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Staff awards cont'd

Key Dates

December

24-31.....Winter Break, no school

January

1-2.....Winter Break, no school

8.....Gr. 6 choir concert, 7 p.m.

9.....Two-hour early release day

12..School board wksp, 4:30 p.m.

16.....BCMS play, 7 p.m.

17.....BCMS play, 2 p.m.

19.....MLK Jr. Day, no school

22.....Quest Info Night, 6:30 p.m.

26.....DES Kindergarten lottery

applications due, 1 p.m.

26.....School board mtg., 7 p.m.



A small group of staff members were named Leaders in Educational Excellence. See the feature story on Page 2.



Holding forth hope

Vinny Johnson, playing the role of Orpheus, sings hope into the despairing crowds of Hadestown during the fall musical at Buffalo High School. The show was the first theatrical production in the refurbished Performing Arts Center.

FFA earns silver at nationals

Over the past decade the Buffalo High School Future Farmers of America program has been one to watch in state and national competition.

Specifically, the program's Marketing Plan teams have won state and advanced to nationals in six of the last seven years, in addition to successes in various other fields. At the 98th annual FFA Convention & Expo in Indianapolis, Oct. 29-Nov. 1, Buffalo's most recent marketing team of Coltonn Peterson, Brendan Park and Isaac Erhard earned a Silver Rating, placing

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From the Superintendent

On efficiency, and a lower tax levy

"Are my tax dollars being used effectively?"

It's a fair question for any taxpayer to ask – and a timely one, given the statewide and nationwide conversations currently underway regarding waste, fraud and abuse.

At your local school district level, I'd like to share three reasons I can confidently answer "yes" to that question. First, a third-party auditor commented about the district's efficiency during her



Scott Thielman

report to the school board on Nov. 24, noting that our district spends more on the classroom and less on administration than average. Second, comparative data gathered by the Wright County Auditor/Treasurer shows that we ask less of our taxpayers than most other school districts in the county. And third, adept management of the bond funds approved by District 877 voters in November of 2023 has stretched the amount beyond the \$41.5 million asked for, giving us flexibility to complete the greatest amount

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New 'Leaders in Educational Excellence'

It's no simple thing to stand out among one's peers when all have dedicated their professional lives to educating the next generation, but four Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose educators were recently recognized for just that.

Those invited to the Leadership in Educational Excellence Awards banquet at River's Edge Convention Center in St. Cloud on Wednesday, Oct. 29, included Kristine Johnson, third-grade teacher at Tatanka Elementary STEM School; Karmen Harnois, speech language pathologist at Montrose Elementary School of Innovation; Eric Cagle, science teacher at Buffalo Community Middle School; and Joel Peterson, math teacher at Buffalo High School.

The event honored educators from nearly 40 Central Minnesota school districts for "a variety of criteria, including their expertise, leadership in curriculum development, and positive impact on students, staff, and the community," according to Resource Training & Solutions, which organized the banquet.

Eric Cagle

While he didn't originally set out to be a teacher, Cagle has made his mark over 16 years at BCMS.

"This recognition celebrates educators who 'serve as examples to inspire fellow colleagues, students, and their communities through positive leadership and attitude toward the educational field.' Eric is the perfect example of that spirit at BCMS," said Principal Matt Lubben. "His positive energy, humor, and ability to connect with students make him a standout teacher and teammate. Whether



From left, BHS math teacher Joel Peterson, MESI speech language pathologist Karmen Harnois, TESS third-grade teacher Kristine Johnson and BCMS science teacher Eric Cagle received 'Leadership in Educational Excellence' Awards this fall.

he's leading an assembly, mentoring WEB students, or tackling new challenges, Eric approaches everything with flexibility and heart."

Though he had planned a career in physical therapy, Cagle changed course after a few years of teaching summer school science beginning in his sophomore year of college.

"I had coached before and always enjoyed building relationships with the players and seeing them grow and learn in the sport and as individuals," Cagle said. "After spending a couple of summers in the classroom, I realized that I could make a bigger impact and became truly hooked on teaching and helping kids grow and learn in life and science. I enjoy teaching them to think critically and gain a deeper understanding of the world around us."

Cagle is active with the school's WEB program (Where Everyone Belongs), and said that building rapport and fostering a positive school culture is an important aspect of his work, alongside the typical daily

classroom duties.

