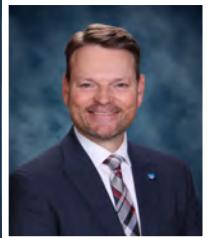


# FOCUS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Winter 2026

A PUBLICATION FOR THE RESIDENTS OF UTICA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



**From the  
Superintendent...**  
**Robert S. Monroe**

## Pursuing milestone changes through strength

We are in a great moment in time in Utica Community Schools.

In August, we opened the completely remodeled DeKeyser Elementary. The school's design fosters innovation, achievement and safety and begins a transformation for how we can best support our students and teachers.

We also began a process that takes a deep look at our student achievement and how we can take our strong school district to its next level. This work continues into the new year and will result in specific actions that are designed to improve outcomes for all students.

With changes in enrollment, we are adjusting school attendance areas and our building grade levels to support neighborhood schools and create more opportunities for student success.

These projects and many more currently underway are rooted in our district's UCS Empowered Strategic Plan. It is a plan that came together with strong community input and our shared commitment to high standards, providing us with a specific road map that sets a specific course to meet our vision of empowering all students.

*....Continue on page 4*

## Student achievement and new opportunities at the center of new grade configurations

Utica Community Schools is introducing new K-12 building configurations to support increased achievement and create new opportunities for its students.

"Our work to address grade configurations in UCS reflects everything we are about as a district – driving academic achievement, creating even more opportunities and choices for our students, and empowering our graduates for success," Superintendent Robert S. Monroe said.

Currently, Utica Community Schools has two different building configurations. Utica, Eisenhower and Stevenson high schools and their feeder schools have elementary schools of K-6, junior high schools of 7-9 and high schools with grades 10-12. Henry Ford II High School and its feeder schools have building configurations of K-6 at the elementary, 7-8 at junior high school and 9-12 at the high school level.

Effective in the fall of 2027, all UCS schools will have building configurations of K-5 at the elementary level, 6-8 middle schools and 9-12 high schools.

### ***The benefits for UCS students include:***

- Greater student access to advanced coursework and extracurricular activities.** Sixth and 9th grade students expanded course options in areas such as Advanced Placement (AP), Career and Technical Education (CTE), art and music. Students will also be able to take advantage of the wide array of clubs and athletic opportunities offered at secondary schools.
- Improved consistency between grade levels.** All UCS schools will now have the same grade structures. In addition, UCS curriculum and the curriculum and assessment standards for the State of Michigan are organized in a K-5, 6-8 and 9-12 format. This change will better align UCS schools to successfully meet those expectations.
- The reimagination of a middle school experience.** This will support the unique

needs of students in 6th through 8th grade and support a successful transition to high school in the 9th grade.

- A more efficient use of facilities,** particularly in the areas of maintenance and transportation. The changes will allow the district to redirect resources directly back into UCS classrooms.

Previously, UCS grade structures had been based on our ability to accommodate students. With the enrollment and facility changes occurring in our schools, we now have the opportunity to create a structure based on students and their success.

UCS teams are now planning every aspect of the transition, including curriculum, student support structures, and the creation of a UCS middle school model.

The new building configurations are part of the district's long-range UCS Empowered Strategic Plan. Adopted by the Board of Education in 2023, UCS Empowered supports future-focused initiatives based on the cultures of transformation, empowerment and caring.

## Help UCS continue our Legacy of Excellence

UCS is inviting all community members to participate in a survey focused on planning for the future.

Thank you for your partnership in continuing the Legacy of Excellence of Utica Community Schools.

**To take the survey, visit  
[www.uticak12.org/communitysurvey](http://www.uticak12.org/communitysurvey)  
or scan the QR code.**

The online survey is open now through Monday, February 16.





KINDERGARTEN & YOUNG FIVES

# ENROLL TODAY

Give your child a strong foundation with Utica Community Schools where learning, curiosity and confidence grow every day through:

- A student-centered approach that supports the whole child, both educationally and emotionally
- A safe, nurturing environment where learning and fun come together
- Programs and services that support each child's unique learning style

This strong beginning supports every student's growth from kindergarten to graduation, where UCS stands among the nation's leaders in education.

