

Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Winter 2020



Dates to remember

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

March 5—All School Read Parent Night, 6:30 p.m., McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.

March 6—Teacher Institute Day, no school.

March 9—PTO meeting, 7 p.m., Meyer School, 8100 Tripp Ave.

March 14—Kindergarten registration, 9 a.m.-1 p.m., Meyer.

March 17—Kindergarten registration, 4-6 p.m., Meyer.

March 23—Spring break begins.

March 30—School resumes.

April 13—PTO meeting, 7 p.m., Meyer.

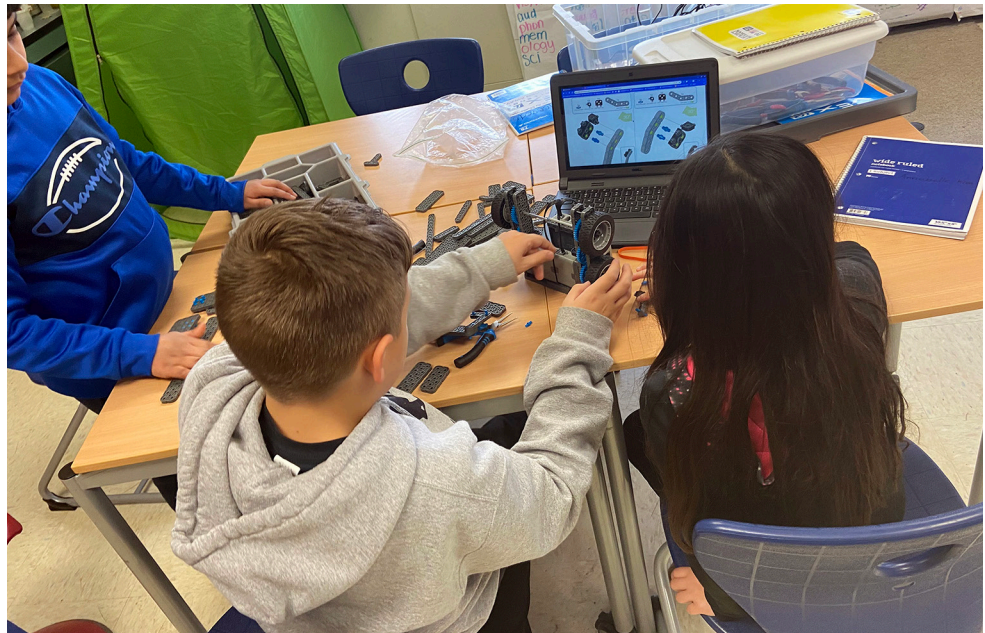
April 23—Showcase, 6:30 p.m., Meyer.

April 29—Principal-Parent Partnership Pop-In, 7 p.m., Middleton School, 8300 St. Louis Ave.

April 30—April Show-ers, 7 p.m., McCracken.

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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Members of the Middleton School robotics team work on their project. The engineering, design and coding aspects of robotics are important elements in the new STEAM curriculum.

Middleton adds STEAM special

Thanks to a concerted effort by administrators, teachers and the school board, Middleton School's curriculum will be — pardon the pun — picking up steam next year.

At its February meeting, the board approved a plan to add STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics) to Middleton's roster of specials. Next year, specials will include art, drama, music and library in addition to STEAM. Those classes meet in 45-minute time blocks, rotating so that each class meets every five days.

School officials started work on the plan last year, according to Nathan McBride, the district's Director of Innovation and Instructional Technology. A district team sought input from teachers, principals, students and community members, and reviewed curricula and programs in place at other schools in Niles Township, before coming up with recommendations.

McBride said the drive to make STEAM learning a formal part of the schedule at Middleton comes from "all of the research about the benefits of learning about engineering in the early grades, especially for female students." While students progress through the three stages of STEAM learning — design and modeling, computer science and robotics — the program also will help them to collaborate, communicate, think critically and be creative. McBride calls those skills "the four Cs."

