



Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Winter 2021



Dates to remember

See <https://www.sd735.org> for up-to-date information about the status of remote and in-person learning. See <https://www.sd735.org/calendar> for all events.

March 29—Spring break begins.

April 5—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.

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New superintendent plans to listen before leading

The next superintendent of District 73½ stands out as a leader of leaders.

In December, the school board chose Dr. Zipporah K. Hightower to take over the district's top job. She succeeds the husband-and-wife interim team of John and Ellen Correll, who replaced Kate Donegan in July 2020.

Hightower will assume her role beginning May 1, rather than the more typical July 1 start in many districts. It's a chance to begin to connect with the school community as soon as possible.

"I believe in doing a listening tour, and that's what I'm doing now," Hightower said, noting that she has already had virtual meetings with board members and administrators, and is planning to connect with community members before taking over. "I don't believe in going into someone else's house and telling them how to clean it. I don't want to make assumptions without really listening first. I want to hear from people about what things are working, and also what things people are bringing up that need to be looked at."

Hightower comes to the district from her position as executive director of the Chicago Public Schools' department of principal quality. There, she has been responsible for developing and supporting principals across Chicago's vast school system. She also has prior experience in leadership development with a national organization devoted to developing principals, and continues to consult in that field.

Before that, she was a math teacher for 10 years, then a principal for five, in Chicago. "The fact that she was a classroom teacher was big in our minds," said Board President Nicholas Werth. Board Vice President Emily Twarog Miller noted that her classroom experience helped distinguish her from other superintendent candidates.



Dr. Zipporah Hightower

Growing up in the middle-class Marynook neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, Hightower saw her career path early on. "I wanted to be a teacher by the age of 5," she said. "Many of my friends, their parents were teachers. I was the kid who, instead of playing with blocks, would rather write on a chalkboard."

Her interest in education was sharpened when, as a struggling reader in first grade, she saw her teachers use data to develop a program to address her problem. She also gives a little credit to an elementary teacher who complimented her math skills for spurring her on to a bachelor's degree in mathematics.

Hightower said one of the elements that intrigued her about District 73½ is its manageable size. "I will be able to get into classrooms as a superintendent, have conversations with multiple stakeholders, get to know students as individuals," she said. "I enjoy very small, intimate settings where you can really get to know people."

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'Specials' teachers get creative to engage students

Faculty members who teach “specials” — classes such as music, visual arts, PE, drama and Spanish — face perhaps even stiffer challenges in remote learning than those who teach academic subjects. Keeping kindergartners on track during physical exercises or coaxing middle schoolers to act a scene or sing all by themselves are not easy when everyone is in a different space.

But they've devised strategies and adopted technologies to achieve their goals. Amy Keipert, vocal music teacher at McCracken Middle School, said, “Our choir classes continue to meet and rehearse, but it's impossible for everyone in the choir to sing together on a Zoom call. So our choir students sing along with rehearsal from their houses, but they have to stay muted. Then, when a song is ready for ‘performance,’ students record their individual singing into a program called Soundtrap, and I mix all of those individual recordings together.

“One of my favorite projects so far was our fall virtual choir concert. The students learned and recorded a variety of songs, but they also produced every other aspect of the concert presentation. Every choir student had some sort of production job.”

McCracken librarian Tori Gammeri said, “I have tried to be sure that none of the library programs or services were eliminated, so everything we offered before is still happening in a different, but safe, way. For instance, my partner, teaching assistant Judy Kopp, and I have been delivering books to students' homes every other Friday. Students use the online catalog to browse and reserve books, and many of the ELA teachers invite me to visit classes to do book talks and promote this service.”

Meyer School PE teacher Iida Borges said, “We've created activities with regular household items and supplies we were able to provide students. Can you throw rolled-up socks into a bowl? Yes! Can you drum with pencils? Yes! Can you balance a stuffed animal on your head and walk? Yes!

“Kindergartners are so eager to share and have a turn to talk, the hardest part is not giving everyone a turn each day. I want to



Middleton School art teacher Michelle Beatrice has students regularly share their artwork with one another online.

hear about the lost teeth, siblings' birthdays and special toys.”

“The center of my art program will always be to help students develop problem-solving skills and nurture their ability to create,” observed Michelle Beatrice, Middleton School art teacher. “The main adaptation I have had to make is with materials and the types of projects we create. I was lucky enough to have sketchbooks sent home to my students, so most of our projects are drawing-based. If we were in the classroom, we would spend more time painting, creating with mixed media, and working with clay.

“I haven't taught much digital art in the past, and this year I have experimented with using digital art in meaningful ways. For example, I created a digital drawing mannequin that students were able to use as an artistic tool. Each student received their own copy and manipulated the mannequin into a new pose, just like you would with a wooden drawing figure. Then the students were able to use it as a resource for figure drawing.”

Stephanie Anderson, drama teacher at Middleton, noted, “Much of our work in the drama classroom involved live performance, costumes and props, and group interactions. Since these have not been possible in the same way over Zoom and computers, I have explored new online platforms like Soundtrap, FlipGrid, ChatterKid, PuppetPals and SeeSaw to allow students to create and share their work with each other.

“The biggest wins for me of online learning have been seeing students in a new way and discovering new technology. I only see students for a short period of time once a

week, so I have loved having the opportunity to get to know them better as individuals through their posts on SeeSaw. Some students who were quieter in the classroom are thriving in this new setting.”

“I often feel like a radio DJ when teaching remotely — looking at a black screen with little or no feedback from those to whom I'm presenting,” said McCracken art teacher William MacBeth. “It's difficult to measure engagement without the feedback we get from body language and facial expressions.”

Keipert said that while most of her choir students love to sing with the group, singing alone in front of a computer can be intimidating. “I'm so proud of them for facing their fears and rising to the challenge,” she said.

And of course there is the challenge of dealing with technology. As Anderson said, “Technology can be both your friend and your foe. The same apps and programs that make learning engaging and fun can turn your afternoon into tech support.”

She and other teachers are thankful for the instructional coaches and technology team. “We are fortunate to have a top-notch tech department, and teachers have been leaning on them a lot this year,” she said.

They have also relied on peers and other resources. Anderson said, “I work on a very collaborative team, so we are sharing teaching ideas with each other constantly.”

Keipert has brainstormed ideas with choir directors from other districts, and has borrowed ideas from the pandemic productions of the Chicago Chamber Choir, where she is associate conductor.

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Videos, guests help keep the band together

The District 73½ community is justifiably proud of the McCracken School bands. How do you keep this award-winning program going strong during a pandemic when band members can't practice or perform together?

"Since the district has been full remote all year we've had to move our program online as well, and that has certainly been a challenge," said Chip De Stefano, McCracken director of bands. "Even though things look different due to the pandemic, I firmly believe that music continues to be a strong force in our kids' lives and a very important component to maintaining their social-emotional health during all this."

"Based on experience from last spring and summer, we really wanted to lean into those areas that worked well with remote teaching," De Stefano explained. "We knew that working on ensemble skills was nearly impossible, but working on individual skills could be quite effective. We knew that keeping the kids motivated and inspired would be a challenge, which led to bringing in a guest every week. We've also worked to try to make every day different, to maintain the kids' interest. We have a bunch of short instructional segments and topics that we rotate through so that no two rehearsals are the same."

Large-group rehearsals and weekly private lessons have been following a schedule similar to the one in place before the pandemic. But those sessions look very different now, because students must participate by themselves from home.

Students are responsible for practicing at home, getting their assignments from Google Classroom and filling out a weekly online practice log.

Weekly lessons, delivered by De Stefano or band director Cesar Mendoza, involve one or two students at a time. When larger groups are practicing — section rehearsals or those involving a full ensemble such as the concert band — the players play together using Zoom, with their own sound muted on their computers. A leader, who is not muted, counts off and performs the material while the others play along, following the leader's direction. Sometimes De Stefano takes that role, but more often, a student leads.

Full group rehearsals are at the end of the day. De Stefano noted, "After a full day of other classes on Zoom they can be pretty drained, so we're trying to mix it up as much as we can. Our guest of the week segment has been a lot of fun and has really resonated with the kids. We've had a wide range of guests come in to perform for the kids and talk about their musical experiences."

Many of the guests De Stefano has recruited are friends and



Band guests have included McCracken alums Tamara Winston (above) and Anna Spina (below).



former students, while others work in the music industry.

All 6th, 7th and 8th grade band members, as well as a handful of 5th graders, have begun their annual solo unit as the major project for the second trimester of school.

