

Governor Ron DeSantis announces month-long Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday

Florida Department of Revenue
Contributor

On Monday, July 28, Governor Ron DeSantis announced the return of Florida's Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday, which will run from Friday, Aug. 1 through Sunday, Aug. 31, giving families a full month of savings on essential school supplies and more.

"Proud to deliver additional sales tax holidays, including the Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday that begins on Aug. 1. With the new school year just around the corner, Florida families can save on back-to-school shopping during the tax holiday for the entire month of August," said Governor DeSantis. "By cutting taxes, empowering parents, and growing our economy, we're making it easier for people to live, work and thrive in the Free State of Florida."

With a consistently low unemployment rate and a AAA credit rating from all major agencies, Florida has maintained one of the lowest per-capita tax burdens in the nation. Earlier this year, Governor DeSantis signed the Fiscal Year 2025–26 budget, which included \$2 billion in tax relief, including the permanent repeal of the Business Rent Tax and several targeted sales tax holidays. This year's tax relief package specifically delivers \$450 million in savings through sales tax holidays designed to support Florida families and residents.

The Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday includes exemptions for:

School supplies selling for \$50 or less

- Binders
- Notebooks
- Pens and pencils
- Lunch boxes

Clothing, footwear and apparel priced at

\$100 or less

- Backpacks
- Pants
- Shoes
- Shirts
- Sweaters
- Learning aids selling for \$30 or less
- Interactive Books
- Puzzles
- Flashcards

Personal computers and accessories priced at \$1,500 or less (for noncommercial home or personal use)

- Laptops
- Flash drives
- Printers
- Headphones

For more information and to view lists of qualifying items, visit FloridaRevenue.com/BackToSchool.

Know the 2025-26 school immunization requirements

Laura Young
reporter3.riverbendnews@gmail.com

According to the Florida Department of Health website, certain vaccines are required to help ensure the healthiest school year possible.

In childcare and/or family day care situations, the following immunizations are required:

- Diphtheria-tetanus-acellular pertussis (DtaP)
- Inactivated polio vaccine (IPV)
- Measles-mumps-rubella (MMR)
- Varicella (chickenpox)
- Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib)
- Pneumococcal conjugate (PCV15/20)

• Hepatitis B (Hep B)
For entry into preschool, the following are required:

- DtaP
- IPV
- MMR
- Varicella
- Hib
- Pneumococcal conjugate (PCV15/20)
- Hepatitis B (Hep B)

For kindergarten through grade 12, the following immunizations are required:

- Four or five doses of DtaP
- Four or five doses of IPV
- Two doses of MMR
- Three doses of Hep B

• One Tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis (Tdap)

• Two doses of Varicella (kindergarten effective with 2008–2009 school year, then an additional grade is added each year thereafter). Varicella vaccine is not required if there is a history of varicella disease documented by the health care provider.

Whether entering, attending or transferring into seventh grade in Florida, there is an additional requirement:

• One Tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis (Tdap)

Immunizations may be obtained from your healthcare provider or at one of the local health departments.

School is for everyone

Kathy Egan
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Life in the United States varies a lot from one area to another. Northern states grow their veggies in the summer, but down here, it is too hot even for the tomatoes. The west coast boasts the Pacific Ocean, but compared to the Gulf we know and love, the waves and temperature in the Pacific hinder our ability to swim at leisure. Florida is accustomed to preparing for hurricanes, while midwesterners listen for tornado alarms.

There is at least one thing, though, that brings almost all of us together: our lives revolve around school calendars. For kids, school is arguably the most significant part of their daily lives. School is the main place for learning about the three R's and all the other myriad subjects that children study in the hallowed halls. But students lives are not the only ones that are deeply affected by the school bell.

Parents, too, are somewhat required to acknowledge the importance of the school year.

When the school calendar starts, ends and provides breaks in-between is what guides moms, dads and guardians in their decision-making. When should we go visit grandma? Well, certainly not when Johnny has a math test. Want to explore one of the theme parks? Maybe during Christmas break when it's not so hot. When is spring break again? We will have to arrange a day camp!

Families aren't the only ones finding themselves organizing their plans around the school calendar. Corporations also run their retail businesses according to what the schools are doing. Back-to-school ads and sales are everywhere. When would it make more sense to sell as many pencils and notebooks as possible? And what young person doesn't look forward to getting at least one new item with the start of the school year? When I was young, my mother and I loved to get a couple of new outfits for me. When my daughter was little, our focus was on brand new scented markers and poster board. We loved scoping out the best prices on filler paper just as much as we liked choosing new sneakers and

blue jeans with the perfect fit. Retail shops know all about this and keep an eye on when things are happening in school.

