



**GREAT START
COLLABORATIVE**
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Meet the Executive Team



Deirdre Bartells
GSC Staff

Deirdre is the Administrative Assistant at Great Start Collaborative.

She emigrated from Ireland to USA in 2009. She worked for WMU prior to joining the KRESA team in 2015, she worked in different fields within KRESA before joining the GSC team in 2019.

Deirdre and her husband have 1 daughter with whom she enjoys sharing her hobbies of glamping, traveling the world and art.



Aubrie Burns

Aubrie currently serves as the Operations Manager at Southwest Child Care Resources that supports over 800 childcare providers in eight counties in Southwest Michigan. Aubrie is a lifelong resident of Southwest Michigan and has dedicated over 14 years to the field of early childhood serving roles such as a teacher, early childhood coach, and now Operations Manager. She feels honored that she can serve the community and promote high-quality education for our youngest learners. Aubrie lives in Portage with her husband and two young boys. In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with her family, reading, traveling, photography, and going to yoga!



Ashley Drenth
GSC Staff

Ashley Throughout her career in education, Ashley has worked as an elementary teacher and instructional coach, an instructor in adult education, and currently as a family liaison with the Kalamazoo County Great Start Collaborative. She enjoys connecting with and learning alongside families and community organizations. She is an Alliance Certified Trainer for the Strengthening Families Protective Factors and is also trained in Be Strong Families Parent Cafés and Zero to Thrive Strong Roots Cafés. She lives in Kalamazoo with her husband and two children, ages 7 and 9. Ashley enjoys spending time outside, visiting Lake Michigan, reading, eating at new restaurants, and traveling. Ashley received her Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education from Western Michigan University.



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Sarah Drumm
GSC Staff

Sarah is the Coordinator for the Kalamazoo County Great Start Collaborative. She has been facilitating workshops for youth and adults for over 20 years. She was a high school English teacher and experiential educator and now works within the local Early Childhood System to ensure that the parent voice is included in decision-making and to help close the gaps in service to better serve families and children.



Mary Gustas

Mary is the Executive Director at the Comstock Community Center. She has been there for 23 years. She is also the president of River Manor Senior Housing, and a secretary of the Sunrise Kiwanis.

Prior to that she served as the Executive Director of the Safety Council for West Michigan for 10 years. Mary has been involved with nonprofit and educational administration for 40 years. She has also served on several boards including KVCC board of Trustees for the past 36 years. Mary has been a member of the Greater Kalamazoo United Way Allocations team as a community representative and as an executive director representative.



Asia Haywood

Asia is a mother of four children, Eldest is Skylar (13), Noah (9), Silas (5), and Nami (2).

Asia has been working for the Kalamazoo Public Library located downtown since 2011, starting as an aide in patron services. She has had a total of three positions while working here; Library aide, Teen Services Librarian assistant, and now Youth Services Programming Assistant located in the children's room.

Asia has been a part of the Parent cafés since the pandemic and in 2022 joined the GSC group.



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Jill Lansky

Jill is a Youth Literacy Specialist at Kalamazoo Public Library with over 25 years of experience serving youth, families, and caregivers in Kalamazoo County. Jill coordinates special programs for youth including Ready to Read, a county wide early literacy initiative that provides gift books to children 0-5 years old.



Amber Morris

Amber is a Family Advocate with KRESA Head Start. She has been serving families within the Head Start program since 2020 by helping them complete enrollment, setting health goals and checking in with them regularly to see if there are any resources within Kalamazoo County that could benefit them or help meet their needs. Amber has a elementary teaching degree and early childhood endorsement from Western Michigan University. Before working for KRESA, Amber was the preschool director and one of the teachers at Heart and Hands Preschool in the Vicksburg United Methodist Church. Amber handled enrollment, marketing, finances and staffing as well as teaching 3- and 4-year-olds over the 10 years she worked in Vicksburg. The last 5 years at that program she taught GSRP and KC Ready 4s students and regularly attended quarterly GSC meetings. Amber is passionate about early childhood education and its impact on future educational success. She and her husband, Mark, live in Portage and are the parents of three young adults. In her free time, Amber enjoys jigsaw puzzles, reading novels and Netflix.



