

Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Fall 2021



Dates to remember

See <https://www.sd735.org> for up-to-date information. See <https://www.sd735.org/calendar> for all events.

Oct. 26—Fall choir concert, 7-8 p.m., McCracken School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.

Nov. 2—Teacher institute day. No school.

Nov. 24—Thanksgiving holiday begins.

Nov. 29—School resumes.

Dec. 14—Winter music concert, 7-8 p.m., McCracken School.

Dec. 20—Winter break begins.

Jan. 3, 2022—School resumes.

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. Meetings also are live-streamed via YouTube with links posted in advance at the district web site. Public comments emailed to contactboe@sd735.org will be made part of the public record.

Skokie School District 73½
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847-324-0509

‘Back to school’ priorities focus on welcoming, diversity, learning

The 2021-22 school year marked the full return of students to District 73½ classrooms after a year-and-a-half of combined remote and in-person learning. Teachers and administrators have three priorities for the year: to ensure that schools are welcoming environments for students, their families and staff; to attract and retain well-qualified and diverse staff members; and to accelerate student learning.

Supt. Zipporah Hightower and principals of the district’s three schools acknowledge the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they all say the new year has gone well and their priorities — which arose from the “listening tour” that Hightower conducted after she was hired in the spring — are on track.

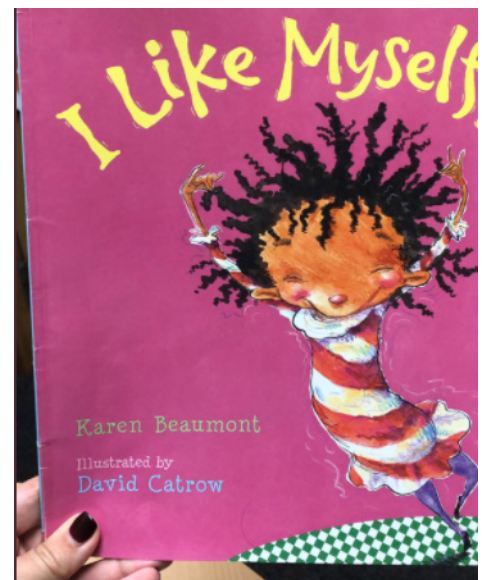
Welcoming began before the school year started. At Meyer School, Principal Helen Wei said the school held an outdoor, in-person event for students and families in August — the kind of event that was not possible last year. “It was very festive, and people were really excited to be back together in person,” she said.

The school also held student visit days, during which students and parents came into the building to obtain supplies and get oriented. Wei said the school hired extra substitute teachers during the first few weeks of school to help youngsters learn the building and operate their lockers.

At Middleton School, Principal Nikki Tammaru — new to the district this year — greets students every day and checks with teachers in the halls to see if they need anything. She also sends a weekly video message for parents.

Tammaru works to convey the message of welcoming to Middleton staff, which added 13 new hires this year. Over the summer, she met with both veteran and new teachers to hear their concerns and to get acquainted.

McCracken School Principal Nancy Ariola



Noting the district’s diversity efforts, Tiffany Voight, psychologist at Middleton School, posted on social media, “Today a student thanked me for a reading a story with a character that looks like her! She further shared that she reads many books, but the characters don’t represent her culture. So proud of all diverse books being read in @Skokie735!”

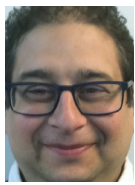
said her school hosted small groups of students over the summer for orientation. Since the pandemic kept last year’s sixth graders from learning the building, the staff hosted a special orientation day just for those entering seventh grade. “That helped spell some of their anxiety,” she said.

To Ariola, “welcoming” encompasses more than just orientation to the building and policies. “It’s paying attention to social and emotional needs. The pandemic has been traumatic for many students,” she said. To address those needs, “We’ve been working on building community, team building — both for staff and students. It

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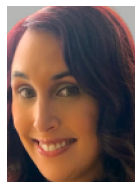
Zipporah Hightower



Dan Swartz



Angela DeMay



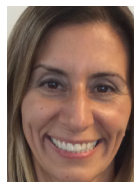
Allison Acevedo



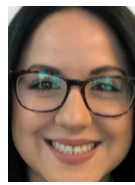
Nikki Tammaru



Samantha Peterson



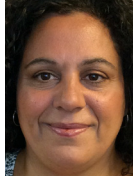
Aleksandra Davidovac



Nicole Derrig



Ninos Khnanisho



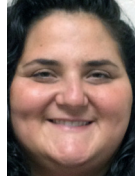
Tricia Moskal



Mahwish Bhatti



Rachel Douglas



Torrie LaBarbera



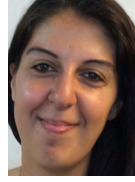
Dashtee Sheharbanu



Anthony Cho



Baylie Ellis



Mirna Eshaya



Abigail Harris-Ridker



Lauren Lancioni



Helen Mitchner



Rachel Mutter-McKeon



Seham Odicho



Kristine Paulson



Zachary Richardson



Elaina Rollins



Robyn Strauss



Sara Sukalski



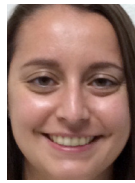
John Wash



Ariait Zamudio



Anastasia Barrow



Jessica Kerbyson



Kathy Parrish



Brandy Stuparits



Erin Walsh

Welcome new staff

District 73½ notes the addition of the following administrators, teachers and support staff:

