



STETSON
UNIVERSITY



NINA B. HOLLIS INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM NEWSLETTER

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

by: Dr. Bette Heins



Dr. Bette Heins

This past year, the Nina B. Hollis Institute for Educational Reform celebrated its 25th anniversary. A milestone that honored not only our history but also the partnerships that have shaped our journey. Our anniversary celebration brought together faculty and staff from across Stetson University, educational leaders from neighboring school districts, community partners, members of the Hollis family, and friends of the institute. Their presence was a meaningful reminder that educational reform is built through collaboration and shared purpose.

This milestone was also recognized in Stetson Magazine, which highlighted the Institute's evolution from a bold vision into a nationally recognized model for research-informed educational reform. The article celebrated our commitment to transforming innovative ideas into practical solutions through Impact Grants, the Hollis Leadership Center, Voices of Reform, and collaborative partnerships with schools and communities. It also recognized the Institute's role in supporting educators through professional development, leadership training, and evidence-based initiatives that strengthen teaching, learning, and school culture. Most importantly, the feature affirmed what has guided us for 25 years: meaningful educational reform begins with trusting relationships and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for students and educators. As we look ahead, we remain dedicated to honoring the Hollis family's vision by investing in innovative ideas that continue to transform education and positively impact future generations.

LEADERSHIP CENTER

by: Dr. Chris Colwell

The 2025-2026 academic year has been another impactful year for the Hollis Institute Leadership Center. The Leadership Center is completing Year 4 of a 5-year training program titled: Building Cultures to Support Teacher Agency and Retention. The Dan Mindich Project is primarily funded by a private donor. Hundreds of schools and school district leaders have been trained over the last 4 years. The program provides 20 hours of leadership training focused on building positive school cultures. Each school, in collaboration with the Hollis Leadership Center and their school district, develop culture and climate action plans for implementation at the conclusion of each cohort's training.

We are pleased to report that in the 25-26 academic year, 23 training sessions were held in Volusia, Seminole, Orange, and Leon County, Florida to 75 school leaders. For the first time in our history, training will also be provided to educators outside the state of Florida. In the summer of 2026, 60 school and district leaders in Georgia will receive Hollis Leadership Center training and support. Restorative Practices training and certification continues to be provided by the Leadership Center. Training for all faculty at one of our partner schools, along with training and certification for all Stetson undergraduate education majors was provided this year. Every Stetson education major graduates fully certified in Restorative Practices.

Also, in 2025-26, the Hollis Leadership Center Tri-Coach Project was completed. The project includes a training manual with a focus on Restorative Practices, Trauma and Resilience, and Coaching. In June of 2026, the Leadership Center held a conference titled "From Surviving to Thriving: Leadership Strategies for Trauma-Responsive Education."

The Leadership Center is well underway in our planning for the 2026-2027 academic year with a continuing focus on enhancing the leadership capacity of educators at all levels. We are excited about the growth and impact of our programs on teachers and the students they serve.

CLASSROOM GRANT PROGRAM EXPANDS AFTER YEAR OF STUDENT SUCCESS

by: Barb Head

This year's Classroom Grant Program brought innovative learning experiences to Blue Lake Elementary, Citrus Grove Elementary, and Woodward Avenue Elementary schools. After a year of strong results and meaningful classroom impact, the program will expand for the 2026-2027 school year to include all DeLand-area schools.

The program has helped teachers turn creative ideas into hands-on opportunities that deepen student learning. Across the three schools, grant-funded projects supported literacy growth, math fluency, earth science, plant science, and inquiry-based learning in ways that made lessons more engaging and memorable for students.

Dig Into Learning: A Mobile Mining Experience for Eagles at CGE

At Citrus Grove Elementary, more than 100 fourth-grade students took part in a mobile mining experience that served as a culminating activity for their study of minerals. Starting at 8:00 a.m. and continuing throughout the day, students rotated through the activity and applied vocabulary such as luster, hardness, and streak while sifting and sorting minerals with running water. With support from the Hollis Grant and additional funds raised, the experience was fully funded so that every fourth-grade student could participate.



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No Soil, No Problem!

Another Citrus Grove project, “No Soil, No Problem,” introduced third graders to hydroponic gardening. Students learned that plants do not need soil to grow, identified the nutrients and elements plants need, and explored how hydroponic systems provide water, light, nutrients and support. By setting up different hydroponic systems and learning the purpose of each component, students gained hands-on experience with scientific investigation and innovation.