Companies that rely on a teen workforce also have to be keenly aware of school dates and happenings. Rules, whether mandated by lawmakers or parents, often determine when young people are allowed to work and how many total hours they can put in. Good managers also tend to realize that homecoming and exam week may mean scheduling adults who no longer go to dances and have to study for big tests.

The media, too, organizes itself around the school year. The best movies come out during the summer and winter holidays. Even newspapers run back-to school sections (like the one you're reading now!) as a service to schools, students and the communities they serve.

As we gear up for another year of going to bed early, preparing lunch boxes, and parent-teacher conferences, let us all remember and appreciate just how important school is to everyone.



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LES Advisory Council seeking members

LES Contributor

The Lafayette Elementary School Advisory Council is seeking new members. If you are interested in serving on this council for the 2025-26 school year, call Janna Walker at (386) 294-2882. The first meeting for the school year will be in September. The date and time of the first meeting will be sent home in the September LES newsletter.

First Assembly Church of God announces school giveaway

Christian Peterson reporter:riverbendnews@gmail.com

The First Assembly Church of God in Mayo has officially announced its 12th annual Back-to-School Giveaway and Resource Fair. The event will be held on Saturday, Aug. 23, from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. Attendees can look forward to free school supplies, free food, a bounce house and more. The First Assembly Church of God is located at 294 SE Mill St., in Mayo.

Branford Elementary presents Color Days

Christian Peterson reporter:riverbendnews@gmail.com

Branford Elementary School is proud to announce its upcoming Color Days. The special days will last from Monday, Aug. 18, until Friday, Aug. 29. Each day up until Friday, Aug. 29, will have an assigned color to wear, helping introduce the younger students

to a world of color. "Please help us introduce a world of color to our new Kindergarteners! Follow the schedule below and wear the assigned color." Make sure clothing is still school appropriate.

- Monday, Aug. 18 - Purple
- Tuesday, Aug. 19 - Green
- Wednesday, Aug. 20 -

- Red
- Thursday, Aug. 21 - Brown
- Friday, Aug. 22 - Orange
- Monday, Aug. 25 - No School
- Tuesday, Aug. 26 - Black
- Wednesday, Aug. 27 - Pink
- Thursday, Aug. 28 - Yellow
- Friday, Aug. 29 - Blue

SCSD announces new Standards of Participation

Christian Peterson reporter:riverbendnews@gmail.com

The Suwannee County School District is devoted to making sure students are held to the highest standard. That is why it has announced its new standards of participation, which apply to Bulldogs and Buccaneers alike.

"Students are required to meet these Standards of Participation in order to attend/participate in school wide events," the Suwannee County School District wrote in a Facebook post. "Such as, but not limited to, general field trips, club field trips, club

service hours during school hours, Powder Puff, Bulldog Bash skits/performance, Homecoming parade, talent show, dance showcase, Prom, Homecoming Dance, Grad Bash, pep rallies, etc."

The standards are simple and easy to follow. A student must have a 2.0 grade point average or higher, less than eight unexcused absences, no more than 10 unexcused tardies and/or early checkouts (without a doctor's note) and zero days of out of school suspension. "[We are] building a culture of being All In," Suwannee High School wrote. "Stay on course Buccaneers, don't let your privileges walk the plank," said Branford High School.

Suwannee Springcrest announces Color Days

Christian Peterson reporter:riverbendnews@gmail.com

Suwannee Springcrest is proud to announce the dates of its Pre-K classes' Color Days. For these special days, students are invited to wear a specific color. Not only does it make for a fun morning picking out clothes, it also allows the students to experience a whole new world of colors. "Please join our Pre-K classes in discovering colors by wearing the given color on the assigned days."

