



## INDEPENDENCE LOCAL SCHOOLS

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# iQ INDEPENDENCE QUARTERLY

A PUBLICATION OF INDEPENDENCE LOCAL SCHOOLS

WINTER 2026

## YOUR IQ QUICK 5

1



**In Design Technology at IPS, first graders are investigating motion and force by exploring how a ball can speed up, slow down, or change direction.** Their design challenge: create a marble run that keeps the marble moving for the longest duration possible. Incredible collaboration and innovation resulted from our young thinkers.

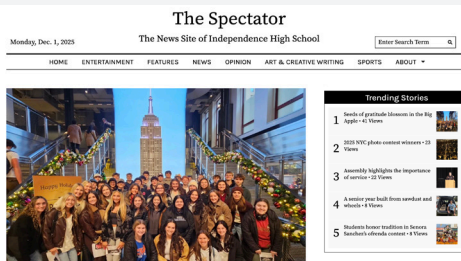
**IMS eighth graders are paleontologists in the making.** Students explored the different types of fossils and how they are formed. They then excavated their own fossils and used them to model rock strata. It was a hands-on learning experience full of discovery and fun.



2

**The student newspaper, "The Spectator," is officially live.** New stories are published daily at [www.ihsspectator.com](http://www.ihsspectator.com). This is the first edition in 15 years. Great job to the students in Jean Kanzinger's news writing class.

3



**New district educators visited City Hall this fall, where Mayor Gregory Kurtz and his staff hosted a welcome breakfast.** The event was part of our district's ongoing quarterly check-ins with new staff—a chance to build connections, share experiences, and strengthen our community partnership. Together, we are Cultivating a Legacy of Excellence.



4

**IHS Principal Mike Janatovich and Band/Music Teacher Michael Greene accepted the Purple Star Award on behalf of Independence High School at the Ohio School Boards Association conference.** This award recognizes our commitment to and support of students and families of the U.S. Armed Forces.

5



Dear Independence Families and Community,

As we move forward together in Independence Local Schools, I continue to be grateful for the partnership, pride, and unwavering commitment that define our community. Over the past two years, we have engaged students, staff, families, and community members in developing a strategic vision that reflects who we are and what we aspire to become. That vision—Cultivating a Legacy of Excellence—guides every decision we make.

At the heart of this vision are four core commitments:

- » Empowering Learners
- » Developing the Whole Child
- » Growing Our People
- » Strengthening Community

These pillars set the direction for our schools, ensuring that every student has access to rigorous and relevant learning experiences, meaningful opportunities to grow, and supportive relationships that help them thrive.

As we look to the future, one of the most important steps in bringing this vision to life is creating learning environments that match the needs of today's students and tomorrow's opportunities. Our current elementary and middle school buildings—while filled with incredible educators and memories—no longer meet modern safety expectations, instructional needs, or the flexibility required for today's teaching and learning.

After extensive studies, facility walkthroughs, community feedback, and financial analysis, it has become clear that building a new PreK–8 school is the most responsible, long-term solution for our district. This project would bring our primary and middle school students together under one interconnected facility—two schools under

one shared roof—allowing for safer spaces, improved traffic flow, greater efficiencies, and expanded opportunities for collaboration, programs, and student support.

In May 2026, our community will have the opportunity to vote on this proposed new building. Between now and then, we are committed to providing transparent information, regular updates, and multiple opportunities for residents to learn more and ask questions. Beginning this month, we will hold a series of informational sessions, share design concepts, review cost details, and outline how this project supports our long-term vision for Independence Local Schools.

A modern PreK–8 building is more than bricks and mortar—it is an investment in our community's future. It represents classrooms designed for hands-on learning and spaces that support STEM, the arts, literacy, special education, mental health services, and student collaboration. It ensures accessibility, safety, and efficiency, and it reflects the high expectations we hold for our students and staff.

Thank you for your continued support, engagement, and belief in our students. I am inspired every day by the incredible things happening in our schools—and even more excited for what is ahead as we continue building a legacy of excellence together.

With gratitude,

Kelli Cogan, Superintendent



## SCHOOL DISTRICT & CITY PARTNER TO IMPROVE TRAFFIC SAFETY AT INDEPENDENCE PRIMARY SCHOOL

The City of Independence and Independence Local Schools joined forces on a much-anticipated project to improve traffic flow and enhance safety at Independence Primary School (IPS). Construction was completed on a new rear access driveway off Brecksville Road, designed to alleviate the significant congestion that has long challenged families during student drop-off and pick-up times.