Administrators

Dr. Zipporah Hightower, Superintendent
Dan Swartz, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
Angela DeMay, Director of Student Services
Dr. Allison Acevedo, Director of Innovation and Educational Technology
Nikki Tammaru, Principal, Middleton School
Samantha Peterson, Interim Chief School Business Official

Support staff

Aleksandra Davidovac, Secretary to the Superintendent and Board of Education
Nicole Derrig, Accounts Payable Supervisor
Ninos Khnanisho, District Technician

Tricia Moskal, Student Services Administrative Assistant

Meyer School

Mahwish Bhatti, Playground and Lunchroom Supervisor
Rachel Douglas, Kindergarten Special Education Teacher
Torrie LaBarbera, Kindergarten Teacher
Dashtee Sheharbanu, Instructional Assistant

Middleton School

Anthony Cho, STEAM Teacher
Baylie Ellis, Fifth Grade Teacher
Mirna Eshaya, EL Teacher
Abigail Harris-Ridker, Fifth Grade Teacher
Lauren Lancioni, First Grade Teacher
Helen Mitchner, Fifth Grade Teacher
Rachel Mutter-McKeon, Elementary Special Education Teacher
Seham Odicho, Instructional Assistant

Kristine Paulson, Instructional Coach
Zachary Richardson, PE Teacher
Elaina Rollins, Second Grade Teacher
Robyn Strauss, EL Teacher
Sara Sukalski, Interventionist
John Wash, Second Grade Teacher
Ariait Zamudio, Administrative Assistant

McCracken School

Anastasia Barrow, Sixth Grade Math Teacher
Jessica Kerbyson, Eighth Grade Social Studies Teacher
Kathy Parrish, Learning Center Instructional Assistant
Brandy Stuparits, Instructional Assistant
Erin Walsh, Instructional Assistant

Farewell to district retirees

District 73½ saw two longtime staff members retire at the end of the 2020-21 school year. Both started at the district in August 1997.

Judy Kopp was a media center assistant at McCracken Middle School when she retired. She worked in school libraries at Middleton and McCracken schools.

She also served as PTA president. All three of her children graduated from district schools.

Laurie Taylor started as an instructional assistant at McCracken. She moved into administra- —Continued on back page

District's drive for greater equity continues

The priorities Supt. Zipporah Hightower has set out for the school year (*see story, page 1*) dovetail with the recent efforts by District 73½ staff, students and families to promote diversity and equity.

In 2019, district officials sought an “equity audit” — an outside review of curriculum, processes and practices to see whether they promote an equitable school system. In such a system, according to the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB), “every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income.”

Since the district received the audit report, many people have worked on the issues identified. A diversity and equity leadership team (DELT), made up of staff members from all three schools and areas of expertise, has met for more than two years. The team worked with the district's equity consultant, Yvette Dubiel. In addition, an equity advisory committee of parents and community members supplements that effort.

Marty Behm, assistant principal at McCracken School, has been a part of the DELT since it began. He said the team focused last year on issues such as how to make curriculum more culturally responsive, how to recruit a more diverse staff, and how to reach non-English-speaking families more effectively. That work will continue this school year, as the team crafts its mission statement.

Board Vice President Kelli Nelson chairs the board's equity committee, which works with DELT. She said last year was primarily devoted to studying the findings of the audit, a process she called “eye-opening.” A teacher herself, she considers the work critically important. “You want to guarantee the most positive outcome for all students. When students' needs, students' voices, student representation

is left out of the conversation or decision, that can alienate them.”

Outreach to families of English learners and the need to hire a more diverse teaching staff are important ways to bring students and families closer as a community, in Nelson's view. “Any way you can get kids connected to the schools makes them successful.”

At the same time, flexibility is needed. “If you're truly rooted in equity work, it's always changing,” she said. In the end, though, “I would like to be able to say five years from now that the curriculum has been audited and kids can see themselves better represented in their learning and their work.”

Dr. LaTasha Nelson, a physician, professor at Northwestern University's medical school, and a district parent, said she and her husband wanted a public education for their children and moved to Skokie for the schools. She got involved in DELT's advisory committee after the equity audit revealed problems. “I learned that it wasn't just me. There were issues borne out in the audit,” she said. “The next step is fixing the problem, and now a lot of people in the district are invested in this.”

Dr. Marla Isaacs, an educator and district parent who also serves on the advisory committee, agrees. “I think the people involved are serious about effecting change. I appreciate their energy, their drive,” she said. “I hope to reach a larger community. We need those parents, those community members to open their eyes.”

