



**GREAT START
COLLABORATIVE**
kalamazoogsc.org

Executive Team Members



Deirdre Bartells
GSC Staff

Deirdre is Administrative Assistant at Great Start Collaborative.

She moved to USA from Ireland in 2009, she worked for WMU prior to joining the KRESA team 7 years ago, she has 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 traveling and reading.



Kristyn Buhl-Lepisto

Kristyn is the Executive Director for Kalamazoo County Ready 4s, a non-profit which partners with over 55 preschools, with the mission of advancing high-quality pre-kindergarten experiences for all 3- and 4-year old's in Kalamazoo county. She joined KCR4s in March of 2020. Prior to KCR4s, Kristyn has held a variety of positions in the non-profit, for-profit, and education sectors and early education is her passion. Most recently she was a Senior Account Manager for Curriculum Associates where she partnered with school districts across the Midwest to analyze assessment and instruction data to improve student success. She also was a Deputy Director at Jumpstart, a national early childhood non-profit headquartered in Boston, where she managed a region in fundraising and partnering universities to provide Kindergarten preparation for preschool children.

Kristyn has a B.A. from Kalamazoo College and a M.A. from DePaul University. She has two young children and in her "free time", enjoys traveling, golfing, and doing CrossFit.



Ashley Drenth
GSC Staff

Ashley is the Parent Liaison for Kalamazoo County Great Start Collaborative. She has been in this role since March of 2020 and enjoys connecting with parents and families in our community. Some highlights of her role include hosting Parent Cafés and Families Connect: Parent Coalition meetings. Ashley also works closely with GSC's Trusted Advisors, who are passionate about connecting with specific families in our community including fathers, Spanish-speaking families, and urban Native American families. Ashley has a background in education, and previously spent 8 years in the classroom at the upper elementary and adult education levels. She and her partner have two wonderful children, ages 5 and 3. She enjoys spending time outside, visiting Lake Michigan, reading, eating at new restaurants, and traveling.



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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 in order to better serve families and children.



Mary Gustas

Mary is the Executive Director at the Comstock Community Center. She has been there for nineteen 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 over 30 years. She has also served on several boards including Kalamazoo Valley Community College for the past 34 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 three, soon to be four children. Eldest daughter Skylar (10), my son Noah (7), my youngest son Silas (3), and my soon-to-be-daughter Nami who is due January 30th.

Asia works for the Kalamazoo Public Library located downtown, and has worked there for 12 years now, 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 the Youth Outreach Coordinator at Kalamazoo Public Library. Jill has over 21 years of experience at our library serving youth, families, and caregivers in Kalamazoo. This position coordinates special program outreach for youth through partnership programs that serve KPL residents as well as the County of Kalamazoo. Jill leads the county wide early literacy initiative called Ready to Read which provides books for 0–5-year-olds through partners such as pediatricians, childcare providers, preschools and more.



Meadow Nuyen

Meadow is a principal with Comstock Public Schools at Comstock Early Learning Academy (CELA). Meadow has worked professionally in education since 2010 when she earned her B.S. from Western Michigan University (WMU). Meadow also has an M.A. (2016) and an Ed.S. (2022) from WMU. She has taught pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, K-5 art, and worked as a behavior coach. Ms. Nuyen was also a principal at a K-4 school prior to working at Comstock Public Schools.

Meadow is a self-motivated leader who takes initiative to promote success for all. Prior to 2010, Ms. Nuyen served as a substitute in Southwest Michigan and also worked retail. Meadow is reflective, makes changes as needed and collaborates with the educational community to support the education of the whole child at CELA. Dynamic and resourceful, she adds ideas and solutions that promote positivity and support for all families.



Amber Morris

Amber is a Family Advocate with KRESA Head Start. She has been serving families within the Head Start program for the last two years 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 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.



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Heather Phillips

Heather is local to the Kalamazoo Area and graduated with a B.S.W. from Eastern Michigan University in 2012. She has had many different experiences that helped shape my knowledge and passion for this career field. Working with kids has always been a passion of hers and she really enjoys being a part of the process that helps shape these little minds. She is a Quality Improvement Specialist for Southwest Child Care Resources and enjoys assisting providers in their Quality Improvement Journey.



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 12 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, followed by Director of Systems Development, and now as Senior Executive for Policy, Planning and Innovation. 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 trainings 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.



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Jen Sova

Jen is the Administrator for Early Intervention and Special Services for Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency, supporting programs for developmentally delayed children birth through age five. Jen was a speech-language pathologist and program coordinator for Early Childhood in Grand Rapids Public Schools prior to coming to Kalamazoo in 2017. Her passion for early childhood education stems from the belief in front loading services through early intervention providing language, literacy, and social emotional learning to increase academic success. Jen has been a leader in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and curriculum implementation designing tiered supports and measurement tools to improve supports for all preschoolers. Jen is a proponent for the use of direct instruction for children with deficit language formulation and processing. Currently, Jen works with individuals across early childhood to expand opportunities for children by reducing barriers and teaching children in their least restrictive environment. Jen has facilitated multiple conference and professional development sessions on the continuum of service for preschoolers, enhancing opportunities for inclusion and thoughtful decisions around least restrictive environments.



Elizabeth Spaner

Elizabeth currently oversees seventeen early childhood classrooms in the KPS district as well as holds the position of principal for Greenwood Elementary, a pre-K to grade 3 building in the district. Her passion for early childhood education began with her first job as a Mobil Unit Teacher for Tri-County Head Start. This position had her driving a 35-foot mobile classroom to rural communities to teach three and four-year-old children in a group setting building their social skills. She worked for Head Start until 2016 when she joined Kalamazoo Public Schools as the Coordinator of Early Childhood Programs.



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 (14 yrs.) and Jordan (10 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 15 years!



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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.