- Wednesday, Aug. 13 - Black
- Thursday, Aug. 14 - Pink
- Friday, Aug. 15 - Green and White
- Monday, Aug. 18 - Orange
- Tuesday, Aug. 19 - Purple
- Wednesday, Aug. 20 - Brown
- Thursday, Aug. 21 - Yellow
- Friday, Aug. 22 - White and Green

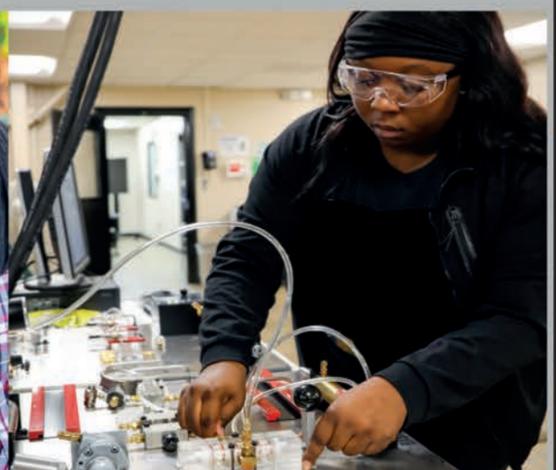
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Live Oak Elks Lodge to host Back-to-School Bash

Danny Federico
reporter3.riverbendnews@gmail.com

The Live Oak Elks Lodge #1165 invites the community to its Back-to-School Bash on Saturday, Aug. 16. This free event will take place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Lodge and will feature food, fun and games.

Additionally, students will be able to receive free backpacks filled with school supplies. These will only be available on a first-come, first-served basis while supplies last. The Live Oak Elks Lodge #1165 is located at 415 E Howard St. For more information, contact the Lodge after 4 p.m. between Tuesday and Saturday at (386) 362-1165 or elks1165@comcast.com.

Welcome back from Ronnie Gray



Photo courtesy
Ronnie Gray, Suwannee County
Superintendent of Schools

Dear students:

I hope you have all had an enjoyable summer and that you are excited to begin another school year.

A new year means a new beginning and the opportunity to learn, grow stronger, and reach new goals. Whether you are just starting school in kindergarten, moving to middle school, or preparing to graduate, this year will be full of possibilities. Your school's teachers, administrators and staff have been preparing for this upcoming school year all summer and are ready for your return.

You are a student in one of the top school districts in Florida. The Suwannee County School District has been a "B" school district for seven consecutive years, and this past year, we were only two points away from being an "A."

We are all very proud of you and all of our schools. We believe in you and can't wait to see what you will accomplish this school year. Let's make this the best one yet.

Welcome back!

Sincerely,
Ronnie Gray
Superintendent of Schools

Welcome back from Dee Dee McManaway

Dear Branford families,

Welcome back to another exciting school year at Branford Elementary School! I hope this letter finds you refreshed, recharged and ready for an amazing year of growth, learning and connection.

Our theme this year is "Start Strong, Support All, Succeed Together" – a reflection of our commitment to academic excellence, strong relationships, and a positive, inclusive school culture. Whether you are returning or joining us for the first time, you are an important part of the Branford Buccaneer family.

We are proud to share that Branford Elementary has earned a Florida School Grade of a B! This accomplishment is a testament to the hard work of our students, the dedication of our staff, and the unwavering support from our families and community. Together, we are continuing to grow stronger and aim even higher.

Over the summer, our dedicated team has been preparing

for the year ahead with enthusiasm and care—setting up classrooms, planning lessons, and engaging in meaningful professional development. We are especially excited to continue implementing the Leader in Me program, helping each student discover their strengths and become confident leaders.

As always, communication and family involvement remain at the heart of our success. We encourage you to stay connected through our school website, FOCUS Messenger, classroom updates, Branford Elementary School Facebook page, and the marquee for upcoming events throughout the year.

Let's make 2025–2026 a year filled with curiosity, courage and community. We are proud of where we've been and even more excited about where we're going.

Respectfully,
Deidre "Dee Dee" McManaway
Principal



Photo courtesy
Deidre "Dee Dee" McManaway

Welcome back from Bill Yanossy



Photo courtesy
Bill Yanossy

Westwood Christian School would like to welcome all of our new and returning students for the 2025-26 school year and want to thank parents for choosing Westwood for their child(ren)'s spiritual and academic education.

Westwood is accredited through the Florida Coalition of Christian Private Schools Accreditation (FCCPSA), for grades PK-12 and also nationally through the National Council for Private School Accreditation (NCPSA), for grades K-12. WCS was established in 1965 and will be celebrating our 60th

anniversary this year!

Our teachers returned on Monday, Aug. 4. Students/parents met their teacher(s) on Friday, Aug. 8 during two time slots: 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. Classes began Monday, Aug. 11 at 8 a.m. We are so excited to see what God has in store for Westwood Christian School this year! Visit us at www.wcsliveoak.com.

