

TODAY



Eastern
Mennonite
School

UPCOMING EVENTS

Great Community Give

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22

Online giving day for local nonprofits
easternmennonite.org/gcg

Fore the Flames Golf Tournament

FRIDAY, MAY 1

Heritage Oaks Golf Course
easternmennonite.org/golf

Alumni Story Nominations Open! Homecoming Weekend

OCTOBER 16-17

Are there EMS alumni whose stories you think we should celebrate?
easternmennonite.org/alumni

A CULTURE OF DIGNITY:

PRINCIPAL AS COACH

*With Ms. Erika Gascho,
EMMS Principal*

Inside the halls of Eastern Mennonite Middle School (EMMS), Principal Erika Gascho is more than an administrator—she’s a coach, mentor, and guide for students navigating the challenging middle school years. “She’s my life coach,” a 6th grade student explained to his parents. With her unique blend of special education expertise and restorative justice training, Gascho and her teachers are working to build a school culture grounded in dignity and belonging. Ms. Gascho adds, “My job is built on trust, I want students to know they belong here, no matter what.”

LEADING WITH CONVERSATIONS

Ms. Gascho’s approach to discipline and student growth looks different from

↑ Collaboration builds community, one project at a time.

many middle schools. Instead of leading with consequences, she leads with conversations. “When I hear a concern I don’t just hand out punishments,” she says. “I pull that group together and we name it. I’ll say, ‘Here’s what I’ve been hearing. Help me understand this.’ It’s not about blame—it’s about learning.”

She conducts regular “check-ins” with students, ensuring that not every meeting is about a problem. For one student with autism, she created a visual rubric—green zones and goal zones—to help make sense of behavior patterns. For another with ADHD, she used school video footage to review PE interactions like a football coach breaking down game film.

“We went play by play,” Gascho recounts. “He thought a peer had intentionally thrown a ball at his head. Watching it back, he realized it just felt that way in the moment. We were able to pause, talk through it, and build empathy.” This kind of reflective coaching helps students develop

CONTINUES ON PAGE 5 →

OUR COMMITMENT TO

BELONGING

At Eastern Mennonite School, Belonging represents a collaborative and aspirational effort shaped first by the equity group and then edited by the EMS governing and alumni boards, strategic leadership team, and faculty and staff. Adopted in June 2024, this statement complements our mission and vision by articulating who we strive to be and how we seek to live as followers of the way of Jesus. It reflects our desire to be a community rooted in Christ's love, committed to practicing this calling together. This issue of **TODAY**, centered on the theme of Belonging, offers snapshots of the many ways we endeavor to live out this vision each day.

VISION

Eastern Mennonite School aspires to embody the love of Jesus as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and joins God's work in the world.

MISSION

Eastern Mennonite School, with home and church, invites students to faith in Jesus Christ, academic excellence, personal integrity, and compassionate service.

BELONGING

At Eastern Mennonite School our commitment to faith compels us to create spaces that are inclusive, that treat all members of our community with respect, and that value each individual's voice, conscience, identities, lived experiences, and perspectives. We celebrate differences, welcome open and meaningful dialogue, and cultivate critical thinking. Together, we dedicate our actions to working towards peace, equity, and justice in the world around us.





BELONGING: A GOAL WORTH PURSUING

*With Mr. Justin King,
EMHS Principal*

At EMHS, belonging is not just a nice idea—it’s a goal worth pursuing every single day. Creating a culture where students feel connected, seen, and valued is at the heart of what we do. Building that sense of belonging requires both structure and heart, and it’s a journey we embark on together.

BEING INTENTIONAL

Mr. King notes, “We’ve worked hard to create systems and traditions that strengthen our community. Events like School Day Out, E-Term, Class Day Out, and field trips are more than just fun—they’re opportunities for students to find their place in our school family. Even small choices, like keeping lockers without locks, speak to the trust and openness we want to cultivate.”

“Belonging takes active effort. We don’t let things slide when they threaten that sense of community. When something isn’t working, it’s our responsibility to pause, reflect, and respond.” One of Mr. King’s favorite memories from this year was our homecoming dance. As the night ended, John Denver’s “Country Roads” played, and students began linking arms, but some remained hesitant and stayed outside the circle. A voice called out, “Widen the circle!”—and suddenly, every student present joined together

in a massive circle, arm in arm, singing at the top of their lungs. Students from different grades, friend groups, and backgrounds came together in a spontaneous display of unity. Mr. King remembers, “It was a beautiful symbol of what belonging can look like.”

ADDRESSING HARM

But the pursuit of belonging also means addressing harm. Mr. King recalls an incident years ago, when a high school student passed by the middle school strings room and yelled an unkind comment to the younger musicians. It was a careless comment, but it hit the middle school students where they were most vulnerable. The student was presented with a choice: detention or a restorative path that would include talking with the teacher and possible reconciliation. “I met with the student and the strings teacher to talk about the impact of their words. Ms. Lorcas expressed her desire for the student not to just apologize, but to understand. The three of us decided that the student would learn a scale on a string instrument and perform it for the middle school class. The student accepted the challenge.”

When the student finally played that scale, the middle school students erupted into applause. Both the student

↑ “Whether you are trying something new, or looking to compete at the next level, athletic teams at EMS create cultures where everyone has a place. We learn together when things aren’t perfect, celebrate the highs and journey together as we seek to create life-long memories.”
—Andrew Gascho, Athletic Director

and the class walked away with a deeper understanding of each other. That one act turned a hurtful moment into a connection, and it reshaped a relationship. It was a reminder that restoring community requires courage, creativity, and time—but the reward is real reconciliation.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF BELONGING

Mr. King reflects, “Teenagers will push boundaries. They will make mistakes, sometimes out of insecurity, sometimes to test limits. Our role as educators is to hold those boundaries lovingly but consistently, and guide students toward making things right. Every correction and every celebration contributes to the culture we are building.”

“Belonging does not happen by accident. It is something we choose to nurture—with every tradition we uphold, every conversation we facilitate, and every circle we widen. At EMHS, this is the work we do together, and it is worth every effort.”

BUILDING A CULTURE OF PEACE AT EMES:

PEACEBUILDING – THE HEARTBEAT

With Ms. Maria Archer, EMES Principal

At Eastern Mennonite Elementary School (EMES), peacebuilding isn't just a class—it's the heartbeat of the community. Principal Maria Archer, who has led this school for over 20 years, describes the culture as one where "every student is known and seen, safe to be who they are, and safe to make mistakes." It's a place where children learn to live in community and to grow as confident, compassionate individuals. "Kids have so much power within themselves and so much knowledge and ability to do the right thing," Archer says. "If we give them a safe environment and some guidance, they will figure it out."

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

The belief that students can "figure it out" shapes every interaction at EMES. When playground conflicts arise, Archer invites students into her office to talk it through. "I hold my tongue," she admits. "I have an idea of what I think should happen, but the kids come up with their own solutions—and they're often different, sometimes better, than what I imagined. That's what peacebuilding is." Sometimes the students initiate conflict resolution on their own using **STORY** steps, an acronym used to guide them through a conflict: **S**et the guidelines, **T**ell your side of the story, **O**ffer solutions, **R**each an Agreement, and **Y**ay! Celebrate. Not only do they practice at school, they bring it home too. One parent recalled, "I overheard my two EMES students arguing outside and then one said, 'I know, let's do STORY steps!'" These skills build and they transform.

FORMING THE CULTURE

A fundamental principle of EMES' philosophy, guided by Peacebuilding teacher Becky Long, is the Peace Pledge. Students and teachers sign the pledge, which emphasizes listening to each

Set.
Tell.
Offer.
Reach.
Yay!

other, considering others' perspectives, playing creatively, and caring for the environment. Archer recalls when, years ago, a group of students noticed trash on the playground. "They came to me, very passionate about it. I asked, 'What do you think we should do?' They created a cleanup club, gathered the bags, made announcements, and really owned the project. I didn't initiate that—they did."

One way we put the pledge into action in the classroom is the Circle process—a way for students to share feelings, solve problems, and build understanding. Recently, third graders used a Circle to address frustrations over fort-building in the woods. Students expressed how hard they worked every day to make cool structures, only to have their forts disrupted by other classes. Together, their teacher Ms.

Byler helped them reflect on how other grades might feel the same way. "This is the good, hard stuff of life," Archer says. "Students learned that no one owns the forts, other kids aren't the enemy, and we can all learn to live in community together." For Archer, peacebuilding is also about encouraging a culture that allows mistakes, especially in academics. "You want noisy classrooms," she insists. "If kids are afraid to be wrong, they won't contribute. When a child answers a math problem incorrectly, we affirm their thinking and then explore why it didn't work. That builds confidence and curiosity."

The goal is clear: to teach children not just curriculum, but to also build empathy, grow together, and give them tools to shape their world. As Archer reflects, "We are teachers of kids, first and foremost. Developing who they are and will be is not just our skillset—it's our calling. **We love our work, and we love our children.**"



↑ ABOVE RIGHT: Ms. Archer walks and talks with students. ABOVE LEFT: Ms. Byler's third grade class gathers for circle.

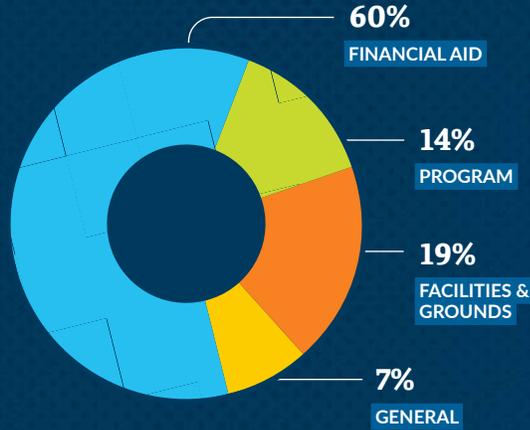
ADVANCEMENT

ENDOWMENTS SUSTAIN THE MISSION AND VISION OF EMS

Endowments provide lasting support that helps EMS thrive—today and for generations to come.

HOW ENDOWMENTS WORK:

Endowments earn approximately 5% annually for one of four purposes (see graphic). Over 20 years, the original gift is fully returned to the school—while the fund continues to grow and give back.



FLAMES FUND UPDATE



Thank you for your generosity in our 2025–26 school year! Together, we have reached 83% of our Flames Fund goal, raising \$181,295 through Christmas Fund Drive (far exceeding the goal!) and \$253,288 through the Virginia Education Scholarship Tax Credit Program—modeling stewardship in action for our students.



New Endowments Created in 2025

INVESTING IN EMS FACULTY & STAFF ENDOWMENT

Strengthens support for salaries and cost-of-living increases, honoring those called to serve at EMS. Established anonymously and inspired by Galatians 6:9–10: “Let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

WEAVER FAMILY ENDOWMENT FOR STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP

Honors Lloyd and Sarah Weaver by providing ongoing financial aid for students at EMS, continuing their legacy of sharing God’s goodness through Christian education.

JOEL LEHMAN FAMILY & FRIENDS ENDOWMENT

Supports athletics and facility maintenance in memory of Joel Lehman, who valued teamwork, spirited cheering for the Flames, and well-cared-for spaces.

GATHERING SPACE ENDOWED BUILDING FUND

Established through the campaign for the elementary Gathering Space to help care for the addition and meet future facility needs.

VIEW A FULL LIST OF ENDOWMENTS AT easternmennonite.org/endowments

CONTINUED

the self-awareness they need to succeed socially and academically.

But it doesn’t end there, structured conversations where every voice is heard, known as Circles, are a cornerstone of Gascho’s leadership. When a sixth-period class spiraled out of control, Gascho took over for a full period to lead five restorative circles (with the teacher’s permission). “By the end of those circles, the whole class felt different,” she says. “They said, ‘We were heard.’ And that changed how the class worked together.” Follow-up circles reminded students of the agreements they made and reinforced the positive changes they had put in place. “It’s textbook restorative justice, and it works,” Gascho notes.

My job is built on trust, I want students to know they belong here, no matter what.”

WIRING FOR EMPATHY, PERSPECTIVE-TAKING, AND LEADERSHIP

At EMMS, this focus on dignity and commitment to belonging has yielded a thriving culture. Students feel safe to take risks and learn from mistakes, and teachers are empowered to partner in the restorative process. “We believe in these students,” Gascho emphasizes. “Middle schoolers are going to push boundaries. Our job is to guide them, with the belief that every single one belongs here.”

Today is written by Abigail Cook, communication specialist, and designed by At Ease Design. All photos by tdc marketing unless otherwise noted. Editorial support from Trisha Blosser, director of advancement, and Paul Leaman, head of school.

SEND FEEDBACK TO today@easternmennonite.org

FIND PAST ISSUES AT easternmennonite.org/today

In admissions processes, Eastern Mennonite School does not discriminate on the basis of any race, color, handicap, national or ethnic origin, or religion, and admits students to all rights, privileges, programs and activities generally accorded or made available to students at the school.

The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the school’s non-discrimination policies, including its Title IX policy: Debbie Katz, high school counselor, 540-236-6022. For assistance related to Title IX or other civil rights laws, please contact OCR at OCR@ed.gov or 800-421-3481, TDD 800-877-8339.



801 PARKWOOD DRIVE
HARRISONBURG VA 22802

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Harrisonburg, VA
Permit No. 155

INTERESTED IN EMS?

Scan the QR code to start your journey at EMS! →



TODAY

IN THIS ISSUE

3. BELONGING AS WE GROW

At EMHS, belonging is not just a nice idea—it’s a goal worth pursuing every single day.

4. BUILDING A CULTURE OF PEACE

Peacebuilding isn’t just a class—it’s the heartbeat of the EMES community.

5. THE POWER OF ENDOWMENTS

Endowments provide lasting support that helps EMS thrive—today and for generations to come.

easternmennonite.org

JOIN US FOR THESE FINE ARTS PERFORMANCES THIS SPRING IN THE EMS AUDITORIUM!

High School Musical, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

FEBRUARY 27, 28, 7 PM & MARCH 1, 3 PM

This musical brings Victor Hugo’s timeless tale to life in 15th-century Paris. It chronicles the story of Quasimodo, the bell-ringer who is kept hidden in Notre Dame Cathedral by the nefarious Archdeacon Frollo. Frollo’s obsessive desire for the beautiful Romani dancer Esmeralda ignites a dramatic struggle filled with themes of prejudice, faith, and love.

Apollo5, A Cappella Concert

MARCH 4, 7 PM

APOLLO5, a UK-based five-piece a cappella group, affiliated with the VOCES8 Foundation, will perform Wednesday, March 4, at 7 PM in the EMS Auditorium. They “share stories, evoke emotions, and inspire audiences through their singing.”

FIND TICKETS AND LEARN MORE AT
easternmennonite.org/tickets

FOLLOW US:

