

Mike Taylor Part Two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 1, 2025)

Benita Albert brings us more insight into the new Executive Director of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation.

It's truly inspiring to see talented professionals return to their hometown. Mike Taylor, 1991 Oak Ridge High School alumnus, has come home to Oak Ridge to serve as the Executive Director of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF).

Cathy Toth, Chairperson of the ORPSEF Board, said, "Mike Taylor brings to the Foundation over 30 years of expertise with non-profits and, in particular, progressive school systems. He is strongly connected to the Oak Ridge community. We believe Mike's leadership will help build a stronger Foundation and enhance our success in continuing Oak Ridge School's legacy of excellence in education."

Mike serves in a unique and strategic dual capacity as an interim CEO of the National Association of Education Foundations (NAEF) and Executive Director of ORPSEF. This collaborative partnership between a leading national organization and a highly respected local foundation reflects a shared commitment to advancing the impact of education foundations, both in Oak Ridge and across the country.

In his national role with NAEF, the only membership organization dedicated exclusively to the education foundation sector, Mike leads efforts to connect, support, and elevate education foundations and their leaders. NAEF serves as the primary thought leader and convener for the industry, representing foundations that collectively impact more than 20 million students nationwide. Mike's work includes advancing best practices, leading professional development, consulting with foundations, and promoting a continuous improvement approach to address the challenges facing our nation's educational system.

A key focus of his leadership is building a unified voice for education foundations through national advocacy efforts. Mike champions the role of local education foundations in shaping equitable and innovative public education systems. He works to ensure policymakers, funders, and education leaders at every level recognize and invest in the transformational potential of these organizations.

Simultaneously, as Executive Director of ORPSEF, Mike applies his expertise to strengthen local public schools through philanthropic partnerships, student opportunity initiatives, and community engagement in Oak Ridge, the historic home of the Manhattan Project and a community with a rich legacy of educational innovation.

This dual appointment creates a mutually beneficial relationship that enhances both organizations. It allows Mike to apply national insights to strengthen local impact, while also grounding national strategy in real-world, community-based work that ultimately benefits students, teachers, and education foundations at every level.

Mike's venture into education foundation work began with an effort to help provide additional monies for a new school, 6-12 grade levels, in Signal Mountain, TN. He said, "It became obvious that the Hamilton County Schools' budget fell short in adequately equipping the new school with the basic educational resources required for quality classroom instruction, such as science lab equipment, library books, computer labs, band instruments, and art enrichment opportunities."

Mike's wife Julie was a Signal Mountain native, and they were sending their young children to the K-8 local schools she had attended. Julie and her schoolmates had to leave the community for high school, commuting to Red Bank High School. The new school, expanded through the twelfth grade, allowed their children to stay in the community.

A 3.5-million-dollar campaign was launched, with Mike successfully concluding the effort in the community. He assumed the role of the Executive Director of the Mountain Education Foundation, establishing it as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Mike fondly remembers that time as the beginning of a refocused career move for him, an investment in not only his own children's growth and welfare, but also a much-needed public advocacy role for educational support and innovation.

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Mike reported that the new school thrived, and the giving program continued, providing initial funding to support increased opportunities for students and a subsequent, increased enrollment of 20% over the next few years. He worked with Hamilton County administrators to ensure their program innovations were subsequently continued under county budgeting. Mike said, "The Foundation supported gaps in educational opportunities for students, such as expanding after-school enrichment, providing sports physicals, and coordinating volunteers to assist with after-hours transportation for the school district's 'No Child Left Behind' program."

Mike accepted a new challenge in the Henrico County School System in Virginia in 2014 after his six years of education foundation work in Chattanooga. Mike described his new job as a move to a more financially disadvantaged program with a rapidly expanding student population overflowing available school space. Mike said, "As CEO of the Henrico Education Foundation, I helped the school system launch a mixed delivery program enabling Henrico Schools to partner with private childcare centers and provide preschool programming for 3- and 4-year-old children in an alternate setting. We focused on improvement of results on third-grade reading proficiency, and we knew there was a correlation to providing early school readiness programs."

Mike continued, "We concentrated on what the community wanted, such as: ESL services, credit recovery, teacher grants, and more. The community supported us and funded more student opportunities." Mike was proud of the education his children received in the Henrico Schools. He added, "When my own children were impacted, it grew my heart and my investment in education. It's really all about the students."

Mike joined the Knox Education Foundation in Knoxville, TN, as their CEO in 2023. He described his work as furthering Knox County's programs, namely supporting the merger of Great Schools Partnership and Project GRAD Knoxville and focusing on student outcomes and advocacy. He served as the 2023-2025 Chairman of the Board of the National Association of Educational Foundations and helped bring the national conference, *impactED*, to Knoxville in 2025.

At the same time as Mike was leading educational initiatives, he was pursuing his own higher education goals. Adding to his undergraduate degree in Business from UTK, he has recently earned a Master of Public Administration from Gardner-Webb University. Further professional credentials accomplished include: Certified Fundraising Executive and Certified Education Foundation Leader. Mike is a frequent conference speaker and advisor to education foundation leaders.

I asked Mike about his return to his hometown and his plans and dreams for ORPSEF's partnership with the Oak Ridge Schools.

"I never dreamed I'd be back. Oak Ridge is a unique and impactful school system. I am honored to support my alma mater. I know how much this community values education, and I credit the strong background I received in my K-12 education with my passion for supporting strong public schools. My older son has chosen education as a career and is currently teaching in Jefferson County. My two other children, a daughter and son, are in college in Tennessee. This is my home, the place where my education began, and now I want to return that by helping all students reach their fullest potential."

"An important role of an educational foundation is to support innovations, not supplant public monies; rather, serve as a research and development arm for our schools. The best way to solve problems and to innovate is through teachers. The ORPSEF teacher grants program and professional development fellowships provide teachers with the needed monies and encouragement in bringing new ideas to classroom teaching and learning. The Foundation, in its R&D mode, can collect the data and best results of each project and appeal to the school board for continued implementation and funding. This model develops new best practices, encourages creativity, and allows for new and different approaches."

ORPSEF's teacher grants program has awarded \$1.4 million over the past 16 years of the program. Awards have been given across all schools, grade levels, and academic disciplines. The new Benita Albert Innovative Educators Fellowships began awarding funds for unique professional development opportunities in the spring of 2025. All funds for the above programs are from public donations.

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Mike also spoke of the exciting new changes coming to Oak Ridge in increased nuclear industry investments, the ongoing innovative programs of the Oak Ridge National Lab, and the growing school population. He praised the efforts in the Oak Ridge Schools to stay abreast of workforce needs, of emerging new Career and Technical programs, and of enrichment resources and programs throughout the schools. He realizes that the need is always bigger than school budgets, and he wants to be a part of solving needs. He comes to Oak Ridge with a strong background of accomplishments including raising more than \$43 million in previous education foundation work.

Mike looks forward to establishing close communications with the Oak Ridge community, and as such, he is eager to meet with and/or speak to civic clubs and other community organizations. The ORPSEF office is in the Oak Ridge Schools Administration Building, 304 New York Ave., Oak Ridge, TN 37830. Phone number is 865-425-9017 and website is www.orpsef.org.

Thanks, Benita, for another most informative series. This time featuring a person who has returned to Oak Ridge, bringing with him a vast experience base and the skills needed to help our schools and city in many ways.



Mike Taylor, the new Executive Director of Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation. His family's story dates to Oak Ridge's pioneering grandparents (Courtesy of Mike Taylor)