She noted that the entire school community has a stake in this effort. “Making 73½ a more equitable district benefits everyone, not just our black and brown kids,” she said. “It's a misconception some people have that it would just benefit a few. Where we live is a global community. Students need to learn to work with all kinds of people. What better place than a safe space?”

New board members seek to collaborate

The three newest members of the District 73½ school board all realize the challenges of operating a school district. But they believe the school community can thrive by working together.

Maureen Jacob, Victoria Wolfinger and Ashley Moy Wooten were all elected to the board in April 2021.

Jacob, a teacher, mother of young twins and a district graduate, said, “Schools work best when the board, administrators, teachers, staff, and students all see themselves as teammates rather than adversaries. I hope that we can build a culture where this is even more true than it is now.”

Her childhood experiences inspired her to move back to the district in 2014. “I loved the progressive, creative, and diverse experience I had growing up in the 73½ learning community, so I wanted to give that same enriching experience to my twin sons.” The boys attend Middleton School.

Wolfinger, a healthcare worker, has lived in the district since 2006. Her daughter attends Niles North High School and her son attends McCracken School. “We were drawn to Skokie for its rich, diverse cultures, reputation of the schools and proximity to Chicago,” she said. “There are many things I love about the district, including the music program, the Spanish-language curriculum, the staff and, of course, the wonderfully diverse neighborhood.”

Wooten and her family moved to Skokie in 2016. A Spanish

speaker, she is studying law and has worked for nonprofit organizations involved in immigration. She has two young children, the older of whom attends Middleton School. “We love Skokie for many of the same reasons everyone does — its fantastic diversity, schools, parks and library,” she said.

All three new board members say they come to the board ready to grapple with important issues. For example, Wooten sees the board playing a critical role in helping the school community emerge from the pandemic. “I believe the most important priority for our board at this time is to provide steady leadership amidst this time of great change for our district.”

For her part, Wolfinger noted, “Being in a multicultural and multilingual district also poses a challenge in engaging our diverse communities who may speak different languages, have trouble navigating the American school system and have different cultural perspectives on education. We have to find a way to meet them where they are.”

Jacob cited the need to review “our practices through the lens of equity to make sure that our schools are actively working to overcome the systemic inequalities that have permeated education since its inception. Also, as we move into a post-pandemic world, it's important that we reflect on what this experience has taught us about teaching and learning, as well as what social-emotional needs students have upon their return to in-person school.”

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8000 East Prairie Road
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Bushra Amiwala, Secretary Pro Tem
Maureen Jacob
Victoria Wolfinger
Ashley Moy Wooten

Dr. Zipporah Hightower, Superintendent

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Priorities

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really helped teachers to think about all of their interactions. It also gave them the opportunity to both work together and to express their feelings and needs.”

With respect to hiring and retention, the second priority, the district has long sought diverse candidates, and regularly pairs new teachers with veteran mentors.

The pandemic has changed the hiring



This board at McCracken was created by Lynn Catanus, an instructional coach. It includes information about notable Hispanic Americans such as Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and labor organizer Cesar Chavez.

landscape, with districts across the country experiencing more openings, and greater competition for the best applicants. “It’s been very difficult nationally to fill positions,” Wei said. “People are in such high demand.”

Meanwhile, the job openings offer op-

portunity to diversify. “We have had strong new staff members, very effective,” Wei said. Once onboard, she said the district is “trying to build community as a staff,” she said. “We’ve put structures in place, such as the program where they are paired with a mentor teacher. They have opportunities to plan with their teams — the staff has been open to helping and supporting.”

Middleton hired more than a dozen new staff members, and sought candidates who speak one of the most common languages in the area — Spanish, Urdu, Arabic, Tagalog or Vietnamese. Once they were in place, Tammaru said support became the overriding concern. “I have to ask, ‘what am I doing to make sure I don’t overtax a staff member?’ We don’t want people to get burned out,” she said. “We want to support all of our candidates, and all of our staff members.”

In terms of accelerating learning, the district offered professional development to teachers this summer on how best to help all students. As the year began, all three schools gauged students’ academic skills and looked for gaps to be addressed. The district uses the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to ascertain which students need academic help, and how much they need.

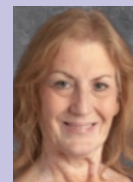
At Meyer, Wei said teachers are assessing early literacy and early math skills one-on-one within the MTSS framework. “We have a full-time intervention teacher to better support students this year,” she said.

Retirees

Continued from page 2

tion, first as secretary to the McCracken principal, then as secretary to the superintendent and board of education.

In November 2020, the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB) honored Taylor with the Holly Jack Outstanding Service Award. Honorees are chosen from board secretaries nominated by district superintendents and board presidents, according to the IASB.



Judy Kopp



Laurie Taylor

At McCracken, Ariola said teachers assess and respond each time new material is introduced. “As they start a new unit, they need to ‘preassess’ first to understand where each student is on that standard,” she said. After that, they offer students additional opportunities as needed to allow them to work on those skills.

Tammaru said teaching and learning will always be driven by what the assessments reveal. “We use individualized data to see where students are at, and to see how we build on their level,” she said. “We believe in accelerating learning for all.”

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