July 27, 2026

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For Immediate Release:

GSCS Staff Kick-Off the New School Year with a Back-to-School Celebration

Griffin, GA – On July 23, the Griffin-Spalding County School System (GSCS) Back to School Celebration brought all 1400+ staff together for a motivational kick-off to the 2026-27 school year at Oak Hill Church.

Staff were welcomed by the drum lines of both Griffin High School (GHS) and Spalding High School (SHS). GSCS Students, Payton Duecker (GHS), Buruk Ykeallo (SHS), Rondell White (SHS), Ansley Register (SHS), Zayra Flores (GHS), Kennedy Reed (GHS) and De'ja Hightower (GHS), served as emcees for the event.

With this year's theme being "Game On," GSCS Superintendent Dr. Donald Warren addressed the staff about being a team. He reminded staff that winning teams and schools don't happen because of one superstar, they happen because everyone understands their role. He stated that, "Excellence is built when every role is valued, every voice matters, and every action supports student success. Together, we create the conditions where every student can succeed." Warren charged staff to, "Bring passion, purpose and energy. Let's support and celebrate one another. Let's raise the bar for ourselves because our students deserve nothing less. Our students are about to walk through the doors. Our families are counting on us, and our community believes in us. The whistle is about to blow. It's Game On!"

Staff were entertained, encouraged and inspired by keynote speaker Jimmy Casas. Jimmy Casas is an educator, CEO, best-selling author, speaker, leadership coach, and a state and national award-winning principal who believes that every student is one caring adult away from achieving greatness. Casas shared his four core principles: Champion for All Kids, Expect Excellence, Carry the Banner and Merchant of Hope, to remind staff that every child deserves to be a part of something great. Casas encouraged staff to enter this new school year with purpose and passion to do whatever it takes for all students to be successful.

Spalding High School Teacher Jane Burke was revealed as the 2026-27 District Teacher of the Year and was surprised with a $3,000 stipend and a gift basket, including free meals for a year, from Partner In Education Chick-fil-A of Griffin. The Teacher of the Year 1st Runner-Up, Kelly Clark from Crescent Elementary, received $2,000 and a prize pack from Chick-fil-A of Griffin and 2nd Runner-Up, Brittany Kitchens from Jordan Hill Elementary, received a $1,000 and a Chick-fil-A prize pack.

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Griffin Spalding County Schools

BOARD MEMBERS
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Zachery Holmes
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Kimberly Register
Cherri Weldon

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Accredited by Cognia

More staff recognition occurred with the naming of the 2026 Classified Employees of the Year, GSCS Counselor of the Year, GSCS Media Specialist of the Year and School-Level Teachers of the Year. Congratulations to the following:
2026 GSCS Counselor of the Year – Velencia McDowell, Carver Road Middle School
2026 GSCS Media Specialist of the Year – Jennifer Harrison, Jackson Road Elementary
2026 GSCS Classified Employees of the Year:
Nutrition – Vickie Talmadge, Atkinson Elementary
Technology – Amber Slack
Maintenance – Buddy Boggs
Clerical – Melissa Styler, Department of Exceptional Students
Transportation – Steve Corley
Custodian – Roger Taylor, GSCS Enrichment Center
Paraprofessional – Kimberly LeSueur, Rehoboth Road Middle School
Nurse – Dani Etheridge, Nurse Paraprofessional
See photos at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1H-t6B_y1v5SGu4rYq9c46kBffOR8ZEgV?usp=sharing

2026 School-Level Teachers of the Year: (Thank you to Coca-Cola for providing the Teacher of the Year plaques)
Anne Street Elementary - Hannah Brook
Atkinson Elementary - Meredith McDowell
Beaverbrook Elementary - Heather McVey
Cowan Road Elementary - Alicia Stratton
Crescent Elementary - Kelly Clark
Futral Road Elementary - Annaclaire Jones
Jackson Road Elementary - Melanie Harrison
Jordan Hill Elementary - Brittany Kitchens
Moore Elementary - Rashawn Capers
Moreland Road Elem. - Rachel Teague
Orrs Elementary - Catherine Gayle
Carver Road Middle - Amanda Thompson
Cowan Road Middle - Candece Simmonds-Ward
Kennedy Road Middle - Derek Wilder
Rehoboth Road Middle - Peter Hein
Griffin High School - Patrick Pratt
Spalding High School - Jane Burke
A. Z. Kelsey Academy - Jovan Mcfarquhar
Mainstay Academy - Kandance Evans
GRCCA - Taylor Delay
See photos at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1640o4v8TDUGNIoX66zX_N1OrpHnG3J3D?usp=sharing

Partners In Education Brightmoor Hospice, First Baptist Church, Food Depot and Marukan Vinegar donated gift cards and gift baskets that were given to some lucky staff members. Thank you to all community partners who helped make this event a success, especially Oak Hill Church for their generosity, hospitality and support!

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