McBride said his objective is to complement what students are learning in the classroom, not repeat it. The Middleton program will lean on standards promoted by Project Lead The Way (PLTW), a national nonprofit that promotes learning in the STEAM areas. The PLTW model already is in use in McCracken Middle School's

Continued on next page

Robotics teams gear up

District 73½ students are all abuzz about robots this year.

For the first time, there are robotics teams at both McCracken Middle School and Middleton Elementary School. Students and teachers alike are enthusiastic about the after-school activity that includes competition with teams from neighboring schools in Niles Township. The teams also fit with the district's increased emphasis on STEAM teaching and learning (*see story, page 1*).

The teams will compete against other area students over the course of the year. All competitors use the VEX Robotics platform. VEX sponsors local, national and international competitions that the company says involve more than one million students in more than 60 countries. Each year, competitors design and build robots to address a predetermined challenge, which changes annually.

Nate McBride, district Director of Innovation and Instructional Technology, has helped organize local competitions both in his current job and his previous post at Fairview School. He said teams from Niles Township high schools "recycle" robotics materials after their year's competition is over, passing them down to middle school teams that work on the previous year's challenge.

McCracken's teams, called the "Buzz Bots," got a boost this fall thanks to a visit from McCracken graduates who now compete at Niles North. Robotics coach Filip Dudic, who arranged the visit, said, "They were able to talk to the students about what they do, and what makes them successful."

Dudic said 18 students are involved in robotics at McCracken, in grade-level teams. Students can participate after school and during lunch recess.

At Middleton, robotics coach Allison Acevedo said nine students are involved, in two teams of fourth and fifth graders. They started by discussing engineering and design concepts and strategies for competition, including watching videos on YouTube. Each team has built a basic robot, and students are working on improving their designs.

Both coaches believe the activity dovetails with what students are learning in class. "Robotics is a good combination of some of the STEAM concepts in the curriculum," said Acevedo, who teaches fifth grade. "It aligns with what the kids are learning in science, technology, engineering and math. They're taking concepts from the classroom and applying them to a real-life situation. And the students also work on social-emotional learning concepts such as working as a team, overcoming obstacles and solving problems."

Said Dudic, McCracken's STEAM teacher, "Our curriculum, particularly eighth grade, does a good job of tying the design, engineering and programming process together. And all my classes already work in teams. In robotics, it's up to the teams to decide how to divide up the work."



McCracken Middle School "BuzzBot" team members work on their robot.

STEAM

Continued from page 1

STEAM program, as are standards from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). McBride hopes that at Middleton, in cases where the PLTW model duplicates what's already in the science curriculum, the STEAM program can be tweaked to address ISTE standards instead. He can't wait to get it underway.

"When I talk to the teachers and the board, this is my passion," McBride said. "I see how excited the kids get. I believe this experience will be well worth the investment."

That investment will entail hiring a STEAM teacher and purchasing furniture and supplies geared to STEAM teaching and learning. The program will take over the school's former multipurpose room, a space large enough for the storage and flexible furnishings needed. McBride said, "Research says the environment can affect the process. We want interaction between students, and between students and staff, and to let the students take ownership."

While the new plan focuses on Middleton, STEAM activities pulse through the entire district. At McCracken, every student gets a trimester of STEAM instruction each year with teacher Fil Dudic. Meanwhile, at Meyer School this year, Librarian Amy Kelley and McBride added STEAM-based activities to engage students in the library's "maker space." The space, which provides art supplies and other materials in an informal setting, was primarily intended to allow students to exercise their imagination and creativity, and still does so. But Kelley said some projects now introduce more focus. "We worked out a more formal scope and sequence this year. Students are trying to solve real world problems," she said. In the first half of the year, those projects focused on engineering. In the second half, youngsters will be exposed to computer coding by programming Dash Robots, which are geared to ages 4 and older.

