



## Elementary renovations begin

**A** planned three-year renovation of all three District 68 elementary schools kicked off in summer 2023 with extensive work done at Jane Stenson School.

Stenson students and staff returned this fall to a more energy-efficient building with better lighting and ventilation, improved classrooms, and a fully renovated, air-conditioned gym. Roofing and siding also were replaced, a project finished after the new year began.

The district plans to tackle Devonshire School next summer, and Highland School the following year. Officials estimate the total cost for renovating all three schools at about \$20 million.

“Under our strategic plan, we are trying to provide an exceptional physical environment for our students in 60-plus-year-old buildings,” said Ryan Berry, the district’s assistant superintendent of business services. “We are updating our facilities to last for the next 20 to 30 years.”

Principal Robyn Huemmer noted, “The renovations have provided more flexibility to students and staff with more white board/bulletin

board space, mobile view boards and dimmable lights.”

First-grade teacher Katie Mortell, a 13-year veteran at Stenson, enthusiastically endorsed the changes. “Classrooms have been updated to include new extended magnetic whiteboards, more bulletin board space, new updated cabinetry and shelving as well as new air vents,” she said. She particularly praised the cabinetry changes that make shelves more accessible to the youngest students.

“Overall, our classroom environment has improved within this new space,” she said. “Each new element included in the renovation has helped us to reach this even better

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First-grade teacher Katie Mortell appreciates the flexibility the renovations at Jane Stenson School offer in her classroom, such as the mobile view board (on her right) that can be positioned as needed.

## District plans to expand ECC

**D**istrict 68 officials are planning an addition to Old Orchard Junior High School that would expand and improve its Early Childhood Center (ECC).

At its October meeting, District 68 Board members unanimously approved the design fees with the Chicago-based architectural firm STR Partners LLC for a 15,000-square-foot addition at an approximate cost of \$13.8 million. It would provide the new ECC up to 10 classrooms, as well as space for staff, therapy sessions, meetings and parent education. STR suggested the addition could be ready by fall 2025.

A primary goal is to satisfy the grow-

ing demand for preschool. “We are always at max capacity by mid-year and turn families away because we simply don’t have enough classrooms,” said Sharon Jacobellis, director of student services. “We also are lacking in other types of spaces that are a vital part of an early childhood center.”

School officials already had a new ECC in mind when the district’s latest strategic plan was developed last year. They see the addition as an opportunity to “raise the bar” in a number of ways.

“The new classrooms will be designed to ensure that space and furnishing are accessible and ample

—Continued on page 3

### In this issue...

OJH gives a boost to selected sixth graders—page 2

Daily circles offer junior high students a voice—page 3

Letter from the Superintendent—page 4

# OOJH gives a boost to selected sixth graders

**D**istrict 68 officials are introducing a new program this year for students who need help building their academic skills and performance.

The program, created by the San Diego-based AVID Center, offers students “research-based systemic solutions to increase academic rigor, develop equitable learning environments and accelerate academic performance,” according to Christie Samojedny, the district’s assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. This year, it’s being offered at Old Orchard Junior High as an elective to a group of sixth graders.

OOJH Principal Greg Hanson said students in this year’s AVID class

were recommended by their fifth-grade teachers, then interviewed. That process yielded a cohort of 17 students who are receiving what he called “pretty intensive support on reaching their goals.” Samojedny said the class is intended to improve the students’ motivation, organizational habits and self-advocacy skills.

The 43-year-old AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program grew out of the efforts of high school teachers in San Diego to promote college readiness, particularly among those whose parents never attended college. It has developed into a full K-12 set of offerings across the nation. The basic approach is summed up by WI-

COR—writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization and reading.

Officials expect the approach to spread throughout the school. “We would like to move toward OOJH using AVID schoolwide,” Samojedny said. “All teachers would incorporate AVID language and practices in their classrooms.” Hanson added, “We are developing an AVID team of teachers who will begin learning about the WICOR strategies and identify how they can implement them within the classroom.” The district’s plan will also tie into the AVID program in place at Niles North High School.