"Working alongside other teachers and helping guide students as they improve and grow as individuals and scientists is incredibly rewarding," Cagle said. "I'm constantly striving to be a better person, father, teacher, and coworker."

Echoing B.J. Neblett's quote that "we are the sum total of our experiences," Cagle said the LEEA honor belongs in part to all who have helped him develop as a person and educator over the years.

"While all teachers work hard and aren't always recognized for it, we all contribute to the overall well-being of our students," he said.

"Congratulations, Eric!" said Lubben. "Your leadership, humor and care for our students and staff truly define what BCMS is all about."

Karmen Harnois

The seed of Harnois' career in speech pathology was planted when, as a high school student, she was asked to assist the school's speech language pathologist with annual hearing screens.

After studying communications disorders in college, her 37-year career in the field began in healthcare.

"I wanted to be in a profession that was challenging and could improve the lives of others," she said.

In 2001 she shifted to Montrose Elementary STEM School.

"I was thrilled to be working at such a great school and to be working in the same school district my children attended," she said.

The opportunity to assist children has kept her daily work feeling meaningful over the years.

"I love seeing the growth that students make with their speech, language and social skills!" Harnois said. "I enjoy getting to know the students and often sharing a laugh with them. Being in a 'helping' profession where I can make connections to students and help them form relationships by communicating with others and promoting independence is very rewarding."

MESI Principal Tony Steffes

**See LEEA
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The BHS boys soccer team, which placed third in the state soccer tournament.



Senior Tristan Lenton, shown here with Coach Dave Knutsen, who took 21st out of 160 runners in the Class 3A State Cross Country Meet to earn Top 25 All-State status on Nov. 1.



Orchestra students who represented BHS at the annual Concordia College Honors Orchestra Nov. 7-9. From left are Elly Kohls (violin), Linna Le (viola), Claire Martin (violin), Sophia Haapala (cello), Cora Smiglewski (viola), and Alyssa Prestidge (bass).



Sophie Alderman who was selected to the 2025 Girls Soccer All-State Team.



Educational Support Staff Award winners (from left) Sophia Warolin, PES special education ESP; Ric Thompson, HES head engineer; Kim Laumann, TESS special education ESP; and Candice Rozeski, DES principal's secretary. Each received Educational Support Staff Awards during a ceremony at Resource Training & Solutions in St. Cloud on Wednesday, Nov. 19. See the next edition of the Insider for profiles of these outstanding staff members.

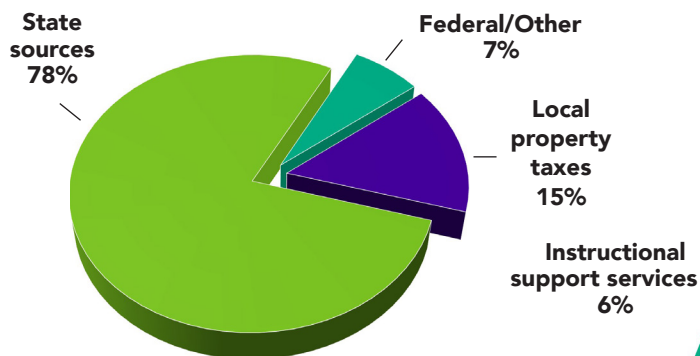


Jed Theisen and the Buffalo/Monticello/St. Michael-Albertville Coyotes Adapted Soccer Team, which had a perfect regular season and took sixth place at the state tournament.

