



District strategists look three years ahead

As District 68's previous five-year strategic plan has come to an end, the district looks ahead through the lens of a new one with a shorter time frame.

In December, the school board adopted its plan for 2023-2025. School officials said they used surveys and meetings with students, staff and community members to help in shaping the plan. To view the one-page plan summary visit <https://tinyurl.com/yc4cn5f5>.

The plan includes goals in five main areas: Cultural Responsiveness, Equity and Inclusion; Social-Emotional Learning and the Whole Child; Teaching and Learning; Facilities and Safety; and Communication and Engagement. There are key differences from the prior plan. Supt. James Garwood said those differences were largely driven by school community input.

For example, the new plan includes initiatives relating to sustainability and the environment. "Questions about how we could reduce our carbon footprint came from parents, staff and the community," Garwood said. "We're taking their views into account. For example, we priced electric buses. They

are not yet feasible, but it's one of the things we're looking at." Other related issues include making school HVAC systems more energy efficient, and employing LCD lighting.

Board President Joseph Ruffner thought the planning process worked well. "Strategic planning is arguably the most important time in the tenure of a board member," he said. "It provides us an opportunity to gather with many different groups of community members and to address the top priorities of the district—giving us the platform for the next few years of board work and a context for every decision we need to make. I appreciate the simple advantage of being able to bounce ideas off teachers, parents and administrators in the same room, thereby cutting through what can otherwise be a time-consuming back-and-forth, days- or weeks-long conversation."

Other new areas of focus include:

- Building a new Early Childhood Center. Garwood said the district applied for a state grant, which would pay a major portion of the cost. The school board will decide how to move forward once the state makes its determination.
- Addressing pandemic-related "learning loss." Garwood said in student surveys, about a quarter of students reported that they thrived during the pandemic, while about the same proportion thought their experience was negative, with the remaining half of students reporting

experiences in between. The district continues to create interventions for students who need them, along with additional supports for teachers dealing with academic issues and behavioral issues.

- Promoting a healthy school environment. This covers nutrition, physical environment, mental health and overall well-being.
- Optimizing staff time for preparation and professional learning. Garwood said staff members expressed this concern, particularly those in the elementary schools. Garwood said the district's new elementary science initiative (*see page 3*) responds to this issue.
- Continuing to diversify the district's workforce. Garwood said the percentage of minorities on staff has moved from about 10 percent to about 20 percent. "But that's a long way from matching the diversity of the student body," he added.
- Addressing ways the physical environment can contribute to teaching and learning. He said this includes continuing to seek appropriate classroom furniture, improving lighting, and replacing noisy classroom heaters with less-distracting ones.
- Shifting the facilities focus. Garwood noted that the previous plan addressed "Future Generation Learning Environment." The current one will focus on "Facilities and Safety." *For more on this topic, see story on page 2.*

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Schools emphasize response to crisis

In partial answer to a series of terrible events, District 68 has partnered with the Skokie Police Department to learn how to think about the “unthinkable.”

“We decided that we had to up our crisis-response abilities,” said Supt. James Garwood, noting the 2022 shooting incidents in Highland Park, Ill., and Uvalde, Texas. In November, police officers conducted trainings at Highland School and Old Orchard Junior High, leading staff through scenarios involving threats posed by school intruders.

Sharon Jacobellis, the district’s director of student services, has taken a lead role in both threat assessment and crisis response. “Uvalde and Highland Park were immeasurable tragedies that certainly heightened fear and concern,” Jacobellis said. “The tragic event that happened in Highland Park was especially sobering because of its proximity to Skokie.”

The November sessions were intended to “train our staff on how to respond to dangerous situations,” Jacobellis said. “We practiced several drills and debriefed after each drill. After the training, we made adjustments in our buildings that aligned with the strategies that we learned.”

Officer Richard Wilken, who led the training at Old Orchard, works in the

Skokie Police crime prevention/community relations unit. He works with local schools to ensure that their crisis plans are established, that the police have the information they need (such as building plans) to respond to emergencies, and to help them comply with state requirements for trainings.

