (MEd/ADCTG '23) was appointed assistant principal of West Jefferson Hills Intermediate School.



Shaun Allen Tomaszewski (BPhil '09, MEd '10, PhD '26) was named vice president of strategic initiatives and community engagement at the Community College of Allegheny County.



DaVaughn M. Vincent-Bryan (EdD '26) was appointed dean of students at Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania.



LaToya Walters (MEd '23), associate director of graduate and professional school recruitment for the University of Pittsburgh, was accepted into NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management's competitive Leadership Academy for this year as Pitt's representative.



Jason Watkins (EdD '20) was appointed assistant superintendent of the Grove City Area School District.

Share Your News or Make a Philanthropic Gift

Have you changed jobs or received a promotion? Are you interested in making a financial contribution to support the School of Education? Let us know by emailing soenews@pitt.edu. We share updates in the magazine, social media, and the school website. To update your alumni information, contact Director of Development and Alumni Affairs Mike Haas at mbh26@pitt.edu.



Co-Founder of Parent Coworking Hub

Anna-Maria Karnes (PhD '19) is part of a team that opened a new coworking space for parents with remote-based jobs. Based north of Pittsburgh in Wexford, Beanstalk HQ offers flexible childcare services, on-site workspaces for parents, a play space for children, and a café and lounge. The goal is to be a place where parenthood meets productivity. "Our model is geared towards the modern parent who is juggling remote/

hybrid work and looking for different childcare options," Karnes said. In addition to the business, Karnes works at Pitt's Center for African Studies as an assistant director for academic affairs. She said responses from parents using the coworking space at Beanstalk HQ have been positive so far. "They feel like they got some work done, and the kids are happy too," Karnes said. ■



Top Alumni Honor

Emeritus Professor Rita Bean (MEd '66, PhD '74) received the University of Pittsburgh's 2025 Distinguished Alumni Fellow Award, the highest honor conferred by the Pitt Alumni Association. For decades, Bean taught courses in the school's reading specialist certification program and published scholarly works that have been cited more than 4,000 times by other researchers. Along with her late husband Tony Eichelberger, Bean established several scholarships in the School of Education and with Pitt Athletics, and she is also an active member of the school's Board of Visitors. ■





Leading a School for the Blind

Rebecca Renshaw (PhD '10) was appointed the executive director of the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children (WPSCB) in Pittsburgh in August 2025. She is the third consecutive alumna from Pitt to hold the role, succeeding Heidi Ondek (EdD '03), who was director from 2018–2025, and Janet Simon (MEd '68, PhD '78), who held the position for 25 years before that. The strong connections exist because of the School of Education's graduate programs in blindness and visual impairment. Founded in 1887, WPSBC is a private institution serving the needs of approximately 200 enrolled students ages 3–21 with blindness and visual impairment from 85 school districts across Western Pennsylvania. "All the skills I learned at Pitt helped me become an exceptional leader," Renshaw said. ■

Prestigious Research Opportunity

Meghan Orman (PhD '24) was selected as one of two inaugural Jackie Bezos Researchers in Residence at the Bezos Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization focused on helping young people reach their full potential. The organization was created in 2000 by Mike and Jackie Bezos, the parents of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. "My work has always been rooted in community," Orman said. As a developmental scientist, Orman aims to expand research focused on early childhood ecosystems and culturally responsive approaches to learning and development. She previously completed a U.S. Fulbright and National Science Foundation project to study how Icelandic preschoolers connect to nature and think about the natural world. ■



In Memoriam



Eugene Khorey (MEd '58) died on January 21, 2026, at the age of 99. A respected leader in Pittsburgh Public Schools, he served as the founding principal of Brashear High School, where he played a pivotal role in guiding the school through its early years of integration, bringing together Black and White students from across the city.



William E. McDonald died on May 19, 2026, at the age of 85. A lifelong educator, he was a former director of the Fanny Edel Falk Laboratory School at the School of Education. He is remembered for the many contributions he made to improving the K-8 school.



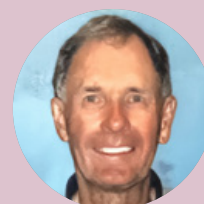
Timothy F. Murphy (PhD '79), a psychologist and former U.S. congressman who represented Pennsylvania's 18th congressional district for 15 years, died on July 18, 2026, at the age of 73.



Three-time Pitt alumnus **Tom Meisner** (BS '68, MAT '70, PhD '78) died on January 21, 2026, at the age of 79. He devoted his career to public education, working as a teacher, middle school principal, and school administrator. After retiring, he was a docent at Heinz Memorial Chapel and served on the School of Education Alumni Society for many years, including as president.



Emeritus Professor **John C. Mosely** died on January 21, 2026, at the age of 90. A faculty member in the counselor education program, he was committed to supporting students' personal and professional growth. Beyond the University, he founded a career skills and job placement organization dedicated to helping at-risk youth. He earned both his MEd (1968) and PhD (1976) from the School of Education.



Emeritus Professor **Robert J. Robertson** died on November 13, 2025, at the age of 82. A proud two-time alumnus of the School of Education, he earned his Master of Arts in 1967 and his PhD in 1973. Over a distinguished career, he was a dedicated educator, mentor, and respected researcher in exercise physiology.



Ada L. Vallecorsa (left) died on August 15, 2025, at the age of 77. She earned her PhD in special education from the School of Education in 1979 and became a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Education.

She Built More than a School

Remembering alumna Betty Hord Robinson's enduring impact through the Manchester Academic Charter School

■ BY JUNIOR GONZALEZ AND
CONTRIBUTING WRITER ERVIN DYER

When Vasilios “Vas” Scoumis started at the Manchester Academic Charter School (MACS) in the 1990s, it was supposed to be a placeholder job for just a couple months until he saved up enough money to move to Las Vegas to teach science.

Thirty years later, he hasn't left.

Scoumis, who has served as CEO of MACS for more than two decades, said **Betty Hord Robinson** (BS '51, MED '70, PhD '74) “became one of the most influential people in my life.”

Robinson died on Sept. 3, 2025, at age 96. Just weeks earlier, on July 14, her husband, trailblazing Pitt athlete the Rev. James “Jimmy Joe” Robinson Sr., died at the age of 97. She is remembered by those who knew her not by her titles, but by a name her grandchildren gave her—one that stuck across the entire school she built—“gram.”

Betty Robinson grew up in Pittsburgh's Hill District, the daughter of Earl and Rema Hord, in a high-achieving family that valued education, discipline and community. She became a teacher before rising through Pittsburgh Public Schools as a tough but benevolent administrator.

She broke barriers as the first Black woman administrator at Pittsburgh Public Schools, but she walked

away when she saw a need in the community surrounding her husband's church in Manchester.

Robinson first started an after-school program, then a preschool. Her program slowly grew, grade by grade, drawing support from local foundations, before the charter school movement took hold. In 1997, Manchester Academic Charter School (MACS) received one of the first three charter school licenses in Pittsburgh, cementing MACS', and Robinson's, legacy.

“She wanted to educate the whole community—the whole child,” said Bill Strickland (A&S '70), a University of Pittsburgh trustee emeritus and fellow North Side resident who was creating arts and jobs programming to aid at-risk youth and adults while Betty was developing her school. “She took children who were challenged by





poverty and academically prepared them to be successful in society.”

Always focused on the kids

As a leader, Robinson had a teaching philosophy that was simple: “It was always about the kid and what was best for the kid,” Scoumis said.

Her laser focus on students was evident in Scoumis’ job interview over 30 years ago. He recalls Robinson being distracted anytime a child walked by in the hallway outside her office door.

“I’d be in the middle of an answer, and she’d be like, ‘Hey, baby, how are you? Are you okay? Let me tie your shoe,’” said Scoumis.

Robinson’s signature toughness came out in defense of students. “She wasn’t worried about how you felt as an adult if a kid wasn’t getting the right education,” Scoumis added. “She wanted it fixed. If it hurts your feelings, sorry about that, but we need to worry about this kid.”

