

North Georgia News

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UCES begins new chapter with community

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

After 17 months of building and preparation, the big day finally arrived on Thursday, April 24, as the new Union County Elementary School held its official ribbon cutting, opening its doors to the community for a look inside before the facility goes into use this fall on Beasley Circle.

Though the outside certainly looks majestic in its own right, the interior of the building is a sprawling testament to modern design. Natural lighting brightens much of the new UCES; skylights serve as the ceiling over most of the hallways, and many classrooms – and staff rooms, for that matter – are decorated with ample windows.

Members of the High School DECA Club participated in the proceedings that day, serving as greeters and handing out agendas and fact sheets. After the initial program, they also acted as tour guides around the building and pointed guests to where they needed to go.

The ceremony itself was opened by UCES Principal Jerry Bavero, who welcomed all in attendance to an “incredible day in Union County.”

Met with applause, Bavero revealed that the goal of the new facility ever since its groundbreaking on Nov. 16, 2023, was to create a school that was “more than just a building.”

“We dreamed of a place where students would feel safe, inspired and excited to learn,” See *Elementary School, Page 7A*



The first students who will grace the halls of the new Union County Elementary School next school year were excited to be included in the April 24 ribbon cutting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

BOE honors 1971 and 2025 Basketball Teams



There's an old saying that history repeats itself, and that's certainly true for the 1971 and 2025 Panther Men's Basketball Teams, pictured here in the April 24 School Board meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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On Thursday, April 24, the Union County School Board hosted a historic gathering of the Men's Basketball Teams from 1971 and 2025 for a joint recognition of both squads' outstanding accomplishments as runners-up in their respective state championships.

Assistant Athletic Director Thomas Nelson explained the significance of the occasion to a standing-room only crowd in the regular board meeting last week.

“What an honor it is to stand before you tonight as we come together to celebrate two extraordinary teams: the Union County Men's Basketball Teams of 1971 and 2025,”

Nelson said. “Though more than 50 years apart, these two teams share a remarkable bond.”

“Both reached the pinnacle of high school basketball in our state. Both earned their place on the biggest stage. And both finished their seasons as state runner-up, a title that represents not just athletic achievement but See *Honoring Panthers, Page 6A*

FedEx driver arrested for UCFD credit card theft

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Union County Sheriff's Office arrested a FedEx delivery driver this month after he confessed to stealing credit card information from the Union County Fire Department, according to Financial Crimes Investigator Sgt. Bob Calamari.

Described by Sgt. Calamari as a crime of opportunity, the theft resulted in over \$3,300 in fraudulent charges being made to the Union County Government-issued credit card for Fire Station No. 1.

Darius Dijon Harris, 29, of Winder, has been charged with one felony count of financial transaction card theft, with additional charges likely to be forthcoming. At the time of his arrest, Harris also had an arrest warrant for fraud



Darius Dijon Harris issued by Watkinsville-area law enforcement.

The theft occurred on Friday, March 28, after Harris, an independent contractor with FedEx, showed up in his work truck with a package delivery for UCFD Station 1 Headquarters on Shoe Factory Road, Calamari said.

When Harris arrived, the front desk employee was in the middle of using the department credit card to book hotel stays for firefighters who were going to out-of-town training. She paused her work to take boxes from Harris, placing the credit card on the keyboard of her computer.

The Fire Department employee informed Harris she had a package to send with him, at which point he went out to his truck and quickly returned with his personal cellphone, Calamari said.

As soon as the employee left the lobby to grab the outgoing box for Harris, he leaned over the counter of the guest window to view the area where the county credit card had been placed, all the while keeping his back to the security camera that was recording the scene, Calamari said. See *Credit Card Theft, Page 2A*

National Day of Prayer is on Thursday, May 1

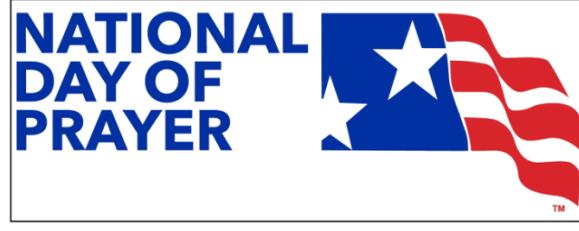
By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Jack Schroeder worked on organizing the local National Day of Prayer service up until he went to his Lord on Tuesday, April 22, and it's partially in his memory that the event will be held this Thursday, May 1, at 5:30 p.m. inside the usual First Baptist Church of Blairsville venue.

