

Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Spring 2018



Dates to remember

See <http://calendar.sd735.org> for a full listing of events.

- April 12**—April Show-ers, 7 p.m., McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.
- April 13**—Assyrian Community Dinner, 6:30 p.m., Middleton School, 8300 St. Louis Ave.
- April 20**—Middleton Musical, 7 p.m., McCracken.
- April 21**—Middleton Musical, 1 p.m. and 7 p.m., McCracken.
- April 24**—District 73½ STEAM Night, 5:30 p.m., Middleton.
- April 25**—Parent Presentation on Vaping, 7 p.m., Fairview School, 7040 Laramie Ave.
- April 26**—Meyer Showcase, 6:30 p.m., Meyer School, 8100 N. Tripp Ave.
- May 2**—McCracken Choir Concert, 7 p.m., McCracken.
- May 5**—International Festival, 1 p.m., McCracken.
- May 15**—McCracken Orchestra Concert, 7 p.m., Niles North High School, 9800 Lawler Ave.
- May 21**—Middleton and McCracken All-Bands Concert, 7 p.m., Niles North High School.

Board meetings—The Board of Education meets at 7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month at McCracken unless noted. All community members are invited to attend.

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McCracken focuses on social-emotional learning

As evidenced by the 2013 strategic plan, District 73½ has emphasized developing the whole child. One major component of that approach involves social-emotional learning (SEL).

SEL is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions,” according to CASEL, the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

The value of SEL programs is especially visible at McCracken Middle School.

“Research indicates the importance of educating the whole child. The State of Illi-

“The idea is to empower students themselves to create a culture of inclusion and connectedness.”

nois lays out specific social-emotional learning standards, and that continues to be part of our strategic plan. But beyond all that, there’s just the obvious positive impact we see that SEL programming has on student development,” said Kristen McCann, a school psychologist at McCracken as well as Meyer School.

McCracken has implemented an SEL curriculum from Second Step, part of the non-

profit policy and advocacy organization Committee for Children. Major themes of the curriculum include empathy and communication, bullying prevention, emotion management, problem solving and goal setting.

“It gives us a series of grade-based learning activities that students engage with during their advisory period,” said McCracken Principal Allison Stein. “Every three or four weeks throughout the year we have a Second Step day when advisory is extended.”

Delivered to all students, Second Step falls into tier 1 of McCracken’s multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). A variety of tier 2 and 3 SEL supports are provided by the school psychologist, social worker and counselor to small groups or individual students who need them.

In addition to year-round activities, McCracken has also instituted a variety of short-term SEL initiatives. Two that worked well this year come from Sandy Hook Promise, a gun-violence prevention organization.

The first initiative was Start with Hello Week, designed to teach students how to reach out to individuals who feel socially isolated from their peers. The week culminated with a “mix-it-up” at lunch, when students changed their routines and sat with students they don’t ordinarily hang out with.

“It’s not that they didn’t know most of the people they ended up with, but they don’t ordinarily talk to each other very much,” Stein said. “The idea is to empower students themselves to create a culture of inclusion and connectedness.”

Another weeklong initiative was called See Something, Say Something, also from Sandy

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Student publication earns honors

Launched in 2016, the McCracken student literary publication *Murmur* has already garnered national attention.

The 2016 edition of *Murmur* received an honorable mention from the National Council of the Teachers of English Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines, which was presented in January 2017. “We were proud of that, considering that it was our first-ever issue,” said John Shay, the 8th grade English language arts teacher who sponsors the magazine.

The second edition was among the third-place finishers in the American Scholastic Press Association’s Top Scoring Magazines for 2017.

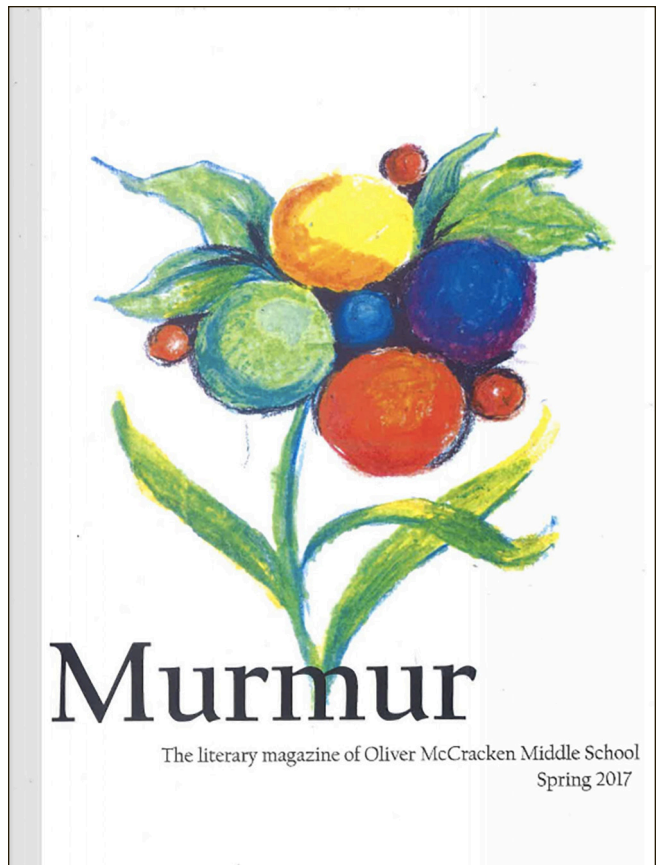
The awards focus on layout, student responsibility and variety of content with an eye to literary and artistic skill and talent. The emphasis is not on “winning” but on recognizing student involvement and creativity.