For years, the district has explored solutions to the traffic backups that frequently stretched along Hillside Road to Brecksville Road/Route 21. The collaboration between the City, the Police Department, and district leaders gained new momentum over the summer when City Engineer Donald Ramm began coordinating with utility companies and contractors to evaluate designs and costs.

“The safety of our students is—and must always be—everyone’s top priority,” said Superintendent Kelli Cogan. “The City has truly stepped up as a strong partner in helping the district move this project forward, and I deeply appreciate their collaboration and commitment to our schools.”

The project included the construction of a 12-foot-wide, 800-foot-long access drive along property owned by FirstEnergy beneath the company’s high-tension power lines. The new roadway features a 6-inch-thick, fiber-

reinforced concrete surface on a 6-inch aggregate base, with a gated entrance near Brecksville Road. The gate will remain locked except during student arrival and dismissal times on school days. Additional work on Brecksville Road included removing and replacing approximately 180 feet of raised center island to create a dedicated left-turn lane for southbound traffic entering the new access road. This will allow vehicles to turn safely without obstructing through traffic.

City Council awarded the construction contract to Catts Construction, Inc. for \$190,000, along with an additional \$10,000 easement payment to FirstEnergy to allow construction on their property.

Currently, about 130 students are picked up and dropped off daily at Independence Primary School, which also runs seven bus routes. The new access road will ease congestion, improve traffic safety, and provide emergency responders with an additional entry point to the campus.

“While the district is pursuing a future PreK–8 building in a different location, that project could take 3-5 years for completion,” said Cogan. “This new access driveway creates a safer environment for our students, families, and community right now.”

## KEY COMMUNICATORS DISCUSS DISTRICT VISION & FINANCIAL FUTURE

Independence Local Schools has held two Key Communicators meetings so far this school year, bringing together community members, staff, and district leaders for an in-depth look at the district’s current priorities and long-term planning. Superintendent Kelli Cogan and Treasurer Jennifer Knapp shared the district’s vision of “Cultivating a Legacy of Excellence” through academic innovation, responsible financial stewardship, and community collaboration.

Cogan discussed how the district is moving from vision to action this school year, including new curriculum adoptions in math and science, districtwide implementation of Tier I PBIS, and the restructuring of leadership to enhance instructional support. She also shared progress toward a new PreK–8 school building on the May 2026 ballot, emphasizing the focus on safety, accessibility, and 21st-century learning environments.

Treasurer Knapp provided an overview of the district’s financial outlook, explaining how Independence Local

Schools remains fiscally responsible while preparing for future challenges. She noted that while the district continues to invest in programs, staff, and facilities, the current level of programming is not sustainable without additional funding in the coming years. Knapp reviewed potential funding mechanisms, including various levy options, and highlighted the district’s commitment to transparency, strategic planning, and maintaining opportunities for all students.

Both leaders emphasized that community engagement is key to the district’s success. As the district continues to plan for the future, partnerships with families, local businesses, and city leaders will remain central to ensuring every student has the resources and support to thrive.

“Our schools are the heart of our community—and the success of our students reflects the support we build together,” said Cogan. “Through thoughtful planning and collaboration, we will continue to deliver exceptional educational opportunities for every Independence student.”

## PRIMARY SCHOOL HOSTS ANNUAL MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS DAY

Independence Primary School (IPS) hosted its 5th Annual Mental Health & Wellness Day on November 25, bringing together K–4 students for a day focused on mindfulness, emotional well-being, and positive mental health practices. The theme, “Be Here, Be Kind, Be Calm,” guided activities that helped students explore strategies for calm, confidence, and self-regulation.

Students rotated through hands-on stations such as mindful walking, calming coloring, kindness rocks, mindful movement with a sound bath, a self-awareness session with the City of Independence, and ASL affirmations led by Independence High School (IHS) students.

IPS extends thanks to Kurtz Bros. for generously donating the rocks used in the Kindness Rocks station. Their contribution allowed every student to create a meaningful, positive piece of art to take home or leave on school grounds to help spread kindness. IPS also appreciates the City of Independence for their continued partnership.



A special recognition goes to the IHS ASL students, taught by Meg Popa, who taught positive affirmations throughout the day and served as role models for younger learners.

Principal Jodie Hughes highlighted the importance of giving students intentional time to explore emotional wellness. “This day gives our students the chance to explore tools they can use not only in school, but throughout their lives,” she said. School Counselor Brooke Gradert added, “When children learn strategies to stay calm, kind, and grounded, they carry those skills with them as they grow.”