The 2025 theme is “Call Out to the God of Hope and Be Filled,” based on Romans 15:13.

“That has turned out to be so personal to me, with losing Jack,” said Pam Schroeder, who assisted her husband with planning during his illness and picked up preparations following his death last week.

But along with the personal touch, the theme is meant to instill hope in a people



bombarded on all sides by tumultuous times.

“People have lost the definition of civility,” Schroeder said. “A lot of what we do is attitude. That's why these attitudes – this division of the country – really bother me.”

And it's more important than ever to show those people love. One of the sayings Schroeder lives by is to “love the sinner, hate the sin,” leaving room to extend love to any variety of person one comes across.

That said, there has

always been a purpose behind the National Day of Prayer. Of course, there is the goal to unite all Christians and bring others to Christ, but the main takeaway, Schroeder says, is in the action itself.

“There is power in prayer, and in the spoken word,” Schroeder believes, adding that by invoking the name of Jesus, desire flows from the wishes of the people to Christ's strength and power. “The reason we do National Day of Prayer is so our country See *Nat'l Day of Prayer, Page 2A*

Inaugural Seafood Festival benefits Historical Society



The Blairville Music & Seafood Festival was a big hit over the weekend, with live music and plenty of food options, plus lots of family friendly activities and historical information. Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

To the delight of hundreds of residents and area visitors, the Union County Historical Society hosted its inaugural Blairville Music & Seafood Festival on the lawn of the Butt-Mock House in Downtown Blairville April 25-27.

In addition to gourmet food provided by local businesses, there were raffles and give-a-ways and a bouncy house for the kids. Some of

the vendors included Lucky's, Pizza Belly, Sammy's Subs, and Blairville Social provided the beer and wine.

Historical Society President Mike Cook was the brainchild behind the festival and hopes the first outing serves as the beginning of a new tradition and repeat fundraiser.

“Our purpose is to educate the public,” Cook said. “We want kids to come out and learn about the past. That's why we've got the mining for gold and Mr. Reeves down there talking about old tools. We're

educating them on rebuilding the Collins Cabin over here. It's just a lot of fun for the whole family.

“If we don't care about this stuff now, then it's going to be gone. The Historical Society was created because we were about to lose the Old Courthouse. That grassroots effort led to us saving all of these cabins which were donated to us. We wanted to restore them and keep them.

“Today, I just want the kids to get away from See *Seafood Festival, Page 6A*



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Nat'l Day of Prayer...from Page 1A

can be covered in prayer.”

Certain prayers are offered for different facets of life during the annual event, which always falls on the first Thursday in May, and while there are some people Schroeder noted do tend to return and minister in the same categories, there are some changes and fresh faces this year.

For one, District Attorney Jeff Langley, who has prayed over government before, will offer a prayer toward education. The decision comes because he is the chair of the Appalachian Christian Leadership Council, a released-time program that has started up in Towns County Schools with hopes to expand to other districts in the coming years.

“(High schoolers) get released from their classes at school, and they come off-campus for this training, and then they go back on campus,” explained Schroeder, describing the optional program as a way for students to learn leadership training based on scripture.

Filling the role of praying for leaders at all levels of government will be Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.

“We’re trying to get more people involved and we want it to become more regional,” said Schroeder, revealing a push to include broader geographical representation in the local program. To accomplish this, next year’s goal will outline getting individual churches in on the idea.

The Schroeders, with their background in radio, planned on broadcasting the program via two local sister stations along with a station as far away as Idaho. Today’s Christian Country on WUCG 89.9 in Blairsville and WCDG 88.7 in Dahlonega will be the local stations for those interested in tuning in.

But Schroeder is taking a step back. The decision had already been made that this would be their last year planning the local event, as Jack’s health was quickly going downhill. Still, he chose to try

to do what he could this year including making phone calls and organizing contacts.

“This year, he took that on, and he was going to do it; no matter what, he was going to do it,” Schroeder said, describing her husband’s fight against cancer and his work to keep going as a “Herculean effort.”

With Jack’s passing at 86, Jim Yohe will be taking up the mantle as official organizer, primarily spearheading all efforts to communicate and draw people together. Schroeder said she’ll be there to advise and answer questions if needed, though, and she certainly plans on attending.

Speaking of attending, anyone who wants to join the 2025 National Day of Prayer in person can head to the First Baptist Church at 296 Blue Ridge Street in Blairsville this Thursday.

Schroeder believes the event does stand as a part of her husband’s legacy, “his heart,” and he would be proud to find it is so well anticipated and successful.

Credit Card Theft...from Page 1A

She brought out the box, and Harris left to continue making deliveries.

A week later, the employee received the credit card statement and saw three charges that did not belong, and she immediately notified Union County Government, which in turn contacted the Sheriff’s Office. Six other charges showed up on April 8, and the employee reported those also.

Among the nine charges were \$551.05 at an auto repair shop in Athens, \$540 for a car insurance payment and five charges totaling \$164 at an Athens-area gas station. There were also two charges by a production company, one for \$2.36 and another for \$2,100.

Fortunately, the bank was able to reverse the charges for the Fire Department, but this set up a scenario in which the repair shop called Harris to inform him that the payment had ultimately been declined and that he needed to settle the bill or face arrest over the incident, Calamari said.

As it turned out, Harris had made the payment to repair his mother’s car after she had been involved in an accident, and she ended up making the payment herself within a couple days of the charge reversing, Calamari said.

Still, Harris grew paranoid about the threat of arrest and called UCSO to ask if he had any active warrants here. Sgt. Calamari said no and invited him to town to clear things up, so Harris worked it

into his delivery schedule to drop by the Sheriff’s Office on Thursday, April 17.

Sure enough – and to the surprise of investigators, especially given how the case concluded – Harris showed up as scheduled in his delivery truck.

During an initial interview, Harris started off by telling Calamari that he had provided his own credit card number to the repair shop and said the business must have entered the information incorrectly during the payment.

But Calamari had done his homework, bringing up other credit card charges that Harris decided he could not refute.

“Finally, he said, ‘I’ve got a question. What would happen if I did do something like this?’” Calamari said. “And I said, ‘I can’t work with a hypothetical situation – did you make these charges?’”

At that point, Harris admitted to making the charge at the repair shop, and in short order, he also confessed to making an insurance payment for his wife’s vehicle using the Fire Department credit card, Calamari said.

Harris was taken into custody that Thursday, and the Sheriff’s Office got a hold of his supervisor to deal with his delivery truck that was sitting in the UCSO parking lot. The supervisor came out to transfer packages that still needed to be delivered, and the truck was picked up that evening.

Three days later, Calamari brought Harris back into the interview room from the jail to ask some follow-up questions after additional investigation, and Harris admitted to the gas purchases as well, bringing the total number of explained fraudulent charges to seven of nine.

But he maintained he had no idea about the two credit card charges related to the production company, which UCSO was unable to tie to an actual business. Harris claimed he likely got scammed by someone with whom he used the card to pay for \$125 in electronic screen repairs.

Remarkably, Harris told investigators he did not take a picture of the credit card but memorized the number inside Fire Station No. 1, later entering the info into a wallet app on his cellphone that allowed him to make in-person payments without the card being present, Calamari said.

“He told us that he was down on his luck, was having financial troubles, and he just got weak,” added UCSO Lt. Doug Brackett, who heads up the Criminal Investigations Division and assisted in this case.

Harris made his \$10,000 bond at the Union County Jail last week, and he was released into the custody of Oconee County authorities to face his Watkinsville-area arrest warrant. He is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 organizes VA Claims Clinic for May 29th in Blairsville

Unsure if you need to file a claim?
Need help starting a claim?



Unsure if you need a supplemental claim?
Need a Claim?

Presents

VA Claims Clinic

29 May 2025
Pat Haralson Civic Center
165 Wellborn St
Blairsville GA 30512
9:00am – 3:00pm

Register at
legionpost121.org
NLT 20 May 2025

**If you’re a
Veteran
this event is for
you**

Walk in anytime throughout the day, but please register

American Legion Post 121 in Blairsville in concert with American Legion Post 248 from Blue Ridge and America Legion Post 23 from Hiawassee are hosting a VA Claims Clinic for any veteran that would like to attend on 29 May. The purpose of the VA Claims Clinic is to provide an opportunity for any Veteran, spouse or widow to speak with a representative from the Veterans Benefits Administration or the Georgia Department of Veterans Services to initiate or follow up on a claim or benefit. If you are unsure how to start a VA claim or if you are unsure if you qualify for a VA claim this event is for you. The Claims Clinic runs from 9AM to 3PM at the Pat Haralson Civic Center in Blairsville. You can drop in anytime during that period to see a claims representative but please register at legionpost121.org.

