



Grow with Us: GCS Celebration of Excellence

2026 NATIONAL SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATION AWARDS

GOLDEN ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

PreK-12 Urban District | 67,000 PreK – 12 Students

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Who We Are: Guilford County Schools (GCS) is the third largest school district in the State of North Carolina and located in the city of Greensboro, North Carolina. The PreK-12 urban district ranks 50th nationally out of more than 14,000 school district and serves approximately 66,000 students at 120 schools. More than 9,800 employees collaborate internally and externally with parents, profit and non-profit businesses, faith-based representatives and community stakeholders to render educational opportunities for every student. As GCS implements its mission, vision and core values, the district continually receives local, state and national recognition with standout schools, top educators, superior students, and prominent resources and partnerships.

GCS Community Engagement Department: The Guilford County Schools' Community Engagement Department is a small team of 12 members dedicated to the work of cultivating strong partnerships in the community, providing resources to the district's diverse population, and managing the district's major events throughout the year. The team consists of a senior executive director of community engagement, senior director of community initiatives and special events, director of stakeholder engagement, program administrator of community engagement and advocacy, program administrator of volunteers and partnerships, and program administrator of Title I community engagement.

Strategic Direction Focus Area: Recruit, Retain and Reward Top Talent: Recruit, Retain and Reward Top Talent is one of the district's four focus areas of the [Better Together 2023-2026 Strategic Direction](#). The focus area emphasizes the support for competitive living wages for all staff; fostering workplace environments where staff feel respected, seen, and appreciated; and, encourages the district to provide all staff with meaningful professional opportunities to learn and grow. As the district works to implement its focus areas, employees are encouraged to exemplify shared commitments such as making an investment to address historical disparities; addressing student achievement barriers through collaboration among stakeholders; maintaining open lines of communication and engagement; and, operating efficiently to maximize resources for students.

Program Summary

The Birth of GCS Celebration of Excellence (COE): The Guilford County Schools' COE event has recognized educator accomplishments, school performance, and student successes in various capacities since the early 2000's. Previously, annual celebratory dinners sponsored by community organizations recognized only teachers and principals. The special dinner was held alongside the district's State of Our Schools public event, which updated academic achievement and award-winning schools. Years later, COE has expanded to a large-scale event, recognizing top educators such as [Guilford County Schools' North Carolina Teacher of the Year in 2013 and 2022](#), highlighting school growth and improvements as well as community partnerships supporting the work of Guilford County Schools. The event continues to honor its educators in more educational categories in support of recruitment and retention, professional development, and career fulfillment.

Intended Audience: Guilford County Schools' students, teachers, parents and caregivers, families, principals, assistant principals, 2025 Teacher of the Year, 2025 Principal of the Year, district-level administrators, local elected officials, district partners, profit and non-profit businesses, faith-based representatives and community stakeholders.

At-A-Glance: The Celebration of Excellence event honors Guilford County Schools' educators for their dedication to prepare students for college, career and beyond. The celebration represents a red carpet event and recognizes outstanding school leaders with awards for Teacher of the Year (TOY), Principal of the Year (POY), Rookie Teacher of the Year, Assistant Principal of the Year (APOY), Counselor of the Year (COY), Social Worker of the Year (SWOY), Mentor of the Year (MOY), as well as finalists in each category and school-level winners. A pre-show powerpoint displays photos and videos of all finalists. To create fun, togetherness and excitement, a Spirit Parade Contest occurs 30 minutes prior to the main event. Before the Spirit Parade and main event, a special Superintendent's Reception provides all Guilford County Schools' finalists an opportunity to network with business representatives who financially support the event through various sponsorship levels. The event welcomes schools, families, and the community to join in the celebration.

Program Goals

Goals for "Celebration of Excellence"

- Increase attendance at the Celebration of Excellence Event.
- Increase the number of employees being recognized visually or through communication streams.
- Greater financial reward to honorees based on sponsorship funding.
- Increase media exposure with Guilford County Schools success highlights.
- Build leadership pathways for district-level winners through professional development opportunities.
- Recognize and celebrate sponsors publicly leveraging the district's Better Together culture.

Progress Monitoring

- Meet or exceed the anticipated sponsorship goal one week prior to the event emphasizing the need of support via benefits package, meetings and outreach with potential businesses and partners
- Determine the projected increase of attendance one week prior to the event based on RSVP checkpoints, deadline and communications shared both internally and externally

Data Source/Relevant Information

- Weekly event team agenda and updates
- Monthly Strategic Implementation Team meetings
- Volunteer assignments
- Event attendance
- After-Action Review (AAR) meetings
- District's COE website
- COE By the Numbers Slick

Key Program Messaging

- GCS deeply values the hard work and dedication of its educators and school staff, who make a significant difference in the lives of 66,000 students.
- Our educators are among the best of the best in education, consistently demonstrating exceptional dedication, expertise, and passion for teaching.
- Guilford County Schools is committed to nurture and grow instructional leaders who drive educational excellence and innovation.
- The district prioritizes the support and retention of our educators, ensuring they have the resources needed to thrive in their roles.
- Guilford County Schools is better together when the community shares a unified commitment and joins the GCS Village.