Bill Yanossy
Principal



Photo courtesy
Laura Williams

Welcome back from Laura Williams

At Suwannee High School, we are All In when it comes to ensuring that every student is supported, challenged and inspired. We are committed to academic excellence, student growth, and building a positive school culture where every student feels seen, heard and valued.

This year, we will continue to focus on high-quality instruction, character development, and preparing students for life beyond high school—whether that means college, career or service. We are proud to be an 'A' school.

Welcome,
Bulldogs!
Laura Williams
Principal

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Welcome to our new faculty and staff members!

Superintendent Ronnie Gray and the Suwannee County School Board Members

Welcome back from Marsha Tedder



Photo courtesy

Marsha Tedder

Start your engines, Riverside families—it's time to hit the gas on another incredible school year!

As we launch into the 2025-26 school year, we are fueling up with excitement, energy and a winning mindset to race toward our goals. Our theme this year is "Racing to Success," and we know that with the support of our

students, families and staff, there's no speed limit to what we can achieve!

This year, we're proud to continue building on our momentum as a "B" school—just five points away from an A! That's right—we're closer than ever, and we believe this will be the year we cross that finish line together. With our engines running strong, we're setting our sights on excellence and preparing for the ride of a lifetime.

To keep us moving full speed ahead, we're jumping on "The Energy Bus" by Jon Gordon. This powerful and positive message is all about fueling our minds with encouragement, staying motivated and keeping our school spirit alive and well. Every student and staff member will

play a key role in helping our school grow, succeed and thrive like a well-oiled machine.

At Suwannee Riverside Elementary, our journey is guided by our core values: Creativity, Respect, Teamwork, Fun and Compassion. These values will steer us through challenges, keep our wheels turning, and help us celebrate every success—big or small.

So, to all our students and families: buckle up and get ready. We're revving up for a school year filled with learning, laughter and limitless possibilities. Let's embrace the journey, fuel up to learn, and enjoy the ride—because this is our year to race to success!

Sincerely,
Marsha Tedder
Principal

Welcome back from Jennifer Beach



Photo courtesy

Jennifer Beach

Dear Springcrest community,
As principal of Springcrest Elementary School, I am thrilled to welcome our students, families and dedicated staff back for what promises to be an outstanding school year! I am

proud to share that Springcrest has earned an A school grade for the third consecutive year—a remarkable achievement that reflects the hard work of our students, the continuous support of our families, and the exceptional dedication of our educational team.

This year, we embrace the theme "Building a Legacy: Strong Roots - Bright Futures." As a Leader in Me school, we recognize that true education encompasses far more than academic achievement. We are committed to nurturing the whole child, developing both character and competence in every student who enters our doors.

Just as strong trees require deep roots to flourish, our students need a solid foundation of leadership principles, integrity and academic excellence. Our faculty and staff work tirelessly to provide this foundation, creating an environment where every child can discover their genius and develop the confidence to use their voice for good.

The legacy we're building at Springcrest is evident in our students' achievements, but more importantly, it's reflected in their character. We see it when students demonstrate kindness to their peers, show resilience in the face of challenges, and approach learning with enthusiasm and curiosity.

To our returning families, thank you for your continued partnership. To those joining the Springcrest family for the first time, we welcome you with open arms. Together, we will nurture strong roots that will support our students as they grow into the leaders of tomorrow.

We are incredibly grateful for the continued support of our community. Your partnerships and sponsorships are invaluable in helping us create an exceptional learning experience for our students. We welcome opportunities to collaborate and build stronger connections within our community.

Here's to another year of cultivating leaders, fostering character, and shaping bright futures for all our students.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Beach
Principal

Welcome back from Carl Manna



Photo courtesy

Carl Manna

Dear Branford High School students, families and staff,
It is with excitement and pride that I welcome you all back to what promises to be an exceptional school year at Branford High School. As we open our doors once again, I am reminded of the spirit and determination that defines our Buccaneer community.

I'm proud to share that Branford High School earned a school grade of "B" last year—a testament to the hard work of our students, dedication of our teachers, and support of our families. However, we're not stopping there. This year, we have our sights set on achieving an "A," and I am confident that with our outstanding faculty and the incredible effort I know our students will put forth, this goal is absolutely within our reach.