Kelley said the new focus has been a hit. "So far the students love it — anything that's new and different and lets them use their hands," she said. "We focused at the beginning on engineering steps — make a plan and see what happens. If it doesn't turn out well, go back to fix it, try again. The kids are developing a growth mindset, learning from mistakes."

District News

Superintendent Kate Donegan accepts position in Kenilworth

After 13 years as superintendent in District 73½, Kate Donegan will assume her new role as superintendent in Kenilworth District 38 beginning July 1. Kate has been an integral part of District 73½ for 24 years, having also served as a special education teacher, assistant principal and principal at McCracken Middle School.

Board President Nicholas Werth said the board plans to hire a consulting firm to assist with the search to fill the vacancy. He said the board likely would hire an interim leader for the 2020-21 school year, before hiring a permanent superintendent to start July 1, 2021.

A dedication to Supt. Donegan will be featured in an upcoming next issue of *Community Digest*.

Board to fill vacancy

The District 73½ Board of Education is working to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of one of its longest-tenured members, Gary Dolinko. Dolinko, first elected in 2013, resigned at the end of January because he moved out of the district.

The remaining six board members are

reviewing applications and conducting interviews to determine the replacement. The board expects to seat a new member at its March meeting.

Those eligible to serve must be U.S. citizens 18 years or older, registered voters, and residents of School District 73½ for at least one year at the time of application. The replacement will serve until April 2021, and may then choose to run for election.

Contract negotiations begin

District 73½ teachers and board members have begun negotiating their next contract, to take effect with the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. The current three-year contract expires in August.

Since 2005, the parties have used a process called “interest-based bargaining” under the auspices of the U.S. Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS). “We feel that it has been a good process for our district overall,” said Board President Nicholas Werth. “We believe it allows for a more collaborative approach to making Skokie 73½ an exceptional district.”

“I was part of using it in the past and feel that it is a great process for finding common ground,” said Katie Hollenberg, a second-grade teacher and president of the

district’s chapter of the Illinois Education Association (IEA). She added, “We are actually not only using the IBB process, but also the Affinity Model. We used it to great success last time and look forward to continued success.”

This is the second set of negotiations for both Werth and Hollenberg. Werth will be joined on the board’s negotiating team by Vice President Emily Twarog Miller and Member Carla Arias. The teachers will be represented by Hollenberg, Meghan Rosenfeld (vice president), Molly Domingo (treasurer), Laura Williams (secretary), Mandy Yom, Debbie Mosher (former president), and Kim Scurek.

“We are excited to represent such a dedicated and talented group of teachers who positively impact our children on a daily basis,” Hollenberg said. “We look forward to collaborating with the school board to come up with a contract that honors all of our teachers’ hard work.”

Werth noted, “Our teachers are amazing and the board is thankful for everything they do. The board of education continues to focus on being fiscally responsible while engaging in a collective bargaining process that allows teachers to continue to enhance equitable education for all students.”

New ELL Parent Center director brings experience

The new director of the Niles Township ELL Parent Center has much in common with the families the center has served since its inception more than 10 years ago.

Sabiha Patel was born in India, grew up in the Middle East, and came to the United States 22 years ago. She speaks five languages, and has had a long connection with English language learners, having tutored students in English at age 16. She has three sons and lives with her family in Morton Grove.

She holds a bachelor’s degree in English literature she earned in India, and since moving to America she has earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in education. Before taking her current position, she taught at the Muslim Community Center in Morton Grove.

Patel has a broad view of what the center offers its families. “The whole purpose of the center is to serve the ELL community of all the partner districts — to help them understand the education system and be empowered themselves,” she said. “The concerns they might have are not limited to their children’s education, but also their own. They really want to be active in their community.”



Sabiha Patel

She is learning the ropes from former director Diana Juarez, who moved to a position with Skokie School District 68. “Diana has been awesome,” Patel said. “Together, we are brainstorming. There will be collaboration between her role and my role.”

