

THE FIRST ✨ THE ONLY

# Vero Beach

*Magazine*®

MAY 2024

Local teen writers  
help us celebrate  
Mother's Day with

**WORDS  
FROM THE  
HEART**





The Redlands Christian Migrant Association in Fellsmere provides early childhood education to migrant and rural low-income families.

EDUCATION

# Making the Mark

FOR INDIAN RIVER SCHOOLS, THERE IS NO 'I' IN 'TEAM,' ONLY AN 'A'



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

Unless you have been away on an around-the-world cruise or asleep under a sand dune, it is likely that you have heard this news: in December 2023, the Florida Department of Education announced that the School District of Indian River County earned an A grade for the 2022–23 school year.

I sent a congratulatory email to superintendent David Moore. His reply summed up what our community has come to appreciate about his leadership style in two words: “Team effort.”

Moore was hired in November 2019 by a unanimous vote from the SDIRC board, which at the time was comprised of

Teri Barenborg, Tiffany Justice, Jackie Rosario, Mara Schiff, and Laura Zorc. When he began his tenure the following month, SDIRC had been carrying the same B grade since 2015, and it was ranked No. 38 out of Florida’s 67 school districts. Today, that ranking has improved to No. 13.

I was curious to know what

# DID YOU KNOW?



**86%**  
of single  
mothers face  
financial  
hardship

Over 1.1 million Floridians live below the ALICE\* threshold – the income needed for household survival. In Indian River alone nearly 31,250 residents are struggling to make ends meet. This Mother’s Day, honor the women in your life by giving back.

**When you give to United Way, you help Indian River County families thrive.**

*\*ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. The household survival budget for an individual living in Indian River County is \$27,516.*

LIVE WITH PURPOSE. GIVE WITH COMPASSION.

**UNITEDWAYIRC.ORG**



United Way of Indian River County

**UNITED WAY  
FOUNDATION  
OF INDIAN RIVER COUNTY**

## INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

**“We are about inspiring and empowering all students to maximize their full potential.”**

– DAVID MOORE

some of the most significant areas of progress were, and here is what I found.

Overall, 65 percent of SDIRC’s schools are A or B schools, compared to 47 percent in 2018–19. While the number of elementary schools with A or B grades is a driving force behind this improvement, one of the county’s three middle schools improved a letter grade, as did one of the two public high schools.

As for content area improvement, significant progress was made in English language arts achievement for grade three, mathematics achievement for grades

three through eight, science achievement for grades five and eight, and biology. In fact, SDIRC exceeded state averages in every category by a statistically significant amount.

And when playing for all the marbles is considered, SDIRC posted a 96 percent graduation rate in 2022–23, ranking No. 3 out of 67. My two eldest children recently earned high school diplomas from area high schools. As their college careers unfold, I can personally attest that their preparation for higher education was significantly influenced by the quality experience they had attending Vero Beach schools.



Crossover Mission, a nonprofit that mentors children in life and academics, received a check from the Indian River Community Foundation in January.



The Gifford Youth Achievement Center helps to develop career paths for students in the Youth Employability Program.

When I ask Moore about some of the criticism he and his administration have received during his tenure, he is both modest and focused in his reply.

“That is not what we are about in the School District of Indian River County,” he says. “We are about inspiring and

empowering all students to maximize their full potential. This incredible achievement is a testament to the hard work and dedication our students, teachers, staff, and community have contributed toward this mission. The only thing to do with these results is to celebrate!”

It is significant to note that these results were achieved amid the chaos brought on by a global pandemic. When the world shut down in spring 2020, Moore and his new administrative team were just a few months into their time working together when COVID-19 forced a change

in both strategy and energy. A little more than three years later, they are stronger than ever before and up for whatever challenges might be next. Unfortunately, there is a long list.

School safety; teacher shortages; curriculum changes; kindergarten readiness; literacy by third grade; eighth grade math proficiency; high school attendance and on-time graduation; the education of students with special needs ranging from severe learning disabilities to homelessness.

# GYAC

GIFFORD YOUTH ACHIEVEMENT CENTER




















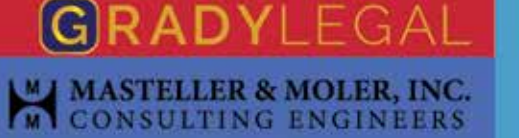





## Youth Employability Program

INDIAN RIVER IMPACT 100

**Changing Lives, Changing Futures.**

Thank you to the following Youth Employability Program business partners for giving youth a chance! Together, we can!

LEARN MORE AT [MYGYAC.ORG](https://mygyac.org)



Redlands Christian Migrant Association is a nonprofit that supports kindergarten readiness and reading proficiency.

I could keep going, but I think my point is clear. Public education is an all-hands-on-deck endeavor that never really takes a day off.

At the individual school level, this approach is on full display, starting with the district's principals. Take, for example, Beachland Elementary School principal Rachel Finnegan, recognized as SDIRC's "Principal of the Year" for 2022-23.

Since beginning her tenure in 2019, Finnegan has inspired the Beachland Sharks community of students, teachers, parents, and staff to embrace the theme of riding the wave of success. Instead of "wiping out" when

the COVID-19 tsunami came ashore, Finnegan's energy and enthusiasm inspired the Sharks to navigate the transition to school-at-home and the return to classrooms while maintaining the school's A grade and its status as a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) learning academy. This success can be attributed in part to a faithful adherence to school values of being warmhearted, active and attentive, vigilant, and enthusiastic for learning. In surfing competitions we call this a "perfect 10," and it is the kind of result that gets me stoked.

While SDIRC makes it a

**"The only thing to do with these results is to celebrate!"**

– DAVID MOORE



priority to recognize individual principals, teachers, and employees with annual awards, sometimes a single school deserves an all-hands-on-deck approach from an entire community. Just eight years ago, Vero Beach Elementary's grade was an F. It is a Title 1 school whose 500 students are some of the most economically challenged in the district. While the

school's grade has improved to a C, according to the most recent school improvement plan, one out of three VBE students still has an attendance rate below 90 percent, and the same ratio applies for students who continue to have a substantial reading deficiency.

In response, at the start of the 2023-24 school year, SDIRC partnered with The



RCMA has been working with low-income families in Indian River County since 1988, providing free childcare and VPK to those in need.

disruptive, most common-sense thing to do would be a temporary arrangement between CSAC and SDIRC and a return to business as usual next year when the new Indian River Education Fund is established at SDIRC.

I trust that Moore and Janet Knupp, the Education Fund's newly recruited executive director, can solve the problem. In a small town like ours, however, with so many significant community challenges, we should be able to get on the same team and avoid these unnecessary disruptions for the sake of our children's education.

Last year, approximately \$10 million out of the \$110 million awarded to local charities went for educational purposes. These dollars support programs that lead to higher levels of kindergarten readiness, reading and math proficiency, and high school graduation. An equal amount was donated to programs that serve children and youth, giving kids the support they need to achieve academically and steer clear of risky behaviors that can lead to the most adverse outcomes, such as teen suicide or death by overdose.

As a father of three children, I cannot think of a better way to show David Moore and the SDIRC community support than by giving to educational causes that align with district goals and get results. It is a team effort that we can all be proud of. ✨



principal Lyndsey Samberg announced enthusiastically.

The resources to make this possible are provided largely by philanthropy, either as charitable gifts from individuals or as grants from organizations like Indian River Community Foundation, which, together with its clients, has awarded more than \$3 million to past literacy efforts. They will be used to support The Learning Alliance to apply lessons learned from its 15-year track record leading the community's literacy initiative, the Moonshot Moment.

With progress, sometimes there are also disappointments that make working together toward a common goal more challenging.

Take the "Step into Kindergarten" program, for example, which is focused on increasing kindergarten readiness through a proven summer enrichment program for children aged 4 to 5 who have completed a

voluntary prekindergarten program. Historically, it has operated as a partnership between the nonprofit Education Foundation of IRC and the SDIRC.

With the recent dissolution of the Education Foundation, however, some of the public funding through the county's Children's Services Advisory Council for Step into Kindergarten is at risk of not being awarded—not for a lack of resources, however. Instead, the culprit is a poorly written section of a county ordinance (No. 2022-007) that prohibits the use of county CSAC funding to pay for or reimburse services provided by other governmental entities or their employees, such as SDIRC.

While the money could "funnel" through another local charity, as was suggested to me by a county administrator, it seems like an unnecessary burden to place on a good neighbor charity for such a small amount of money. In the spirit of collaboration, the least

Learning Alliance to open the "Moonshot School" at VBE. The plan is to operate VBE as a demonstration school for best practices and as a hub for innovation, inviting educators from across the community and state to learn what it takes to ensure that all children can read proficiently by the third grade.

"We aspire to be the first elementary school in Indian River County to achieve the Moonshot goal of 90 percent literacy by third grade,"