

DOWNERS GROVE DISTRICTS 58 AND 99 | 4 ISSUES TO WATCH

D-58 kindergarten, D-99 admins lead 2016-17 stories

By **NATHAN LURZ**
nlurz@shawmedia.com

DOWNERS GROVE – As the new school year ramps up, districts 58 and 99 in Downers Grove have a few issues and new opportunities ahead of them.

Here are a few items to watch out for in 2016-17:

1. State budget

One of the most pressing issues shared not only by Downers Grove's two school districts but by those around the state is the budget.

Although Illinois passed a stopgap budget in June, many are still concerned about a lack of a long-term compromise to ensure funding in the future – or about what those compromises may actually entail.

"The fact that the legislature stepped up and passed a comprehensive budget for the upcoming school year obviously lowers the stress level at schools across the state," District 99 Superintendent Hank Thiele said. "That being said, though, nothing is settled in yet in Springfield. ... It puts us in a spot where we have to continually keep a close eye on how funding is going."

Thiele said he hoped for a long-term solution rather than a year-to-year one.

Megan Hewitt, community relations director at District 58, said their district was also happy there was a stopgap budget, and said careful budgeting had helped the district stay



Shaw Media file photo

Samantha Joyce, her brother Alex and their parents lead the way down Hill Street on Aug. 25, 2014, as families arrive at Whittier Elementary School in Downers Grove for the first day of school. Districts 58 and 99 are preparing to start the new school year.

ahead of some of the smaller cutbacks in this and recent years.

2. District 58 – All-day kindergarten opportunities at all schools

District 58 has officially rolled out its after-school kindergarten programs at all of its schools in the 2016-17 school year.

Participating students get the opportunity for more enrichment in the afternoon after their normal half day of kindergarten, including reading, music and STEM [Science, Technolo-

gy, Engineering and Math] projects. It was previously only available as a pilot in five schools.

3. New District 99 administrators

As the landscape of education changes around the country and state, District 99 will look to its new leadership to guide them through, including Thiele's first year as superintendent.

Thiele was named to the position in December 2015 and officially started July 1. He previously served as the assistant superintendent for technology in Maine Township District 207 in Park Ridge.

In addition, as of July 1, Cathy Bendicson takes over as the assistant principal for counseling and student support services, Sarah Courington is the associate principal for curriculum and instruction and Kelly Zuerner is the associate principal for student activities.

4. D-58 playgrounds

Playgrounds at schools across the district got a variety of face-lifts over the summer, including some with new pieces of equipment, wood chips and other new items.

Most impressively is the new "Owen's Playground" project at Hillcrest Elementary School, constructed as an all-abilities playground for children with special needs to play alongside their classmates. A photo gallery of the playground's opening is on Page 3.