UFLI Foundations

At Blue Lake Elementary, the UFLI Foundations grant strengthened literacy instruction across grade levels. The structured, research-based program proved especially effective for fifth-grade students working to close skill gaps and for younger students who had not found success with SIPPS. Teachers reported increased confidence, engagement, and independence in reading, and by the third week, progress was already visible through classroom observations and QPA data.

Fractions in Full Bloom

Blue Lake’s Fractions in Full Bloom grant connected plant science and math for third graders in a meaningful way. Students used lab coats, seeds, seed pots, a grow light, journals, and poster materials to transform their classroom into a mini research lab. After forming hypotheses about soil and light conditions, they observed plant growth, recorded data, and used their findings to calculate fractions, create models, and write summary statements.

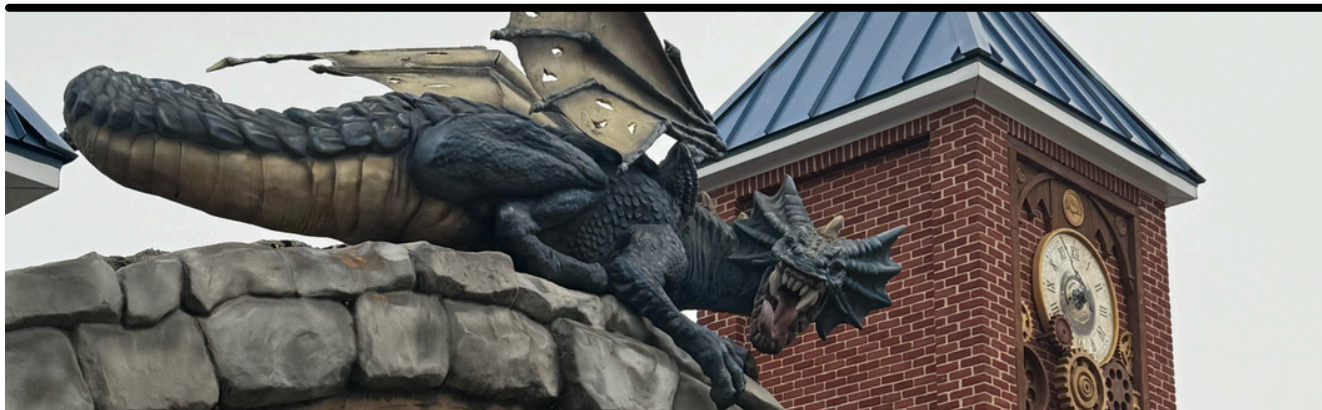
Fast Facts, Bright Futures

At Woodward Avenue Elementary, Ms. Jenkins’ second-grade classroom benefited from Fast Facts, Bright Futures , a grant designed to strengthen math fact fluency. Students worked through four levels of timed addition and subtraction drills with the help of flashcards, fact tests, and fun incentives such as Labubu toys, hover ball spheres, accessories, and plushies. The program built motivation, confidence, and foundational math skills that support long-term academic success.

Together, these projects show the value of investing in teacher creativity and classroom innovation. As the Classroom Grant Program expands to all DeLand-area schools next year, these success stories offer a clear example of how targeted support can create lasting benefits for students and schools alike.

2026 VOLUSIA COUNTY TEACHER OF THE YEAR VISITS THE RON CLARK ACADEMY

by: Jeremy Davies



The Ron Clark Academy was an experience like no other. Before attending, I had only read about Ron Clark being named Disney Teacher of the Year and his introduction of the House System. However, experiencing the Ron Clark Academy goes far beyond anything you can read about or see online.

From the moment we walked onto campus—knowing no one—we were welcomed by current students dressed in shirts and ties as teachers checked in. Even more impressive was watching every student shake teachers' hands, make eye contact, and engage in professional conversation. These students are learning invaluable people skills as educators from all over the world travel to be part of the Ron Clark experience. The learning doesn't stop in the classroom; it happens every minute students are on campus.

Before rotating through classrooms to observe, the energy was electric. We gathered in the atrium, where we were greeted by live music performed by students and dragons soaring across the digital ceiling. And the energy never faded. Music played as we entered and exited each classroom to maintain engagement. Students communicated with teachers using sign language, broke into song to remember math and phonics rules, and eagerly shared their learning.

We ate lunch with students and learned more about their experiences at Ron Clark. Hearing from a technology expert about the use of AI in education was mind-blowing. Ending the day by becoming “slide certified” made us feel like kids again, and choosing a house truly made us feel part of the Ron Clark Academy community.