"For the last several weeks the students have been working on their solos, which will culminate in a video performance with recorded accompaniment," De Stefano said. "Once we have all the student videos, we'll group the performances into several mini-recitals to share with families online." The 8th graders' recordings will also serve as their audition for the Niles North High School bands.

The students have been using Soundtrap software for solo and group work. That enables them to collaborate with other students and also record their own parts, which can be layered on top of one another to create a virtual ensemble performance. The performances will ultimately be posted online.

"As a whole group and as individual students, they've really bought into what we're trying to do and have made terrific progress," De Stefano said, adding, "We desperately can't wait until we can make music in-person again. The kids really miss performing and making music with their friends — which is nearly impossible to replicate while we're completely online. But they are working hard and will be ready for when we come out on the other side of this."

Finally, De Stefano said, "I'm so appreciative of the continued support our band families have given us this year. From encouraging their child to stick through this, to providing donations to keep our guest of the week program going, they've gone above and beyond. I've always known that I worked in the best community, and this year only solidifies that belief."

Four board candidates in April

Four individuals will be on the April 6 ballot for the District 73½ Board of Education election. They are running unopposed for four-year terms.

The four are Emily Twarog Miller (running for a second term), Maureen Jacob, Victoria Wolfinger and Ashley Wooten. The latter three would be new to the school board.

President Nicholas Werth and board members Crystal Johnson and John Wash did not seek new terms.

Board of Education

Nicholas Werth, President
Emily Twarog Miller, Vice President
Kelli Nelson, Secretary
Bushra Amiwala, Secretary Pro Tem
Carla Arias
Crystal Johnson
John Wash

Dr. John Correll and Ellen Correll, Interim Superintendents

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New superintendent

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She expects to bring to the job a focus on education and instruction, as well as an understanding of systems and systems thinking. Her experience has taught her that “leadership is really understanding who it is you are working with — getting to know people as people. The most important thing is to be able to build trust. We need trust to be able to solve problems together.”

That vision of leadership convinced the board she was the best choice for superintendent. “The one piece that came up multiple times was her commitment to cultivating leadership across the district — helping

principals and building a vision for the district that reflects our strategic plan and our needs,” Miller said.

“We appreciated that she wanted to listen and get to know everybody,” Miller added. “We’re a tiny district. There’s no reason a superintendent can’t have relationships with teachers and students.”

That commitment to relationship building fits with another of the district’s primary concerns. “We were looking for a leader who could establish strong communication — both internal and external — and to build on our focus on equity,” Werth said. “The district’s equity audit got us started, and that will be a central focus going forward.” He added that the board believes

Hightower will continue to improve and maintain a high-level curriculum.

The district’s path to new leadership was ably assisted by B.W.P. & Associates, who brought a number of highly qualified candidates to their attention, Miller said. The consultants also actively sought the views of school community stakeholders, not an easy task during the ongoing pandemic.

“I just want to thank all the stakeholders who participated in this collaborative process,” Werth said. “Using the search firm was a good investment of the community’s dollars. This is one of the hardest decisions a board has to make, and I believe we found the leader that we want to take our district forward.”

Specials

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Some teachers get support from social media and affiliations with professional organizations, or online resources. Adapting material is not always simple, however. Anderson said her biggest challenge as an elementary school drama teacher is finding curricular resources suitable for that age group. “Many of the online resources for theatre are geared toward older students,” she said. “I spend a lot of time taking ideas meant for older students and adapting them.”

Despite the challenges, teachers continue

to find creative ways to reach students.

“Students miss the fun of being with their friends and the safety of singing together,” Keipert said. “But as we’ve all learned what works and what doesn’t, and they have gotten to hear the final product of their voices combining together, it’s been really meaningful for them. In this time when so many of us are so isolated, it’s incredibly powerful to be able to work together.”

According to MacBeth, “The quality of artwork is excellent, and students are developing and demonstrating their artistic knowledge and skills. They are eager to share ideas and offer suggestions.”

“I have been impressed by the resilience of our students. Most are adapting well and bringing positive energy to our work. They have caught on to new programs and technology quickly and are patient with us as we navigate them ourselves,” Anderson said.

Teachers also appreciate the support and encouragement they receive from families.

Gammeri said, “Remote learning is far from ideal or easy on any of us, but I am grateful to work in a district with so many understanding families.”

Beatrice said, “Our families have been so supportive. I am incredibly grateful to be part of the 73½ community!”

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