

Meet the Syracuse City School District

Independent Evaluators

(2024-2025)

The Syracuse City School District, the Syracuse Teachers Association (STA), and the Syracuse Association of Administrators and Supervisors (SAAS) believe that providing teachers opportunities for feedback from a content-focused observer supports their professional practice and enhances the administrative evaluation process. In support of this, SCSD has hired a team of Independent Evaluators with experience in art, business/technology/CTE, English Language Arts, elementary education, ENL, math, music, physical education, science, social studies, special education, and world languages.

Independent Evaluators were selected via a rigorous process that considered teaching effectiveness, ability to provide honest and objective written and oral feedback, content area expertise and experience, and commitment to improving the overall effectiveness of the SCSD teaching force. Independent Evaluators were trained in several areas:

- Danielson's Framework for Teaching
- Collecting objective evidence & providing constructive feedback
- StaffTrac Platform
- APPR
- Writing high-quality observation reports
- Ongoing calibration
- District initiatives

Under the SCSD APPR agreement, all SCSD teachers will receive observations conducted by Independent Evaluators. Probationary teachers will be observed once each year in announced visits, and tenured teachers will be observed once in an unannounced visit. What follows are brief biographies of the SCSD's Independent Evaluators.



Kim Huhtala
Lead Independent Evaluator

Content Expertise: Elementary Education

Kim Huhtala currently serves our Elementary and QR teachers. While these areas are her focus, she has also provided feedback to teachers in SpEd and ENL as well. She has facilitated several PD sessions on best practices, Danielson, and the evaluation process, and has served as a mentor to other evaluators. She enjoys networking teachers across the district, engaging in reflective conversations, and sharing best practices to enhance student performance.

Prior to this role, Kim was a dedicated teacher at a middle school in East New York, Brooklyn. She was selected by the New York City Department of Education as a Lead Teacher after receiving her certificate from the Teacher Facilitative Leadership Institute at the United Federation of Teachers. She is certified in Childhood Education (1-6) and Special Education.



Elizabeth Banish

Content Expertise: Elementary Education

Elizabeth Banish is returning as an elementary independent evaluator. She began her career as a general education teacher in the Syracuse City School District in 2005. During that time, she served the district in many capacities, but primarily as a teacher in third and fourth grade. Elizabeth also has experience co-teaching in an inclusion setting and as an AIS teacher. Elizabeth received her bachelor's degree from Oswego State University and a master's degree from Le Moyne College. She is certified in both General Education (1-6) and Special Education (1-6).



Thérèse Como

Content Expertise: English Language Arts

Thérèse Como looks forward to continuing to serve in her role as an Independent Observer. Previously, Ms. Como has taught English Language Arts, was appointed the ELA content specialist and completed an internship at Nottingham High School. Serving in each role, she has provided an array of professional development and has served as a mentor to teachers entering the teaching profession. In addition, Ms. Como has received a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Leadership from Le Moyne College.



Stephanie Frisina
MTIP Coordinator

Content Expertise: Elementary Education

Stephanie Frisina is an independent evaluator within our elementary and middle schools observing a variety of grades/subjects K-8. Her goal of the independent evaluation process is to support and develop teachers through the use of the Danielson Framework, to build positive relationships with teachers within the SCSD district and share/discuss best practices surrounding academic, social, and emotional teaching.

Prior to this position, Stephanie taught 4th grade within the Syracuse City School District. Before moving to Syracuse and joining SCSD, she taught throughout grades K-8 within the New York City Department of Education in both Manhattan and the Bronx. She also served as a teacher, math interventionist and peer coach at SANY Charter Schools. Stephanie received her bachelor's degree from the University of Waterloo (Ontario, Canada), master's in teaching from SUNY Potsdam, and her CAS in School Building and District Leadership at Canisius University. Stephanie is also the MTIP Coordinator for SCSD.



Cory Frederick

Content Expertise: Physical Education & Health

Cory Frederick has worked for the Syracuse City School District for 23 years as a physical education teacher and coach. He was born and raised in Rochester, New York. He attended Eastridge High School, in Rochester New York. Cory holds degrees from SUNY Brockport, B.S. and USSA MS in Sport Coaching. Cory is a dedicated physical education teacher with certifications in American Red Cross Life Guarding and Project Adventure Course Manager. Cory has coached Modified Soccer and Baseball for over 20 years. He also is head of the project adventure ropes course program at Meachem Field, which is now available to all SCSD students. Cory is very excited about the opportunity to work with fellow teachers to foster a greater physical education program for all students in SCSD. A Great Coach can change a Life!



Don Gates

Content Expertise: Social Studies

Don is returning as one of the district's Independent Evaluators for Social Studies and Science education. Don earned a M.S. in Social Studies Education from Syracuse University. He also has a B.S. in Environmental Studies from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. During his 21 years as a social studies educator, he has taught all levels in secondary social studies education (7-12). During his Syracuse City teaching career, he has taught at VINTA, Blodgett K-8 and PSLA @ Fowler. Most recently, he taught Active Citizenship, SUPA Public Policy and ESF Economics at PSLA @ Fowler. In the 2021-2022 school year Don was a SyraFuse fellow.



Janice Hammerle

**Content Expertise:
Science/CTE/Technology/Business**

Janice is looking forward to improving student achievement by supporting teachers with targeted feedback and resources.

Janice has been with the SCSD for 22 years. She graduated from SCSD schools and began her career as a Technology teacher at Nottingham HS. While there, she also served as an Internship Program Coordinator for 4 years. She served as the Technology/Art Department Chair, participated on the Community of Caring and PBIS committees, developed new Technology Course curriculum, participated in numerous PD opportunities, and led a group of dedicated students in producing the yearbook for 3 years.


In 2012, Janice transitioned to MS Technology at Huntington K8 for the Project Lead the Way pre-engineering program. She enjoyed working with students as they engaged in classes that promoted critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Janice holds degrees in Architectural Technology, Technology Education, and Vocational Technology Education from SUNY Oswego.



Brenda Harris

Content Expertise: Elementary Education

Brenda Harris has been an educator for 29 years. She received a bachelor's degree from SUNY Oneonta and earned a master's degree from Syracuse University. She is a certified Nursery, Kindergarten, and 1-6 teacher. Her career began as a K/1 teacher at Little Learners in 1993. She began working for SCSD in 1994 as a TA Sub at Danforth Elementary School. Prior to becoming an Independent Evaluator in 2021, she taught fifth grade at Dr. King School for 18 years and 6th grade at Salem Hyde for 7 years. She was a Science Club teacher for several years at Dr. King School and a member of the School Leadership Team (SLT) at both schools. She was a mentor for fifth-grade girls in the Sister to Sister Program at Dr. King School and presently serves as a mentor to students in the C.U.R.E. (Cortland's Urban

	<p>Recruitment of Educators) Program. C.U.R.E. provides a comprehensive urban teacher preparation program that recruits qualifying students of color to become K-12 educators in underserved urban schools. She believes C.U.R.E. and programs like it are invaluable as we seek to create classrooms that are reflective of the students we serve.</p> <p>During her time as an observer, after 27 years of teaching, she has found that her “teacher hat”, continues to drive her written and verbal feedback cycles. She anticipates another year of observing quality teaching and is committed to sharing practices that increase student efficacy and performance.</p>
 <p>Jim Hart <i>StaffTrac Support</i></p>	<p>Content Expertise: Math</p> <p>Jim Hart looks forward to continuing his role as the math Independent Evaluator. It continues to be an incredible learning experience for him each year. Throughout the observation cycle, he has been able to share many of “best” practices/activities/strategies that he has seen in SCSD classrooms. His 25+ years in education, between 6th grade and first year college students, has provided a variety of experiences to help shape feedback to support individual teachers meet the needs of their students. Jim’s continued intention is that the feedback process will be a positive experience, leading to an improved classroom environment for you and your students. In addition, he has facilitated learning sessions regarding the evaluation process, Danielson Rubric, Cognitive Coaching, and the StaffTrac platform.</p> <p>Jim has earned his Bachelor’s degree in math education from SUNY Plattsburgh, his Masters degree in education from LeMoyne College, and his Certificate in Advanced Studies in Education Leadership from SUNY Oswego.</p>



Jamie Higgins

Content Expertise: Elementary Education

Jamie Higgins looks forward to continuing her role as a Special Education Independent Evaluator. She began her career as a Special Education Teacher in the Syracuse City School District in 2006. During that time, she served as a self-contained teacher, integrated co-teacher and consultant teacher. Jamie served on the PBIS committee for several years where she helped to create and implement behavior plans for students with various needs. Jamie received her bachelor's degree from Le Moyne College in 2002 and a Master's Degree from Le Moyne College in 2006. She is certified in both General Education (1-6 and 5-9) and Special Education (1-6 and 5-9).



Sandy Nucifora

Content Expertise: Elementary Education

Sandra Nucifora has spent over 30 years working in the field of elementary education where she taught at every level from Pre-K to 6th grade.

Sandra started her teaching career in Catholic schools in Syracuse where she taught 4th grade. She then transitioned into a site supervisor job for the second-largest head start program in Syracuse. Sandra joined the Syracuse City School District in 2003 as the coordinator of the Even Start program. Under her guidance the Even Start program evolved from a program in need of improvement to one of the top 10 performing programs in the state. Sandra won an outstanding service award from the Syracuse City School District for her efforts with the Even Start program.



Toni Orlando

Content Expertise: Fine Arts

Tonette (Toni) Orlando values the opportunity to support teachers, share resources, and engage in collaborative conversations with teachers throughout the district. She has given professional development on various components of the Danielson Rubric. Toni has experience teaching Music from Pre-K through High School and has worked in curriculum development, having created courses accredited by the AP College Board and the NYS Dept. of Education. She currently is an online teacher for BOCES, where she teaches a variety of music classes. She is also Music Director and organist for local churches where she works with cantors, choirs, and instrumentalists. She received her Bachelors, Masters, and CAS in Educational Leadership from Syracuse University.



Nikki Petties

**Content Expertise:
World Language, ENL, & Dual Language**

Nikki Petties looks forward to continuing her role as an independent evaluator for World Language, ENL, and Dual Language. She began her career as a Spanish teacher at Corcoran High School in 2002. During her time at Corcoran, she served as a mentor to many new teachers in the building and as a cooperating teacher to many student teachers from area universities. She has been an active member of the World Language department over the years, serving on curriculum and assessment writing teams, the SCSD World Language Textbook Adoption Committee twice in 2003 and 2016, and is a current member of the New York State World Language Leadership Council as we continue to roll out the new state standards for World Language. Nikki earned her bachelor's degree from LeMoyne College in 2002 and her master's degree from Grand Canyon University in 2007. She is certified in Spanish 7-12. Nikki and her husband Jeff (Henninger High School) have four children – all SCSD students or graduates.



Areli Schermerhorn

Content Expertise: ENL & World Languages

Areli Schermerhorn has supported the development of students and teachers in the Syracuse City School District for over thirty years. Ms. Schermerhorn is a national trainer on English Language Learners for the American Federation of Teachers, and an ELT New York State United Teachers Instructor. She has provided professional development in an array of settings including the district, state, and national level. She earned a Certificate of Advanced Study in Urban Teacher Leadership from LeMoyne College and is a SUNY Oswego Adjunct Instructor.



Stephanie Walters-Rowe

Content Expertise: SpEd/ Social Studies

Stephanie Walters-Rowe earned a B.A. in History and Education and a MEd. from SUNY Cortland. During her nearly 15 years as a social studies educator in the Syracuse City School District she has worked at both the middle and high school level, most recently at Nottingham High School. Stephanie has taught U.S. History, as well as Global Studies, AVID, Economics, Participation in Government, and a Career Guidance elective. She has also served as a master teacher for student teachers from SUNY Oswego and Syracuse University.

Stephanie has served on numerous committees such as School Leadership Team, textbook adoption team, middle level curriculum mapping, U.S. History 11 curriculum writing, city-wide assessment writing and the Teach American History grant writing team.

She has also participated in extensive professional development at both the district and national level. Stephanie has attended several National Endowment for the Humanities and Gilder Lehrman summer workshops in U.S. History, working with historians such as Ira Berlin, Jim Horton, Lois Horton and David Blight.

	Stephanie completed her C.A.S. in Educational Leadership at Syracuse University in the Spring of 2016.
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