



May 8, 2026

For additional Information, Contact:

**Adison Lambert, Hamilton County Schools Communications
Director**

Email: Lambert_adison@hcde.org

HCS Leadership Announcements for the 2026-2027 School Year

Hamilton County Schools (HCS) announces changes to district leadership for the 2026-2027 school year. The newly announced leadership roles include school principals and the Chief of Schools.

“I’m proud to welcome these leaders into new roles across Hamilton County Schools,” said Superintendent Dr. Justin Robertson. “Strong school leadership is essential to building successful schools where students are supported, staff are empowered, and communities are connected. I look forward to the positive contributions they will make for students, families, and staff across our district.”

Central High School



Dr. Justin McCulley, *Central High School Principal*

Dr. Justin McCulley will serve as the new principal of Central High School. Most recently, Dr. McCulley served as principal of East Hamilton Middle School, where he worked collaboratively with students, staff, and families to foster a supportive and high-performing learning environment. Prior to serving at East Hamilton Middle, he



held assistant principal positions at Brainerd High School, East Ridge High School, Dalewood Middle School, Soddy Daisy High School, and Signal Mountain Middle High School. Throughout his career, he has focused on strengthening instructional practices, building positive relationships, and creating opportunities that empower students to succeed, and he has completed the HCS Principal LEAD Program.

Dr. McCulley holds a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Mass Communications from Emory & Henry College, a Master of Science in English Education from the University of Tennessee, an Education Specialist degree in Instructional Leadership from Tennessee Technological University, and a Doctor of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Lincoln Memorial University.

Dr. McCulley's commitment to student achievement, strong school culture, and community engagement will support Central High School's continued growth and success.

"I am beyond excited and honored to be trusted to help lead Chattanooga Central High School," said Dr. McCulley. "The school has a long-standing, illustrious legacy in the Harrison Community that we will continue to elevate and push as we strive to prepare kids for life after high school!"

Hamilton County Schools is dedicated to upholding East Hamilton Middle School's commitment to community involvement and student support. The selection of a new principal will involve multiple steps to ensure a seamless transition under the guidance of an experienced leader. Families and staff will soon receive a survey to gather feedback as the search begins. HCS will work to announce a new leader in May.

Dawn School



Kristen Ruiz, *Program Principal Dawn School*

Kristen Ruiz has been named Program Principal of the Dawn School. A dedicated educator and experienced instructional leader with more than two decades of experience in education and child development, Ruiz has a strong background in student support, program leadership, and collaborative school improvement.

Ruiz currently serves as interim program principal at the Dawn School, where she has supported students, staff, and families through student-centered leadership and strategic program coordination. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Covenant College, a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and an Education Specialist degree in Academic Leadership from Lincoln Memorial University.

Before joining the Dawn School, Ruiz served as assistant principal at Rivermont Elementary from 2022 to 2025. Earlier in her career, she taught fifth-grade English language arts and social studies at Big Ridge Elementary School. She also held several leadership and instructional roles at East Ridge Elementary School, where she served as program director for the 21st Century Learning Academy, RTI coordinator, fourth-grade teacher, and special education paraprofessional. Across these roles, she supervised staff, coordinated intervention supports,

managed after-school and summer learning programs, and worked to expand academic opportunities for students.

Throughout her career, Ruiz has demonstrated a commitment to instructional excellence, student growth, and belonging. She has served as a team leader, adult leader coordinator for “Leader in Me,” and participated in the LEAD Aspiring Assistant Principal program. Her dedication to education has been recognized through honors including HCEA New Teacher of the Year and multiple local Teacher of the Week recognitions.

“I am thrilled to continue serving in this role for the upcoming school year,” Ruiz said, “I look forward to strengthening partnerships between the Dawn Program, home zone schools, and our community agencies to support the emotional growth and development of our students.”

Lookout Valley Elementary



Valerie Bonine, *Principal Lookout Valley Elementary School*

Valerie Bonine has been announced as the principal of Lookout Valley Elementary School. A school leader with experience in instructional leadership, school improvement, and student-centered culture, Bonine has a proven track record of supporting academic growth and teacher development.

Bonine currently serves as assistant principal at McConnell Elementary, where she has helped advance student academic, social, and emotional growth through a whole-child professional learning



community model that integrates general education, special education, RTI, and instructional leadership. During her time at McConnell, she also supported efforts to strengthen campus culture, trust, and belonging for students and staff.

