

As we approach Labor Day weekend, I want to reflect on the significance of this holiday and the importance of appreciating the dedicated employees who contribute to the success of our educational community. Like employers across the country, Bay District Schools understands and appreciates the many contributions, and sacrifices, of those who serve our community. Labor Day is a poignant reminder of the value of hard work, commitment, and the power of a shared mission.

At Bay District Schools, we are fortunate to have a Team of Teams of exceptional individuals who tirelessly work to provide a nurturing and enriching environment for our students. From teachers who inspire a love for learning to administrative staff who ensure our operations run smoothly, it takes the efforts of all team members to execute our responsibility to Bay County. While many of our families are familiar with those who teach their children and their principals or other administrators, most do not have a chance to meet the dedicated men and women who are mission-critical to our operations but play their roles more behind the scenes.

For example, did you know that Rusty Rooney has been fixing our school buses for over 40 years? His dedication and leadership in our Transportation Department is inspiring, and he's one of our unsung heroes.

But Rusty isn't alone in his longevity.

Shirley Odom, a bus driver, is another shining example of an employee who has dedicated her life to helping the children in our community. Shirley has been driving a school bus for an incredible 46 years, and we're so very grateful to her and the other dozen or so employees who have more than 40 years of service to BDS. Barbara Kendrick, known as B.K. to many, is another stellar employee with more than four decades of service to our community. B.K. has supported many principals as their confidential secretary and is currently working with the students and staff at Mowat Middle School.

While I am humbled by those with years and years of service, I am also excited to welcome 645 NEW employees to BDS (646 if you count me in that group). These men and women, embarking on new careers in many different capacities, have also answered the call to serve our children and community.

One of those brand-new employees, Josh Laatsch, will probably become a familiar face to many of you as he embarks on a new career as our Director of Athletics and Extra-Curricular Activities. Josh will work with all our athletic teams and coaches to ensure our student-athletes have the best opportunities possible.

Another brand-new employee to us is veteran educator Ron Hensley. Ron hails from Northwest Arkansas and lives in Port. St. Joe. He commutes to Rutherford High School every day and has already hit the ground running as their new Assistant Principal. I'm grateful for employees like Ron, and I'm excited to see what he can teach us!

There are so many amazing stories in our schools about employees who routinely go above and beyond for students and their families, and I find all those stories inspiring and heartwarming. Many of you may remember us highlighting West Bay Elementary School Custodian Thomas Aycock last year as our Ann F. Smith Support Employee of the Year Runner-Up. We were thrilled to shine a spotlight on his service to our children and to celebrate his contributions to Team BDS. Thomas lives out of Bay County and drives more than an hour to work each way, every day. While he's officially the school's custodian, Thomas is also a mentor, a part-time

guitar teacher to some interested students and a “best friend” to our assistant custodian Mikey, one of our employees with special needs. People like Thomas deserve our appreciation and gratitude, and I’m honored to work alongside him and our other exceptional employees as we embark on a new year together.

As we approach Labor Day this year, please join me in expressing our gratitude to all of our employees for their dedication and passion. Here are a few ways you can show your appreciation:

- **Thank You Notes:** A heartfelt note or message can go a long way in letting our employees know that their efforts are recognized and valued. Encourage your children to express their appreciation for a teacher or staff member who has positively impacted their learning journey.
- **Acts of Kindness:** Encourage your children to engage in acts of kindness throughout the week, whether it's helping a teacher with a task, sharing a positive compliment, or simply being respectful and considerate to all employees.
- **Volunteer Opportunities:** Look for opportunities to volunteer your time or skills to contribute to the school community. Your involvement sends a strong message about the importance of collaboration and support.
- **Support for School Initiatives:** Many schools have fundraising campaigns or initiatives aimed at enhancing the learning experience. Participating in these efforts demonstrates your commitment to improving the entire school community.

As we take a moment to reflect on the essence of Labor Day, let us remember that our employees are the heart and soul of our Team of Teams. By expressing our gratitude and appreciation, we uplift their spirits and foster a culture of respect, teamwork, and support within our school communities.

Thank you for joining me in recognizing the contributions of our employees. Together, we can make this Labor Day a meaningful and memorable occasion.

We wish you all a happy and well-deserved Labor Day!