Samojedny believes AVID fits well with the district’s overall objectives. “AVID embodies the notion of leveraging instruction to strengthen student agency,” she said. “AVID also addresses social-emotional learning, in that it supports students to develop their full human potential.”

Hanson believes the approach will spread naturally. “Eventually, the goal is to expose all students within the school to some of the high-impact practices that, for now, only exist within that one classroom,” he said. “A teacher is doing something in their classroom that really works and then that teacher becomes a leader and the practices expand across a school.”

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## Renovations

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sense of organization and a more flexible instructional layout.”

Marc Jenkins, who has taught PE at Stenson for 30 years, also praised the renovations. “The addition of air conditioning has been a welcomed asset early in this school year as I, as well as the students and PE teachers before me, have endured many hot days in the gym for several decades,” he said. He said fresh paint, improved lighting and sound have made the gym more inviting, and new padding on walls and other areas have improved student safety.

Even the baskets are better. New, height-adjustable backboards allow “primary students to shoot on eight-foot rims when they are in class, but with the push of a few buttons, the intermediate grades get to practice their shooting on regulation 10-foot rims, or any height in between.”

Jim Hamilton, who taught fourth and fifth grades at Stenson for 19 years, assumed a new role this year

as K-5 science teacher. He also got a redone classroom with “a large waterproof counter with a sink, tons of cabinets for science materials, new lights, new whiteboards, bulletin boards, science tables, and stools. There is lots of space for kids to work on their science investigations. All the furniture is on wheels, including the teacher’s desk. It’s easy to reconfigure the room depending on what experiments the students are working on.”

He added, “Students are very excited to have a space dedicated to investigating science.”

In addition to the coming renovations at the other elementary schools, the district is seeking bids for solar panels at each building. Berry said he is gathering proposals from vendors.

He expects that, once installed, the panels would boost the district’s bottom line. “There would be a slight savings projected because we will be buying energy at a lower cost,” he said. “But it is really about reducing our carbon footprint as a district.”

HIGHLIGHTS is a community newsletter published three times a year by Skokie School District 68.

### District 68 Board of Education

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. All are invited to attend.

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# Daily circles offer junior high students a voice

**R**estorative justice is not a new concept at Old Orchard Junior High. But this year, students and staff are integrating the practice into their everyday routines.

Principal Greg Hanson said the school has been using the concept for five years. What's new this year, he said, is the implementation of daily community-building circles, where students and teachers can discuss acceptable behavior as a group.

Restorative justice seeks to have students understand the consequences of their actions and repair the damage they may have caused. Hanson cited this example: "We had a student who was misbehaving, making a mess in the bathroom this year. In the past, the traditional way to deal with this would be to give the kid a detention. Now, we have the kid help the custodians clean the bathrooms after school."

The community building circles are allowing students to express their opinions in response to prompts. Hanson expects the discussions to

evolve. "The idea is you can address all kinds of issues, including learning, as a community in the form of a circle conversation," he said. "Everyone is in the circle. Everyone's voice — including the teacher's — is equal."

When an individual's behavior crosses a line, school officials can use a "restorative conference." "When a conflict occurs you bring the offender and the victim together and allow the victim to express how the offender's actions caused them harm," Hanson said. The offender can explain why they did what they did, including the possibility that there was some type of harm the victim caused the offender. The parties can then try to resolve their conflict. "This doesn't mean a kid who hits another kid won't get a suspension or some more traditional consequence," Hanson said. "It's a process that is focused on repairing harm when harm is done, as opposed to removing consequences."

Hanson believes students are helped by the process. "I have seen so many

kids who were harmed gain confidence and understanding from taking part in a mediation," he said. "It restores a sense of control to the harmed person, particularly when I ask the kid who was harmed what they think needs to be done to make things right. For the person who was the offender, the mediation process ensures they show real remorse."