Budget Overview \$

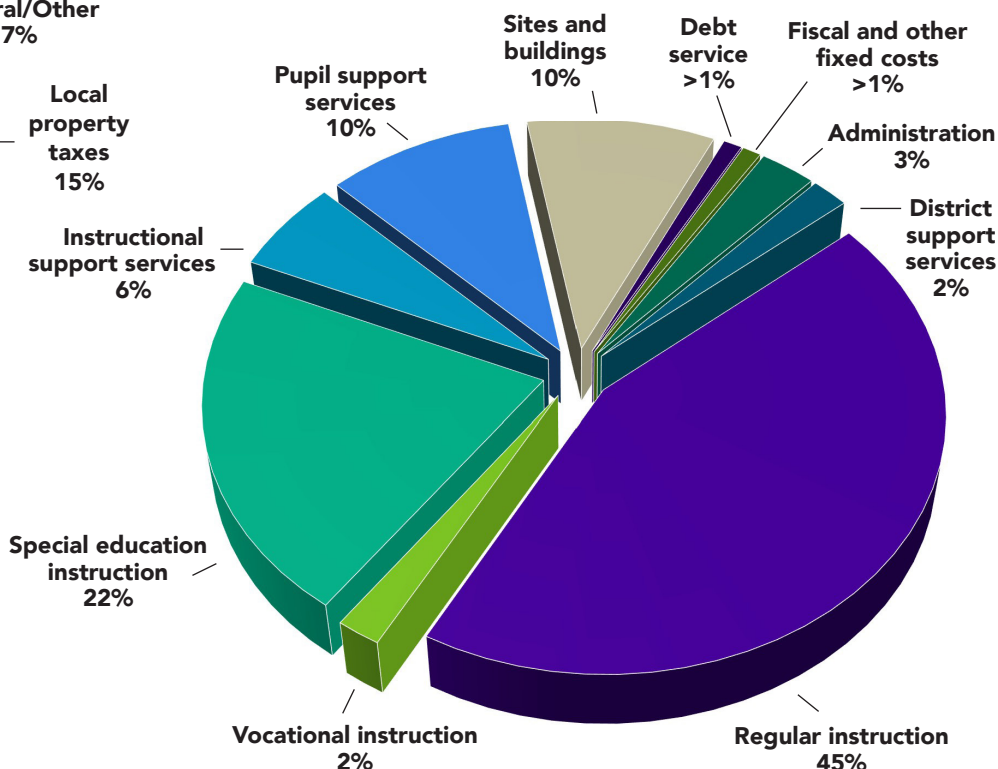
Sources of funding and how it is spent

2025 General Fund Revenue



This information is from the district's most recent annual independent audit presented by BerganKDV. In 2025 the district collected \$81,752,676 in general fund revenue and expended \$79,875,615 from the general fund. In 2024, the most recent year that statewide numbers were available for comparison, BHM general fund expenditures were \$15,064 per average daily membership served, compared to \$16,649 statewide.

2025 General Fund Expenditures



Proud Of....

Those listed below were submitted by district staff and recognized by the BHM School Board for their special contributions and accomplishments.



BHS Girls Swim and Dive Team state qualifiers: 200 Medley Relay: Elena Close, Estelle Bergs, Emily Larson and Avery Lowe; 100 Butterfly: Avery Lowe and Emily Larson; 500 Freestyle: Adi Anderson; 100 Breaststroke: Emily Larson. Team members pictured here are, front from left: Lynne Franzen (alternate), Samantha Greig (alternate), Avery Lowe and Elena Close. Second row, from left: Emily Larson, Riley Kampschroer (alternate), Adi Anderson and Estelle Bergs.



Clockwise from above, Wyatt Anderson, Owen Seestrom and Gerhard Ungaro, who were selected to the 2025 Boys Soccer All-State Team.

Thielman

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of work possible – pending bid results – on behalf of our students, staff, and the wider BHM community. Read on for additional details.

Audit

Auditor Janel Bitzan of BerganKDV, while presenting the annual audit to the school board last month, shared a breakdown of where our general fund expenses go. As you can see in the pie graph on Page 4, about 85% of our total expenses go toward the classroom, which Bitzan told board members is higher than what she typically sees. She also noted that our district's 3% expense for administration is lower than normal, and that those allocations have remained stable over time.

"You're very consistent with where you're spending your dollars," she said.

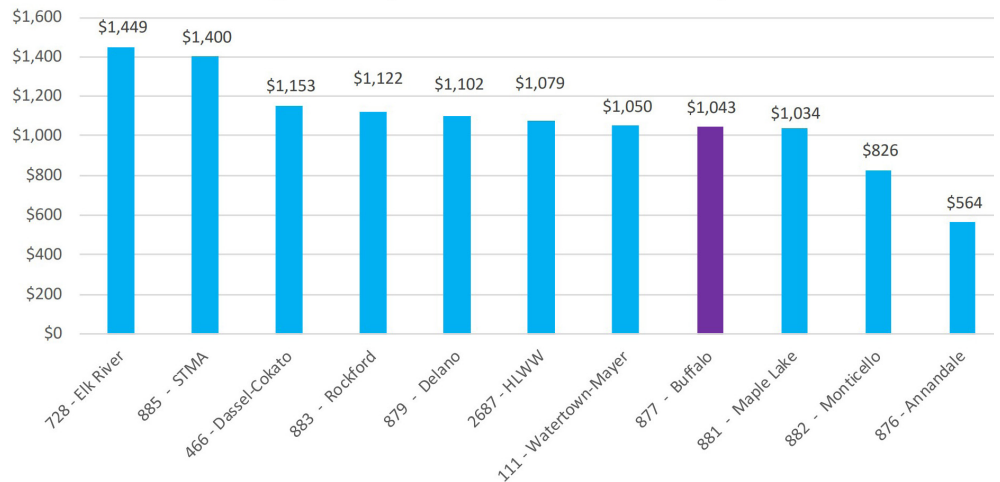
In a written report to the board, Finance and Operations Director Ryan Tangen noted that the district's general fund revenues exceeded the budget by about 1.86% over the last year, while expenditures were about 1.9% below budget, leading to a fund balance (savings) increase of more than \$1.8 million. Revenues were slightly higher than anticipated due to more state aid based on student enrollment and other reimbursement aid. Additionally, expenditures were less than anticipated in salaries and benefits due to position openings throughout the year, fewer supplies and materials, and the timing of capital projects.

Tax levy decrease

At the December 8 Truth in Taxation meeting, we shared that BHM ranks eighth out of 11 school districts with property in Wright County in terms of the tax impact on an average home.

2025 Pay 2026 \$300,000 Residential Homestead Property Tax Comparison

Wright County Public School Districts- Proposed Final*



These numbers, compiled by the Wright County Auditor/Treasurer, do not reflect November referendums approved by voters in Annandale, Monticello, St. Michael-Albertville and Rockford, which will increase taxes in those districts.

In addition, the 2026 proposed tax levy will actually feature a decrease of \$68 from the final 2025 levy for an average home in our district valued at \$300,000. In the 2025 final levy that home would pay \$1,111 per year, while the number is proposed to decrease to \$1,043 in the 2026 proposed levy.

Overall, the district will collect \$125,579.92 less in taxes, a decrease of 0.56%. Impacts on individual properties will vary, of course, based on value and numerous other factors, but in an economic climate where the cost of most things is going up, our overall school property tax is not.

Stretching bond funds

Thanks to good timing and favorable markets generating a premium on the sale of our bonds, and to an investment portfolio that has maximized the interest earned throughout the project, the \$41.5 million originally approved by district voters has increased to about \$48 million. Essentially, we have managed to significantly stretch the

resources provided to us to cover more costs, without asking for additional money from taxpayers.

This doesn't necessarily mean more projects will be completed, but it has helped us weather higher-than-expected bids for projects at the high school and middle school, including the new secure entrances and HVAC improvements. Because we don't know how much each project will cost until actual bids are received, the extra funding available from the bonds has helped to keep us on track in terms of the projects we hope to complete.

Conclusion

We always take care to manage our money well and maximize the return on investment for our community. The points mentioned above provide some objective evidence that we are succeeding in that regard, and we will continue to make that efficiency a focus as we strive to provide a place where all students can **dream, believe and achieve**.



Painting plows

Hanover snowplows are sporting colorful new styles this season thanks to the creative talents of Hanover Elementary School's fifth-graders. City staff presented a classroom session on plow safety, after which students had a few days to brainstorm names and paint schemes before applying their ideas to the blades carried on the city's two plows, now dubbed 'Scoop Dogg' and 'Snow Problem.'



FFA

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them squarely in the middle of the Gold, Silver and Bronze awards earned by 38 total teams.

"The whole experience was just surreal," said Peterson. "Winning state was probably a Top 5 moment, maybe higher. And going to nationals was really cool. I've never seen so many people from different states in my life. Just looking around – we wear these blue jackets that are our official attire – you see Alabama, California, Texas, Delaware, Hawaii. You meet so many people, everybody is really nice, you get to talk with them, and it's so much fun."

Choosing a project

All three juniors were recruited last year as the school's next Marketing Plan team by BHS Ag instructor and FFA advisor Gary Wirkus, who saw an opportunity based on their aptitude and common place of employment.

"They all work at Deer Lake Orchard, so they're very knowledgeable about that company. I've never had that happen before (where they all work in the same place)," said Wirkus.

After interviewing their company owner, the boys decided to create a marketing plan for apple orchards to provide produce to schools. They created an eight-page report covering client status, behavior trends, budget and the five Ps of marketing (product, price, place, promotion and people). They interviewed nutrition directors at school districts large and small, from Anoka-Hennepin – the largest district in Minnesota – to Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted.

"We found out what they



FFA students on the Silver-rated national Marketing Plan team are, from left, Brendan Park, Isaac Erhard and Colton Peterson. They are flanked by sponsors for the national competition, which took place in Indianapolis earlier this fall.

like about getting local produce, things they would change, and how communication and delivery could be improved," Erhard said.

The team created a 32-slide presentation and memorized a 15-minute pitch, while also preparing for likely questions they would face from the judging panel. Coach Mike Socha

"The number of doors that it opened up, the knowledge that Mike taught us, everything we know now about marketing – it's crazy how much we've learned."

Colton Peterson
FFA student

directed their efforts, and expectations were high based on the recent run of success from Socha and previous BHS marketing teams.

"I would say nationals was on the radar from the start because of the previous success of our coach, Mike," said Erhard. "He's a very good coach, super smart. He told us we could do it if we pushed hard."

"We put our time into it collectively and tried to give Buffalo our best shot," said Park. "That we made it is an example of why Mike is one of the best marketing teachers in the whole country. We can't thank him enough."

At nationals

While the experience of competing at and winning state was a confidence-builder, Peterson said the scale of the national event and the pedigree of the judges was "nerve-wracking" when it came time to present.

"The judges typically are college professors, CEOs of companies like John Deere, marketing specialists from major companies like Cargill, things like that," said Wirkus. "So when you make it to nationals you are exposed to a lot of different people. That's what it's about, making connections and networking."

Despite their nerves, the group felt their presentation went well, although there were a few areas they thought could have been better. The overall experience, however, was unforgettable.

"Mr. Wirkus told us we'd be one of the top teams in the country right off the bat when we were thinking about doing the Market Plan," said Peterson. "We were like, 'What? Really?' So

we did it. We didn't know it was going to be so much work until we got into it, but then we got into a rhythm and everything started clicking. It's been such a cool learning experience for all of us. The number of doors that it opened up, the knowledge that Mike taught us, everything we know now about marketing – it's crazy how much we've learned."

Opportunity knowledge

Wirkus said the variety of fields within FFA competition reflect the wide-open career opportunities in agriculture. Asked what the sustained success of BHS students means to the local program, he said it helps build students' opportunity knowledge.

"There are a lot of jobs, a lot of careers, in marketing (ag products)," he said.

"Something in ag business is what I'm looking at for a career," said Erhard. "This was a big accomplishment and opportunity to meet people and talk to different businesses and colleges there. It helped open doors for the future and prepare us, because at the end of the day the world runs on business."



Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose School District Calendar 2026-2027

AUGUST Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31	SEPTEMBER Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	OCTOBER Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31	NOVEMBER Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
DECEMBER Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31	JANUARY Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31	FEBRUARY Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28	MARCH Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
APRIL Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 25 26 27 28 29 30	MAY Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31	JUNE Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat 27 28 29 30	<div> <div>First/Last Day of School</div> <div>No School/Holiday</div> <div>No School K-12/Teacher Workshop</div> <div>No School 9-12/Teacher Workshop</div> <div>No School K-8/Teacher Workshop</div> <div>Early Release (2 hours)</div> </div> <div> 174 Student Days Quarters 44-40-47-43 Trimesters 57-59-58 </div>