# FIRST CLASS START



UTICA  
COMMUNITY  
SCHOOLS

**START YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY  
AT [WWW.UTICAK12.ORG/KINDERGARTEN](http://WWW.UTICAK12.ORG/KINDERGARTEN)**



**Together We Make an Impact**  
[www.ucsfoundation.org](http://www.ucsfoundation.org)

  
**UCS**  
Foundation

# Points of Pride

## UCS administrator honored as emerging leader in school public relations



Jennifer Kane, the Utica Community Schools coordinator of public relations, has been honored statewide as the top emerging leader in the field of school communications.

Kane was selected as the sole recipient of the first ever “Rising Star” award from the Michigan School Public Relations Association.

The honor is awarded for innovation, resilience, commitment to growth, inclusion, collaboration, impact, leadership, being data-driven, and strong digital media skills.

Kane, who is in her fourth year with UCS, has led the district's rebranding initiatives, coordinated the Legacy of Excellence celebration, effectively integrated the use of data to improve marketing and was an integral part of the district's successful 2023 bond issue. She also oversees the district's media relations and creates and implements communications for the UCS kindergarten registration process.

Her background in broadcasting has also brought a new dimension to the district's nationally recognized multimedia communications.

## UCS teams bring the thunder

Six Utica Community Schools teams received top honors at this year's ThunderQuest robotics tournament, with four earning the right to compete at the state level.

The UCS ThunderQuest event is the longest running and largest regional FIRST LEGO Robotics tournament in Michigan. It is sponsored annually by the high school ThunderChickens team, a three-time winner of the international FIRST title.

UCS teams advancing to state competition and the honors they earned are:

- The Robo Faires, from Messmore Elementary, who earned the top award – the Champion's Award – at the competition and placed second for Robot Performance. The team's mentors Perla and Ray Moncayo earned the Coach/Mentor Award.
- Morgan Elementary Dinos, from Morgan Elementary, earned first place for the Core Values Award.

- The Deep Fried Eagles, from Morgan Elementary, earned fourth place in the Innovation Project category. The team's mentor Shana Gasparovich earned the Coach/Mentor Award.
- The Maverick Mechanics, from Messmore Elementary, earned fourth place in the Champion's Award and third place in Robot Performance.

Other schools earning top awards include the Wiley Elementary Challenge Team winning the Spirit Award, first place in Robot Design for the Bit Busters from Beacon Tree Elementary School, and second place in Robot Design and fourth place in Robot Performance for the Evil Croutons from Ebeling Elementary School.

## UCS translators obtain Language Line certifications



In a community like UCS, translators provide an invaluable service to the district. Utica Community Schools is fortunate to have three translators who help support communications in Albanian, Arabic and Spanish.

Luljeta Guri, Aned Bazan and Raad Tomika recently received their Language Line certifications. To obtain the certification they had to complete a six-hour online course going over the essentials of interpreting and three hours of instructor-led live sessions. The course covers skills such as attentive listening, dual-tasking, note-taking, memory development and professional presentation and delivery.

## CTE automotive program receives grant from local foundation

The Margaret Dunning Foundation, a foundation founded in honor of the late Margaret Dunning, has provided a \$43,000 grant to support Henry Ford II High School's automotive repair program.



The grant will update equipment to industry standards.

Students in the automotive program in UCS earn certification through the ASE (Automotive Service Excellence), with many already employed in private auto repair businesses.

## Two UCS students have been named among the best student musicians in Michigan



Jordan Matthews of Stevenson High School (left), and Liam Freiburger of Shelby Junior High School (right), were selected to perform with Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association's bands at their state conference in January.

Matthews performed the flute with the high school band and Freiburger played clarinet in the middle school band.

