



Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Winter 2019



Dates to remember

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

March 19—Meeting to discuss formation of a new PTO, 7 p.m., Meyer School, 8100 Tripp Ave.

March 21—McCracken orchestra concert, 7 p.m., Niles North H.S., 9800 Lawler Ave.

March 25—Spring break begins; no school.

April 1—School resumes after spring break.

April 12—Middleton School musical, 7 p.m., McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.

April 13—Middleton School musical, 1 p.m. and 7 p.m., McCracken.

April 17—Meyer School Showcase, 6:30 p.m.

April 23—District STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, math) Family Night, 5:30-7 p.m., Middleton Elementary School, 8300 St. Louis Ave.

April 23—Special Board of Education meeting, 7 p.m., McCracken.

April 25—McCracken April Show-ers, 7 p.m.

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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Partnership offers job training to prospective language interpreters

More than half of District 73½ students come from homes where a language other than English is spoken — 62 languages and counting. In a school system so diverse, language differences can sometimes interfere with communication. A proposed partnership between the Language Access Resource Center (LARC) and the ELL Parent Center would work to reduce language barriers by training multilingual parents and staff to be interpreters.

LARC would conduct the training in Skokie in conjunction with the Parent Center, 9440 Kenton Ave. The course consists of 60 hours of classroom work followed by 40 hours of practicum work — progressive on-the-job training as an interpreter under supervision by LARC staff. Those who complete the program receive a certificate making them eligible to work as an interpreter. Continuing education credits are also available.

For all of this to come together, at least 15 individuals from Niles Township schools will have to sign up for the training. LARC charges \$600 for the training and \$75 for an initial language assessment. However, District 73½ would cover the cost for any parent or staff member who makes the commitment and is willing to provide occasional interpreter services in district schools.

“I see this as a win all around,” said Supt. Kate Donegan. “Our district would get certified interpreters and the people who go through the training can develop and use their language skills for employment or other purposes.”

According to LARC program manager Eva Rafas, “We have working relationships with many school districts in Cook, Lake, McHenry, DuPage and other surrounding counties. Our face-to-face interpreters assist with parent-teacher conferences, various special ed meetings

If you or someone you know is interested in learning to be an interpreter, contact District 73½ Supt. Kate Donegan by email at kdonegan@sd735.org or by phone at 847-324-0509.

such as IEP conferences and annual reviews, screenings, testing, discipline meetings, orientations, presentations, workshops, board meetings, school plays and musicals, etc. LARC is a resource for all their language access needs.”

Some current district staff members went through the LARC training a few years ago and can testify to its effectiveness.

Asia Shahid, a kindergarten instructional aide, went through the program in 2013. She recalled, “When I joined the district in 2006, I was the only Urdu-speaking teacher at Meyer School. I was asked occasionally to interpret at IEP conferences or translate written material, and I was happy to do it, but after a while I wanted to be a little more professional. I attended classes at the ELL Parent Center three evenings a week with 20 or 25 other people, and I found the training to be so useful. I’m an immigrant myself and I know what problems newcomers to the country and our schools can face.”

Asma Ahmad, a speech pathologist at McCracken School, went through LARC training at the Parent Center in 2014. In her opinion, “This is a legitimate course where you are expected to be an active learner — not a passive learner. I wanted to be trained as an interpreter because I wanted to be as helpful as I could be for the Urdu- and Hindi-speaking families in the district. After going through the training, I realized that being bilingual or multilingual is not the same thing as being an interpreter. I

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Seven in race for school board

Seven people are running in the April 2 election for three seats on the District 73½ Board of Education. The last day to register to vote is March 17, and early voting begins March 18.

Bushra Amiwala is an alumna of District 73½ and an undergraduate at DePaul University in Chicago. She is a full-time intern at the Wright Foundation for the Realization of Human Potential and an assistant debate judge/coach at Niles North High School. As a student at Niles North, she was alumni liaison between the high school and District 73½. She has volunteered in all three district schools and has taught enrichment at Middleton.

"My historical involvement with District 73½ was centered around volunteering and giving back to the school district that made me the woman I am today," Amiwala said. "By serving on the board of education, I will have the formal platform and capacity to do more. I am the only past student running for a seat, meaning I am the only candidate who has actually seen a lot of the positives that this district has to offer, and I seek only to make it better."

Carlotta Arias is vice president of retail operations for a Skokie-based company. She has lived in the district for nine years and has a daughter in kindergarten at Meyer School, where she served as a room parent and volunteered. Her wife is a teacher in a nearby school district.

"I know there are no easy answers when it comes to school and education. And I know the importance of taking into consideration the expertise of teachers, the opinions of parents and the voices of the students," Arias said. "I hope to be a board member who can identify what information is needed and who is best qualified to provide that information when making important decisions."

If elected, Arias will focus on increasing transparency, bringing more STEM opportunities to students, addressing issues of equity and making sound financial decisions.