To our returning students: Welcome back! I encourage you to embrace new challenges this year, whether that means taking on leadership roles, exploring different academic interests, or stepping outside your comfort zone in meaningful ways.

To our incoming and new students: Welcome to the

Buccaneer family! You are joining a community that values academic excellence and believes in the potential of every single student. Don't hesitate to get involved—whether through athletics, clubs, the arts, or community service.

To our dedicated faculty and staff: Thank you for your unwavering commitment to our students. Your passion for education and genuine care for each young person who walks through our doors is what makes Branford High School the special place it is.

To our families: Your partnership is invaluable. Together, we create the support system that allows our students to thrive. I encourage you to stay engaged, attend our events, and maintain open communication with our teachers, guidance counselors and administrators.

I want to emphasize that Branford High School is more than just a place of learning—it's a community where character is built, dreams are ignited, and lifelong memories are made. We are committed to providing every student with the tools, support and opportunities they need to succeed not just in high school, but in life.

I look forward to seeing our hallways filled with energy, our classrooms buzzing with curiosity, and our campus alive with the sound of students pursuing their education. Here's to a fantastic year ahead, Buccaneers!

With school spirit and high expectations,
Carl Manna
Principal

Welcome back from Amy Boggus



Photo courtesy

Amy Boggus

Dear SPE families,
We are so excited to welcome you and your child back to Suwannee Pineview Elementary for another wonderful school year! Our theme this year is "Blueprints for Brilliance," and we believe it perfectly captures the heart of what we do at SPE—helping every child build a bright and successful future.

Just like a builder uses a blueprint to create something strong and lasting, we're working

together to help every student grow, explore, and shine. At SPE, we believe every child has their own brilliance—and we're here to help them build on it day by day.

This year, your child will:

- Experience hands-on learning and creative exploration.
- Be challenged and supported through high-quality lessons.
- Build friendships and confidence in a caring environment.

• Discover their strengths and celebrate their growth.

We are proud to partner with you to build this "blueprint" together. When schools and families work as a team, amazing things happen—and we can't wait to see all the brilliance that this year brings!

Let's make this our brightest year yet!

Amy Boggus
Principal

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students, teachers
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Steve Land
Lafayette County Clerk of Court

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Welcome back from Robbie Edwards



Photo courtesy

Robbie Edwards, Lafayette County Superintendent of Schools

Welcome back, Hornets!

As we begin another exciting school year, I would like to start by saying thank you to our incredible community for your continued support of Lafayette Schools. The unwavering involvement of our parents, families and local businesses plays a vital role in the success of our students and schools. Your dedication continues to make Lafayette one of the best school districts in the state, and we do not take that for granted.

To our students—thank you for your hard work, your commitment to learning, and the pride you bring to our district every single day. We are so proud of everything you’ve accomplished and are excited to see what you’ll achieve in the year ahead.

This past week, we were thrilled to welcome so many families during our open house events. It was great to see familiar faces, meet new families, and begin building the relationships that make our school community so strong. From reconnecting with teachers to exploring extracurricular

opportunities, it was a wonderful start to what promises to be another outstanding year.

I also want to take a moment to recognize our incredible faculty, staff and support personnel. Their dedication, hard work and genuine care for our students have been on full display as they’ve prepared classrooms, planned engaging lessons, and ensured every detail is in place to give our students the absolute best experience possible this year.

The first day of school was Monday, Aug. 11, and we continue to be ready for the upcoming year! Our team is committed to providing a safe, welcoming and inspiring learning environment where every student can thrive.

Thank you again for your continued trust and support. Together, we will make this school year another success. I cannot wait to see what we will accomplish.

Go Hornets!

Robbie Edwards

Lafayette County Superintendent of Schools

Welcome back from Lisa Newman

What an exciting time of the year! Back to school means a fresh start on a 180 day adventure for all of our Hornet students, families and staff. This year is shaping up to be incredible.

We kicked off the year with our annual Meet the Teacher event on Friday, Aug. 8 at 10 a.m. All students and families were welcome to go directly to their classrooms at that time. Class lists were posted by grade

level in the front of the school.

We are happy to have added several new teachers and staff members this year. I am confident they will fit right in and be an asset to the amazing team of teachers and support staff we already have in place.

School began on Monday, Aug. 11 at 8 a.m. Parents/guardians were allowed to walk with students to their classrooms on the first day. We will

be opening the front gate at 8 a.m. Buses will be operating as usual.