Students remained enthusiastic and engaged throughout the event, embracing new techniques for supporting their well-being. IPS looks forward to continuing this tradition as part of its commitment to nurturing a school community where every student feels valued and supported.



## SIXTH GRADERS BUILD CONFIDENCE AND LEADERSHIP AT SYMPOSIUM



In December, a group of enthusiastic sixth-grade leaders from Independence Middle School (IMS) spent a day growing their confidence, developing new skills, and learning alongside peers from across Northeast Ohio at the Brooklyn City Schools Hurricane Leadership Conference.

The event brought together student leaders from several districts for a day of collaboration, inspiration, and hands-on activities designed to strengthen communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Independence students eagerly embraced each challenge, participating in group workshops, leadership rotations, and team-building sessions.

IMS students made an outstanding impression. They shared ideas, embraced new perspectives, and demonstrated the values of respect, responsibility, and school pride throughout the conference.

“We are proud of the leadership our students demonstrated,” said Principal Haley Mueller. “They represented Independence with positivity, curiosity, and a willingness to learn from others.”

The students are excited to bring their new strategies and insights back to the classroom—and to continue leading the way as role models within the Independence community.

## PROVIDING MEANINGFUL CAREER PATHWAYS FOR STUDENTS

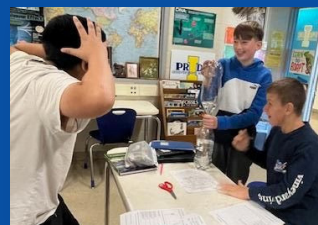
Independence High School is helping sophomores explore their interest in attending the Cuyahoga Valley Career Center (CVCC) for next school year.

In early December, all 10th graders toured CVCC to learn more about the wide range of programs available. Because some programs are highly competitive, the district is updating its selection process to ensure it is fair, thorough, and centered on student readiness and interest. Our eighth graders visited CVCC as well.

This year, two key components are being added: a student essay and an interview. These additions will help better understand each student's *why*—their passion, motivation, and connection to the program they hope to pursue. By strengthening this process, the district is supporting students in making informed decisions and ensuring access to meaningful pathways for all.

## STORM SCIENTISTS IN ACTION: SEVENTH GRADERS EXPLORE THE POWER OF WEATHER

Seventh-grade students at Independence Middle School are stepping into the role of storm scientists as they explore the dynamic forces behind rotating weather systems. In Rio Vincz's science classes, students have been investigating how low-pressure systems form powerful spiraling storms known as vortices—just like the tornadoes and hurricanes they see in real-world weather events.



Through hands-on demonstrations and lively discussions, students learned how air pressure, temperature, and motion work together to create these dramatic natural phenomena.

The classroom buzzed with excitement as students watched mini "storms" take shape and tested their own hypotheses about how vortices behave.

Vincz's energetic and inquiry-driven approach brings complex science concepts to life, helping students deepen their understanding through creativity, experimentation, and teamwork.

## INDEPENDENCE HIGH SCHOOL CELEBRATES NATIONAL HONOR SOCIETY INDUCTEES & DALE CARNEGIE GRADUATES



The National Honor Society (NHS) at Independence High School held its annual induction ceremony on November 24. Current NHS officers led the program and presented the four pillars of character, scholarship, leadership, and service to the inductees. The newly inducted members are: Daniel Alrabady, Penelope Averde, Carmen Chen, David Crooks, Jamie Donovan, Kylie Hanobik, Giovanni Hasrouni, Emma Iacianci, Julie Jurkiewicz, Robert Kalman, Shane Korinek, Josie McNamara, Lilia Pawuk, Mia Percaciante, Sophie Polter, Melina Rodriguez, Angel Sajan, Mae Sheehan, Rylee Shepard, William Stray, Ryan Suhy, and Alexander Waski.



Congratulations to the 36 students from Independence High School who graduated on November 17 from The Dale Carnegie Course—Skills for Success: Brooke Balsler, Gianna Carlucci, Brooke Coldsnow, Lauren Dalrymple, Matthew Dubitsky, Emily Gibbons, Rebecca Gibson, Elyse Grill, Owen Jenks, Anna Jirmasek, Matthew Jirmasek, Samantha Kandzer, Paul Kundmueller, Matthew Liepert, Gianna Londrico, Nathan Lu, Tate McGovern, Gracie Mindzora, Thomas Misso, Stephen Mlynarczyk, Madelyn Mudra, Kayla Newcomer, Nora Olexa, Brooke Patton, Joshua Peters, Sofia Pichert, Steven Polasko, Tatiana Randjelovic, Liam Rienerth, Matthew Shamblen, Mae Sheehan, Anthony Sobonya, Brooke Vollman, Grady Wachs, Alexander Waski, and Haley Wilson.



