

CONVERSATION WITH COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS OF KALAMAZOO'S NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: JAMES DEVERS



In taking on the role of executive director, James Devers isn't simply embarking on a job. It's personal.

James Devers began his tenure as executive director the first week of July, when Pam Kingery, the nonprofit's founding executive director retired at the end of June.

In 2017, after 23 years, James, along with his wife Tamisha, a registered nurse (they rode the same bus to Kalamazoo Central High School!), returned to their home town of Kalamazoo, Michigan. James brought with him more than 19 years of diverse experience in the field of education, ranging from working for the Ohio Department of Education, to doing community-based computer literacy training, to serving as principal at a K-8 public school in Ohio. Most recently, James served as the Senior Director of Site Services for Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo.

A quiet intellectual with a big heart, James holds a bachelor's degree in sociology from Western Michigan University and a master's degree in public administration from The Ohio State University. He thinks deeply about things like school achievement and poverty. "Some people draw the incorrect conclusion that because a student is poor that's why they don't achieve," he says. "Poverty doesn't strip students of their potential. Yes, circumstances and challenges can divert a lot of folks. That doesn't mean, however, that students can't do it." But it takes the right kind of support, says James, and it matters how that support is provided. He champions a strength-based approach, one in which the passions, strengths, and talents of our children are realized. It's this philosophy, infused in the CIS model of helping students achieve that attracted James to CIS in the first place. "We need more people to get on board," he says. "If we really want to get somewhere, we need to look beyond labels such as 'low income' and 'poor' and look to students' strengths."

You're a graduate of Kalamazoo Public Schools. Is it exciting that you are now in a position to support students in the very school system that you attended?

It is exciting to be back, and in this role. But that's actually not a simple question. During my childhood, I moved frequently around the city with my mother and four siblings. As a result, I attended a number of different KPS schools: Woodward, Woodrow Wilson Elementary School [the school is gone now, replaced with the Wilson Recreation Area, an open field and playground on Coy Avenue], Spring Valley Center for Exploration, and Washington Writers' Academy. I think that's all of them, at least for elementary. After that it was Milwood and Hillside Middle Schools. Even when I attended Kalamazoo Central High School and KAMSC [Kalamazoo Area Mathematics & Science Center], we still moved around. Ultimately, I graduated from Kalamazoo Central High School and KAMSC.

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Of the qualities you possess, which two do you think you will most draw upon to lead the CIS team in Kalamazoo?

Humility is one quality that stands out to me. Acknowledging the legacy in terms of all Pam has done. She started Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo and sustained the organization for over 20 years. That is rare for anybody to do something of that magnitude. What she has accomplished is a direct result of what she has poured into this organization and the people. She has established—and I have inherited—a high level of quality folks that work at CIS. A number of staff have been here a long time. Many have seen a lot and done a lot. I recognize I have a lot to learn and that I'm not an army of one.

Two, I'm going to call it wisdom. Wisdom as it relates to decision making and steps I need to make in terms of engaging people as we move forward.

You're a good engager, I hear.

During my senior year of high school, I was labeled "quietest in the school." That I'm doing this now and have stepped into the role of executive director is rather amazing, considering that my natural tendency is to be introverted.

What book changed your life?

Miseducation of the Negro by Carter Godwin Woodson. In summary, it addresses how oppression affects people. The author comes at it from a racial perspective. This resonated with me, personally. At the same time, I also appreciated the parallels that one can draw across concepts. So with *Miseducation*, you can also look at oppression in general—oppression of any kind—and consider how it can impact one's abilities.

While not in the book, I've told my team this story as a way to illustrate this concept. It goes like this: There is this baby elephant that is tied to a chain, so every time the elephant pulls on the chain, it isn't strong enough to get away. The elephant tries and tries, but cannot break away. The elephant grows up but is so used to being limited, it no longer attempts to go forward. Even though opportunity is available to the elephant and the elephant is strong enough now to break away, the elephant does not.

