

Season of Gratitude

November is a season of gratitude focusing on family, friends, and personal well-being. Gratitude has been defined as the quality of being thankful. However, gratitude is more than simply saying "thank you." The unique powers of gratitude can shift us from focusing on the negative to appreciating what is positive in our lives. At Halifax County Schools (HCS), we want to thank our staff, families, and communities. We are grateful for everyone's support, patience, and understanding as we chart this new course to higher student achievement. Through my experience, expressing gratitude can help balance us out when times are stressful or uncertain. When we express gratitude, our brain releases dopamine and serotonin — two hormones that make us feel lighter and happier inside. If we want to take care of our minds, understanding how to trigger this feeling is an essential tool at our disposal.

Why is practicing gratitude important? We experience gratitude when we shift our focus from what we do not have to what we do have and when we take time to appreciate and be thankful for those who have contributed to the abundance in our lives. When I look back on the history of Halifax County Schools, I am reminded of what we no longer are through the many positive strides and processes implemented and instituted in our schools. Halifax County Schools is no longer an impoverished school system. We have changed over time, and I would like to recap what I am thankful for in HCS. Our graduation rate has grown from 74.3% in 2016 to 85% in 2022. We have created two makerspaces at our middle schools, empowering students to shift from passive consumers of information and products to active creators and innovators. We have expanded our Career and Technical Education program at our high schools, where scholars can now receive stackable industry certifications. Our elementary schools are thriving with focus areas on leadership, STEM/STEAM, or global learning. Additionally, we have created several earn-while-you-learn opportunities for students and launched an Early College program. In 2011, it was reported that six out of the thirteen lowest-performing schools in the state were in Halifax County Schools. I am proud that seven out of eleven schools met or exceeded growth this year (2021-22).

Everything in our lives can improve when we are grateful. Research has shown that gratitude can enhance our moods, decrease stress, and drastically improve our overall level of health and well-being. On average, grateful people tend to have fewer stress-related illnesses and experience less depression and lowered blood pressure, are more physically fit, happier, have a higher income, have more satisfying personal and professional relationships, and will be better liked or received by others. Grateful kids are even more likely to get A's in school. At all levels of our district, the staff takes time to express gratitude and often allows students to self-reflect and express appreciation. These activities can be seen as displays of art, writing, or specific actions connected to service learning or other community support/giving activities. These types of activities are directly related to our mission and vision for students.

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As a member of Halifax County Schools and part of this fantastic community, I encourage each of us to take some time to reflect and express gratitude. Speaking those things we are thankful for helps our community's well-being. This season, I encourage you to practice gratitude and watch how it positively impacts your lives.