Her other great conviction was literacy. A lover of language and literature, Robinson was relentless about reading, particularly in the earliest stages of development. Scoumis said Robinson believed that getting a child to read in kindergarten and first grade set the trajectory for everything that followed.

“She wanted everybody reading as much as possible,” Scoumis said. “She really felt at the core that those early years were very, very important.”

While at Pitt in the early 1950s, Betty was introduced to James, a Pitt athlete and the first African American to play football for the Panthers. The couple had an abiding love of family, community empowerment, and each other that would cross generations.

Jimmy Joe was also a fierce advocate for education and justice—he founded the Bidwell Training Center, giving laborers and people struggling with addiction new skills for employment and new hope for stability. During the Civil Rights Movement, he marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and met with Malcolm X. He also became known for keeping Manchester calm after King’s

assassination, even as other neighborhoods erupted in violence.

Their son, James Robinson Jr., said his parents always supported each other’s community outreach and goals. “Their service came in shifts,” he said. “My father went first, building a ministry. Then in about the 1970s, his ‘saga’ ended, and my mother picked up and deepened her work in Manchester.”

A Legacy in the Building

Robinson retired from MACS more than two decades ago, but her legacy lives on. Manchester Academic Charter School now educates more than 170 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Nearly half of its staff are alumni of the center—living proof of the Robinsons’ belief that community can renew itself from within.

“They did pretty well for the kids,” Strickland said. “His work with the Bidwell Training Center was exemplary, and together they created places that saved lives.”

The Robinsons downplayed their accomplishments. “We had God in our guts,” Betty once said, crediting their faith as the force that sustained them through lean budgets, neighborhood struggles, and the long fight to keep institutions alive.

Their work gained national recognition. In 2004, Steeler great Franco Harris and then-Pitt Chancellor Mark Nordenberg hosted a dinner in honor of the Robinsons as they retired from the Manchester Youth Development Center. But the couple saw themselves as servants, not celebrities. “We started this as a Ma and Pa operation,” Betty said. “It’s been great. We’ve seen history, but it’s time to leave our little piece of the world.”

In truth, their “little piece” was expansive. The Robinsons’ efforts reshaped Manchester, providing stability where there had been turmoil and hope where there had been despair. Their model—rooted in education, skills training, and faith—remains embedded in the Bidwell Training Center, the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, the Youth Development Center, and the Academic Charter School.

In addition to their only son, James Jr., and his wife, Debbie, the couple is survived by three grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren and extended family, along with generations of students, parishioners, and neighbors whose lives were transformed by their vision.

In Scoumis’ office hangs a framed Pitt letterman jacket—one belonging to Jimmy Joe. Scoumis found it crumpled in the corner of a closet during a visit to the Robinson family home. “Nobody wants that,” he recalls Jimmy Joe telling him. Scoumis disagreed. He had it restored and mounted and plans to make it a centerpiece of a future remodeled gymnasium at MACS.

“Both of them—the way they lived and all of us at MACS learning from them, and passing that ethic on to other folks,” Scoumis said. “That’s her legacy.” ■

A version of this story originally appeared in Pittwire. Read more at pittwire.pitt.edu.

New Pathways on the Horizon

School initiatives connect education, workforce development, and student success

■ BY GREG LATSHAW

Under the direction of Renée and Richard Goldman Dean Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, the School of Education is developing innovative pathways to support learners across every stage of their education. The approach gives students multiple on- and off-ramps into higher education and comprehensive wraparound support services to support the “to and through of their education experience,” said Zamani-Gallaher.



“I WANT WHOEVER IS ON THE MARGINS TO BE BROUGHT INTO THE FOLD AND TO HAVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT.”

Dean Eboni Zamani-Gallaher

Mapping Pathways for Life Sciences Workers

The Life Sciences Career Pathways Initiative is centered on expanding the Pittsburgh region's life sciences workforce by creating new education and job training pathways for local workers. The pathways will stretch from middle school through advanced employment.