Hearing from Ron Clark himself was truly inspirational. He is not only the co-founder of the school, but he continues to serve as an administrator and teacher to this day. Watching him interact with students, it was clear his passion has never wavered. Listening to stories from his career and his methods for impacting students was jaw-dropping. One concept that deeply resonated with me was his idea of “1 percenter” actions.

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Teachers often leave professional development sessions feeling overwhelmed, wondering how to change their practice overnight. Ron Clark emphasized starting with small, meaningful steps—"1 percenters." For example, teachers collectively choosing one parent to email. A positive email takes only five minutes to write, but imagine the impact if 100 teachers did this regularly. That simple act could dramatically shift school culture in a positive way for students, parents, and faculty.

I cannot thank Stetson University and the Hollis Institute enough for giving me the opportunity to fully experience the Ron Clark Academy. What I learned there will influence my practice as I continue to grow as an educator, collaborate with colleagues, and share these experiences with educators throughout Volusia County.

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Jeremy Davies



A PERIOD OF TRANSITION AND GROWTH FOR VOICES OF REFORM

by: Dr. Amy Smith



Over the past year, Voices of Reform has undergone a focused period of transition under the new editorial leadership of Dr. Amy Smith. This shift reflects a deliberate refinement of the journal's scope, expectations, and academic presentation, strengthening its alignment with both scholarly and practitioner audiences.

A key indicator of this progress is the journal's expanding global reach. Readership has grown from 69 countries—with 85% based in the United States—to 98 countries, with less than half of readers now located in the United States. This broader international presence has enhanced the journal's visibility and reputation across diverse educational contexts. At the same time, readership has surpassed 10,000 for the first time, with unique viewers increasing by 155% over the previous year.

Alongside this growth, the journal has adopted a more selective approach to publication. While maintaining a wide scope across pre-K through 20 teaching and learning, the acceptance rate has decreased from 100% to 77%, reflecting higher expectations for clarity, contribution, and scholarly depth. Under new leadership, submission pathways and evaluation processes have been re-envisioned to support this elevated standard.

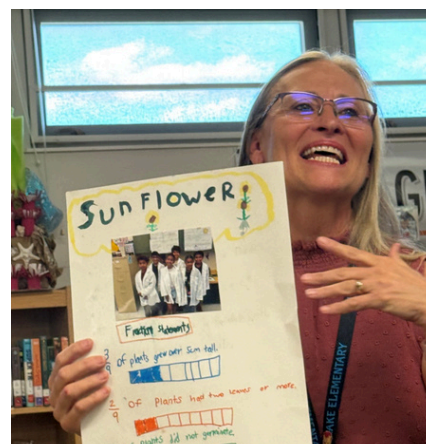
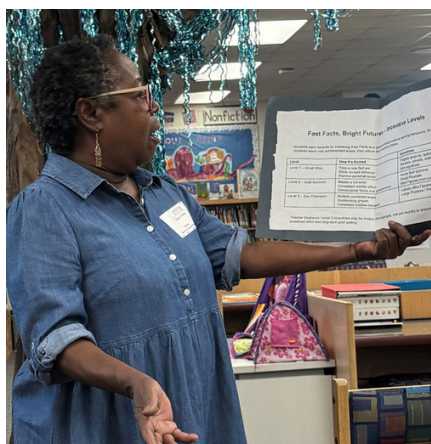
Voices of Reform continues to offer flexibility in publishing, with the capacity to produce multiple issues annually in both print and digital formats as warranted. Its broad scope remains central, supporting a diverse range of manuscripts and readers across educational settings.

Looking ahead, the journal remains committed to strengthening its academic purpose in alignment with its mission of Bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners through actionable outcomes to improve equitable teaching and learning for today's students; guided by its vision to Strategically reimagine how teaching and learning can look across preK-20 educational settings.

This period marks a significant step forward for Voices of Reform, positioning the journal for continued growth, broader impact, and sustained contribution to the field.

VOLUSIA COUNTY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOLS

Building on the success of the Institute's instructional innovation initiatives, the Hollis Institute continued its Mini Teacher Grants program to enhance classroom instruction through partnerships with our Professional Development School (PDS) partners. In FY 2025, seven mini-grants totaling \$4,500 were awarded to support creative, teacher-led projects that enrich student learning. Additionally, 20 educators received Garden Mini-Grants to expand garden-based learning experiences for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, fostering hands-on, interdisciplinary learning opportunities. To celebrate the impact of these initiatives, a showcase was held at Citrus Grove Elementary School on May 7, 2026, where grant recipients presented their projects and shared the innovative ways they enhanced student learning through Institute funding.