“We are excited to be among a very small handful of middle schools that are earning recognition from these programs. The lion’s share of applicants are high schools,” Shay said.

Murmur showcases the expressive talents of McCracken students through literature, visual arts and other art forms. Student editors accept submissions from other students, proofread and edit as necessary, and meet with the student-artists to discuss revisions.

Murmur is going strong in 2018, as students learn that it is not restricted to those in Shay’s language arts classes and that they can submit original, independent work rather than recycling classroom assignments. “In the first year, we might have had 7-10 students attending meetings, all of them current students of mine. This year, our third, we now attract 20-30 students from all grade levels. This is resulting in much-more energetic meetings as well as a richer variety of genres,” Shay said.

The magazine is published online and in a limited print edition. The first issue was fairly traditional, consisting mainly of stories, poems and drawings. The upcoming issue should feature more audio and video content because sound and video files can be embed-



ded in the online version, Shay said. The audio-video submissions appear in the printed issue as a screenshot with a scannable QR code, allowing readers to access those elements on a mobile device.

Shay expects the next issue of the magazine to come out in mid-May. Past issues can be viewed at the McCracken website: <http://www.sd735.org/mccracken/murmur>.

Social-emotional

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Hook Promise. The program teaches students how to look for warning signs from someone who may be threatening to hurt themselves or others and then say something to a trusted adult.

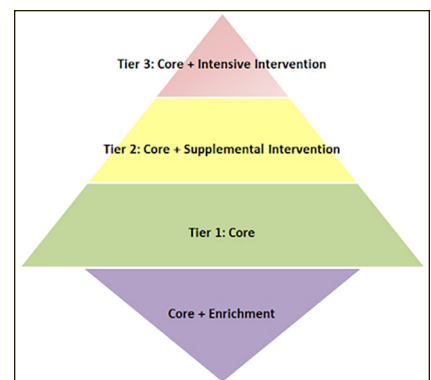
“The purpose is to empower students to be upstanders,” Stein said. “One thing we stress is that it’s not being a ‘snitch.’ It’s recognizing that someone needs help and reporting it to someone who can provide that help.”

“The kids really got into that one,” said Kate Pellish, the social worker at

McCracken. “It’s an idea that gets buy-in from students because it has a powerful purpose. There’s a lot happening in the world today that makes this hit home for them. They realize, “There are things I can do to make sure these things don’t happen at my school.”

“I think our students appreciate getting this kind of SEL programming,” McCann said.

“We are careful that what we design is age-appropriate, we try to make activities fun as well as informative, and we do keep parents informed. What I’ve been hearing is that kids are happy to participate. It brings them a new level of awareness.”



In the district’s multi-tiered system of support, all students receive core (Tier 1) instruction. Students who need additional support receive supplemental interventions that increase in intensity as appropriate.

Budget holds steady as political winds blow

The just-completed primary season is an intense time of year for local politics, even for those who aren't running for office.

Just ask Ann Williams, the District 73½ Chief Financial Officer. In the weeks prior to the March primary elections, she listened carefully as candidates made budget promises and tried to gauge which ones might come true and what effect they would have on teaching and learning here.

School funding is often a major topic among candidates for state offices. School officials in the northern suburbs watch particularly to see whether their region will do better or worse under any given proposal. "The governor has been promising more money for schools, but wants to pass on pension obligations to the districts," Williams said. But specifics are hard to come by. "Those unknowns just keep you guessing," she added.

In the meantime, the state's weakened finances continue to plague local districts. "There are delays in receiving funds from the state," she said. "Some hasn't started to flow yet, and it could go into next fiscal year." She noted that the district's strong fund balances keep the delays from being a major problem — as a matter of policy, the district keeps six months' worth of funding on hand. Nevertheless, the situation



Dr. Ann Williams

"makes financial reporting problematic at times."

