



Great Circle Academy Leaders



Dr. Mike Golden, Vice President of Education

He joined Great Circle in 2020, bringing more than 20 years of special education teaching and educational leadership skills in several public school districts. He oversees the six GCA locations across Missouri that serve about 300 children with emotional and behavioral challenges.

His approach: "Our staff works to understand each of our students on a personal level, which helps build trust. When kids feel comfortable, they are more likely to open up and talk about what's going on in their lives – and that helps them find success in school and build lifelong skills."

Dr. Pamela Dawson, Director of Special Education, GCA-Lebanon & GCA-St. James

Prior to joining Great Circle in 2018, Dawson served in various school administrative roles in the Richland R-IV and Camdenton R-III districts, and School of the Osage. She is an adjunct professor at William Wood University, where she also received her doctorate.

Her approach: "We believe all students have the ability to learn. We focus on helping them develop the tools they need to learn and grow emotionally and physically so they can transition back to their home school."



JT Hartley, Director of Special Education, GCA-Marshall & Kansas City

With more than 20 years experience in the mental health field and special education, Hartley joined Great Circle in 2016. He has a master in administration from University of Missouri-Kansas City and bachelor of science in elementary/special education from Missouri Valley College.

His approach: "Our educational program is, in a sense, the last line of defense for children. Our goal is to provide each one the opportunity to experience educational success both academically and socially."

Erika Rackers, Director of Special Education, GCA-Columbia

Joining Great Circle in 2014 an elementary level teacher, she was a statewide Neuro-sequential Model of Education trainer before being named to lead the Columbia school. Previously, Rackers taught in the New Bloomfield R-III Schools. Her master in education, with emphasis on leadership in educational administration is from Capella University.

Her approach: "Our staff delivers quality education programming by emphasizing teamwork and collaboration within a strengths- based approach which encourages positive student outcomes in a trauma-informed classroom setting."





Lindsey Ray, Associate Director of Special Education, GCA-Kansas City

In her current role since 2018, Ray has 15 years of education-based experience in western Missouri as a special education teacher and district-level behavior coordinator of special education. She has a master in education in elementary school administration from University of Central Missouri.

Her approach: "Everyone is unique and must have a stimulating environment where they can grow physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. My job is to ensure everyone – students and adults – knows their opinions matter and their role is valued."

Kaysi Rinks, Director of Special Education, GCA-St. Louis

Before being named to lead the school in 2020, Rinks served as GCA's associate director and as a trauma-informed education trainer. She has taught at the elementary level at multiple public and private schools. Her master in education in administration is from Southwest Baptist University.

Her approach: "Changing lives starts with building relationships. We know that relationships are the vehicle to change, which builds on the creation of a trauma-informed culture."



Abby Swearingen, Associate Director of Special Education, GCA-St. James

With more than 20 years of education experience, Swearingen joined Great Circle in 2020, teaching at the elementary/middle school levels and providing school-wide training. Her master in education is from University of Western Alabama.

Her approach: "Safe, nurturing spaces for both students and staff are fundamental – to maintain a predictable environment for students to grow and learn and to ensure each person is appreciated as an individual who brings their own perspectives and values."

Tina Wheeler, Associate Director of Special Education, GCA-St. James

Joining Great Circle in 2021, Wheeler has served in multiple special education administrative and classroom roles in public and private Missouri schools. She has a master of arts in teaching and is a certified educational specialist in school systems, superintendency and leadership.

Her approach: "We believe each student is important, deserving to be loved and, above all else, worthy of change. We work to instill these ideas into the hearts and minds of our students. And once children believe this about themselves, they can achieve anything."