To make the most of this opportunity at a minimum bring your DD214. If you’ve worked with the VA in the past and you are considering a Supplemental Claim or an appeal, bring a copy of the VA decision for the previous claim. Bring an official photo ID and if you’re a surviving spouse bring the death certificate of the military member. If you don’t have a DD214 and you have copies of old Orders,

bring those too. Basically, bring anything and everything you may have to prove your service to the military and anything that might help with the claims process to include medical records. Register for this free event at the Pat Haralson Civic Center on 29 May 2025 at legionpost121.org.

On 10 May, the Legion is holding a social at the Crane Creek Winery in Young Harris in honor of Legion Family Day. This is the day the Legion celebrates the work they do, the camaraderie they have, and the strong relationship within the Legion Family. May is also the month the Legion Family, led by the Auxiliary, celebrates and remembers the importance and value of the Poppy. The Auxiliary has set up displays around the town to educate the public on the history of the Poppy. These activities culminate on National Poppy Day on 23 May. On this day, you’ll see members of the Auxiliary at South State Bank, River City Bank and United Community Bank to engage the public with conversation, smiles and Poppies.

The Legion Family, which consists of the Legion, Auxiliary, the Sons and the Riders, never stop with the goal of supporting Veterans at every opportunity and supporting the 4 Pillars of the

American Legion. If you’re a Veteran or related to one, come check us out, you won’t be disappointed.

The American Legion is the largest and one of the oldest and most influential of all veterans’ organizations worldwide and devotes itself to mutual helpfulness, mentoring youth, advocating patriotic honor, promoting strong national security, and continued devotion to fellow service members and veterans.

All members, and interested veterans, are encouraged to attend our meetings on the third Tuesday of every month at 6:30 PM. The next meeting at the Leon Davenport Veteran’s Center, 78 Blue Ridge Street is on 20 May. It’s a great opportunity to become engaged in the community and establish strong bonds with fellow Vets. The Auxiliary for spouses of Veterans, will begin its meeting at 6:30 PM in the same building on the same day and the Sons of the American Legion meet at 5 PM. Additionally, the Legion Riders will have their meeting on 2nd Tuesday of each month at 6 PM.

For more information on the meeting or any Post activities email the Post at post121@gmail.com or visit the website at legionpost121.org.

Honoring Panthers...from Page 1A



Congratulations to the UCHS Wrestling Team for 2024-2025, which had a stellar season.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

resilience, pride and heart.

"Let's begin by honoring the 1971 team. Over half a century ago, this group of young men ignited something powerful in Union County. They played with passion and purpose. They made history.

"Their journey to the state championship rallied this entire community in a way that had never been seen before. Families filled the bleachers. Townspeople followed their every game. For a moment in time, Union County was united behind one cause, one team and one dream.

"Tonight, we also celebrate the 2025 team, who carried that same spirit onto the court this season. Their determination, their unity, and their never-quit attitude brought us all to our feet again.

"With every game, they brought back the energy and the excitement that the 1971 team inspired decades ago. They, too, made it to the state championship. And while they, like their predecessors, fell just a little bit short of the title, they accomplished something even greater; they brought us together once more.

"These two teams represent more than basketball – they represent legacy, they represent what happens when talent meets commitment, when a community rallies behind its youth."

One by one, Nelson called forward the players of both teams to receive certificates of achievement and heartfelt congratulations from everyone in attendance, starting with the team that set the bar 54 years ago.

Attending members of the 1971 team were Barry Collins, Larry Turner, Gary Turner, Danny Aaron, Gary George, Mike Scott, David Buchanan, Johnny Huggins, Gary Kelley, Troy Collins and Sammy Owenby.

Represented by loved ones that evening, deceased

members of the 1971 squad were also honored: Lyndsey Gregory, Ray Snead, Danny Bridges, Donald Kelley and Coach Earl Odom.