Before joining McConnell Elementary, Bonine previously served in Hamilton County Schools as a Human Resources business partner and as assistant principal, instructional coach, and elementary teacher at Ringgold Primary School in Catoosa County Public Schools. Across these roles, she led professional learning communities, supported targeted intervention, strengthened teacher effectiveness, and helped build positive school climates through family engagement and behavioral support systems.

Bonine is actively completing her Doctorate of Education in Administrative Leadership at Carson-Newman University. She has previously earned a master's degree with a leadership endorsement at Kennesaw State University, and a bachelor's degree in early childhood education at Dalton State College.

"I am honored and excited to serve as the next principal of Lookout Valley Elementary School," said Bonine. "Supporting teachers, students, and families has always been my passion, and I am grateful for the opportunity to join the Lookout Valley community. I look forward to building on the strong foundation already in place and working alongside staff, families, and community partners to ensure every student thrives academically, socially, and emotionally."

Wolftever Creek Elementary



Visa Williams, *Wolftever Creek Elementary
Principal*

Visa Williams will step into the role of principal of Wolftever Creek Elementary School. Williams has served as assistant principal at Wolftever Creek Elementary School since 2012, where she has led daily school operations and supported teachers through instructional coaching, professional development, and data-driven

decision-making. She holds a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education and a master's degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She also holds administrator and professional teaching licenses and has completed extensive professional development in instructional leadership, RTI2 frameworks, social-emotional learning, and school improvement practices.

During her time as assistant principal at Wolftever Creek, Williams played an instrumental role in sustaining Level 5 school performance through leadership transitions by strengthening instructional systems, supporting staff development, and maintaining a culture of high expectations and achievement. She also helped build leadership capacity among staff, with six educators being accepted into the district's LEAD programs under her mentorship.

Prior to her time at Wolftever Creek, Williams served as principal of Woodmore Elementary School from 2005 to 2012, where she led efforts to improve student achievement through strategic planning, data-driven instruction, and intentional staff development.

“Wolftever Creek Elementary has been home to me for many years, and I am incredibly honored to serve as the next principal,” said Williams. “I look forward to continuing the strong traditions and success of our school while working alongside our amazing staff, students, and families to ensure every child is empowered to succeed.”

District Office



Dr. Elaine Harper, *Chief of Schools*

Dr. Elaine Harper will transition to serve as Chief of Schools.

In 2025, Dr. Harper was named superintendent of the Harrison Bay Learning Community, where she supported schools through collaborative leadership and a focus on continuous improvement. Prior to that role, she led the North River Learning Community beginning in 2020, guiding schools through significant growth in instructional coherence, family engagement, and principal development. She has championed a shared vision for student success, expanded the Community Schools Model, and developed leadership pipelines that strengthened school-based decision-making and educator support systems.

A longtime educator and native of Hamilton County, Dr. Harper previously served as principal and assistant principal of Red Bank High School, where she led innovative school transformation efforts focused on student engagement and academic achievement. Under her leadership, the school implemented project-based learning initiatives, opened the BlueCross Technology Academy, and achieved increases in graduation rates and ACT scores. Her leadership has consistently



reflected a commitment to preparing students for success while building strong partnerships with families, staff, and the broader community.

An accomplished educational leader with extensive experience in instructional leadership, school transformation, and community engagement, Dr. Harper's proven ability to support schools, develop leaders, and strengthen student outcomes will help advance the district's strategic priorities.

"I am deeply honored to serve as Chief of Schools and support the incredible work happening across Hamilton County Schools each day," said Dr. Harper. "I look forward to partnering closely with our community superintendents, principals, and our student support teams to align academics, operations, and whole-child supports. Together, we will advance strong academic press and meaningful personalization for every student, while fostering a culture of continuous improvement across all schools."

Hamilton County Schools is pleased to welcome these leaders into new roles as the district continues working to strengthen schools, support students, and create meaningful opportunities for every learner.

"Identifying the right leader for a school requires more than matching skills and experience to a position," said Deputy Superintendent Dr. Zac Brown. "It means understanding the needs of the community, the responsibilities of the role, and the qualities required to help students, staff, and families thrive. These leaders have the right combination of experience, service, and purpose, and I am confident they will support our schools to continued success."