TCAPS
Traverse City Area Public Schools
DISTRICT NEWS



Westwoods Elementary School Kindergarten Class

Welcome to the 2026-27 School Year!

Dear TCAPS Community,

Welcome to the 2026-27 school year! August is always an exciting time as we begin to fill our schools with the energy and enthusiasm of our students. Over the next few weeks, many back-to-school events will be happening across the district, including the various academic and co-curricular activities that TCAPS is able to provide to our Pre-K-12 students. We especially want to welcome all of our new students and staff who have chosen to become a part of the TCAPS community!

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Dr. John VanWagoner, Superintendent

Letters from the Classroom



"Nostalgia is proof you are living a life to be proud of. What a privilege it is to be able to yearn for your own memories."

Tessa Newman, Traverse City West Senior High School, Class of '27

As I go into the 2026–2027 school year, I have a unique perspective to describe the bittersweet reminiscences of my life. I've always waited for this moment: the moment when I grow up and make authoritative decisions that can change my life forever. But now, going into the new school year, I sit in silence and reflect on the memories and milestones I've achieved. I'm not ready to let everything go. I don't want to grow up. That is a sentence I never thought I would say.

Leading up to my senior year, I would sit in the cafeteria and laugh with my friends about how close we were to the end. We were excited for the day we walked the stage, said our goodbyes, and threw our caps into the air, knowing we would never have to set foot in that school ever again. High school is a tricky topic, as my mind immediately thinks of all the exhausting late-night hours of homework and test prep, praying it would all be over soon. However, I tend to forget the sweet side of the routine I've had for the past 12 years: football games, homecoming, friends, concerts, and panicked last-minute study sessions. How could I give up that piece of my life so abruptly?

From a young age, I have always been a go-getter. My anxious brain needed to be busy, so beyond school, I dedicated a lot of time dancing at Dance Arts Academy. The moment I performed on stage, I knew I wanted to be a dancer. Even though I had my life already planned out, high school allowed me to discover different parts of myself. In middle school, I fell in love with the cello and still continue to play in the Philharmonic Orchestra under Ingrid Pylvainen's guidance. In high school, I joined the Model UN team and met so many amazing people whom I hope to keep in touch with.

My junior year in high school opened my eyes to new passions that I didn't know about myself until I tried them. I want to give a shoutout to Claudia Riedy and Kelly Rintala for inspiring my interest in psychology and research. Their passion, encouragement, and dedication made learning enjoyable and sparked a curiosity that I hope to carry beyond high school.

It may seem pointless to know 100 digits of pi, symbolism in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or Constitutional amendments in the "real" world, but without all of it, could we really call it high school? To the rising 2027 seniors, take a moment to sit in the presence of everyone around you, and let's enjoy our final moments in high school rather than rushing into the next chapter. When we finally take our last look at the school, we will yearn for what it once was. And to the current students: take risks, don't be afraid to ask questions, and look for things that genuinely interest you, rather than chasing what you think is the correct answer. Thank you to TCAPS, the staff, teachers, and the student body for everything. We only live once, so *Carpe Diem*!



Embracing the Journey of a New School Year

Aspen Reamer, Traverse City Central High School, Teacher

Excitement, uncertainty, joy, fear, hope, anxiety, and optimism. These are just a few words to describe what is felt by students, teachers, and families alike as a new school year begins and they stand at the edge of the unknown.

As an educator entering my second year in the field, I am all too familiar with each emotion. I fear failure—that I will be unable to step up to the plate when faced with conflict or hardship. I hold anxiety, struggling with self-doubt and the inability to foresee hardships that will arise. And uncertainty—will I be strong enough to handle whatever this year may have in store for me?

Yet with each passing feeling of doubt and trepidation comes its opposing, more powerful counterpart—the overwhelming excitement to form new relationships and build community; the indescribable joy found in watching students experience success and laughing with colleagues; and the optimistic outlook that each year will bring unforgettable memories I will carry with me throughout my career.

These emotions are what outweigh any uncertainty and are what will keep me returning to the classroom year after year. And with every interaction, lesson, and conversation had, it is these emotions that I hope to instill in students so that they, too, continue to come back each school year feeling valued, eager, and confident that any apprehension they hold will be exceeded by their excitement for what lies ahead.

So, whether you are a student, teacher, or family, as we look to begin another school year, be sure to hold space for all the emotions. Remind yourself of the purpose that drives you forward, the promise of new beginnings, and, most importantly, that we are all in this together.



TCAPS Traverse City Area Public Schools
FIRST STEPS
Offering All Day / Every Day
Junior Kindergarten & Kindergarten
Free Preschool opportunities are available.
www.tcaps.net/enroll





Focusing on the WHOLE CHILD

LEAP Basketball at Traverse City West Middle School

Student well-being provides a strong foundation for a successful school experience. Research consistently shows that students who feel safe, connected, and supported are more likely to attend regularly, engage in learning, and experience positive academic and social outcomes. At TCAPS, supporting the whole child—physical health, social-emotional development, and mental health—is essential to helping every student thrive.

Through community partnerships, TCAPS continues to expand services and remove barriers to learning. A key example is the Student Health Center's Mobile Health Unit (MHU), a partnership with the TCAPS Student Health Center and Northwest Michigan Health Services, Inc. (NMHSI). By bringing care directly to schools, the MHU reduces barriers such as transportation, scheduling, and missed instructional time. **The Mobile Health Unit (MHU) will visit every school in the district throughout the school year. Stay tuned for more information about when it will be at your school!**

Services provided by the Mobile Health Unit include, but are not limited to:

- Well-child and sick visits
- Sports physicals
- Behavioral health supports and services
- Care coordination and community referrals

In addition, TCAPS offers a comprehensive system of supports, including School Social Workers, Behavioral Specialists, Behavioral Interventionists, School Success Liaisons, and E3 initiative providers. Through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), students receive universal, targeted, and individualized care.

Supporting student well-being is a shared responsibility. By collaborating with families, educators, healthcare providers, and community organizations, we ensure every student has the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed both in the classroom and beyond.

Success starts with Support

TCAPS
Student Support Network

A missing pair of shoes, a lack of school supplies, or unstable housing shouldn't stand in the way of a student's success. The TCAPS Student Support Network (SSN) works alongside schools and community partners to remove barriers so all students can come to school ready to learn, participate, and thrive.

How SSN Helps:

- **School Essentials:** Clothing, shoes, hygiene supplies, and classroom materials.
- **Emergency & Health:** Basic needs support, as well as medical and dental referrals.
- **Extracurriculars:** Financial assistance with participation fees and related expenses when available.
- **Housing Support:** Referrals and dedicated coordination through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to keep students connected to their school.

Need Assistance? If your family is experiencing financial hardship or a change in housing, please reach out to your child's school or email the TCAPS Student Support Network directly at **KubeshCa@tcaps.net**.

Want to Give Back? Community generosity makes this work possible. To make a financial gift in support of local students, visit **www.tcaps.net/give**. Together, we can ensure every student has the tools they need to succeed!



GROWING
Supporting and Celebrating
OUR TEAM





Coni Taylor, Associate Superintendent of Labor Relations & Legal Services

Welcome back, TCAPS staff! The Human Resources department is thrilled to share highlights from a busy and successful hiring season.

Thanks to an early recruitment strategy, we posted certified vacancies before the winter holiday break. From January through July, our team processed over 1,100 applications and conducted more than 500 interviews. As a result, we have filled 306 positions so far—including onboarding 45 new teachers! We look forward to welcoming our new staff at the New to TCAPS Orientation, August 24–26, 2026. Please also join us in congratulating Karen Chambers, former Westwoods Elementary teacher, on her new role as principal of Cherry Knoll Elementary School.

Beyond recruitment, our HR team remains committed to professional development and internal growth. Highlights include certifying 39 staff members and coaches in CPR, as well as developing leadership pathways with Northwestern Michigan College through our “Grow Your Own” initiatives. To foster retention, we will continue on-site visits and staff “stay interviews” throughout the year to gather feedback and address needs.

Finally, we look forward to continuing to recognize exceptional staff through the district Compass Awards, which honor individuals who embody our **TCAPS Compass 2.0 Strategic Plan**. Staff, parents, and community members are encouraged to submit nominations via the **Compass Award Nomination Google Form**.

To view open positions throughout the district, please visit **www.tcaps.net/jobs**.



Welcome to the 2026-27 School Year!

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As we open our doors for the new school year, our community will once again see major physical transformations across the district. Thanks to the commitment of our taxpayers and the 2024 Capital Bond Project, these investments ensure safe, modern, and high-quality spaces where all students can learn and achieve to their full potential.

This year's key upgrades highlight significant progress across our campuses. West Middle School will unveil its expanded music facilities, while West Senior High reopens with a fully completed parking site. Additionally, critical heating system replacements and essential infrastructure modernizations have been completed across multiple buildings throughout the district. Meanwhile, preliminary work is officially beginning on the three-year Central Grade School renovation. To support this exciting transition, we are thrilled to welcome Central Grade students and staff into their updated temporary home at our Glenn Loomis Building for the duration of the project.

This year, our administration team will continue to evaluate a key area across all grade levels: the use of computer screen time and digital device usage. TCAPS staff and our Board of Education have been proactive in our policies and practice with removing cell phone use during instruction time. However, due to a new state law put in place to ensure all wireless communication devices are not used during instructional time, there will be a few adjustments to this policy. To support this effort, our staff is working across the district to ensure classroom technology is used purposefully to support active learning, with offline instruction generally serving as our primary foundation. Through this balanced model, we are committed to equipping our students with the digital competencies essential for career and college readiness.

We continue to use our five-year **TCAPS Compass 2.0 Strategic Plan** to guide the school district. We are working hard to achieve the goals of our plan including:

- **Academic Achievement:** Delivering rigorous and engaging learning experiences that ensure all students achieve proficiency in literacy and mathematics, demonstrating deep understanding, critical thinking, and the ability to apply skills across contexts.
- **Student Well-Being:** Cultivating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments where every student feels connected, valued, and empowered through building relationships and group activities.
- **Positive Student Behaviors:** Promoting a culture of respect, responsibility, and resilience through modeling positive behaviors, problem-solving, and conflict resolution to build skills and strengthen relationships.
- **Post-Secondary Readiness:** Preparing every student for success beyond high school through equitable access to rigorous coursework, career exploration, and meaningful post-secondary pathways that inspire purpose and lifelong learning.
- **High-Quality Staffing:** Recruiting, developing, and retaining exceptional educators and staff who model excellence, foster innovation, and grow through continuous professional learning and collaboration.

Each year as we prepare for the opening of school, I am reminded that TCAPS is a truly great school district. We have amazing opportunities for all our students and extraordinary staff who truly have a passion to see our students succeed. Thank you for your ongoing partnership and dedication to TCAPS. Let's work together to make this a wonderful school year, and we will see you all on Tuesday, September 8!

Sincerely,
John. R. VanWagoner II
Superintendent



Rendering of Central Grade School Renovation



Christine Thomas-Hill, Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Operations

Building Our Future with School Bond Projects

As we welcome back students and staff this fall, our commitment to creating exceptional learning environments remains front and center. Thanks to our community's investment in local bond initiatives, we continue to make major strides in modernizing facilities, improving safety, and upgrading infrastructure across the district.

Here is a look at what we've accomplished over the summer and what lies ahead as we begin the new school year.

Completed and Active Projects

District-Wide Energy Efficiencies:

Upgrades to 26 boilers, 256 heat pumps, 91 unit ventilators, water conservation systems, modern building controls, and district-wide lighting are nearly complete. Students will return to safe, comfortable, and well-maintained buildings this September.

Central Grade School Renovation:

Construction has officially begun. You can track ongoing progress by visiting the Central Grade School Renovation web page on the Central Grade website.

Glenn Loomis Renovations:

Move-in activities are officially underway. When Central Grade students arrive for the first day of school on September 8, they will step into a safe, fully refreshed, and welcoming space.

West Middle School:

Enhancements include upgraded band and orchestra instructional spaces, as well as a new choir addition.

West Senior High School (Phase 2):

Work is concluding on the final phase of site circulation and pedestrian safety improvements.

Upcoming Projects

Central High School:

Major upcoming updates include a renovated gymnasium, a dedicated wrestling room, updated main and athletic offices, and a single secure entrance.

Thank You for Your Continued Support

These vital improvements directly impact our students, teachers, and community every single day. We are deeply grateful for your investment in the future of our schools.

Each month, the Board Finance and Operations Committee shares a comprehensive report featuring project photos, financial breakdowns, and upcoming purchases. You can watch live meetings or recordings on the TCAPS website and view full visual updates on the TCAPS Capital Projects web page under "2026 Updates."



West Senior High School Circulation Phase 2

Nourishing Young Minds
TCAPS
Food & Nutrition Services

EVERY FORM MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Completing the Education Benefits Form secures essential state and federal funding for all students across our district.

Apply by Thursday, October 1



ATHLETICS
STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Erica Heffner



Erica Heffner enters the 2026 season as a four-year varsity starter after serving as team captain in 2025. A leader on and off the court, Erica continues to grow in confidence, consistency, and physical ability, making her one of the Trojans' biggest offensive threats. With the ability to score from all three front-row positions, she has a powerful swing and a knack for delivering in key moments.

Last season, Erica earned Second Team All-Conference and First Team All-Region honors while leading the Trojans to their fourth consecutive conference and district titles and second straight regional championship.

Beyond volleyball, Erica has been an active member of Central High School's Student-Athlete Leadership Organization (SALO) for the past two years. This school year, she will serve her third term with the organization as one of its six team captains.

Brayden Tillman



As the West Senior High School football team prepares for the upcoming season, junior quarterback Brayden Tillman is focused on leading the Titan offense. Tillman returns as the starting quarterback after throwing for 882 yards and 11 touchdowns while adding two more scores on the ground as a sophomore.

His performance under center has caught the attention of major college programs nationwide. Entering his junior year, Tillman is already a highly sought-after recruit, holding 10 Division I scholarship offers from prominent programs, including Michigan State, Florida State, Purdue, and Wisconsin. Despite the growing national spotlight, his coaches commend his steady focus, work ethic, and quiet leadership as he guides his teammates through summer conditioning and early team practices.

With the season opener right around the corner, Tillman's preparation over the offseason has positioned him to be a major impact player in the region. We look forward to watching him and the rest of the West Senior High School football team kick off an exciting new season at Thirlby Field!

T&APS Summer Success & Fall Events

Even during the summer months, TCAPS music students have been hard at work honing their craft and preparing for another extraordinary school year.

The Central High School (CHS) and West Senior High School (WSH) band programs kicked off the summer in high gear, proudly performing as part of the landmark 100th National Cherry Festival celebration. Carrying that momentum into August, student musicians from both high schools are now gearing up for their fall marching seasons with intensive drumline rehearsals and annual band camps.



CHS Band at the Cherry Festival



WSH Band at the Cherry Festival

Over in the vocal department, West Senior High choir members gathered in early August for their annual choir camp. The three-day retreat gave students a head start on the upcoming year as they rehearsed new music, built strong team bonds, and warmly welcomed their new choir director, Duncan Cooper.



Choir Camp at WSH Auditorioum

Tune In This Fall

Mark your calendars for these upcoming fall music highlights:

Thirlby Marching Expo
October 5, 2026
TCAPS will host more than 20 marching bands from across northern Michigan for the annual Thirlby Marching Expo. This noncompetitive exhibition showcases area bands as they perform their 2026 field shows for the community, featuring performances by both the CHS and WSH marching bands.

CHS Orchestra Collaboration
October 14, 2026
The Central High School Orchestra will host and collaborate with the St. Olaf College Orchestra during its Michigan tour. The performance will take place in the Central High School Auditorium.

CHS Fall Musical *Wonderland*
Opening Night November 13, 2026
Central High School theater students will present their annual fall musical production, *Wonderland*.

2026-27 Concert Season
The TCAPS Music Department will present more than 120 concerts throughout the school year.

Visit **www.tcaps.net** for the complete district performance calendar and ticket details.

TCAPS
Traverse City Area Public Schools
FOUNDATION

Did you know that during the 2025-26 school year:

- **More than 3,000 TCAPS students federally qualified for financial assistance.**
- **More than 1,600 TCAPS students requested help with basic needs, including food, clothing, hygiene items, transportation, and assistance with LEAP fees.**
- **A total of 384 TCAPS students experienced homelessness.**

These statistics represent the ongoing critical needs within our schools and community. This is why TCAPS began fund development efforts in 2025. As we reflect on the completion of the first year of the TCAPS Foundation, we are overwhelmed by the extraordinary generosity of our community. Thank you to all who have supported our work thus far.

As we move into our second year, we maintain our focus on access and opportunities with both TCAPS Student Support Network (SSN) and the Learning, Enrichment, Activities, and Performance Program (LEAP) while deepening our community connections.

Expand SSN: To provide for the increase in student needs across our district, we have a fundraising goal of $250,000 for the 2026-27 academic year.

Sustain LEAP: To ensure programs remain accessible to all students, we aim to raise $200,000 to offset costs for LEAP participation.

Grow Our Donor Family: To help fund these essential student programs, we aim to reach 170 new donors.

Learn more at www.tcaps.net/give

TCAPS
Traverse City Area Public Schools
FOUNDATION

Join Us

8.20.2026
4 p.m. - 7 p.m.

Support SSN and LEAP
at Short's Brewing Co. Pull Barn
211 Industrial Park Drive, Elk Rapids, MI 49629

GIVE TODAY!

GET SOCIAL! Follow us on: