



Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Spring 2019



Dates to remember

See <http://www.sd735.org/calendar> for all events.

May 28—Eighth-grade graduation, 7:30-9 p.m., Niles North High School, 9800 Lawler Ave.

May 30—STE(A)M Community Forum, 7-8:30 p.m., McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.

June 1—Open house to honor retiring teacher Tom O'Brien, 9-11 a.m., McCracken.

June 3—Last day of school for 2018-19 school year.

July 23—Residency verification day for 2019-20 students, 9 a.m.-6:30 p.m., McCracken.

July 31—Residency verification day for 2019-20 students, 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m., McCracken.

Aug. 15—Schedule and Chromebook pickup by last name for 6th- to 8th-grade students, 9 a.m. -noon, McCracken. *Please check the district online calendar for the correct time slot for your child.*

Aug. 26-27—Teacher institute days.

Aug. 28—First day of school for 2019-20 school year.

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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Teacher Tom O'Brien is district's historical figure

McCracken's history teacher has a history of his own. A long one.

Since 1959, Tom O'Brien has stood before classrooms of middle school students lecturing, quizzing, cajoling and persuading them that there are people and events from centuries ago that are worth knowing and understanding. That ends in June, when O'Brien will retire (*see box below*).

"What makes Mr. O'Brien such a good teacher is how he is able to show us the connections between events that have happened hundreds and thousands of years ago to our modern-day life," wrote one of this year's students, Chloe Delos Reyes. "He has taught me and my other fellow classmates life lessons that we will take with us for the rest of our lives."

One of those lessons, Chloe wrote, is O'Brien's catchphrase: "Dates change. People don't." As the dates have changed during his six-decade tenure, he has worked hard to keep up in his field (teachers "learn as much as they teach," he said). But his appetite for what he teaches remains constant.

"I love reading. I love books. I love history," said O'Brien, 84. "Knowledge of one's subject doesn't get enough respect. You need to know your area and have a passion for it."

Mr. O'Brien's colleagues recognize the value of how he approaches his work. Maureen Even has known him throughout her 30-year career in the district. "Mr. O'Brien is a classic teacher," she said. "He captures the attention of his students with his professional demeanor, he sustains their interest with lessons that share his passion and love of history, and he fills them with historical knowl-



Tom O'Brien

edge that they remember for years to come."

Another constant has been how he works with students. O'Brien offers them respect — referring to them as "Mr." or "Miss" — and receives it in return. Supt. Kate Donegan believes students respond well to his calm manner and firm adherence to routine, which extends beyond the classroom. She notes, for example, that he has the same cafeteria lunch every day: soup, chocolate milk and a cookie.

His classroom methods, honed over decades, make an indelible impression. "He's pretty old-fashioned in his ways of teaching," wrote Olivia

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Tom O'Brien

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Frey, a current student. "We've barely used our Chromebooks, and countries drills every week are things that I would never have an opportunity to do. These types of things, however, make his class and his way of teaching even more memorable and understandable."

Delivering classroom lectures may not seem like the best approach for young teens in the 21st century, but it works. His students know he cares about learning, and about them. "He never leaves a student behind," wrote current student Kirsten Ng. "He gives everyone multiple chances to succeed in his classroom, and when we miss a class he makes sure we have time to review the content before the quizzes, tests or drills."

That respect extends to co-workers. "My colleagues have always been very well-informed, well-educated people who challenged me to do my best work and be as professional as I could be in my field," O'Brien said. "Being the luddite I am (he doesn't use email, for example), my colleagues have become my saviors. As technology has passed me by, they have been very charitable."

Carrie Eccleston, a social studies teacher who has known O'Brien for 20 years, said, "Tom is the epitome of a professional and a true role model. You can see that teaching was his calling as he walks the halls with purpose and kindness." Another colleague of 20-plus years, Annie Monak, said, "It truly is Tom's goal to educate students to be critical thinkers and good citizens."

His influence has taken root in the district. Eccleston said, referring to her own teaching, "When I think about the choices the Founding Fathers were making at the Constitutional Convention, or when Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act or Lincoln made the decision to go to war, I think about these moments as human choices that involve power, greed, sacrifice and duty. I try to convey to my students what I am sure Tom has done over the years — way better than I ever could — that humans make choices and those choices have consequences."

For all his plaudits, O'Brien noted that his 60-year tenure in the district — the only place he has ever taught — almost didn't happen. He calls his hiring in August 1959 "a fluke" prompted by the firing of another



Working on the McCracken yearbook was always a highlight for Tom O'Brien, shown here with a group of editors.

teacher, which had administrators scrambling to find a quick replacement. A friend on the district faculty let him know about the opening, and the rest was ... history.

And his story is largely the story of District 73½. He started before Oakview School (now McCracken Middle School) was built, saw the construction of Meyer School, additions to both Middleton and Meyer, and the 2008 addition to McCracken that bears his name. He has served on committees, helped shepherd teacher contract negotiations, emceed dozens of staff retirement dinners, and was teacher liaison to the PTA for decades. He has taught children and grandchildren of former students. He knows everyone who is, or ever was, connected to the district.

Among his highlights, he cites his long-time work as McCracken yearbook advisor, which he yielded to Monak several years ago. A particular bright spot, he said, was the trip to Washington, D.C. in 2002 when McCracken was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education. Difficult times included having to console students when John F. Kennedy was shot ("they wanted to know what was going to happen to Caroline and John-John"), Robert F. Kennedy was killed, the Challenger exploded, and the World Trade Center was attacked. He's attended wakes, funerals and shivas for students and colleagues.

On the surface, much has changed since 1959. "We've gone from slacks and collared shirts, skirts and blouses, to sweatshirts and sweatpants," O'Brien said. "When I started,

there were blackboards; now they're whiteboards. School doors were open, now they're locked. Technology consisted of a mimeograph machine and microfilm. The most popular mode of communication was the telephone; entertainment was the television."

But true to his aphorism, O'Brien believes his students have remained much the same. "Junior high students haven't changed in that they're still coming into their personalities, looking for approval from their peers. They still come to school curious and seeking knowledge, from homes where their parents are supportive of their learning experience and the teachers."

He estimates that he has taught more than 6,000 students — first as a full-time teacher, then after 2004, as a part-timer in his first stage of retirement. "My attorney, and every one of my physicians, is a former student," he noted with pride. "I've been in restaurants where a server comes up to me and recognizes me by my voice."

Numerous students keep in contact with him. "They ask, 'Are you still doing the countries and continents?' One recently told me, 'I'm the only American I know who knows anything about geography.'" He said his eye doctor told him recently, "I'll never forget you because you treated us as adults."

As full retirement beckons, O'Brien hasn't decided what his next step will be. He said, "I'm closing one chapter, but I'm not going to look backward. I'm opening a door to the future. I don't know what it will be, but I do know I won't be sitting around idle."

District joins in early childhood study

District 73½ is taking part in a project that seeks to measure early childhood development in Skokie and Morton Grove neighborhoods. Other participants include nearby school districts, early childhood centers, government agencies, libraries and other organizations.

The project is being led by Chicago's Erikson Institute, the graduate school and research institution that focuses on child development. Using a tool called the Early Development Instrument (EDI), Erikson researchers gather data and then map early childhood development at the neighborhood level in the target communities, highlighting local resources and areas of need.

The EDI Project fits the mission of the Niles Township Early Childhood Alliance, a network of local early childhood professionals who began meeting about two years ago. Meyer School Principal Alison Gordon represents District 73½ in the alliance. Other members include Districts 67, 68 and 69, the Niles Township District for Special Education, the Infant Welfare Society of Evanston and the Skokie Public Library. "We started talking about what we could do to benefit our families and about different partners we could bring on board. We visited communities like Oak Park, which has a long-time early childhood alliance," Gordon said. "We were gaining steam and starting to get excited when the Erikson Institute approached us and asked if we would be part of the EDI study."

Skokie Cares plans equity training

Skokie Cares, the community organization whose slogan is "Skokie Welcomes Everyone," is sponsoring a series of SEED training seminars during the 2019-2020 school year. The three-hour sessions will take place once a month beginning in fall 2019. They are open to anyone who lives, works or has children attending school in Skokie.

SEED stands for Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity. The National SEED Project works to bring about personal, organizational and community change leading to greater equity and diversity.

SEED seminars are not lectures. They give people an opportunity to talk openly about race, gender, cultural differences and other issues that separate individuals and groups from others in the community. They use a variety of methods to stimulate the conversation, including group exercises, personal reflections, video clips and readings. They help people connect with one another and with society at large by acknowledging systems of power, privilege and prejudice.

As a member of Skokie Cares, District 73½ encourages members of the community to sign up for the upcoming SEED training by completing an online application at skokiecares.org between June 3 and July 15.

For details contact Nancy Kim Phillips, Community Engagement Manager, at the Skokie Public Library (phone 847-324-3144 or email NKimPhillips@skokieliibrary.info).

In January, Erikson researchers gathered data from kindergarten teachers and other sources. Erikson presented its findings in a community report released in early May to leaders from the schools and agencies participating in the EDI study. On May 9, a team from Erikson shared the information with teachers at Meyer.

Erikson created a set of maps to show student vulnerability across five "developmental domains," including physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge.

"Over the next several months, this data will be shared, understood and analyzed," Gordon said. "From there, with the continued assistance of the Erikson Institute and the Early Childhood Alliance, an action plan will be generated to target the community's needs."

The EDI project gauges how well young children are developing within their community. Erikson has been piloting the Early Development Instrument in Illinois communities since 2016. Those communities have used information from the project to apply for grants, improve programs and focus attention on areas of need.

Research indicates that experiences early in life have a significant impact on educational achievement, lifelong health, economic productivity and responsible citizenship. By providing a neighborhood-level snapshot of children's health, development and school readiness, EDI provides a picture of child development that can help leaders figure out how and where resources should be directed.

The Erikson Institute describes EDI as a research tool, a checklist and a presentation of aggregated data (i.e., results are presented for entire neighborhoods, not for individual children).

EDI results are reported as the percentage of children who are "on track," "at risk," and "developmentally vulnerable" in each of the five developmental domains. Children whose scores suggested that they were on track developmentally in kindergarten were much more likely to meet expectations in subsequent grades. Children who were determined to be at risk or vulnerable, however, were less likely to meet developmental and academic expectations, particularly if they were found to be vulnerable in multiple areas.

Information from the EDI can be used to tailor supports for preschool children and plan future interventions for kindergartners as they progress through school. The study delivers information that parents, teachers, child-care providers, health professionals and local governments can use to coordinate and improve services where they are needed most.

New board members take seats

The District 73½ school board swore in its newest members and chose officers at an April 23 special meeting.

Newly elected are Bushra Amiwala, Carla Arias and Kelli Nelson. They replace outgoing members Michael Lemke, Baccet Levy and Randall Steger.

The new board president is Nicholas Werth, and vice president is Emily Twarog Miller. Nelson is secretary, and Amiwala is secretary pro tem. In addition to Werth and Miller, Scott Bramley and Gary Dolinko remain on the board.

Board of Education

Nicholas Werth, President
Emily Twarog Miller, Vice President
Kelli Nelson, Secretary
Bushra Amiwala, Secretary Pro Tem
Carla Arias
Scott Bramley
Gary Dolinko
Kate Donegan, Superintendent

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Gordon, Herbach bring district careers to close

With the end of the 2018-2019 school year, District 73½ will bid farewell to two longtime staff members who are retiring: Alison Gordon and Ann Herbach.

Although she began as a classroom teacher, Gordon has been a principal for 31 years — in Northbrook, then Highland Park and, for the last 11 years, at Meyer School.

If you have visited Meyer, you know that she is not one who spends the day in her office. She's out greeting students as they arrive, visiting classrooms, roaming the hallways. "Throughout my career, I've always tried to stay closely connected to the kids," Gordon said. "You see the benefit of the work you do when you have daily contact with these children as they grow and learn."

Gordon has two children, one who will start college in fall 2019 and one who will be a sophomore. That was a major factor in her decision to retire. "It may sound silly, but I want to be more available for my own kids," she said.

Retiring does not mean she will cease all education activities, however. Gordon has been teaching graduate students and participating in educational leadership programs at Northwestern University. About five years ago she started an educational coaching network. And she has been working with the Illinois Principals Association.

She also hopes to maintain relationships with District 73 ½ staff and other educators she has gotten to know during her career. "I've been so fortunate to work with so many wonderful people and get to know them. Hopefully I'll be able to continue a lot of these relationships. These are people who really care and are invested in education."

Herbach started at Middleton in fall 1993 as an instructional assistant in a self-contained NTDSE classroom. She worked as the library assistant the following year and became school librarian in 1995. "When I received my master's in Librarianship and Information Management, I always thought I would end up in a university



Alison Gordon



Ann Herbach

library," Herbach said. "But after my year in the NTDSE classroom, I knew I would enjoy being in an elementary school."

She soon learned she would be involved in redesigning the media center space. The following summer, she took part in technology planning as Middleton began a project to install computers throughout the building.

"I had the opportunity to revamp the library collection and convert to an online catalog," she said. "At the same time, I helped my tech counterpart, Mike Neims at McCracken, set up the computer network, establish email, set up computers in the classrooms, create a website for Middleton, train teachers in these new technologies and support teachers in instructional technology."

She said the district has been able to manage tight resources to "integrate new technology and instructional techniques." As the school's tech infrastructure grew, her role shifted to integrating technology and digital citizenship. Later still, "I began to focus on helping students research and evaluate information and engaging students in the pure enjoyment of finding good books."

But through all the change and innovation, Herbach said, "Something remains constant: the desire to do what is best for the children in front of us."

Asked about her plans after retiring, Herbach said, "I look forward to unstructured time. I hope to be able to take advantage of cheap airfares at random times. I hope to study and fill in some gaps in my knowledge."

The District 73½ board of education would also like to acknowledge two dedicated staff members who are each celebrating 25 years in the district: custodian and bus driver Alvin Carter, and 8th grade English language arts teacher Sara Denaro. Thanks to both for their commitment and dedication.

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