## BOARD OF EDUCATION APPROVES RESOLUTION TO PLACE PREK-8 SCHOOL BUILDING ISSUE ON MAY 2026 BALLOT

The Independence Local Schools Board of Education approved a Resolution of Necessity at its December 17 meeting to place a school facilities funding issue on the May 5, 2026, Primary Election ballot, focused on the construction of a new PreK-8 school building.

The proposed project would replace the district's aging elementary and middle school facilities with a single, modernized PreK-8 school designed to serve approximately 800 students. The building would be located on the district campus across from Independence High School and connected via a secure interior corridor, allowing for shared resources and efficient operations. The resolution follows a comprehensive third-party facilities assessment, which concluded that constructing a new PreK-8 school is the most financially responsible long-term option.

Renovating the existing primary school (built in 1956) and middle school (built in 1961) would cost approximately \$63 million, while constructing a new building is estimated at \$59.5 million. The proposed funding plan uses two tools that work together to support school building and facility improvements while spreading costs more fairly across the community. The first is a small property tax, known as a bond issue, which is used specifically to fund construction and long-term facility needs. All property owners and businesses contribute, and the impact is modest; however, this contribution continues for the full life of the bond, which is anticipated to be 30 years, much like a long-term mortgage for the school district.

The second tool is a school district income tax that applies only to the earned income of Independence residents—meaning income from work. This tax is automatically

withheld from a paycheck and spread across an individual's number of pay periods each year, rather than being paid in a single lump sum. Importantly, this tax is finite and situational: it only applies while someone is actively working and earning income. As residents retire, stop working, or transition out of the workforce, the tax naturally ends for them. The tax does not apply to retirement income, Social Security, pensions, or income from interest, dividends, or investments. As a result, an earned-income-only tax helps protect residents on fixed and non-wage incomes.

The proposed funding plan would combine a 0.75-mill bond issue with a 1.00% school district income tax.

At the December 16 Board of Education meeting, representatives from Garmann Miller, the district's master facilities planning partner, presented initial design concepts, cost estimates, and potential funding options for a new PreK-8 school building. Beginning this month, the district will host community meetings to share these concepts and gather feedback from residents.

The proposed PreK-8 building would total 125,530 square feet. This size reflects a collaborative programming and planning process involving district staff, administrators, and leadership to ensure the building is appropriately sized to meet today's instructional, safety, and student-support needs.

During this process, teachers and staff discussed the project during a November professional development day, while the district's Key Communicators Committee reviewed early plans and provided input during two meetings so far this school year. In addition, a community focus group was held to gather resident perspectives on the design and vision.

Student voices have also played an important role. Members of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Committee shared ideas on flexible learning spaces, collaboration, and hands-on, real-world learning experiences. District leaders noted that this feedback is helping shape the vision for a modern and connected PreK-8 learning environment.

## WHY IS THE DISTRICT CONSIDERING A NEW PREK-8 SCHOOL BUILDING?

Independence Local Schools' current primary school (built in 1956) and middle school (built in 1961) are more than 60 years old. Independent facilities assessments found that renovating these buildings to meet current educational standards, safety codes, and accessibility requirements would cost nearly \$63 million and would still leave long-term limitations.

- A new PreK-8 school with two buildings under one roof estimated at \$59.5 million would:
- » Cost less long-term than renovating and maintaining two aging buildings
  - » Better support today's teaching methods, student services, and safety expectations
  - » Allow the PreK-8 school to be located next to the high school for shared resources and smoother student transitions

## WHAT IS BEING PROPOSED?

The Board of Education has approved a Resolution of Necessity to place a school facilities funding issue on the May 5, 2026, Primary Election ballot. If approved by voters, the funding would support the construction of a new PreK-8 school building on the district campus.

## WHAT WOULD THE NEW PREK-8 SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

- The proposed building would be approximately 125,530 square feet and designed as two schools under one roof:
- » Elementary (PreK-5) and Middle School (6-8) students would have separate wings, entrances, and administrative areas
  - » Shared "core" spaces (media center, arts, STEM, common areas) would sit between the two schools
  - » A secure connector would allow middle school students continued access to limited high school resources when appropriate

All learning spaces are designed to meet or exceed Ohio School Design Manual requirements.