## Senior named to international leadership role



Like all successful research projects, Dron Datta's project started with a question: how will the rise of Artificial Intelligence affect computer science jobs?

“As an avid coder building software-engineering projects like my Google Extension WebBarrier, which is now used in 80 countries worldwide, I was very intrigued about the future of the field that I am currently working in,” Datta said.

A senior at Stevenson High School and the Utica Center for Mathematics, Science and Technology, Datta has been selected to publish and present a major research paper at a workshop at the IEEE International Conference on Data Mining in Washington, D.C. The paper is titled *Evaluating the Code Generation Capabilities of Popular Large Language Models for Front-End Web Development using Neighborhood Pixel Similarity*.

Datta began his project over a year ago in his Advanced Placement Research Class. His first step was to look at the research in the field and conduct more than 200 tests with six of the most popular Large Language Models (LLMs) – artificial intelligence tools that generate code. The six models were ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Claude, Pixtral and LLaMA.

**For more Points of Pride stories, visit [www.uticak12.org/news](http://www.uticak12.org/news).**

## Pursuing milestone changes through strength

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It has also led to improvements that represent significant milestones in the history of our district. A move toward changing our grade configurations is one of those milestone opportunities.

The question I often receive is "why now?"

My answer is that we are making these improvements from a position of strength. Our district is still emerging from a period of difficult financial times when we were working to preserve what we had. The

leadership of this district remembers those difficult times, and we are committed to doing everything possible to keep our district out of this position. Much of this depends on our state lawmakers.

Just as important, we have momentum on our side. We have the partnerships that can make these improvements happen. It is a team that will create stability and student success as we work towards a brighter future.

We recognize the impact of change on our staff and community. It is one reason why we announce many of these changes years in advance. We remain committed to ensuring that positive transitions will create new opportunities for our students and those who will enter our doors in the future.

We embrace these changes with respect to the legacy of our school district. Throughout our history, there have been milestone years like 2025. Times when the community came together to chart a course of change that was not always easy, but created the foundation that we enjoy in our district today.

One part of our legacy that will remain is the day-to-day focus on student success and the relationships that are at the center of our culture. Our team works hard to foster effective relationships with students and families that creates a network of support and is an inherent part of the UCS success story.

**This is something in our legacy that will never change.**

## Building on Excellence

*UCS is inspiring remarkable student growth and achievement, as is illustrated here.*



UCS students on average outperform their state and national peers on standardized tests.



In reading, early elementary students outpaced their expected achievement growth by more than 10 percentile points. In math, students exceeded growth percentile by 25 points, as determined by NWEA achievement data.



The number of UCS secondary students taking AP courses has grown 21 percent since 2021. Over that time, the rate of students earning a 3 or above has grown 12 percent.



All UCS secondary schools have been honored as among the nation's best by US News and World Report.



Over the past three years, approximately 10 percent more Career and Technical Education students have earned industry credentials. Enrollment in CTE courses have grown by more than 60 percent.

### Translation Assistance

Persons seeking or needing district-related language assistance, please contact [translations@uticak12.org](mailto:translations@uticak12.org), or:

- For Albanian: (586) 797-6946
- For Arabic: (586) 797-6906
- For Spanish: (586) 797-6986

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Las personas que buscan o necesitan asistencia con el idioma inglés para asuntos relacionados a las escuelas de nuestro distrito escolar, por favor comuníquese con: Para español: (586) 797-6986 [translations@uticak12.org](mailto:translations@uticak12.org)

### Notice of Nondiscrimination

In compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Elliot-Larsen Civil Rights Act and the Persons with Disabilities Civil Rights Act, it is the policy of Utica Community Schools that no person shall, on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry, sex, age, disability, height, weight, or marital status be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination during any instructional opportunities, programs, services, job placement assistance, employment or in policies governing student conduct and attendance. Any person suspecting a discriminatory practice should contact Utica Community Schools Human Resources at 11303 Greendale, Sterling Heights, MI 48312 or call (586) 797-1000.



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**FOCUS for the  
Community**

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