



Eureka City Schools Invests in Educators Through Innovative Graduate Partnership

At Eureka City Schools (ECS), the future of learning begins with investing in the people who make it possible.

This year, twenty-seven ECS educators were awarded scholarships to participate in an innovative, competency-based Master of Education program made possible through a partnership with 2Revolutions and Spalding University. The initiative represents a significant step forward in the district's long-term commitment to building a learner-centered system.

For Superintendent Gary Storts, the partnership reflects both a professional vision and a personal commitment to the community he has always called home. Having grown up in Eureka and served the region throughout his career, he sees this work as deeply rooted in place and purpose. He explains that the partnership emerged from relationships and conversations with national education leaders who understood the direction ECS was taking. Those discussions led to exploring professional learning opportunities that could help embed competency-based learning across both classrooms and district systems.

“What really drew us in,” Storts shared, “was the opportunity to approach competency-based learning from both sides, supporting classroom practice while also shaping the policies and systems that make it sustainable.”

The program offers two pathways: Learner-Centered Practices, which focus on instructional strategies that support personalized learning in classrooms, and Learner-Centered Systems, designed for leaders working on structures, policy, and districtwide alignment. Together, the pathways ensure the work is cohesive from classroom to cabinet.

Kristi Puzz, Director of Personnel Services and Public Affairs at Eureka City Schools, is a participant in the Systems pathway. With nearly three decades of service in ECS, as a teacher, coach, principal, and now district leader, she sees the program as timely and transformative.

“As we move toward personalized, competency-based learning,” Puzz explained, “it’s incredibly powerful for our educators to experience this type of learning themselves. What we’re doing in this program mirrors what our students will experience, and that perspective matters.”

Participants meet weekly, complete rigorous assignments, and engage in applied projects aligned with district priorities. The fast pace and depth of the work, Puzz mentioned, are part of what makes the program impactful.

“It’s demanding,” she said, “but it’s also energizing. We’re gaining a wealth of resources and ideas while thinking strategically about how everything connects to our district goals. That’s going to be a real advantage for ECS moving forward.”



Originally, ECS leaders expected to accept a smaller group of participants. However, when the application process opened, the level of interest and the depth of educators' reasons for applying prompted the district to expand the cohort.

"This isn't an easy program," Storts noted. "Participants have to demonstrate mastery before moving on, and it takes real time and energy. But the commitment we saw from people wanting to do what is best for students made it clear we needed to support them."

That level of engagement speaks to a broader culture within ECS, one defined by curiosity, collaboration, and a willingness to innovate. Puzz believes the program will help build internal expertise that benefits the entire district.

"We're creating a group of early adopters," she explained. "They'll be able to try new strategies in their classrooms, and eventually other educators will be able to visit and see learner-centered practices in action. That kind of visibility helps build momentum across the system."

The partnership is also helping ECS clarify its long-term vision for teaching and learning. Storts described how the district began its journey by asking educators a simple but powerful question: What is the purpose of school?

The answers, he said, painted a picture of learning environments centered on engagement, ownership, and meaningful demonstration of knowledge. When district leaders compared those ideas to research on competency-based learning, the alignment was clear.

"Our educators described their ideal learning environment," Storts explained, "and without even naming it, they were describing competency-based learning. That gave us confidence we were moving in the right direction."

A hallmark of the graduate program is its culminating defense of learning, in which participants must demonstrate mastery, reflect on their growth, and apply their learning in authentic ways. ECS leaders see this model as closely aligned with the experiences they hope to create for students.

Puzz noted that this approach is already shaping how she thinks about professional development and evaluation. ECS is currently refining its Portrait of a Graduate and exploring how students might demonstrate mastery at key milestones. Experiencing a similar process themselves, she said, helps educators better envision what those student experiences could look like.

"If we're asking students to show their growth and mastery over time," she said, "it makes sense for us as educators to do the same."

District leaders see this partnership as part of a broader strategy to support educator retention and growth, particularly important in a rural coastal region where recruiting staff can be challenging.



Puzz emphasized that the district is focused on “growing its own,” supporting educators from early career stages through advanced degrees and leadership opportunities.

“When we invest in our people,” she said, “we’re strengthening our schools and our community at the same time.”

For Storts, the work ultimately comes back to purpose. ECS’s journey toward competency-based learning, he said, is rooted in a shared vision shaped by educators themselves.

“We’re starting with our ‘why,’” he reflected. “We’re investing in our people and building a vision that fits our community. This partnership is helping bring that vision to life.”

Over the next 18 months, participants will complete six terms blending online coursework, applied learning, and capstone projects connected to real district challenges. ECS leaders expect the program to influence classroom practice, strengthen leadership alignment, and expand opportunities for student voice and ownership.

Most importantly, they believe the investment will help cultivate educators who see themselves as leaders, innovators, and lifelong learners.