Paul Easton, an English teacher at New Trier High School in Winnetka, has been an educator for 24 years. He and his wife have two children, one at Middleton and one at McCracken. They have lived in the district since 2003. He canvassed for the last District 73½ referendum and has worked on the strategic plan, served as a Cub Scout den leader and been a parent volunteer.

Easton said, "As a parent and educator entering my last decade of teaching, I am in a position to give back the educational expertise I have gathered over the years. I believe in a whole-child philosophy of education, but I also have a master's degree in education administration, and I understand how schools should work. My union experience in the IEA/NEA, as well as my experience negotiating three faculty contracts, provides some of the nuts-and-bolts experience of working on a board. My hope is to be a voice in support of children's exploration and play, administrative transparency, more welcoming facilities for our community, and increased faculty participation in decision-making."

First elected in 2015, **Michael Lemke** is now board vice president. He is vice president of learning architecture at Area9 Lyceum and has lived in the district for 10 years. He and his wife have three children, one in each of the district schools. He has been involved as a parent, working with teachers to bring "advanced STEM opportunities" into classrooms and serving on the MTSS committee.

Lemke said the current board reached the objectives in the previous strategic plan and collaborated with the community to create a new plan in 2018. "A few of the many objectives that I wish to accomplish over the next five years include additional STEM opportunities in all grades, retain our talented teaching staff, attract new candidates who reflect our diversity, and ensure that all our curricula are equitable."

Baccet Levy is manager of technology and media services at Evanston Township High School. He also heads the Black Caucus at ETHS and is the co-sponsor of E-BAN (Evanston Black Advocacy Network). He has one child attending school in District 73½. He was elected to the board in 2017 to complete an unexpired term.

Levy said, "I have served on the board for nearly two years and I would like to continue the work of making this diverse district the best it can be. That includes high student achievement and fiscal strength. I want this to be a welcome place for everyone."

Kelli Nelson is an English teacher in Lisle. She has master's degrees in secondary English curriculum and instruction, and in educational leadership. She is a National Board Certified teacher in English language arts. She and her husband have two young children in District 73½.

Nelson said, "To effectively serve a school community, the board must be reflective of its constituency. As mother to a 2nd-grader and a kindergartner and as a 6-12 educator for the past 20 years, I will bring a unique and often underrepresented voice to the school board. I believe in our schools, this great, diverse community, and our wonderful teachers and support staff. The board is designed to serve as the bridge between the school system and the community, and it would be an honor to help craft the vision, goals, educational access and opportunity, not just for my children but for all students and families."

John Wash was a teacher's assistant for two years at Middleton School. He is now a middle school language arts teacher at a charter school in Chicago. He and his fiancée have two children at Middleton, and have lived in the district for three-and-a-half years. He volunteers as a coach for the Skokie Indians Little League program.

Wash said, "As I started to attend meetings and talk to other members of the community, I thought being an educator on the board could be beneficial in addressing their concerns. I have two children who will go to district schools for another eight and 10 years respectively and I would like to be an advocate for, not only them, but for all students."



Bushra Amiwala



Carlotta Arias



Paul Easton



Michael Lemke



Baccet Levy



Kelli Nelson



John Wash

District spending down, but revenues still lag

With the completion of additions at Meyer School and Middleton School, District 73½ spending is anticipated to drop about 10 percent this budget year. However, district officials say the “structural deficit” created by the county property tax cap continues to keep anticipated revenues falling short of anticipated expenses.

As the 2018-19 fiscal year began on July 1, the district planned for about \$21.1 million in revenue — primarily from local property taxes, support from the state of Illinois, and federal funds. But expenses were forecast to total about \$22 million, leaving an expected shortfall of about \$900,000 for the year.

More than 60 percent of the district’s spending goes for salaries and benefits, as is common among public school districts. This year is the second of a three-year teacher contract, with teacher salaries set to grow about 3 percent. Pay for administrators and non-teaching staff was also planned to increase by 3 percent.

Those increases are partially offset by an expected decrease in healthcare costs ranging from 0.3 percent to 4 percent, depending upon each employee’s choice of coverage. Total staffing was expected to hold steady compared to the prior year, and purchased services were planned to decline by about half a percent.

District officials have continued to keep pace with fast-changing technology, adding new SmartBoard TVs in 1st and 2nd grade

classrooms and refreshing iPads at Middleton. Currently, those devices are provided for Pre K through 2nd grade students and Chromebooks are provided to students in 3rd through 8th grade. Replacing older networking equipment and adding new management software is expected to improve connectivity, communication, operations and management of the district’s network. All three buildings are now using the same updated audio-visual system located in each gymnasium and multipurpose space.

On the revenue side, the district’s property taxes are regulated by Cook County’s mandated cap, which is tied to inflation. This year’s cap was 2.1 percent. Because property taxes are the district’s largest funding source (about three-quarters of all revenue), the cap serves as a constraint that is out of school officials’ control. State and federal funding, which together make up about 10 percent of revenue, were both expected to increase slightly.

School leaders continue to monitor fiscal concerns that could impact the district. These include the tax cap, tax revenue appeals and refunds, potential changes in state funding, possible pension reform, rising costs for special education, and medical insurance costs. Said Supt. Kate Donegan, “It is our intent to continue to spend responsibly while seeking long-term solutions to the issues that have adversely affected the financial resources of our district.”

Language interpretation

Continued from page 1

now know the rules for interpretation and how to assist both sides of the conversation.”

Ahmad’s class met two evenings a week and was taught by Eva Rafas. LARC supplied materials and followed its own customized curriculum. “The majority of the training focused on helping you understand the skills required to be an interpreter,” Ahmad said. “We learned the basic rules of interpreting so the rights of those present are upheld. We learned about patients’ rights to privacy, legal documents which may require interpreting, and different settings in which we might have to interpret. We learned about body positioning techniques, eye-contact techniques, etc. to make an interpreting session go smoother. We also did a lot of role-playing to practice different interpreting situations we may encounter.”

Since the LARC training, Ahmad has been able to assist parents, teachers and administrators in parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings, as well as on phone calls to students’ homes. The training has been useful when completing bilingual speech-language screenings and evaluations for students in all three district schools.

She explained, “I have been able to help interpret for faculty when a new student has started and I’ve been able to ease the transition for students and their parents who are new to the district and may even be new to the country and the educational system. This has helped build a stronger connection between the school and families because they know there is someone at McCracken they can call if they need help with something related to their child’s education. This has been true for students on my speech-language caseload as well as students in the general education cur-

riculum who I wouldn’t have interacted with otherwise.”

In addition to school staff and parents, LARC also delivers interpreter training to medical staff, human service providers and any bilingual individuals who want to be certified as an interpreter and can pass a written and oral language assessment.

“Our graduates use their skills after earning their certificate of completion,” Rafas said. “Many of them work with LARC as independent contractors and others interpret at their full-time workplace.” She said LARC has more than 200 trained interpreters.

“I used to do some interpreting outside District 73½ — at hospitals and other schools — but I don’t have much time for it now that I’m working full-time at Meyer,” Shahid said.

Ahmad said that because her job with District 73½ is part-time, “I’ve been able to use my ‘off hours’ to do some interpreting for other districts. I have also been offered opportunities to interpret for medical appointments, but since most of those have taken place in DuPage County, I haven’t taken LARC up on those offers.”

In the last few years, the interpreter training program lapsed to some extent in Niles Township schools. Donegan said that District 73½ supports the effort to revive it and encourages parents to apply — particularly those who speak languages for which interpreters are scarce, such as Vietnamese and Tagalog. “I can help these parents gain a skill that is beneficial to the district and to themselves.”

Classes can begin in Skokie as early as summer 2019 if enough people express an interest.

“I would definitely encourage others to go through this kind of training,” Ahmad said. “It is a time commitment but I learned a lot about interpreting and have been better able to assist students, district parents, my colleagues and administrators because of it.”

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Skokie School District 73½
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School-related information is only a click away

District 73½ officials can't anticipate every question or concern a parent or community member might have, but they do offer multiple ways to get important basic information.

A place to start is the district's web site, www.sd735.org. Both general information about the district and its operations (board packets, budget information, policies, informative links and more) and specific information related to the district's three schools (weekly newsletters, curriculum descriptions, staff phone numbers and email addresses, etc.) can be found there.

Parents or guardians don't have to rely solely on online resources. There is a steady flow of printed information available, including the yearly Student/Parent Handbook, school newsletters, and memos, letters or brochures as warranted. All are available online as well.

The district's annual calendar, which establishes the start and end of the school year and school holidays, is set by the school board every two years. In February, the board approved the plan for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. Officials seek to coordinate with Niles North High School, and also coordinate with neighboring districts to benefit students served in-district by the Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE). The board also must respond to state-mandated calendar changes as they occur. Daily, weekly and monthly calendar information can be found at the district web site, on each school's web page, and in each school's weekly newsletter.

At student registration, parents or guardians are asked to provide email addresses and telephone numbers to be used when school officials need to communicate. For example, in bad weather, automated calls would go out no later than 6:30 a.m. letting families know school would not be in session that day; when possible, closures are announced the evening before. This information is also released through local radio and television news.



District 73½ maintains a wealth of information at www.sd735.org.

Families learn about their child's progress via PowerSchool, the district's system for tracking and communicating student achievement. PowerSchool allows parents or guardians to be informed and to participate in their child's education. Report cards and parent-teacher conferences also are ways for teachers and families to communicate about students' academic progress.

When parents or guardians have questions or concerns, they are encouraged to contact their child's teacher directly to schedule a meeting to discuss any classroom issue. Although school officials recommend that the teacher always be the first point of contact, the principal, special services team, and district personnel are also always available to help clarify or resolve issues.

Parents and other interested community members are welcome to visit schools and volunteer. Interested parties should contact the school or district office to inquire about opportunities.

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