Research

Workplace Environment

- The [North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions \(NCTWC\) Survey 2024](#) found that 91% of North Carolina's teachers and student support personnel who participated feel their school is a good place to work and learn overall.
 - 87% of all [Guilford County Schools'](#) teachers and student support personnel agree that their school is a good place to work and learn.
 - The percentages of [Guilford County Schools' teachers](#) who agree varies in small margin based on years of experience: 1 to 3 Years – 84%, 4 to 10 Years – 85%, 11 or More Years – 89%

Recruitment and Retention

- 76% of North Carolina teacher and student support participants agree that schools across the state recruit and retain diverse teaching staffs.
- 80% of Guilford County Schools' teachers and student support personnel believe their school [recruits](#) and [retains](#) diverse teachers and personnel.

Teacher Support

- 80% of North Carolina's teachers and student support personnel feel they have the support needed from the community, which impacts student success.
 - 77% of Guilford County Schools' teachers and student support personnel say [community members provide support](#) and contribute to their [success with students](#). Varying slightly by experience, the percentages of Guilford County School's teachers who concur are: 1 to 3 Years (71%); 4 to 10 Years (75%); and 11 or More Years (80%).
 - While school districts across the globe develop strategies every year to [recognize school educators](#), the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) currently offers [several recognition programs](#): Burroughs Welcome Fund North Carolina Teacher of the Year, Teachers of the Year, Book Booklet, Regional and District Teacher of the Year, NC Teacher Leadership Council. NC Principal of the Year, Regional and District PRincipals of the Year, Welles Fargo Principal of the Year
- After reviewing the budgets from the past three years, a [\\$55,000 budget](#), along with specific budget codes, was established to implement the 2025 event.

This process involved [joining forces](#) with the district's Finance Office.

- Through [collaboration](#) with the district's Office of Public Affairs and Philanthropy, a comprehensive sponsorship benefits package was developed. Since its inception, the
- Celebration of Excellence event has been generously funded by community partners. Meetings with a district partner help guide the direction of solicitations.
- With a new venue, [site visits](#) were scheduled to assess and determine the event's needs. This was the first time the district offered the event at the venue.
- Stagehands were identified to oversee stage lighting, sound, and transitions. With [top talent within the district](#), it is customary to utilize theatre teachers for their expertise.
- Due to the size of the Community Engagement Team, the need for additional help was quickly identified. An [event volunteer team](#) was developed to include members of the Communications Department, Human Resources Department, New Teacher Support Department, English Language Learners Department, and the Guilford Family Academy.
- In addition to the event team, a [Celebration of Excellence Strategic Implementation Team](#), already established for an existing districtwide project, was utilized to assist with [planning](#), participate in think tank [discussions](#), and [provide feedback](#) on programming. This collaboration marked a first for the district.
- [Attendance data](#) from the past four years, along with the venue's capacity, was used to [project](#) a potential [increase in attendance](#) for 2025.
- The COE Strategic Implementation Team met monthly to provide feedback on planning, coordination, and event implementation strategy. The Communications Team met weekly to employ the district's social media [outreach](#) plan. Planning for branding and content development was a [joint effort](#) between the senior director of Community Initiatives and Special Events with a freelance graphic designer. All district assets must adhere to the established brand standards set by the district.

Implementation

Better Together Philanthropic Efforts

- Several meetings took place to determine the [list of potential sponsors](#). The Office of Public Relations and Philanthropy maintains a [listserv](#) of the district's partners, previous donors and local non-profit and for profit businesses. Having the list handy and taking into consideration that businesses were still recovering from the impact of Covid-19, no time was wasted on making contact and sharing the sponsorship packet.
- A [partnership](#) was formed with a former donor to assist with outreach, separate meetings, phone calls, office visits, and emails. [Checkpoint](#) meetings held weekly informed of hot, warm and cold [leads](#), which helped strategize effective communication and engagement.

Gathering GCS Teams: Internal Collaboration

- [Meetings](#) were held with the Communications Team, members of the Community Engagement team, and the Office of Public Relations and Philanthropy to determine the flow of the event. The COE Strategic Implementation Team met virtually on a monthly basis. The meeting [agenda items](#) included a discussion to critically evaluate previous awards categories and identify new ones aligned with the [district's strategic direction](#); provide feedback on volunteer tasks; and, program components.
- Guilford County Schools' Departments developed processes for the winners and finalists in their categories: Human Resources, Counseling, Social Work, and New Teacher Support.
- Two district administrators served as judges for the Spirit Parade Contest and identified the winners based on a point rubric.

All in the Family: District Communications

- *My GCS*, the district's all-exchange [internal newsletter](#), was emailed to all Guilford County Schools employees with information about the event and how to register to attend and how to sign up for the Spirit Parade Contest.
- Each week, the COE invitation was distributed in the district's [Leadership Action Update](#) to principals and district administrators. As sponsors were secured, their names and logos were included in all announcements.
- The invitation, [key messages](#), goals, and event updates were emphasized during weekly Cabinet meetings which included the superintendent, deputy superintendents, and district leadership officers. [The invitation](#) was posted at every administration building to encourage central office staff attendance.