That is the challenge of oppression, that mindset that a student may have "that I can't go further," not because they literally can't, but because they have been conditioned to not go further.

According to leadership guru Sarah Clayton, "Few things are more important during a change event than communication from leaders who can paint a clear and confidence-inspiring vision of the future." Using words, can you paint a picture of your vision of the future for CIS?

I've already been a part of this organization. I see it as a blessing that, technically, the transition began when I started with Communities In Schools! As the leader of site services, under my leadership we've had two slogans: *move from good to great* and *being one great team*. I want to build on the work that's already been done while acknowledging the

qualities, skills, and talents of all our people and acknowledge the additional heights we can reach.

The CIS board has already established a vision for our organization: *an engaged community where every child fulfills his or her promise*. To realize that vision, every one of us must first be fully engaged. I want us to see and experience ourselves as one great, unified team. It's not an "us vs them" mindset; there is no place for "it's not my school building" or "not my role." Everything we're doing is inter-related and we all need to see that. It's not about what I'm doing or you're doing. It's about what we're doing, all of us together. I've already begun that journey with the site staff and want to see that attitude pervade the entire organization. I want everyone who works, partners, and volunteers with us to feel part of the collective that is CIS.

When you look back on your education, does any particular teacher stick out in your mind as having impacted you?

Mr. Cameron Nichols. He taught math at KAMSC. I was part of the initial class of KAMSC [KAMSC opened its doors in 1986]. It was around this same time that graphing calculators had just been introduced, and we were required to use them. Besides teaching at KAMSC, Mr. Nichols was involved in going to other districts to show teachers how to use the graphing calculators. To my knowledge, he went on two trips—to Detroit and Flint—to do this. He invited me to attend both trainings with him. He had picked me for whatever reason. I was a shy kid back then and I thought, "Why is he making me do this?" We never talked about why he selected me, but he must have seen something in me. Whatever the case, he cultivated me and broadened my experience.

It was eye-opening for me. In the cities we went to, the demographics of teachers were much different than Kalamazoo.



CIS volunteer Lois Fisher discussing the book she is reading to students.



There were lots of African American teachers. I was going around as his helper, and some of the teachers were so proud to see a black kid helping. One even pulled me aside to tell me that. It caught me off guard.

That experience allowed you to see yourself in a different way, through the eyes of others who saw the possibilities in you. That opened you up to experiencing yourself as a young leader.

Yes, and that experience also showed me that it is possible to impact learners even when you aren't a (professional) teacher.

Prior to that, I had another significant experience related to graphing calculators. At one point during the school year, everyone was required to buy one to do their work at home. Day after day I watched as students brought in their fifty dollars and got their calculators. There was no way my family could afford the fifty dollars...so I was one of the last students to get one and at times I wasn't sure if I would get one. Fortunately, a parent stepped forth and donated some money for calculators, so I was able to get one after a few weeks.

That had to have been so stressful for you, seeing your peers getting what they needed for school as you sat there without the calculator you needed, and probably wondering what was going to happen, and not knowing where to turn.

It was. My barrier wasn't the standard basic needs item. At times, we didn't have much or the best in terms of shoes, clothes, and food, but I didn't see those things as "barriers." In my situation, it was a piece of equipment, a calculator, that stood in the way of my success.

The community, through CIS, provides kids with things they need, that without it would be a barrier to their education. How can we as an organization get better at matching the barrier need—whatever it may be—so students can advance in school and life? That's one of the things I want to help us get better at doing.

Over the years, CIS has grown into a healthy-size organization. We're in 20 Kalamazoo Public School buildings. How will you take the pulse of CIS?

Listen. I plan to do a lot of listening. I'll listen to what people are saying and also to what they are really saying, organizationally, so to speak. I tell people you can say whatever you want as long as you're not yelling or swearing. I'll consider and ponder what I'm hearing. Ultimately, I may go a different direction, but I promise you, I'll listen.

Learn more about James, what question he's been asking himself lately, who impacted him as a leader, and more in the CIS blog, *Ask Me About My 12,000 Kids*.

BAGELS & BOOKS



Volunteer JJ Henn reading to a group of students during Bagels & Books.



Over the summer, CIS helped funnel over 50 volunteers into the Kalamazoo Public Schools elementary summer school program. On July 16 and 17th, the volunteers poured into Milwood Elementary and Northeastern Elementary and shared their time and love for reading with students. Some volunteers brought their own books to read to students while others chose from a selection available at the school. CIS Volunteer Services Coordinator Nicky Aiello says Bagels & Books is a "win-win strategy" for students and grownups alike. "The students love having the volunteers come into their class and read to them. They are enriched by the experience. Bagels & Books is a fun and easy way community members can munch on a bagel, sip some coffee, and support the district's literacy focus and promote a college-going culture. We are so fortunate to have such wonderful volunteers supporting literacy efforts year-round."

On the CIS website you can find ways to support youth through volunteer opportunities, such as Bagels & Books.



Principal Hawkins and Principal Washington getting ready to read to students at Milwood Elementary School during KPS's summer school program.





● THINKING
▷ A LITTLE
• DIFFERENTLY
ABOUT CIS
❖ THINK
SUMMER!

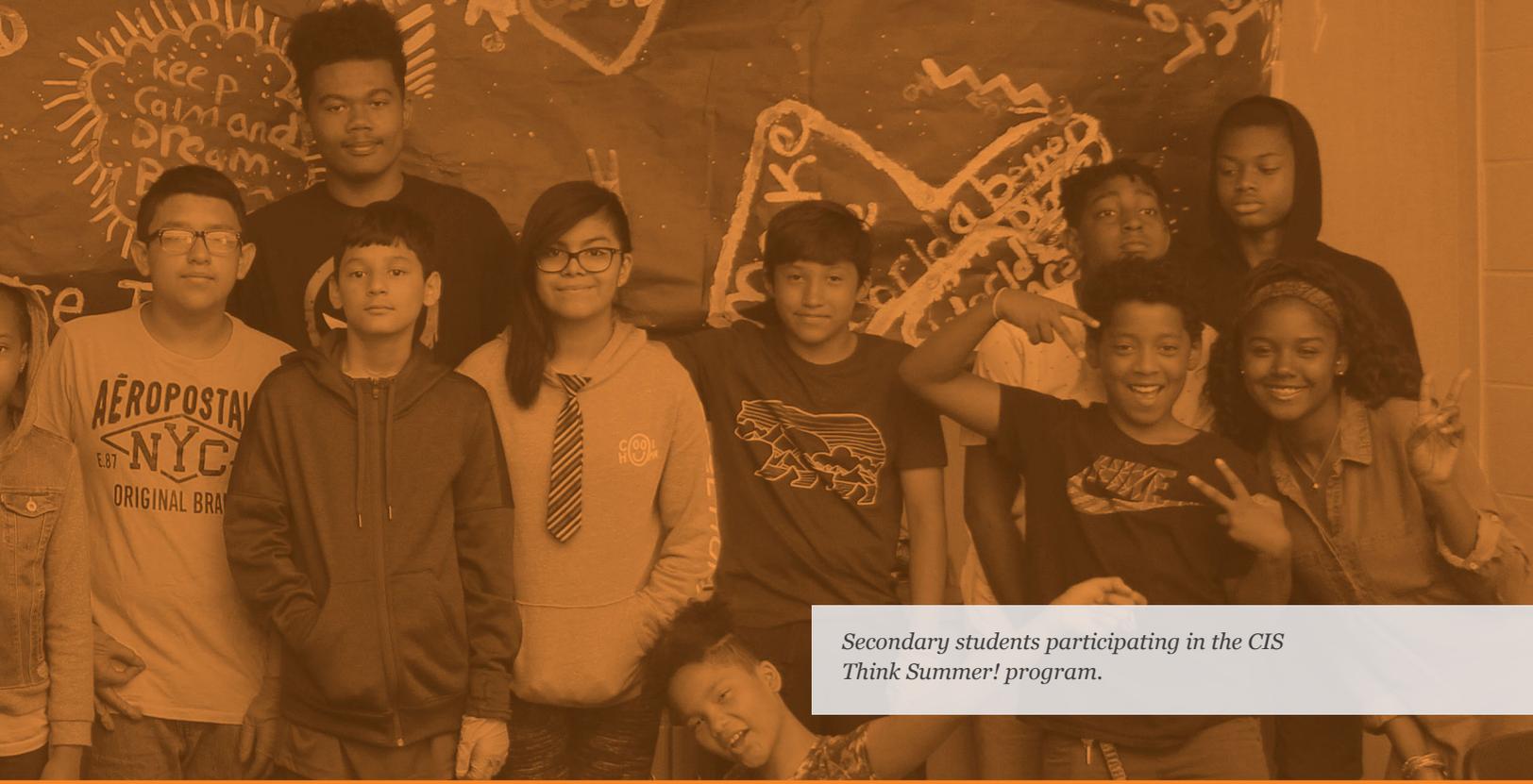


CIS Think Summer! was in full swing this year (for both elementary and secondary students) thanks to the support of federal dollars awarded through the Michigan Department of Education for 21st Century Community Learning Centers. CIS Think Summer! served 123 students in grades 1-9 from 12 Kalamazoo Public schools. It provided 24 days (144 hours) of programming designed to reduce summer learning loss and increase academic and enrichment opportunities. Students participated in reading, writing and math programming, enrichment activities, college and career exploration, and experiential learning.

“We redesigned our Think Summer! enrichment program to provide students opportunities to explore careers and make meaningful connections between their academic learning and career skills,” said Viridiana Carvajal, who served as the CIS Summer Director for elementary students. During the school year, Viridiana serves as CIS After School Coordinator at El Sol Elementary.

From June 24th through August 1st, students chose a preferred two-week career focus from the themes featured that week. Each theme incorporated critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity while emphasizing various social emotional skills, such as personal responsibility, healthy peer relationships, and social awareness.

Exposing the students to career choices got them thinking about their future and their interactions with peers and adults. “This



Secondary students participating in the CIS Think Summer! program.



Secondary students visiting the Nature Center during CIS Think Summer!

summer I have learned more about teamwork, how to compromise, and work with others,” said Winter, a secondary CIS student participating in the Think Summer! program.

“Community partners like the Air Zoo, the Nature Center, and Pfizer partnered with us throughout the summer,” Viridiana said. “The students have really enjoyed the career-themed experiences they offered.” The six career strands included: arts & entertainment, skilled trades, health & wellness; research, food service & culinary arts, entrepreneurship & business, and retail.

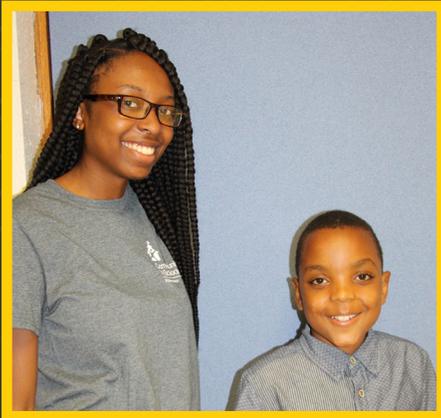


Elementary students participating in hands-on activities and interactive experiments to explore science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM) with the Air Zoo during CIS Think Summer!

STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS

WE MET UP WITH THESE TWO ELEMENTARY STUDENTS AT ARCADIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WHILE BOTH WERE PARTICIPATING IN THE 2019 CIS THINK SUMMER! PROGRAM.

Marcell ARCADIA ELEMENTARY | FIFTH GRADE



Marcell with CIS Coach Ms. Holmes, during the CIS Think Summer! Program.



During the visit from Pfizer's volunteers at CIS Think Summer!, Marcell shows his balloon did not pop during one of the hands-on activities which featured the 4 C's (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration & communication).

Q&A

So far, what has been your favorite thing about CIS Think Summer!?

That I get to hang out with my friends and we get to go on a field trip! I'm really excited because this Thursday we get to go to Bronson Park... The Kalamazoo Public Library is downtown, you know. They have special events and cool stuff. They came to visit us during our summer program and told us about the Summer Reading Challenge. It's all about space.

A specific activity you've most enjoyed?

Mindfulness. It helps me with calming down. I tend to run around a lot. I'll go and do it on my own, too, like when I'm home and need to calm myself down. It works and then I'm not doing crazy stuff. I'm calm and can have a happy day.

Who has been one of the caring adults helping you this summer?

My coach Rana [Holmes]. She's nice and helpful. She helps us with reading and gives us lots of ideas when we're working on our morning journals.

What are your favorite subjects?

Math, social studies, science, and I kind of like writing. Especially writing about fiction. I like writing about video games and mixing characters up to make new ones.

Goal for the new school year?

I want to try and write more stories and make them interesting. When I get older I want to publish them.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

Maybe we should leave nature alone. I've seen a lot of dead animals on the road lately, especially when my mom is driving me around. I wish they wouldn't be there.

Maybe...um, I think it would be better

to wish that at least animals could be more like us and look both ways. Yeah, that would be really good, and then I could talk to them and they would look both ways before crossing the street...

If you could make one law, what would it be?

I could think of a lot of rules I'd want, but if you think about it, it could get complicated. I don't want to make one that seems like it would be good but ends up being bad. Like, I'm thinking it seems like it would be a good law to make everything free, but then everybody would just be poor. Nobody would make money. So, instead, maybe a better law would be to make all stuff just have lower prices.

How have you grown as a person or student over the summer?

I've improved my math skills and I'm good at math concepts. I'm getting better at summarizing a story, you know, picking three main parts to the story and writing about them.

Ysabel EL SOL ELEMENTARY | THIRD GRADE



Ysabel with Ms. Carvajal during this year's Think Summer! program.



Ysabel working with her peers during the visit from enrichment partner, Air Zoo, during the CIS Think Summer! program.

Q&A

What has been your favorite thing about CIS Think Summer!?

Doing fun things like painting rocks and playing games...I've also made new friends.

A specific activity you've most enjoyed?

Recess!

Is there a caring adult who has helped you grow and learn over the summer?

My dad. He really helps me with my math. Also, my [CIS Think Summer]

coaches, Ms. Anasia [Monroe] and Mr. Brandon [Jean]. They help me learn new things and how to have fun. And how to treat people, like helping them when they need help.

What would you say to them if you could thank them?

Thank you for helping me with everything!

What are your favorite subjects?

Gym, especially playing basketball. Oh, and math, too.

Goal for the new school year?

That I can pass all my math tests.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

That everybody could have what they need—like shelter, food, and water.

If you could make one law, what would it be?

That everybody is given what they need.

Follow the CIS blog, Ask Me About My 12,000 Kids to learn more about both Ysabel and Marcell, including whether they'd rather be a dinosaur or whale for one day.

No Summer Slide Here

Exploring Careers & College with High School Success Coaches

For high school CIS Success Coaches Jenna Cooperrider and Nazhly Heredia-Waltemyer, the word “break” was not a part of their summer. In addition to supporting secondary students in KPS Summer School, they continued to work with CIS high school students to plan and prepare for their future.

As part of the CIS Think Summer! program, recently “graduated” 8th graders met with the success coaches to prepare for high school, which they will start in the fall. Students learned about credits, expectations, support available at high school, and college preparation.

High school students who worked with Jenna and Nazhly during the school year continued to meet regularly with them, exploring a variety of college and career options over six weeks. They visited colleges, as well as heard from community volunteers about their career fields. With the support of Comerica Bank, students also participated in a money management workshop, giving them a hands-on experience with financial decision-making and the cost of living on their own.

“To see the level of engagement shown by all students participating in our programs is the fuel that we need to do more and to make sure that they see their future from a different window - a window of learning, opportunities, and success,” says Nazhly.





KPS High School Counselor
Kelly Fullerton and KPS
Teacher Brandon McNab



GRANTING OUR KIDS MORE TIME TO LEARN AND GROW

This spring, CIS successfully applied for three 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grants that will sustain out-of-school time programs for students that extend the learning day and the learning year. Grants are awarded on a competitive basis by the Michigan Department of Education in five-year cohorts. This means that several hundred students across 15 KPS schools will continue to benefit from hundreds of hours of after school and summer support, particularly in academics.

At each of the 15 sites, the CIS After School Program serves 40 – 50 students, four days per week, for 2 ½ to 3 hours per day during the school year, providing academic assistance and enrichment activities. That is an additional 360 hours of learning time for each student! Students also receive a hot dinner and transportation home. A six-week summer program is also made possible through the grants, giving students another 144 hours of academically enriching support and extending the learning year.

The CIS After School Program is a significant resource for students who can benefit from additional academic assistance, exposure to college and career options, the opportunity to develop their strengths and interests, and much more. After school and summer support also address the CIS “Five Basics,” which we believe every child needs and deserves. These include a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult, a safe place to learn and grow, and a marketable skill to use upon graduation.

While the 21st CCLC grants only support after school and summer programs, they are a tremendous addition to our core work of removing the barriers that derail kids from success – work that you support with your charitable gifts. Your support of CIS makes it possible to bring additional resources like the 21st CCLC grants to our community to impact students. Thank you for investing in a system of support for kids!

Introducing New Members of the CIS Board of Directors

By: Namita Sharma

As I begin my role as Board Chair, I want to share my excitement about the future of Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo. This past July, we welcomed five new members onto the Board of Directors. I want to welcome Josh Sledge, Jyllian Liggins, Sheri Welsh, Scott Nykaza, and TiAnna Harrison who share our passion for helping kids succeed. They join more than two dozen other committed individuals who are “all in” for kids.

I also want to thank several outgoing board members for their years of dedicated support for the children in Kalamazoo. Mike Stoddard, Carolyn Williams, Jennifer Randall, Bob Miller, and Carol McGlenn have given their time and talents to CIS to ensure that the children we serve can stay in school and succeed in life.

Visit our website for a full list of the CIS Board of Directors: ciskalamazoo.org/meet-the-board/

Follow the CIS blog, *Ask Me About My 12,000 Kids* to learn more about the new board members.

Not pictured, **TiAnna Harrison** is a new addition to the CIS Board of Directors representing Kalamazoo Public Schools as the Board of Education Treasurer.



Jyllian Liggins, Community Member

Favorite Children’s Book: *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* by Simms Taback



Dr. Scott Nykaza, Chief Executive Officer at Kalsec[®], Inc.

Favorite Children’s Book: *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans



Josh Sledge, Senior Director, Programs at Financial Health Network

Favorite Children’s Book: *The Book With No Pictures* by BJ Novak



Sheri Welsh, President & CEO of Welsh & Associates, Inc.

Favorite Children’s Book: *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown



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Students are back to school. Are you interested in donating school supplies to CIS Kids' Closet? Here is a list of the most requested items for KPS students:

- Middle School & High School Backpacks
- Zipper Binders / Trapper Keepers
- Two-pocket Folders
- Sweatpants
- Underwear

Mark Your Calendar

NOVEMBER

Bundle Up Drive Begins!

DECEMBER

Ugly Sweater Party Fundraiser

If you believe in our efforts to ensure that ALL kids stay in school and achieve in life, please visit www.ciskalamazoo.org or call 269.337.1601 for more details on getting involved with CIS.

The work of Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo is supported by the Kalamazoo Public Schools, the City of Kalamazoo, the Michigan Department of Education (21st Century Community Learning Centers), local foundations, and donors like you.

Photos in this newsletter were taken by contributing CIS staff, unless otherwise noted.



Sign up for CIS emails at: <https://ciskalamazoo.org/contact/>