"Thank you," Nelson said. "You were pioneers. You set the standard. Your legacy lives on not just in trophies or records but in the very culture of Union County Basketball."

2025 team members in attendance were Ethan Hogsd, Houston Henry, Holden Payne, Ryland Chambers, Maddox Young, Vince Marevka, Jackson Nichols, Hayden Price, Jacob Rodriguez, Kaden Combs, Hayden Hughes, Head Coach Corey Garrett, Assistant Coach Kevin Hughes and Assistant Coach Anthony Payne.

"Thank you for writing the next chapter," Nelson said to the younger players. "You've honored those who came before you in doing so and became part of something timeless.

"And our incredible community – your unwavering support, your cheers from the stands, your belief in these young men – that's what truly makes a great team. You are the soul behind the scoreboard.

"Tonight, we celebrate two teams, two eras, one legacy: Union County past, present and future. We are proud, we are united, and we are champions in every sense of the word."

Also recognized that evening were the grapplers from the 2025 Wrestling Team, who achieved tremendous success over their season this year.

"A high school wrestling season has two parts; each season has dual competition and individual competitions," Nelson said. "A high school wrestling dual is a head-to-head competition between two schools where each team puts forward one wrestler per weight class to compete in individual matches.

"There are 14 weight classes, and each match

contributes points to the team's overall score based on the outcome. The team with the most points at the end of all matches wins the dual. Both duals and traditional individual have an area region competition and GHSA state competition.

"This year, the Union County High School Wrestling Team won the 8AA Duals Area Tournament, becoming back-to-back Area Champions. The team then competed in the GHSA AA State Tournament, where the team placed fourth."

The 2025 Duals Team was: Eli Hancock, Eli Flowers, Michael Raines, Aiden Hyatt, David Tiu, Thomas Gary, Riley Mortensen, Parker Dobson, Ryker Lambert, Michael Lindsey, Andrew Engle, Evan Helbert, Paxton Legatt, Brayden Tullar, Ben Gary, Kevin Kilpatrick, Payton Legatt, Isaac Milam, Blake Webster, Asa Smith-Foot, Ayden Lee, Zane Barrett, Jacob Parawana and Jackson Arthur.

For Individual State Placements, qualifiers were Thomas Gary, Ayden Lee, Jackson Arthur, Jada Taylor and Kristyn Kraft; Aiden Hyatt and Asa Smith-Foot placed fifth; Eli Flowers and Payton Legatt placed second; and Paxton Legatt finished State Champion in the 157-pound weight class.

Wrestling Coaches are Head Coach Justin Byers and Assistant Coaches Micheal Smith-Foot, Jim Legatt and Craig Flowers, with Coaches David Brown and Holly Smith-Foot for the girls.

"If you've ever had any part in wrestling, you understand that this is probably the toughest sport," Nelson said in conclusion. "So, understand that these young men and women have gone through quite a bit to be here, and we're extremely proud of them."

Additional coverage of the April 24 School Board meeting appears in a separate article of this week's newspaper.

Seafood Festival...from Page 1A

that phone, get away from that television and that Xbox controller, and come throw an axe and see how people used to live. Those are my main goals for the kids."

Historical Society Past President Mickey Cummings was on hand answering questions about the restoration of the Collins Cabin, which is being erected right next to the 1906 Butt-Mock House that serves as the site of the Mountain Life Museum.

"It was built sometime between the 1820s and 1850s," Cummings said. "One of our local farmers, F.C. Collins, was born in that cabin, and the family donated it to us. We are restoring it as much as possible because it is one of the oldest houses in the county.

"What we want is for people to come and see what it is like and to save as much of our heritage as possible, and this is one way of doing that. This cabin has some gun portholes in it, so we know it was built during Indian times. This cabin probably housed eight or nine people. Can you imagine?"

Kathleen Cook, the eldest child of a family of 12, is the curator of the museum and quite a historian in her own right.

"I'm a good storyteller because I remember so many things. I've lived through it. I am 82 years old. Everything you see here has been donated," Cook said, indicating the many museum exhibits. "The doctor's equipment there belonged to Dr. Herbert Edge, and he was the doctor who delivered me.