INTRODUCING OUR NEW PROJECT MANAGER



The Nina B. Hollis Institute for Educational Reform is pleased to welcome Monica Gandia as its new Project Manager. Monica joined Stetson University in 2019 and brings extensive experience in academic operations and program management. Most recently, she served as Assistant Director of Undergraduate Education Services, where she managed academic systems, prepared state-mandated reports for the Florida Department of Education, coordinated with local school districts, and collaborated with faculty and university leadership. We are excited to welcome Monica to the Hollis Institute team and look forward to the leadership and expertise she brings as we continue advancing educational initiatives and supporting our community partners.

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES: OVERCOMING ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

by: Dr. Jesse Fox



From Left to Right: Ariel Chivers, COHL Coordinator; Research Assistants Milena Lorenzi Salini, Paige Pei, Trinidee Mercado, Aracelis Carter; Panelists Dr. Paul Granello (OSU), Dr. Jesse Fox (Stetson), The Rte. Rev. Audrey Sutton, Garrett Graves, LMHC

One of the most entrenched challenges contemporary society faces today is what was referred to by the US surgeon general's report in 2023 called "Our Epidemic of Isolation and Loneliness." Some large-scale data observations from non-partisan polling suggests that loneliness remains at record levels despite four to five years of recovery from the worst levels of loneliness observed shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (see here). The fact that loneliness was on the rise before the pandemic, while also accelerated by it and appears to be intractable, has led some to speculate that the contemporary loneliness problem extends well beyond the days of social distancing mandates and economic upheaval of shuttered business and layoffs. The exact source of loneliness appears to be multivariable, irreducible down to one thing like "social media" or "working from home." How lonely people are and the causes behind it can be complex. For this reason, Dr. Fox, the Director of the Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan, and his team of research assistants decided to investigate these issues in West Volusia County. Through the generous support of the Nina B. Hollis Institute, they co-constructed a survey with Stetson's Center for Public Opinion Research and sent out an invitation to residents within a 15-mile radius of DeLand to complete a brief, 3-5 minute set of questions about loneliness and social connectedness. They also organized a free community symposium called "Connected Communities: Overcoming Loneliness and Isolation" which invited stakeholders from DeLand to participate in a panel discussion with mental health and faith community experts. Attendance for the symposium sold out, and was held in The Canterbury House at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in DeLand. The panelists presented points of perspective on loneliness nationally and locally, and presented some of the preliminary survey results from the data collected in West Volusia County. Dr. Fox's research team gathered attendee feedback on the symposium, and plan to expand this work into other communities in the region. They received an invitation to do a second symposium in the Lake Eola Community in Orlando exploring the same themes this fall.

AT-A-GLANCE

2025-26 IMPACT GRANTS

- Prof. Christine Cerniglia - Pathways to Justice Advocacy Academy
- Dr. Kathy Piechura-Couture - Language Development thru Focused Play
- Dr. Jesse Fox - Stress Management and Resilience
- Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown - Engaging Middle through High School Students to Author Narratives of Empowerment
- Dr. Nathan Wolek - Video Lesson Plans for Listen & Learn
- Dr. Andrew Olson - Leadership Lab

PLANNING GRANTS TIMELINE

- Applications due November 13, 2026.
- Planning Grant Selection Notification: December 1, 2026
- Successful applicants (whose grant applications are accepted) will be awarded \$250.00 and are expected to submit a full Impact Award application.
- The remainder of the planning grant award (\$750.00) will be awarded if their completed Impact Award is successfully approved for funding.

Nina B. Hollis Institute for Educational Reform

Mission

It is the mission of the Nina B. Hollis Institute at Stetson University to stimulate innovations for the advancement of all learners, particularly birth through grade 12 and non-traditional students relating to creating educational opportunities for all students through research and applied partnerships. The Institute focuses on outreach and dissemination to address ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations and other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement and attainment for affected groups of students.

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RESEARCH IMPACT AWARD APPLICATION TIMELINE

- Call for Proposals: October 2026
- Application Due : Mid-March 2027
- Award Notification: May 3, 2027
- Funding Cycle: July 1, 2027 - June 30, 2028