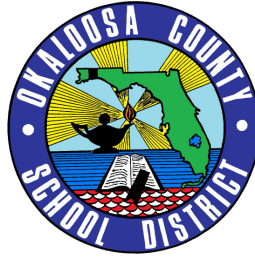


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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
September 3, 2026

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Leadership Experience Initiative Expands Leadership Opportunities for Okaloosa County Educators and Students

A local initiative is creating additional opportunities for Okaloosa County educators and students to grow as leaders through immersive, hands-on experiences. The Leadership Experience Initiative (LEI), founded in 2024 with a mission of “Nurturing Leadership Through Experiences,” complements the leadership development already taking place in our schools by providing participants with unique experiences designed to challenge perspectives, build confidence and inspire personal growth. Since its founding, LEI has invested in eight local school leaders, providing them with immersive leadership experiences through the Gardner Carney Leadership Institute (gcLi) over the past two summers. The initiative expanded its reach in 2026 to include students, extending its commitment to developing leadership at both the educator and student levels.

The 2025 participants included Lindsey Smith, Fort Walton Beach High School; Michelle Heck, Choctawhatchee High School; Heather Graham Williams, Bruner Middle School; and Jason McClelland, Pryor Middle School. In summer 2026, LEI expanded its investment to four additional educators: Marcelo Mueller, Fort Walton Beach High School; Nichole Humphreys, Choctawhatchee High School; Brittany Tate, Pryor Middle School; and Melissa Howell, Meigs Middle School.

For the educators who participated, the experience provided an opportunity to step outside their daily roles, reflect on their leadership, and return to their schools with new perspectives. “This was the best professional learning experience any educator could attend. It was truly life-changing. The biggest takeaway for me was the importance of remembering that we are in the ‘people business.’ Before we can educate, we have to build relationships, make connections, and create a sense of belonging for everyone within our sphere of influence.” — Marcelo Mueller, Assistant Principal, Fort Walton Beach High School

In 2026, LEI expanded its mission to students, providing four students from Fort Walton Beach High School and Choctawhatchee High School with immersive leadership experiences through Students Shoulder-to-Shoulder and Outward Bound. The participating students were Elyse (Fort Walton Beach), Caycey (Choctawhatchee), Carmelo (Fort Walton Beach), and Karighn (Choctawhatchee). For Caycey, the experience offered an opportunity for personal reflection and helped her better understand her own leadership style. “Over the 10-day trip, I looked much deeper into myself, exploring new ways to lead and how to be a better person overall. I specifically discovered my leadership style through an activity we did, and mine was called ‘caregiver.’ I think that says it all.” — Caycey, Choctawhatchee High School

The expansion to students represents an important step in LEI’s mission to nurture leadership across generations. By providing meaningful experiences to both educators and young people, LEI seeks to develop leaders who bring new perspectives, stronger relationships, and a greater sense of purpose back to their schools

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and communities. LEI will continue expanding leadership opportunities for educators and students, including additional opportunities for school-based leaders.



(Left photo: Brittany Tate, Marcelo Mueller, Melissa Bowell, and Nichole Humphreys
Right photo: Caycey, Choctawhatchee High School)

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