Wilken said Skokie provides trainings based on ALICE principles—Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Escape. He said the trainings help school personnel understand what the options for students and staff might be in a crisis: When should you run? When should you hide? When should you fight? The police use the scenarios to walk trainees through circumstances they may need to prepare for.

“Teachers didn’t get into education to learn how to counter an active threat,” Wilken said. “We need to make sure people have the best tools available so they can make the best decision.”

The district has adopted a tool this year to help staff better communicate in a crisis. Informacast, from Madison, Wis.-based Singlewire Software, is a smartphone application that would allow any staff member to send or receive alerts in the event of an emergency.

“The Informacast app gives every

employee peace of mind that we will be notified immediately if there is a dangerous situation looming,” Jacobellis said. “It also provides the location of the dangerous situation, which will allow staff to use their judgment on how to keep their students safe based on the ALICE training. The app also gives staff members the ability to communicate if their class is safe or if they need help.”

District officials note that they are not simply waiting for the next crisis to happen. Jacobellis said administrators have been trained to understand different types of threats, risk factors for violence, warning signs for violence, and how to accurately assess a threat.

The district also has a standing threat-assessment team that meets at least once a year to review and update emergency and crisis response plans, the efficacy of law-enforcement-led drills, and each school’s compliance with drills.

School officials also acknowledge the importance of preparing for the aftermath of a crisis. Jacobellis said administrators and key support staff have received training on how to respond to trauma in the school and community through a program called “PREPaRE,” created by the National Association of School Psychologists.

Plan

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Overall, Ruffner argued the new plan builds on District 68’s historical strengths. “Skokie 68 has been fortunate in that we have a well-funded district that has a reputation for taking care of our students and staff, and the plan intends to build on that, tweaking our infrastructure where we can while continuing to focus on our core values,” he said. “Community involvement was a large part of the planning—and

when the participants self-selected into the five goals of the district, we did so evenly, demonstrating consistent support for each goal across the district.”

Ruffner welcomes the opportunity to re-engage with community members in three years instead of five. “We had excellent participation from the student population, and while we had a good number of parents turn out, we hope that we can increase their input in the next planning session,” he said. “We’d love for parents to keep that in mind for the 2024-25 school year.”

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

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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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K-5 students to learn science in a new way

District 68 officials are preparing to change how science is taught in the district's three elementary schools next year.

Now, K-5 students get a semester of science in their home classrooms each year, taught by their regular teachers. But the need to increase instruction time post-pandemic has cut into classroom teachers' time to plan, collaborate with colleagues and improve their skills. Further, parents and teachers alike are recognizing that students would benefit from a greater emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) learning.

Starting with the upcoming fall semester, students at Devonshire School, Highland School and Jane Stenson School will move down the hall two days a week to labs designed for STEM instruction. They'll work with science teachers trained to focus on the best ways to teach the content and use the lab spaces. In this way, the changes fit well with the district's latest strategic plan (*see page 1*), which sets elevating student learning as a primary goal.

In each building, "one teacher can be dedicated to teaching the subject of science all day long, leading to more rigorous and focused attention to the practices of science and state standards," said Dr. Christie Samojedny, the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "The science teacher will have deep knowledge of the progression of learning that must take place starting in kindergarten and leading all the way up through fifth grade."

Samojedny expects this plan to benefit students because they will receive more rigorous, focused instruction; learning will take place in a dedicated space, as opposed to a regular classroom that must accommodate other subjects; and there will be greater continuity of instruction, both through



Kindergartners at Devonshire School learn the basics of coding using "BeeBots."

the elementary years and into junior high, since officials plan to have the elementary science teachers engage in professional development alongside teachers at Old Orchard Junior High.

Brandi Barnett, a first-grade teacher at Highland, agrees. "I think this will have a positive effect on students," she said. "When teachers are passionate or excited about what they do, students pick up on that. Having a teacher that lives and breathes science sounds exciting! I also think having more opportunities to tie in STEM can only be helpful."