Nathan Reed

Nathan is a Registered Dietitian and Coordinator for the Kalamazoo County Women Infants and Children (WIC) program. He has been working for WIC for over 16 years. He is passionate about making sure that families have access to healthy nutritious foods and get a great start right from the beginning. He is a husband and the father of two young boys and spends most of his free time with his family.



Dianne Shaffer

Dianne has worked for Integrated Services of Kalamazoo (ISK) since November 2012, first as a Program Manager for Youth and Families and moving into other administrative roles serving now as Chief Project Officer. In her current role, she serves in a leadership capacity to plan, design, develop, implement and monitor community collaborative programs, projects and service delivery systems. Dianne directs the planning and implementation of public education and social marketing strategies to meet the identified goals of ISK and to increase the awareness of the mental health services and resources available within Kalamazoo County. Dianne also assists with grant writing, program development and implementation. Prior to ISK, Dianne was the Executive Director of Advocacy Services for Kids (ASK). During her tenure with ASK, she was involved in the implementation of federal SAMHSA grants in both Kalamazoo and Kent Counties, and provided training on family-driven, youth-guided mental health services at the local, state, and national levels. After earning a Master of Social Work degree from Western Michigan University (WMU) in 1997, Dianne served families in Kalamazoo and Southwest Michigan for 10 years prior to moving into administrative roles.



Jen Sova

Jen is the Early Intervention and Special Services Director for KRESA, supporting programs for at risk and developmentally delayed children, birth through age five. Jen's twenty-two years in the field as a speech-language pathologist, coordinator and administrator for early childhood programming has led to positive outcomes for young children and their families. Currently, Jen works with individuals across the early childhood landscape to expand opportunities for children by reducing barriers and teaching children next to same age peers in all areas of academic and social skills. Jen has facilitated multiple conference and professional development sessions on the continuum of service for preschoolers, enhancing opportunities for inclusion and thoughtful decisions around the least restrictive environments.



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Jen Stroven
GSC Staff

Jen is the Early Literacy Project Manager for the Great Start Collaborative, overseeing the county's Talking is Teaching campaign. Prior to her work with KRESA, Jen led leadership development and strategic planning sessions with area nonprofits and provided individual coaching and group facilitation. As the executive director of Great Lakes PeaceJam, Jen worked alongside young people to address social justice issues and create systemic change. Jen and her husband Chris have two daughters, a large, unwieldy garden, and too many animals.



Laura Ynclan

Laura, in her professional life, she is an Early Childhood Specialist, which is a coach for preschool teachers in Kalamazoo County. She works with state funded preschool programs and Head Start preschool programs. Laura says “the best part of her job is watching teachers realize their potential and getting to know the children in the classroom! In her personal life, Laura lives with her best friend and spouse, Jeremy, and their two children, Christian (18 yrs.) and Jordan (14 yrs.). She has been involved with the Great Start Collaborative in some way (as a parent on the Parent Coalition or as a professional on the executive board) for almost 20 years!



Michiko Yoshimoto

Michiko is the Program Manager for the Soga Japan Center at Western Michigan University. She has visited over 40 schools (preschools and K-12) and over 45 organizations such as libraries, community centers, colleges, companies in Michigan to teach Japanese culture and language. Michiko earned a master's degree of Arts in Socio-Cultural Studies of Education from Western Michigan University. Before coming to Kalamazoo in 2009, Michiko worked for City of Miura and City of Yokosuka in Japan as a city official for 7 years. In this position, her job responsibilities included making and evaluating city plans as well as supporting educational projects for youth including Mother's Clubs, Children's Clubs and exchange programs with sister cities in Japan and Australia. Michiko enjoyed international volunteer activities called International Work Camps when she was a young adult. She visited Cambodia, Thailand and Italy for joining projects for children and environment. Michiko has three young children with her husband and thinks making children do homework is one of the toughest jobs in her life.