I hope that you have all had a restful and relaxing summer and are ready to return to school to grow and learn. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call the LES front office at (386) 294-2882.

See you soon!

Sincerely,

Lisa Newman

Principal



Photo courtesy

Lisa Newman

Welcome back from Stewart Hancock



Photo courtesy

Stewart Hancock

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you, as part of our educational family, to the 2025-26 school year. I am very excited about the upcoming school year and the opportunities that are available to our students at Lafayette High School. Our highly motivated faculty and staff will continue to work hard to ensure every student has an educational experience that will help them grow into the best versions of themselves.

We recognize parents are their children’s first and most important teachers, and we ask for your support and involvement to provide your children with the best education possible. Your interest in their academic progress

will motivate them to do their best. Please maintain contact with your children’s teachers and with me. We encourage you to ask questions and communicate concerns so that we can build a partnership which will ensure student success. Good communication is the key to greater understanding.

At LHS, we are proud of our school and community. We want you to be informed, involved and take pride in calling LHS your school! Together, we will continue to make Lafayette High School a great place to prepare for a successful future.

Stewart Hancock

Principal

Are you forgetting something? A back-to-school guide for easy to forget school gear!

Heather Ainsley
reporter3.riverbendnews@gmail.com

Schools are great about providing a necessary check list for supplies and back-to-school gear that each student will need to start up the new school year on the right foot. But what about the supplies that don't make the checklist? While parents everywhere scour the local supermarkets and carefully select the necessary calculators, pen colors and folders, there are many forgotten items that aren't required but are certainly useful for students starting the new year. Here are some back to school items that can help make the transition from summer to school year that much easier. Consider this your unofficial back to school checklist!

A water bottle or thermos. The excitement of starting a brand new school year can make it hard to remember that your student needs to be drinking plenty of water. While temperatures certainly begin to cool off in August and September, the weather will still be plenty hot,

and with all the excitement, you don't want your student to overheat or get dehydrated.

Name labels that adhere to your student's personal items. Your child may have hand-picked a Spider-Man backpack, but remember, they selected it out of about only 15 options that were available at the store, meaning there's a chance that another student in your child's new classroom may also have that same backpack. To avoid any mixups, and to help your student easily distinguish their items, consider applying a name tag to your student's backpack. For safety, you can place this on a part of the backpack that is not easily visible to strangers, like under the strap or along the part that rests against your child's back. You can also add name labels to supplies that will be stored within the classroom, like binders, pencil cases and lunchboxes.

While it may not be a classroom item, a new school year may be an excellent time to **refresh some hygiene items.** Inspect your child's tooth brush, hair brush, soap bar, chapstick and lotion to make sure everything is still within the use-by

date and is in good working order. These are the tools your student uses at the beginning and end of each day, and having fresh tools can help them feel more focused and ready to tackle anything that comes their way during school.

In case of storms or bad weather, be sure to **invest in an umbrella or poncho** that can fit in your child's backpack. No one wants to get soaked on the way to school, and sitting in a classroom damp will make it difficult to concentrate. A name label can help ensure that your student's rain gear doesn't get lost.

While many parents buy fresh clothing or shoes to help with the initial “first impression” jitters, **a haircut** can also be a great way to increase your child's self esteem. Because haircuts can often feel strange at first, be sure to plan your child's haircut at least a week before the first day of school, to allow them to get used to their brand new look before the big first day!

Many of your student's school supplies are likely to reach school and stay there all year long. Be sure to buy a little extra to stock your child's home study space with paper, pencils, pens, a calculator and other supplies. That way, even if they forget something at school, they'll have everything they need right there at home.

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Welcome back from Superintendent Lee Wetherington-Zamora



Photo courtesy

Lee Wetherington-Zamora,
Hamilton County
Superintendent of Schools

Dear Hamilton County students, families and community,

As Superintendent of our Hamilton County School District, it is my sincere pleasure to welcome everyone back for another awesome year! I am honored to serve as the Superintendent of Hamilton County

School District. It is truly a privilege to be a part of a community where our families, our teachers, and our students care for one another and strive to build positive relationships which support children's academic and social growth. The district, along with the schools, has been working diligently over the summer to ensure all is ready for our new school year.

