

Michele Spurgeon Hartzell, Ed.D., Superintendent

North East School District

North East, Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

Meet Michele Spurgeon Hartzell, Superintendent of the North East School District in Erie County, North East, Pennsylvania, *Home of the Grape Pickers*. The North East School District serves about 1,435 students across its elementary, middle, and high schools, forming a close-knit community grounded in tradition, academic excellence, and local “Picker Pride” symbolized by its “Grape Picker” mascot. The district consistently earns high rankings and honors including top placements by U.S. News & World Report with our high school achieving the National Blue Ribbon recognition. Our students continue to achieve strong academic outcomes with our seniors receiving over \$325,000 in annual scholarships, competitive success in STEM and extracurricular activities in which our Marching Band has claimed thirteen LMBA championships, and our seniors receive over \$325,000 in annual scholarships.

Education

Michele holds a Bachelor of Science in Education from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, a Master of Education in Administration from Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, as well as an Education Specialist and a Doctor of Education Degree from Georgia Southern University. She has also achieved the prestigious AASA National Superintendent Certificate, participated in the inaugural cohort of the Pennsylvania NISL Institute, as well as the PASA Superintendent’s Academy, underscoring her ongoing commitment to professional development and leadership in education.

Experience

Dr. Michele Spurgeon Hartzell has over 35 years of combined experience in business and education, including extensive service in administrative, management, and leadership spanning both in Pennsylvania and Savannah, GA. During her thirty years as an educator, she has served in a leadership capacity since 2000, including teacher, Assistant Principal, Ninth Grade Academy Administrator, Director of Title IV Programs, Director of Magnet Schools, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent. Michele is a dedicated advocate for public education and academic excellence, and is committed to guiding and empowering the next generation of educational leaders. She brings both depth and breadth of perspectives and believes the role of educational leaders is to serve as coaches and mentors for new and aspiring leaders, fostering their growth in order to support, promote, and sustain the future of public education.

Outstanding Achievement(s)

Dr. Hartzell has partnered with many organizations to write, co-write, and received over \$16 million in grants including, but not limited to, creating community gardens to make fruits and vegetables affordable and available; grants to create walking and bike paths, outdoor classrooms, score boards for athletic fields; a grant that afforded hands-on engagement experiences through five magnet school programs that included a medical program, International Baccalaureate, Engineering, Micro-Society, and Marine Science program which was recognized as a National Magnet school. During COVID, she led her team to begin a Summer Learning Lab hands-on program, which still exists today, to benefit students in order to help prevent the summer slide. She also partnered with Erie County to create a Profile of a Graduate and the Districts Road to Gold Initiative, which celebrates both students and staff.

Her team has also completed the consolidation of elementary schools, renovated the stadium complex with a new track and field, made upgrades to the elementary and high school HVAC systems, and has partnered with local agencies for campus beautification. One of the hallmark initiatives within her current district is the *Giving Back Day*. This event embodies the district's mission to "*Nurture and Empower lifelong learning and responsible citizenship,*" while also reflecting a central component of our vision: to "*develop skills to productively influence a changing world.*" By engaging in meaningful community service and supporting our local schools, we fulfill this mission in ways that extend well beyond the classroom.

She is a lifelong supporter of veterans, holding membership in the Auxiliary of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Legion, serves on the Advisory Board for the Mellon Veteran's Outreach Center, volunteers with Therapy Dogs United, and has volunteered with Pennsylvania Wounded Warriors. She also serves as the greeter coach at her local church. Dr. Hartzell believes in giving back and was recognized with the Katherine Hall Distinguished Service Award "for going above and beyond the normal standard of an excellent volunteer for her dedication and commitment to children."

She resides in North East, Pennsylvania with her husband, Shawn, where her most outstanding achievement is being a mother to three sons: Westin, Austin, and Brandon, with two of them currently serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHELE S. HARTZELL

Tell us about how you see today's superintendent.

I see the role of a superintendent continuing to be increasingly complex, requiring both confidence and resilience in the face of constant challenges. To be effective, you need a genuine passion for the work and a deep commitment to the students, staff, and community you serve. The impact of social media is not going away and has transformed the superintendency, especially in smaller communities where information spreads quickly and narratives can form before you even become aware of a situation. Because of this, it is critical to be proactive rather than reactive, consistently encouraging your team to share and celebrate the accomplishments of their children, and telling your story to help ensure accurate information reaches your community before misinformation can take hold.

Additionally, having a trusted circle of colleagues or mentors is essential. These are the people you can turn to for guidance, perspective, and support when you need to process challenges or simply talk things through.

What new understandings did you acquire after two or three years on the job?

The superintendency is both one of the most rewarding and most demanding roles you will ever take on. Success begins with doing your homework; taking the time to truly understand the values, history, and traditions of the community you are serving. That context matters, because every decision you make should be grounded in what is best for all children, not just in the moment, but for the long-term health of the district.

Strong leadership also means empowering your team. Encourage others to take thoughtful risks, try new ideas, and learn from both successes and setbacks. Progress does not always come in big leaps, so it is important to celebrate the small steps along the way. Those incremental wins build confidence, sustain momentum, and reinforce a culture of growth. At the same time, give yourself grace. This work is complex, and perfection is not the goal; progress is.

It is equally important to maintain perspective. I often remind my team that family comes first. The job can be overwhelming, and without balance, it can consume you. Finding ways to turn challenges into opportunities, to “make lemonade out of lemons,” helps keep things in perspective. And sometimes, the best thing you can do is laugh at yourself, reset, and keep moving forward.

Share an idea to use or something you've learned with you colleagues

One of the most important lessons I have learned, though it is not always easy to put into practice, is to not sweat the small stuff. When you first step into the superintendency, everything can feel urgent and high-stakes, and it's natural to interpret many situations as crises. In the moment, the pressure can make challenges seem overwhelming, but with time, reflection, and experience, you begin to recognize that not every issue requires the same level of intensity. Tomorrow does come, and each experience, whether difficult or successful, becomes an opportunity to learn, grow, and refine how you respond to both challenges and opportunities in the future.

It is also essential to have confidence in your abilities. You were chosen for the role for a reason, and trusting your instincts and preparation will help guide your decisions. Take time to identify your strengths and the areas you are most passionate about, and lean into them. Passion is powerful; it energizes your work and inspires those around you. When others see your genuine commitment and enthusiasm, it becomes contagious and helps build a positive, future-focused culture.

Submitted by: Dr. Michele S. Hartzell,  Date: April 23, 2026