"This is the Butt-Mock House, and we have worked on this for some time. Ms. Mock was my teacher who taught history and French. We used to eat out on the porch and have chocolate milk and



The Historical Society is expanding its catalogue of heritage buildings with the Collins Cabin, which received tours during the Seafood Festival.

Photo by Shelly Knight



The handmaking of quilts was one of several historical demonstrations on offer during the weekend fundraiser.

Photo by Shelly Knight

tomato sandwiches. My team and I have spent many hours making this home look the way it once did."

The work of the Historical Society continues today, and so the idea of the fundraiser was born to help

finance the projects these folks are working on. It is a true labor of love, and Union County is taking great pains to keep the past alive.

For more information, visit <https://www.unioncountyhistory.org/>.

Elementary School...from Page 1A

Bavero said. “Today, as we look around, we see that dream brought to life in this beautiful new building.”

There were a handful of notable faces in the crowd, including State Rep. Stan Gunter, Sheriff Shawn Dyer and even Avis Shaw, whose land was purchased in order for the school to be built. As a matter of fact, Shaw also spoke as part of the presentation.

“You’re always going to have children – I hope we’re always going to have children – and we’re always going to need a school and a place to educate them,” Shaw said. “See, this school is so beautiful. I have enjoyed seeing it go up.”

Superintendent John Hill said the project started when the Board of Education identified a need for a new facility. The goal was to complete the building without debt, and Hill revealed that, indeed, even by its completion, construction ran under budget and ahead of schedule.

Measuring in at 114,000 square feet and housing 67 classrooms, the debt-free facility cost \$36.3 million. It has enough space to hold 1,200 students at a time, and the building was designed to be easy to add onto as the county’s population expands, with an expected lifespan of 50 to 75 years.

“The teachers that I had in elementary school, I can tell you, made a lifelong impact on me,” said Board Member Julia Barnett, voice breaking as she detailed how educators made her feel smart – and she

believed them, thus believing in herself.

“I can only imagine how many little lives that (staff) are going to influence positively in this beautiful new building that we have,” added Barnett.

Keynote speaker Scotty Jarrard, a local preacher, drew attention to the power of the penny, pointing to how the voter-approved E-SPLOST paid for the project in its entirety.

Like Barnett, Jarrard gave voice to how his elementary school experience changed his life forever, making him into the person he is today.

This included everything from humorous memories of mundane patterns used by teachers to instill learning to the death of a classmate in a tragic farming accident. Through these, he learned to value his community, and he hopes the same will ring true for Union County’s youngest generations.

“That’s why I’m here today, because this community cared for me, and now it’s my turn to care for it,” he said, addressing the students in attendance. “Your superintendent, your school, many teachers in your school, are the dividends for the investments that were made a long time ago.”

Jarrard continued, promising the little ones that they are the very future by saying, “And you know what? There’s one thing that I want you to hear from me: I believe in you. I believe you’ve got what it takes.”

Between the words of

Jarrard and Barnett, several audience members shared in their tears. They also enjoyed the other speakers of the day, including Georgia State Facilities Director Michael Sanders, Douglas Breaux of Breaux & Associates Architects and C.J. McDonald of Charles Black Construction.

Then came the promised ribbon cutting, which was itself cut into two different ceremonies to represent the two groups at the forefront of everyone’s minds when it came to UCES’ conceptualization and realization.

First, the elementary students to be named as the first class to grace the new halls had their own ribbon cutting. A line of eager youngsters stood behind a fittingly purple ribbon before severing it with oversized scissors made even more apparent in tiny hands.

Then, school leaders such as the Board of Education, Bavero, Hill and even those who helped make the building possible like Sanders, Breaux and McDonald, had the opportunity to cut their own ribbon – also purple, in the spirit of Union County’s Panthers.

Afterward, everyone was invited to walk the new halls, exploring everything from the classrooms to the administrative cubbyholes, from the bathrooms and art room to the gym and cafeteria.

Though empty, the rooms are set to fill up quick; move-in started the day after the ribbon cutting, and classes will begin there this August.



The optimism was palpable inside the new Elementary School April 24, as school officials, construction partners, students, community members and others celebrated the completion of the ESPLOST-funded project. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



A modern design ethic permeates the new Elementary School, as seen here in the soon-to-be-filled Media Center. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks