**From the Superintendent...**

**Christine M. Johns, Ed.D.**

**Against the Grain**

We are proud that Utica Community Schools is widely recognized for innovation and excellence. Our teachers and staff members live out innovation and excellence in their work with students or their administrative responsibilities.

For instance, for the past sixteen years, we have received high marks on our audit, demonstrating hard work and a commitment to excellence by our finance team. In addition, when a national organization does an independent survey that recognizes the district for being a quality employer and quality workplace as Forbes recently did, it reflects the engagement of teachers and staff members across the school community.

As often as we celebrate our success, we recognize UCS made it to a new level when an internationally recognized multi-billionaire business executive gives a shout out to the innovative work of Henry Ford II teacher Mr. Christopher Davis. Sir Richard Branson, a British entrepreneur and well-known environmentalist, recently became aware that a group of Henry Ford II students were creating wood-based paddle boards.

Most paddle boards are traditionally made with fiberglass. Mr. Davis began looking into creating them from wood. On his own initiative, Mr. Davis investigated how paddle boards are being constructed by a northern Michigan company with a wood-based market niche.

Bringing the idea back to UCS, Mr. Davis proposed working with the company – Little Bay Boards – to show his students how their woodworking skills could lead them into a fast-growing career in sports and recreation. Mr. Davis’ work with students and wood paddle boards suddenly went global when he got the attention of Mr. Branson, an avid paddle boarder, who promptly requested one of the unique boards.

Mr. Davis responded innovatively by establishing a plan that cut against the grain of gender stereotypes. He created a team of all-female students to build Mr. Branson’s board. The student team was excited to build the board, which are annually set by state lawmakers – have been well below the rate of inflation.

She noted that the district continues to feel the impact of a $470 per pupil reduction approved by lawmakers in 2012. The cumulative effect of the reduction is $54.8 million.

**Fiscal Responsibility Recognized as “A+” for Independent Audit**

According to the national auditing firm Plante Moran, Utica Community Schools has maintained its 16-year record of excellence in financial reporting. The auditors found that through “A+ work” UCS has a structurally balanced budget.

Donna Hanson, CPA and partner in the auditing firm, said the district has for the 16th straight year received an audit that demonstrates strong financial controls and policies.

“It is clear that the Utica Community Schools Board of Education and leadership are committed to meeting the highest level of fiscal accountability for their community,” Hanson said at the October 28 Board of Education meeting. “To use the language that you would be most familiar with, you have achieved A+ work.”

**Students Network with District Leaders**

Student representatives from every UCS high school and specialty programs recently met with district leaders to share student feedback on their schools during a two-hour program held at Stevenson High School.

**Collaborative work results in UCS having settled current contracts with seven of its eight employee groups.**

On December 9, the UCS Board of Education unanimously approved an agreement with the Utica Paraprofessional Association.

Our staff is committed to showing students how they can make a difference in their community through service. During the holiday season every school has a charity drive to support area families. This year, our students are supporting more than 200 charities.
Points of Pride
All UCS high schools named among nation’s best for STEM
All four Utica Community Schools comprehensive high schools have been named among the nation’s best for providing student experiences in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Eisenhower, Henry Ford II, Stevenson and Utica high schools were among the top 13 percent of the nation’s public and private high schools to be honored as 2020 Best STEM schools by Newsweek Magazine.

UCS Bands are Superior
All four Utica Community Schools bands took top honors at a recent regional competition. Eisenhower, Henry Ford II, Utica, and Stevenson bands received the top Division 1 ratings from judges at the annual Michigan School Band & Orchestra Association (MSBOA) District 16 Marching Band Festival.

Utica High, Henry Ford II, and Stevenson performed Wednesday at Runkel Field. Eisenhower performed Thursday at L’Anse Creuse North High School.

Each school’s performance was graded by three judges, one judge for music, marching and general effect.

UCS student athletes finished a successful fall season
Eisenhower High School: District Championship for Varsity Football; 10th in State and MAC Players of the Year for Girls Golf; State Qualifier for Cross County and 24th state finish for Boys Tennis with six athletes qualifying for state finals

Stevenson High School: Semi-finalist for Varsity Football, district championship for Volleyball, and seven state qualifiers for Cross Country

Henry Ford II High School: MAC Blue Champs for Volleyball

Utica High School: State Qualifier for Cross Country

UCS remains a leader in K-12 computer science
District builds strong foundation in technology
Naliyah Reeves understands the importance of learning the programming behind her Lego robots. “This is serious business,” said Reeves, a fourth grader who is a member of the Browning Wreckers robotics team. “You need to understand coding because you have coding and technology in games and the internet.”

Reeves and her teammates are among the first teams of younger elementary students competing in an expanded FIRST robotics competition. The team reflects the growing efforts to introduce coding and programming content to students at an early age, in a way that builds a strong technology foundation for future success. UCS is one of the first districts to have a comprehensive and consistent K-12 computer science program for students.

Through this leadership, the district is giving its graduates an advantage for high paying jobs that

UCS Honors Choir set to Perform on January 8
A more than 40 year tradition in Utica Community Schools is back for another year. The UCS Honors Choir will have a public performance on January 8, 2020 at 7:00 p.m. at the Performing Arts Center at Henry Ford II High School.

The Honors Choir features two students from each school, selected by their school elementary music teacher, to be part of the choir. The group practices every week after school beginning in September and finishing with its public concert in January.

The choir is under the direction of music teachers Susan Rosso, Jennifer Gard-Eret and elementary teacher Dana Gress.

The Honors Choir is an example of why Utica Community Schools continues to be recognized as one of the nation’s best communities for music education by the National Association of Music Merchants.

Contracts
Continued from front page
The Utica Paraprofessional Association is an affiliate of the Michigan Education Association (MEA). The three-year agreement adds an additional cost to the district of $1.5 million over three years.

Details of the negotiated agreement include:
• Annual step increases on the salary scale. A step is an increase in pay based on experience. Steps and/or half-steps are not guaranteed and must be collectively bargained.
• A one-time off-schedule payment of $200 - 400 per person depending on qualifying status.
• An increase in the wage scale over the three years of the agreement.

In addition to Board of Education approval of the paraprofessional agreement, the district has approved changes for the administrative group that includes principals, associate/assistant principals, executive directors, directors and supervisors.

Since March 2019, the district bargaining team met on 22 separate occasions, 15 of which involved the district’s full bargaining team, with representatives of the Utica Education Association (UEA) to put together the details of a new contract.

Despite the dedication to good faith bargaining represented by this significant commitment of time and money, to date the district and the UEA have been unable to reach a mutually satisfactory successor contract.

UCS has taken the necessary steps to request the services of a State appointed mediator as it continues to bargain a new contract with the UEA representing teachers. District officials noted that an objective third party is often able to help all sides discover new options and opportunities while finding a collaborative solution. The key is an agreement that is fiscally responsible and financially realistic.

Left to Right: Naliyah Reeves, Bradley Maier, Olivia Richter, Micah Sornig and Kennedy Remsnyder
**Welcome to Parents of the Class of 2033!**
**Save the Date for Kindergarten Open House**

Utica Community Schools will be hosting its annual open house on March 11 to begin the registration for students entering kindergarten in the fall of 2020.

All 25 UCS elementary schools will hold an open house for new kindergarten students at 7:00 p.m.

We believe our students’ academic success is strengthened by a positive partnership between home and school. The Kindergarten Open House is the first step in our working together to meet the high expectations we have for our students.

At the open house, parents will have the opportunity to learn about the district’s curriculum, meet the teachers and building staff and submit school registration forms.

UCS offers students comprehensive instruction in core academic areas of English Language Arts, reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies. Students also receive instruction from specialized teachers for media center/technology, art, music and physical education.

In addition, UCS offers a personalized blended learning program at the early elementary level that allows teachers to use technology – iPads, laptops and SMART boards – to support an environment based on each students’ learning style and pace. The program has been honored at national and state level for its innovation and impact on learning.

Children are eligible for kindergarten if they turn five years old on or before September 1, 2020. However, children who turn five between September 1 and December 1, 2020 are eligible to enroll in kindergarten if their parents submit a waiver form.

For more information, please visit: www.uticak12.org/kindergarten

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**Specialty Programs Expand Options for Secondary Students**

UCS Secondary Specialty Programs are part of our district’s “Portfolio of Choices” that support the unique needs, talents and interests of our students and their focus on successful college and career experiences. The specialty programs are offered hand in hand with the nationally recognized programs and services available through our district’s four comprehensive high schools.

Students apply for the programs while in eighth grade and, if accepted, begin attending as ninth graders.

Every eighth grade student has the opportunity to apply for the district’s four-year secondary specialty programs through an open and accessible process, regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, disability and/or gender. All students who apply and meet program requirements have an opportunity to be selected.

The secondary specialty programs include the Utica Academy for International Studies (UAIS), the Utica Center for Mathematics, Science and Technology (UCMST), and the Utica Center for Science and Industry (UCSI). Students attending Davis, Heritage, and Jeannette junior high schools and residing in the attendance boundary for Stevenson High School, are also invited to apply to the Stevenson Manufacturing Automation and Design Engineering (MADE) Academy.

Interested eighth graders may apply on Wednesday, February 5, 2020 at 4:00 p.m. when the online application will be live. The application closes on Friday, February 14, 2020 at 11:59 p.m. A link to access the application can be found at www.uticak12.org/academics/specialtyprograms/2020_application_process

It is never too early to begin planning for your student’s future educational opportunities. Attend the UCS Academic Blitz on Thursday, January 9, 2020 at Henry Ford II High School to hear more about UCS Specialty Programs and find out how to prepare for the application process. (See article above.)

For more details, consider attending the UCS Specialty Program Informational Nights.

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**Ready, set, Academic Blitz! Plan early for secondary success**

The Academic Blitz is an opportunity for all UCS families to find out more about the extensive portfolio of opportunities and programs available to students through its schools.

By working closely with our parents, the district remains committed to providing all students rich experiences that spark creativity and prepare them for academic success.

The Academic Blitz, created 13 years ago by the Superintendent’s Student Advisory Board, was developed to ensure parents knew of the available secondary options and could take advantage of the services and programs open to all students.

By planning early, parents can set their students on a path that best fits their needs and interests.

At the Blitz, families can select up to three sessions to attend and visit a series of informative booths, all designed to provide program overviews and opportunities to have questions answered. District administrators, building principals and staff are also on-site and available to parents.

Join us for this year’s Academic Blitz scheduled for Thursday, January 9, 2020 from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. at Henry Ford II High School, 11911 Clinton River Road in Sterling Heights.

For more information and session descriptions, please visit www.uticak12.org/academicblitz.

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**Class of 2020**

Applications for the Superintendent’s Scholarship are now available. Visit www.uticak12.org/superintendentScholarship for the application.

Deadline to submit is Monday, January 6, 2020
Students Continue to Achieve Success in College-level Advanced Placement Courses

UCS is increasing both the student participation and success levels in college level Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams. AP courses, which are offered at secondary schools, give students the opportunity to earn credit or advanced standing at most of the nation’s colleges and universities.

Over the past four years, the number of students participating in the district’s 30 AP programs and taking the national exam has grown by approximately 32 percent. Recently, more than 500 students were honored as AP Scholars by the College Board, which administers the AP program. According to the Board, UCS has more students participating in AP courses than any other Michigan school district. Since 2016, the number of students enrolled in AP courses has grown from 2,945 to 3,863. During that same time, the number of exams taken by UCS has increased from 3,290 to 4,349. The tests are graded on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest. Students who score a 3 or higher will receive consideration for credit by colleges and universities.

The district provides support for students who increase the rigor of their academic coursework including those participating in Advanced Placement. Partnerships have been developed with national organizations, such as Equal Opportunity Schools, Advancement Via Individual Determination, Microsoft and the College Board, to drive successful student outcomes.

Computer Science Leader

will strengthen future economic growth – whether that is across the world or right in our backyards in the defense, automotive or healthcare industries.

Through partnerships and program development, UCS has created a K-12 continuum that focuses not only on computer science, but also develops skills that businesses see as essential for a future workforce – innovation, creativity, teamwork and problem-solving.

“I like coding because when you succeed, it is very satisfying,” said sixth grader Van O’Brien.

Against the Grain

It is not every day that school systems receive a shout out from an international celebrity. Yet, through their innovative approach and commitment to excellence, Henry Ford II teacher Mr. Christopher Davis and the woodworking students of Utica Community Schools are modeling the benefits of an outstanding education.

They reflect what I see across our district every day. Teachers committed to engaging students innovatively and challenging them to be excellent. Staff members looking for ways to serve and engage with our families and students to ensure a quality educational experience.

On behalf of our entire community, I want to thank each of you for your continued support of our schools and our work to make our students successful in academics and their life. Have a safe and happy holiday season. And, by the way, look for those wooden paddle boards. I hear they make great gifts!

Independent Audit Receives A+

“Through your hard work to address head on the revenue challenges you face, you have brought expenditures in line with the revenue levels set by the State of Michigan,” Hanson stated.

For the fiscal year 2018-2019, expenditures of $269 million were reported. Nearly 80 percent of the budget goes directly to instructional and instructional support. Hanson noted that UCS has one of the highest percentage of expenditures directly supporting teachers, paraprofessionals and the costs of classroom instruction among regional and comparable school districts.

“We understand that this community trusts and supports the school district to use public resources to achieve our educational mission,” Board President Dr. Robert Ross said. “This audit assures our residents that we will continue to maintain the highest standards in accountability and transparency.”

Revenue for the district is $275 million, primarily through state funding sources. “We are committed to excellence and accountability in all that we do,” said Superintendent Dr. Christine Johns.

“The financial professionals who work in our business office deserve congratulations and affirmation for work that is well done! Like our teachers and staff members, they live out the mission and values of our district every day.”

A video of the audit presentation and more information is available at http://www.uticak12.org/audit19.