More broadly, giving offending students a chance to make amends benefits the school as a whole. "We want kids to be continuing and positive members of the community," Hanson said. "Restorative justice is focused on identifying where poor behavior or harm comes from and seeking to use the resources of the community to support the child, which in turn supports the community."

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## ECC

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enough for children and adults to move freely, with enough space for equipment for children with disabilities," Jacobellis said.

Outside, the addition will open to activity space and a playground that will be appropriate for three-to-five-year-old preschoolers.

Besides eliminating the waiting list, Jacobellis said, the new space will allow the ECC to better serve children whose parent or caregiver speaks a language other than English, children experiencing homelessness, children with low family income, and children with IEPs or whose screening indicated delays.

Board President Joe Ruffner said, "We are financially sound as a district and we're seeing an uptick in student population, so it feels like the timing is appropriate for a project of this scope with long-term benefits for families who currently have to travel out of the district for early childhood education."



District 68 welcomes new staff for the 2023-24 school year: (front row) Alice Belgrade, Lauren Deer, Barbara Trinh, Martha Kowalczyk; (middle row) Brigett Rosado, Beth Chiet, Jessica Clemmons, Leah Birhanu, Cindy Sanchez, Claudia Lopez, Danbie Han, Danielle Kray, Savannah Pakosta; (back row) Julie Anderson, Tess Byas, Kendall Cox, Rachel Zimmerman, Lauryn Johnson, Saima Akram, Abby Carpenter, Jeanine Brownell, Mary Rock. Not pictured: Athena Karkazis, Bahra Temaneyous, Nilay Unal.

## HIGHLIGHTS

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## Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

**B**efore the development of the current strategic plan, the District had begun to incorporate green initiatives into some of its building remodeling projects. An example of this is the inclusion of LED

and motion-sensor-initiated lighting during recent renovations at Old Orchard Junior High and Jane Stenson Elementary School, and in upcoming renovations at Devonshire and Highland Elementary Schools. While cost savings are always welcome for a school district, the desire to be good stewards of the environment is also a strong motivator. The growing concern for the environment in recent years led the District to more explicitly target green initiatives in the 2023-2025 Strategic Plan. Since the approval of that plan the District has amplified its efforts to reduce the District's carbon footprint.

In September, the Board of Education approved a plan to add solar panels to the rooftops of all of our schools. The panels will be leased from a company that will manage and maintain them. Not only will they significantly reduce the amount of electricity that we purchase from "the grid," but they will also allow us to sell excess energy back, especially in the summer when less electricity is used and the longer days generate more of it. Installation will begin in June 2024.

In October, the Board approved the administration's proposal to heat and cool two of our schools (Devonshire and Highland) using geothermal energy, with the other two schools under consideration for future heating and cooling updates. Whether it's during a winter freeze or a hot sum-

mer day, the ground five feet below the surface maintains a constant temperature year-round. This constant earth temperature is higher than average winter temperatures, and lower than average summer temperatures. Geothermal systems will use this difference in temperature to transfer heat between the schools and the earth using a heat pump inside the schools and a system of buried pipes extending 500 feet below the surface to circulate heat transfer fluid.

The heat pump and circulating fluid continuously transfer heat. During summer, the geothermal system draws heat from the air in a building and transfers it to the ground. During winter, it draws heat from the ground and transfers it to back up to the building. In order to install a geothermal system, approximately 40 holes, 500 feet deep, will be drilled in the immediate vicinity of the schools to create the temperature transfer circuit. These holes comprise the heart of a geothermal heat-pump system that is expected to reduce carbon emissions by approximately 50 percent over a comparable building using conventional heating and cooling systems.

As these systems all come online in the coming months, the District will monitor energy consumption closely to determine their full carbon footprint impact, and communicate with stakeholders. We expect that the total impact of LED lighting systems in our schools, electricity generated by rooftop solar panels, and reduction in natural gas use will represent our significant contribution to a cleaner future. Perhaps our School Board's commitment to sustainability will even encourage other school districts to take similar steps.

Sincerely,  
James E. Garwood, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools

**Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.**