The vagaries of state budget aside, the district's financial position is strong, Williams said. Construction of additions at Meyer and Middleton schools is coming in under budget, and revenues are basically keeping pace with expenditures in the \$21 million spending plan.

Planning for next year is well under way. Williams said the district is looking hard at its replacement schedule for technology, and also some preventive maintenance

at its buildings. She is also preparing to meet new federal budget standards that tie expenditures to each school, as a lead-in to getting all schools to report their expenditures on a per-pupil basis.

Williams is acclimating herself in her first year in the district, after working for 14 years for larger districts in the south suburbs. Before that, she worked in the insurance industry as an analyst. "I decided to seek a career in education," she said. "I love what I do. I get to affect the lives of students."

In researching the district before she took the job, she found its broad range of people and backgrounds appealing, and her experience so far confirms that. "The number of languages in the hallways is always exciting," she said. "The diversity is awesome."

Coming from larger districts, she also appreciates the smaller scale here. "I'm beginning to know the parents and staff members," she said. "There's more of a family feel, which is nice."

Williams plans to be visible at school events and hopes to meet many more members of school families. "They will see me at events and I welcome any conversation they have for me," she said. After all, she noted, her job "is not about me, it's about the students."

Band fundraiser hits all the right notes

District 73½ has a long tradition of excellent music programs. That excellence depends in part on the support that comes from parents and other district residents, who have shown repeatedly that they want quality arts programs in their schools. That support was demonstrated once again at a recent fundraiser for the McCracken band programs.

More than 100 people attended the event at the Fleetwood-Jourdain Center in Evanston on Feb 10. They participated in raffles, games, auctions and a team trivia contest. By the end of the evening, the contributions totaled nearly \$11,000 — by far the most money ever raised at a band benefit.

"We'll use the money to bring in professional musicians to work with our students, commission new pieces and supplement our instrument purchases," said Chip De Stefano, McCracken band director. "And parents did 100 percent of it. I

just showed up!"

The fundraiser was organized by parents Cyndy Novak, Charlene Abraham and Kate Donegan. They took care of scheduling, advertising, securing the venue, obtaining prizes and putting together an agenda for the evening.

"I feel that the arts are very important to our district, especially the band program," Novak said. "We are very lucky to have such a talented and well respected band director who has helped create one of the best band programs in the country. Kids want to be a part of that. And other areas of arts are also highly regarded. With so many other districts cutting funds to the arts, we invest more in them. Our kids are able to grow and learn so much from the arts."

She added, "This event was fantastic. We had over 100 people attend and received tons of positive feedback. We cannot wait for the next one!"

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Latest five-year strategic plan takes shape

The District 73½ school board will soon vote on a new five-year strategic plan. The board heard a presentation about the 2018-2023 strategic plan at its March 13 meeting.

According to Supt. Kate Donegan, “The strategic plan is the road map for the district. It is the opportunity for the community to voice what is important to them. The plan allows for the uniqueness of District 73½ to shine and guides how we use our resources.”

The process of developing the new plan started in earnest in January, when Donegan outlined five broad strategic areas identified by district administrators:

- Academics
- Community Engagement
- Fiscal Responsibility
- Learning Environment
- Whole Child

Following that, a group of approximately 50 people — parents, staff, district residents, board members and local officials — met on four occasions in February to hammer out a draft.

They examined the current state of affairs within the district, including successes, challenges and critical issues that need to be addressed. They also reviewed outside trends, issues and events that might affect district operations.

“I am very thankful to all of the staff, parents, and community members who volunteered their time to take part in this very important process.”

— Supt. Kate Donegan

They divided into subgroups that discussed each of the five strategic areas under consideration and developed a set of goals and potential actions to accomplish them for each area. At the final meeting, they reviewed their findings and agreed on a document for administrators to refine and ultimately send to the board.

The process was facilitated by Don Kachur, an education consultant and emeritus professor at Illinois State University who worked with the district on the last strategic plan five years ago.

“I am very thankful to all of the staff, parents, and community members who volunteered their time to take part in this very important process,” Donegan said. “There were many rich conversations focused on students and the experiences they should have.”

“The process worked and we got it done,” said school board President Gary Dolinko. “In many ways, the process was similar to the one we went through five years ago. Of course it’s a new group of people, and some of the wants and needs expressed had shifted. For example, there’s a desire to increase STEM programming (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). And as you can imagine, safety is a big concern right now. Some things, like communication and transparency, are a carryover from before. The main thing people want is for this district to keep moving forward.”

District 73½ guiding principles

- ◆ Our schools will support and inspire our students
- ◆ Our students will be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers
- ◆ Our community will demonstrate integrity and respect
- ◆ Our graduates will help make the world a better place