## HOW DOES THE DESIGN SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING?

- The layout reflects extensive input from teachers, administrators, and staff and supports:
- » Small-group and project-based learning
  - » Dedicated STEM and science spaces for elementary and middle school students

- » Special education and student support spaces in both school areas
- » A two-story media center with age-appropriate uses
- » Wider corridors and flexible areas for informal learning and collaboration

## HOW DOES THE BUILDING ADDRESS SAFETY AND SECURITY?

- The design includes modern safety features such as:
- » Secured vestibules and controlled entry points
  - » Door access control systems
  - » Interior and exterior security cameras
  - » Safety glazing/film on windows and doors
  - » A single connected campus that is easier to supervise than multiple buildings

## HOW WOULD TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORTATION BE HANDLED?

- The site plan includes:
- » Separate traffic patterns for buses, parent drop-off, and staff parking, and staggered start times between buildings
  - » Dedicated preschool drop-off and parking
  - » Clear, one-way traffic flow to reduce congestion and improve safety
  - » Final traffic plans will continue to be coordinated with district and city partners.

## WHAT IS THE ESTIMATED COST OF THE PROJECT?

- The total estimated project cost is \$59.5 million which includes:
- » Building construction: \$53,350,250
  - » Site improvements and utilities: \$4,000,000
  - » Abatement and demolition: \$2,002,837

- This is an all-in estimate that includes:
- » Construction and site work
  - » Furniture and built-in classroom technology (such as monitors/projectors)
  - » Technology infrastructure (cabling, Wi-Fi, network systems)
  - » Contingencies (approximately 8.5%)

## HOW WOULD THE PROJECT BE FUNDED?

- If approved by voters, the project would be funded through a combined bond issue and School District Income Tax (SDIT):
- » 0.75-mill bond (property tax)
  - » 1.00% SDIT (earned income)

## WHAT WOULD THIS COST RESIDENTS?

- » A resident earning \$100,000 per year and owning a \$100,000 market value home would pay approximately \$1,026.25 per year
- » A homeowner with a \$100,000 market value home and no earned income would pay approximately \$26.25 per year

The income tax portion applies only to earned income; it does not apply to Social Security or retirement income.

On the district website is a calculator to estimate each individual's cost.

## WHY DOES THE BUILDING COST MORE THAN EARLIER ESTIMATES?

Earlier concepts assumed a smaller building size. The current plan reflects a collaborative "right-sizing" process with staff and administrators to ensure appropriate classrooms, support spaces, and adjacencies needed for today's instruction and student services. The 2019 bond process did not include a Program of Requirements, which when utilized gives accurate sizing needed.

## CAN COSTS BE ADJUSTED IF NEEDED?

- Yes. During the design process, which will occur after the bond is passed, cost estimates are reviewed at multiple phases. If adjustments are necessary, options may include:
- » Material selections
  - » System features
  - » Design details
  - » Phasing or delaying certain non-essential elements

A construction manager would work with the district throughout design to help control costs.

## WHAT ARE THE OPERATING IMPACTS OF A NEW BUILDING?

- A new building would:
- » Reduce long-term maintenance costs due to new systems and finishes
  - » Meet current HVAC and air-quality codes, providing a healthier learning environment

Utility costs may change depending on system upgrades, such as adding air conditioning where it does not currently exist.

## WHEN WOULD CONSTRUCTION BEGIN?

- If approved by voters:
- » May 2026 approval
    - » Design: June 2026 – June 2027
    - » Construction: April 2027 – May 2029

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

- Between now and the election, the district will focus on sharing factual information through:
- » Community information meetings
  - » The district website and social media
  - » Small-group and community outreach

No construction decisions occur unless the issue is approved by voters.

## WHERE CAN RESIDENTS FIND ACCURATE INFORMATION OR ASK QUESTIONS?

Residents can find updates and submit questions at: <https://www.independence.k12.oh.us/page/future-facilities-planning>



WEBPAGE



YOUTUBE PLAYLIST

## COMMUNITY MEETINGS

### COMMUNITY MEETING #1

- ▶ Thursday, January 22, 2026 at 7 p.m.
- ▶ Independence Middle School  
*Babysitting provided by IHS Key Club*

### COFFEE WITH KELLI COGAN

- ▶ Thursday, February 5, 2026 at 7 a.m.
- ▶ Sweet P's Cafe & Bakery (6523 Brecksville Rd.)

### COMMUNITY MEETING #2

- ▶ Tuesday, February 24, 2026 at 7 p.m.
- ▶ Independence Primary School