She is particularly impressed with the center’s Parent Mentor program, which allows parents to serve as teacher’s assistants in their children’s schools and can offer a pathway to employment. “When I see the parent mentors, I see all the diversity. The program is a wonderful way to integrate them into their communities, and also to empower them,” she said.

She is busy familiarizing herself with the center’s member districts, including District 73½. She plans to find ways to enlist more multilingual volunteers to help address the needs of the area’s growing immigrant population. In the meantime, she knows the center plays a vital role in the lives of many. “We offer language and literacy classes. We have people walk in often and ask simple questions, any kind of question related to life here,” she said. “They see this as their help line.”

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Written, designed and produced by Complete Communications, Inc., Skokie, Illinois

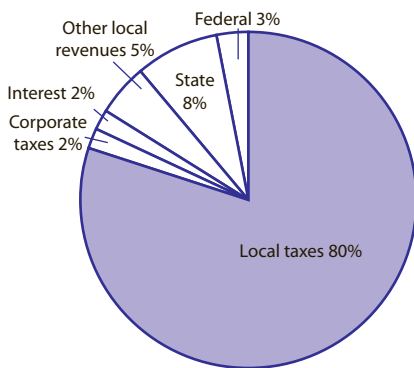
District financial picture remains steady

In his first year on the job, District 73½ Chief School Business Official Anthony Ruelli is keeping district finances on course.

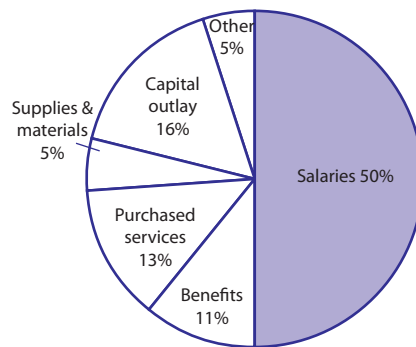
The 2019-20 budget continues the fiscal strategy used by the district for years. “We were being very conservative on both sides, overestimating expenses and underestimating revenues,” Ruelli said. That conservatism shows in the budget’s projected revenues of \$20.7 million, compared to projected expenses of \$21.8 million, a \$1.1 million shortfall.

Although little is new for 2019-20, Ruelli expects the pace of change to pick up next year. The new STEAM initiative at Middleton is expected to cost about \$140,000, and building maintenance projects will start in July. The district’s latest five-year maintenance plan calls for improvements in heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), plumbing, power and lighting at all three schools. Costs could range from \$3 million to \$5 million over the five-year period, depending upon which projects are approved and when they are completed.

Like other districts, District 73½ must cope with changes in state law that may affect budgets. “The two that will always be around are a property-tax freeze and a pen-



Revenue Sources, 2019-20



Expenditures, 2019-20

sion cost shift (that would require local districts to pay more into pension funds),” Ruelli said. “I try to incorporate those into my projections. But they’re so up in the air, you never know if they’re going to pass or not.”

He noted that state legislation to increase the minimum wage should not be a factor in the district any time soon. “There’s no concern on that right now,” he said. “It does not affect a lot of employees here. No one had to be increased as of Jan. 1, 2020.”

Since property taxes account for the lion’s share of district revenues (see graphic), school officials monitor tax appeals closely, he said. His figures show that the district has paid about \$1.4 million in refunds in the past six years, and local schools work

with the Niles Township School Treasurer’s office to stay abreast of both commercial and residential appeals. With a triennial property assessment scheduled for next year, Ruelli said he expects the number of challenges to increase.

In the meantime, Ruelli works to make the arcane topic of school finance clear to the community. “For me, I’m really passionate about getting information out to the public, try to make sure people understand,” he said. “We’re trying to make materials user-friendly. We want people to feel, the district is doing what they can to make information available to us. This year we’re trying to make people more aware of the financial information they need.”

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