Beyond the District: External Communications

- In addition to the sponsorship benefits package, the invitation was shared with any [potential sponsors](#) contacted to encourage them to attend and learn more about the district's outstanding educators. There was a need to encourage their attendance especially if they did not select to fund the event this year. The rationale was to spark an interest for 2025. The COE invitation was included as part of Guilford Parent Academy's Contact Contact digital newsletter reaching [more than 16,000 households](#). More than 13,000 of the district's active volunteers [received the COE invitation](#) through email.

Plugged In: Digital and Online Communications

- District Website: [The COE Website](#) was developed to publish the invitation for public access, showcase event sponsors and finalists. A web banner broadcasted on the district's homepage featured the event and linked to the COE website.
- Social media posts using #GrowWithUs placed on the district's Facebook and Twitter account built awareness of the event as strengthened the call-to-action RSVP before the deadline. Post event, the website was updated with the full [YouTube](#) video of the event, winners of each category, a special Thank you to all sponsors and event highlights.

In Full Color: Printed and Digital Materials

- [Press releases](#) were pitched to local media reporters to generate [feature stories](#) and [live interviews](#).
- The [event programs](#) were developed with [sponsor ads](#) utilizing the district's brand strategy and printed by the Guilford County Schools' Print Shop. The program ads created a unique [marketing pathway](#) for sponsors. VIP parking passes were printed and shared with the district's leadership. Pop-up banners were printed with the logos of top-tier sponsors and names of all other sponsors used as a backdrop on stage – another presentation of support.
- Highlighting all finalists, a powerpoint presentation and script was showcased as part of the event program.
- Sponsor boards were on display in the lobby of the event venue to ensure their charitable efforts were seen by attendees. Without the patronage of the district's sponsors, the event would not have been possible. Guests were able to take photos at the district's photo area, which included the district's branded 8' x 8' [backdrop](#).
- The invitation for the [Superintendent's Reception](#) was emailed to the superintendent, district leadership, all sponsors, and all finalists. The special reception provided a [networking](#) opportunity for the district's leadership and educators.

Evaluation: The achievement of the district's Grow with Us: Celebration of Excellence event was threefold. Thanks to philanthropic efforts, the district secured over \$75,000 in sponsorships from 12 local businesses to host the event, exceeding the anticipated budget by \$55,000. With heartfelt gratitude to the host sponsor, the district was afforded the privilege of presenting the event at the Steven Tanger Center for the Performing Arts, the city's premier arts venue that opened in 2021. This was the second year of Tanger hosting the event offering an expansion of seating for guests, a lobby for light refreshments, and a private area for the Superintendent's Reception. Building the partnership with the host sponsor further highlights the district's commitment to collaborating with the community.

Focused on fostering collaboration and gaining support among stakeholders, the event attracted approximately [1,480 attendees](#). In addition, 25 service-learning students assisted during the event from serving as greeters to parking attendants. Three high school bands and a chorus performed as entertainment during the event. Students from two elementary schools served as the red-carpet paparazzi and two middle schools as stage escorts.

The Spirit Parade was a resounding success, [bringing together schools, families, and the community](#) to celebrate the diverse talents and achievements of Guilford County Schools. This year, 16 schools participated in the Spirit Parade Contest, showcasing the unique talents of approximately 395 school team members. The district's engagement strategy [promoted open lines of communication](#) and utilized ongoing distribution of district-branded materials through various information-sharing channels, including invitations, event sponsorship benefits packet, flyer, internal e-blasts, dedicated website, volunteer and strategic implementation teams, and social media #GrowwithUs.

The [significant increase in attendance](#) and enthusiastic participation of all involved exemplified the district's commitment to implement the ["GCS Village" in the classroom and beyond](#) the district's brick and mortar buildings. Through strategic engagement and effective communication, the event not only showcased the district's [excellence among educators](#), but also [strengthened the bonds](#) within the community. The district's educators are critical to its mission, vision, and values. [Recognition efforts](#) will continue to help attract new teachers and maintain teachers in the classroom every day who provide endless learning opportunities for students.

Two days after the event, an After-Action Review (AAR) meeting was convened with all event volunteers. This was followed by a second AAR meeting with the Strategic Implementation Team the following week. The feedback from these meetings provided a SWOT analysis of the event and prompted discussions for the 2026 planning and implementation strategies.

- [Schools](#) communicated the event through their communication streams and word of mouth. There was excitement built around the Spirit Parade Contest especially in support of school finalists.
- Protocols for the Spirit Parade Contest were shared with all principals to ensure their [participation](#) was done by the rules. The Spirit Parade can only include school staff. Bands were not permitted as all schools do not have a school band.

Supplemental Materials and Resources

- Item I. Communication Plan
- Item II. Event Invitation
- Item III. Superintendent's Reception Invitation
- Item V. Guilford County Schools' Celebration of Excellence By the Numbers
- Item VII. Run of Show
- Item VIII. Volunteer Strategy
- Item IX. Program with Sponsorship Ads
- Item XI. Sponsorship Benefits Packet
- Item XII. Spirit Parade Contest Judging Rubric