Important Dates

<div>August 24-27</div> <div>August 31</div> <div>September 1</div> <div>September 4</div> <div>September 7</div> <div>October 14</div> <div>October 15-16</div> <div>November 6</div> <div>November 25-27</div> <div>November 30</div>	<div>Teacher Workshop Days</div> <div>First Day of School: Gr.K-5 (last names A-K), Gr.6 and Gr.9</div> <div>First Day of School: Gr.K-5 (last names L-Z) Gr.6-12, PLC and PRIDE in session</div> <div>No School K-12</div> <div>Labor Day: No School K-12</div> <div>Teacher Workshop: No School K-12</div> <div>Fall Break: No School K-12</div> <div>Teacher Workshop K-8: No School K-8 End of 1st Quarter</div> <div>Thanksgiving Break: No School K-12</div> <div>Teacher Workshop 9-12: No School 9-12 End of 1st Trimester</div>	<div>Dec.24-Jan.1</div> <div>January 18</div> <div>February 15</div> <div>March 5</div> <div>March 8-12</div> <div>April 2</div> <div>May 31</div> <div>June 3</div> <div>June 4</div>	<div>Winter Break: No School K-12</div> <div>Martin L. King, Jr. Day: No School K-12 Teacher Workshop End of 2nd Quarter</div> <div>Presidents' Day: No School K-12</div> <div>Teacher Workshop 9-12: No School 9-12 End of 2nd Trimester</div> <div>Spring Break: No School K-12</div> <div>Teacher Workshop K-8: No School K-8 End of 3rd Quarter</div> <div>Memorial Day: No School K-12</div> <div>Last Day of School</div> <div>Commencement Teacher Workshop End of 4th Quarter and 3rd Trimester</div>
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*****ECRWSS**
RESIDENT DISTRICT 877

LEEAA

from Page 2

said that Harnois carries a "spirit of excellence" marked by compassion and professionalism.

"Karmen has been a leader at both the school and district level in the field of speech pathology, guiding others with her deep expertise and passion for helping students develop vital communication skills," he said. "As a lifelong learner, she continually seeks out new knowledge, strategies, and approaches to ensure every student can reach their full potential."

In addition to speech work, Harnois has been an active member of the school's support team, which addresses both academic and behavioral needs, and its events committee, which plans engaging family and staff events. She has also dedicated many hours to helping colleagues renew their licenses.

"Karmen's influence extends throughout our school," Steffes said. "Her dedication to supporting others reflects her belief that when we lift each other up, our entire school benefits."

For Harnois, last week's recognition was a gratifying surprise.

"The LEEA award is an unexpected honor," she said. "I feel very blessed to be surrounded by such a great community of co-workers (past and present), students, and families at Montrose Elementary School of Innovation."

Kristine Johnson

"I became a teacher because I have a deep love of learning, find great joy in working with students, and am passionate about making a positive difference in the community I love," said Johnson, who is in her fifth year with BHM Schools and seventh as a teacher overall.

"We are thrilled to recognize Kristine Johnson for her outstanding dedication and excellence in the classroom," said Tatanka Principal Andrée Iden. "She embodies what it means to be a lifelong learner — constantly seeking new ideas, reflecting on her practice, and embracing opportunities to grow so she can best support her students."

Johnson said she most enjoys spending each day "with some of the best people on Earth — my students! Their curiosity, humor, and excitement for learning make every day special."

She added that the opportunity to work alongside others to support stu-

Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose Vol. 52 No. 2



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dents academically, socially and emotionally is both fulfilling and energizing.

"It is a great honor to be one of the recipients of the 2025 LEEA Award," said Johnson. "This recognition is incredibly meaningful. It's both humbling and inspiring to be recognized alongside so many outstanding educators who share a commitment to helping all students thrive."

Iden said the recognition is well-deserved.

"[Kristine's] patience, kindness, and warmth create a classroom where every child feels seen, valued, and inspired to take risks and wonder boldly," she said. "She approaches each day with curiosity and a problem-solving mindset, modeling perseverance and positivity for her students and colleagues alike."

Joel Peterson

Peterson is in his 28th year of teaching, and his 22nd at BHS.

"I had many influential teachers in my life who inspired me to choose this profession," he said.

While math can be a difficult subject for many, Peterson said he enjoys the opportunity to build relationships with students while helping them work through numerical challenges.

"Joel Peterson is the kindest person I know," said BHS Principal Mark Mischke. "He cares deeply about serving others, and always works to make sure everyone feels welcome in his classroom. He is a great mentor for young teachers, and simply makes our building a better place."

While the award is an individual honor, Peterson said the recognition also reflects well on those around him.

"The LEEA award reminds me that I have great colleagues that challenge me to improve each day," he said. "I am very grateful for a supportive staff and administration at BHS."