Families and students, please note the state of Florida expanded the "cell phone" law regarding personal electronic device use in schools. Hamilton County School District procedures now state: "A student may possess a wireless communications device while the student is on school property or in attendance at a school function; however, students may not use a wireless communications device at

any time during the school day." Please be prepared to adhere to the guidelines in the Code of Conduct!

It is Hamilton County School District's mission to ensure a successful future for every student and to celebrate with each student and their families as they reach the milestone of graduation. We believe every student should graduate from high school prepared for the demands of post-secondary education, military service, or a productive career. To support this goal, the high school team has strategically planned student pathways that will assist students with achievement in their chosen path.

Hamilton County High School is continuing with the implementation of the "Leader in Me" framework for all grade levels. The "Leader in Me" model is based on the theory of change: When you change the way you see things, it influences what you do and the results you get.

For our Hamilton County Elementary students, educational principles continue to focus on the Science of Reading. Science of Reading is a set of key components developed by the National Reading Panel essential for reading proficiency: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Parents and caregivers can support this critical focus by committing to reading with their child at home. Research has proven "the more words that are in a child's language...the more prepared they are to be able to read, and the

better they read, the more likely they will graduate from high school" (*PBS.org*). I encourage our families and our community to actively engage in our children's education.

Another continued focus for this school year is to ensure that every student attend school regularly. Regular school attendance positively impacts learning while chronic absenteeism has a negative impact on learning. Parents and families play a huge role in promoting student attendance. While our district teams can offer student support and programs to improve attendance, parent engagement is the catalyst for regular student attendance. Our mission is to work with our families and our children to have regular attendance as our teachers cannot impact a child's education when the child is absent from school.

Please reach out to my office or to the schools if you have any questions or concerns at any time throughout the school year. My office number is (386) 792-7800 and my email address is dorothy.zamora@hamiltonfl.com. The district's website is www.hamiltonfl.com.

Once again, welcome back! Let's make this 2025-26 school year the best by "rising up and being relentless in our pursuit" of student achievement.

Sincerely,
Lee Wetherington-Zamora
Superintendent of Schools
Hamilton County School District

Welcome back from Ryan Mitchell



Photo courtesy

Ryan Mitchell

To the students, families and valued stakeholders of Hamilton County High School: Welcome to the 2025-26 school year!

We are excited to launch another promising year at HCHS. The 2024-25 school year was truly one for the record books. Our students rose to the occasion academically and, together as a school community, we achieved a historic milestone—earning 591 points toward our school grade, the highest in HCHS history. This success is a testament to the hard work, dedication and spirit of our students, staff and families.

As we set our sights on becoming the #1 school in North Florida, we remain focused on high standards, continuous improvement, and student success.

Important Policy Updates

To further support a focused, productive learning environment, please note the following updates to our school procedures:

Cell Phone Policy: Cell phones must remain out of sight and unused from the moment students enter campus until they leave campus after the

final dismissal bell. Phones that are visible or in use during the day will be confiscated, and appropriate disciplinary action will follow in accordance with our Code of Conduct.

Attendance and Participation: Students who are deemed truant will be ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities, including—but not limited to—athletics, theater, prom, Grad Bash and other school-sponsored events. We urge families to support regular attendance to ensure both academic success and student engagement.

Please help us lay the foundation for a strong year by discussing these changes with your student ahead of time.

Stay connected throughout the year by visiting our official website at <https://hch.hamiltonfl.com> and following us on Facebook at facebook.com/hchstrojans.

It is an honor to serve the families of Hamilton County as we work together to ensure a bright and successful future for every student.

Built by effort. Driven by excellence. Determined. Resilient. Relentless. We are Trojans.

Go Trojans!

Ryan Mitchell Principal

Relentless Pursuit of Excellence

Hamilton County School District announces policy amendment for serving meals

Hamilton County School District
Contributor

On Monday, July 28, the Hamilton County School Board announced an amendment to its policy for serving meals to students under the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs for the 2025-26 school year. All students will be served lunch and breakfast at no charge at the following sites: Hamilton County Elementary School, Hamilton County High School and Achiever's Christian Academy.

For additional information, contact Patrick Howell, Coordinator of Food, Nutrition and Wellness, at (386) 792-7838 or patrick.howell@hamiltonfl.com. Mail can be sent to the Hamilton County School Board, Attention: Patrick Howell, at 5686 US 129 S, Suite 1, Jasper, Fla. 32052.

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Staying safe on the streets:

A guide to pedestrian safety for students

Danny Federico
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Walking is a wonderful way to explore the world around us, get some exercise, and help the environment. School students often navigate the streets on foot, whether on their way to school, the park, a friend's house, or any other destination. While walking can be a great experience, it's crucial to prioritize safety. This article will explore essential tips on staying safe as a pedestrian, especially as the school year starts back up. These tips will help students avoid harm's way and make the most of their travels.

Stop, look and listen. This is the golden rule of pedestrian safety: stop, look and listen before crossing the street. Always stop at the curb or the edge of the road before crossing. Look both ways for any oncoming traffic, and listen for the sound of approaching vehicles. Make sure it's safe to cross before stepping into the roadway.

Use crosswalks and pedestrian signals. Crosswalks and pedestrian signals are designed to help individuals cross busy roads safely. When available, always use crosswalks to cross the street. Wait for the pedestrian signal to indicate it's your



turn to cross. Look for the "walk" sign and never start crossing if you see a flashing "don't walk" sign.

Walk facing traffic. When there are no sidewalks, make sure to walk on the side of the road facing oncoming traffic. Doing so allows you to see vehicles coming toward you, giving you more time to react and step aside if needed.

Be visible. Wearing bright or reflective clothing during the day and at dusk can make you more visible to drivers. This is especially important in low-light conditions, such as early mornings and foggy or rainy days. Carrying a flashlight or wearing reflective accessories at night can also increase visibility and reduce the risk of accidents.

Stay off electronic devices. Many students from each grade level have some form of electronic device on their person each day, taking their attention away from what's in front of them. Avoid distractions like texting, playing games, or listening to loud music while crossing the street. These distractions can prevent you from noticing potential dangers, making it crucial to stay focused and attentive when near traffic.

Hold hands. If you're walking with younger siblings or friends, always hold hands while crossing the road. Doing so ensures everyone crosses together safely and no one gets separated from the group.

Be cautious around parked cars. Be wary when walking near parked cars. Drivers might not see you as they pull out of parking spaces or driveways. Look for signs that a car might be about to move, such as brake lights or a running engine.

Be predictable. When crossing the street, make sure your actions are clear and predictable. Avoid sudden movements or running across the road. This helps drivers anticipate your actions and react accordingly.

Watch out for turning vehicles. Be especially careful when crossing intersections, as cars may be turning. Drivers might not always see you, so make eye contact if possible to ensure they're aware of your presence.

The safety of young pedestrians is of utmost importance. Ensuring students understand these tips can significantly reduce the risk of accidents going into the new school year and ensure their journeys are enjoyable and secure. Remember, pedestrian safety is a responsibility everyone shares. Stay vigilant, stay informed, and always prioritize safety when you're out and about.

A refresher course in school bus safety

Metro
Contributor

The dawn of a new school year is a time marked by change and fresh opportunities. For many children, school marks the first time they are away from their parents for an extended period of time. It also may be the first time they ride in a vehicle other than their parents' cars.

Each school day, 25 million children ride a bus to school in the United States. A school bus is among the safest modes of transport and one

of the most regulated vehicles on the road, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Riding a school bus can be a novel experience no matter a student's age or grade. Kindergarteners may be introduced to the school bus on their first day of school, while older students are no doubt familiar with life inside a school bus. But, all students and families can benefit from a refresher course on school bus procedures to ensure this school year begins on safe footing.

• **Be a smart pedestrian.** Riding the school bus is very safe, but injuries can occur walking to and from the bus stop. Watch for cars backing out of driveways and always look both ways multiple times before crossing streets.

• **Remember school bus laws.** Most areas of the country have specific school bus laws that include stopping when red lights are flashing on the school bus. Cars must stop whether they're behind the school bus, next to it or on the opposite side of the street facing the bus. Stopping allows passengers to enter or exit the bus safely.

• **Stand away from the curb.** The National Safety Council advises keeping six feet, or three giant steps, away from the curb while waiting for the bus. Young children should be carefully supervised.

• **Be visible.** Always cross in front of the bus, making eye contact with the driver so that he or she knows your intentions before crossing. If you drop something, do not bend down to pick it up. Tell the driver instead.

• **Remain seated.** Find a seat promptly and remain seated for the duration of the ride. Do not stand up and proceed down the center aisle until the bus has stopped.

• **Minimize distractions.** Always speak softly and behave so that you do not distract the driver.

School buses are very safe vehicles, but passengers need to do their part to avoid injury.



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