Barnett also thinks classroom teachers will appreciate having more time for core subjects. "We do our best to provide exciting and robust science instruction, but it is not our main focus," she said. "Teachers will have one less thing to plan for, letting us focus even more on literacy and math."

She added, "Teachers are already stretched thin, coming in before school, working during lunch and staying after school. Next year, when our students are receiving science instruction, we will have more flexibility to meet with all of the teachers who help support our students and make plans that we can implement in our classrooms."

Implementing the plan next year would add some costs, officials say, including the hiring of three new science teachers, and some modifications needed for the labs. However, Supt. James Garwood told the school board

in a December memo that some of the increased costs could be offset. For example, the district would require fewer substitute teachers under this plan, because elementary teachers would not have to be pulled from their regular classrooms for professional development. He also noted that an expected enrollment decline at the junior high may reduce staff costs as well.

Barnett echoes administrators' comments that the changes fit with the district's objectives. "It is important for parents and community members to know we have our students' education as our top priority," she said. "This really is a win-win for all."

Kindergarten signups now open

Kindergarten registration is now open in District 68 for students who will be at least 5 years old on September 1, 2023. Parents and guardians can initiate the registration process by visiting the district web site (<https://www.skokie68.org/>) and clicking on the orange button that reads "New Student and 2023-2024 Kindergarten Registration." Once there, please follow the steps listed.

For more information, call the district office at 847-676-9000 or email the district registrar at kmorimoto@skokie68.org.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

Recently I was asked to present to the Skokie Valley Rotary Club about the effects of the pandemic on our district. As I thought about the topic, I went down the list of disruptive changes we en-

dured including remote learning, social distancing, masks, vaccinations, weekly saliva testing, etc. I reflected on the fact that these mitigation efforts are no more, and that the worst is behind us. But while the medical crisis has waned, our teachers will be the first to tell you that we are far from normal.

For students, the COVID experience affected academic performance, mental health and behavior, and social-emotional wellness. In the fall we surveyed students in grades 4-8 to gauge their perceptions on how the pandemic affected their academic performance, their mental health, and their relationships. What we found for most questions was that approximately 25% felt a negative or very negative impact, 50% felt neutral about the impact, and approximately 25% felt positive or very positive impacts. Parents were asked similar questions, with similar results. While most students felt that the experience was positive or neutral, a sizable number reported being negatively affected. So how does that translate into what our teachers are experiencing everyday, particularly with students who experienced more negative outcomes?

Since we returned to in-person classes, we have seen an increase in the number of students who struggle with behavior, as well as the severity of some of those behaviors. A minority of students have difficulty regulating emotions, are

making poor behavior choices, or are feeling apathetic. Similarly, a sizable minority have declined in their academic progress. Our new strategic plan focuses on remediating those challenges, and before the new plan was even completed, the district increased mental health and academic interventions and continues to provide them to more students than in the past. We have hired additional staff to facilitate this, but that help has not offset the accumulated strain on all staff members. District 68 educators, as a general rule, are extraordinary in their willingness to go above and beyond to help students in need. Our staff's dedication comes at a cost, however.

Our teachers, in addition to dealing with their own pandemic-related traumas, and despite their desire to get our students through rough spots, are exhausted at mid-year. Your school board, the administrative team, and our teaching staff will continue to address the mental health and academic needs of our students, and the school board and administrative team will continue to support teachers.

To that end I have a personal request of our parents, as well as any other reader that feels so moved. Even though Teacher Appreciation Week is in May, our teachers could use a boost right now. I would like to designate this March as a special Thank-a-Teacher Month and ask that you take a moment to reach out to a teacher to thank them for their service—with an email, a card, a personal acknowledgement, or any other means you find appropriate. The joy and gratitude you will create by doing so will be much appreciated, by teachers and by our students as well.

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.