So far, the project has convened monthly working groups, conducted community focus groups in greater Hazelwood, developed pathway journey maps, and compiled a regional employment data catalog to better understand workforce opportunities and gaps. The effort will focus on connecting noncredit and associate's degree programs with stackable credentials.

"Our project aims to create clear career pathways to build a strong, diverse workforce for this growing industry, which is expected to add 24,000 life sciences jobs and 180,000 related jobs in southwestern Pennsylvania over the next five years," said Zamani-Gallaher, the principal investigator of the project

Funded by a \$498,000 grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, project partners include Pittsburgh Public Schools, the Community College of Allegheny County, Greater Hazelwood Neighborhood Council, Pitt Bioforge, ElevateBio, Pitt's Center for Digital Excellence in Education (Pitt EDGE), Office of Engagement and Community Affairs, and the University Center for Social and Urban Research.

Launching a Summer Bridge Program

As part of ongoing efforts to better support community college students who transfer into the School of Education after earning their associate's degree, the school started a summer program for incoming transfer students. The Dean's Spark Summer Bridge program was held over two weeks in summer 2026, giving students a head start on their college experience at Pitt before their first semester.

Through virtual and in-person programming, students were able to build early friendships and support networks



by connecting with their peers, staff, and campus resources.

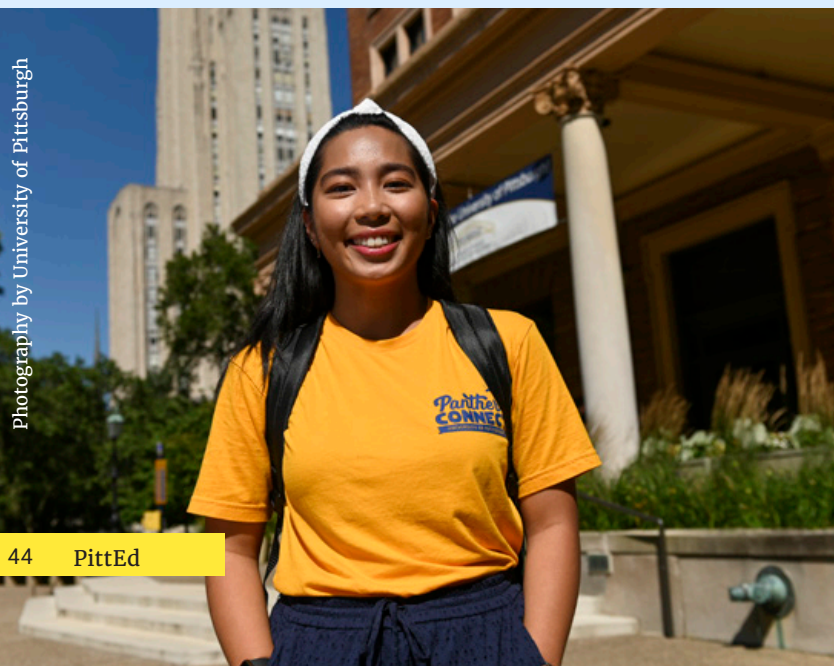
The pre-college program is part of Zamani-Gallaher's priority of making the school a top destination for community college transfer students. Other efforts underway include the annual Transfer Pathways Summit, academic and social programming specifically for transfer students, and work to establish articulation agreements with community colleges.

Establishing a Pathways Center

The School of Education is establishing a new Pathways Research and Resource Center (PRRC) to drive equity-centered innovation across education for learners of all ages, from children through older adults.

The PRRC aims to expand pathways to credentials, careers, and economic mobility for all learners. Its portfolio encompasses five primary domains: community college pathways, workforce credentials of value, early childhood education, high-school-to-college pathways, and rural and community-based education.

Building on the work of the school's Community College Research, Praxis, and Leadership initiative, the center will freely disseminate resources to the public and policy makers through practitioner-focused publications, blog posts, and podcasts. Additionally, it will provide training programs and paid consulting services to outside organizations. ■



Photography by University of Pittsburgh



Nadia Dixon (left) completed the Spark Summer Bridge program

Photography by Junior Gonzalez

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85	9.1%	\$4,550

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