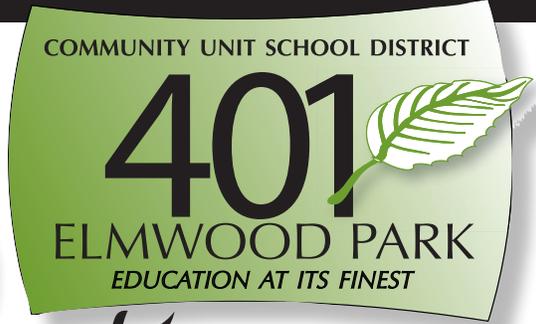


FOCUS



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D401 to Offer Full-day Kindergarten Starting August 2020

Beginning with the 2020-21 school year, D410 will offer full-day kindergarten to all eligible students who are Elmwood Park residents. The District 401 Board of Education approved the plan on March 20 at its regular monthly meeting.

“Moving to full-day kindergarten is the most important recent development we have made toward improving student achievement and providing a well-rounded experience for students,” Superintendent of Schools Dr. Nicolas D. Wade said.

“This Board decision helps solidify the many significant changes we have made to better our students, our standing as a District, and the community as a whole,” he continued. “Having this opportunity for our students is significant to their education and social development.”

No New Taxes Needed

As approved by the Board, the expansion of the kindergarten program will require no new taxpayer funding.

The District has budgeted funds for adding up to five additional kindergarten staff if needed, according to Dr. Wade.

This will allow the District to serve 200 kindergartners, and limit class sizes to a maximum of 25 students per teacher.

In addition, preschool will remain half-day, and parents will continue to have a half-day kindergarten option if they prefer.

Implementing the Change

The beginning of full-day kindergarten will coincide with the debut of an expanded Elm Middle School. Starting in August 2020, the renovated Elm building will house the District’s sixth-grade students in addition to seventh- and eighth-grade students.

Moving sixth graders to Elm will open up space in Elmwood and John Mills, the District’s two elementary schools, allowing kindergarten and preschool classes to move to these schools from the Early Childhood Center (ECC) building, which the District leases from the Village of Elmwood Park. Kindergarten will be located at both elementary buildings, and preschool will be housed at John Mills.

Because the Village-owned ECC building is not large enough to accommodate the full-day kindergarten program, the District will close the ECC after the 2019-20 school year.

Expanding Instructional Time

During the 2018-2019 school year, 120 students were enrolled in the District’s kindergarten program at the ECC. A small number of those students (fewer than 20), were in an extended-day program for students who needed additional math and reading assistance. The remaining students were in a half-day program. They attended class for two hours and 35 minutes on regular school days, either in the morning or in the afternoon.

With the new full-day program, the amount of time students spend in kindergarten will increase to over six hours per day, including lunch and recess.

Instead of following a schedule unique to the ECC, full-day kindergarten students will have the same schedule as the District’s elementary students.

Said Dr. Wade: “This will maximize instructional time, make building operations more efficient, and be helpful for most parents in scheduling drop off and pick up for their children.”



The 2018-2019 school year marked the beginning of “specials” for D401 kindergarten students, like these, in art, music, technology, enrichment, and physical education. (District 401 photo by Dave Porreca.)

Academic Benefits

The benefits of more than doubling the school time for kindergartners will be significant, according to ECC Principal Mr. Kevin Seibel.

For example, the ECC just completed its first year of teaching new curriculum programs in English language arts (*ReadyGEN*) and math (*GO Math!*). The kindergarten staff had to compact lessons meant for full-day instruction into a half-day format. The new schedule will eliminate this constraint.

“I’m extremely proud of our teachers for the work they have done in implementing a full-day curriculum into a half-day program,” said Mr. Seibel, who will assume other administrative responsibilities within the District after the ECC closes. “They’ve done a wonderful job — which makes me enormously excited about our full-day opportunity.”

Also, during the 2018-2019 school year, the ECC offered “specials” for the first time — instruction from visiting elementary school teachers in art,

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Kindergarten teacher Liliana Kosek answers a question from one of her students. Ms. Kosek saw the benefits of full-day kindergarten first hand from her previous experience in another district. (District 401 photo by Dave Porreca.)

music, technology, enrichment and physical education. “They have been a great addition to our program,” Mr. Seibel noted.

But specials can only be taught for 20 minutes in the current half-day format. In the full-day program, this will increase to the preferred 40 minutes.

“Moving to full-day kindergarten will provide the opportunity for our youngest learners to have a solid academic and social foundation,” said Mr. Seibel. “Hopefully, this will eliminate the learning gaps that students have when they enter kindergarten and will move them forward, so that upon entering first grade they’re ready to take on those challenges from day one.”

Social-Emotional Benefits

Greater academic opportunities aren’t the only benefits students will reap from the change.

As Mr. Seibel explained, a full day of school gives younger children the means to develop social and emotional skills in a structured and safe environment.

“A half-day program just doesn’t allow enough time for instruction or appropriate social interaction and play, which is a fundamental necessity for children of this age,” he said.

“It’s imperative that children have those opportunities for not only the academics, but for the social engagement the school environment requires,” he added, “and having those skills allows students to be so much more successful.”

Additional Benefits

Kindergarten teacher Ms. Liliana Kosek stated that full-day kindergarten yields another benefit for students — it strengthens their ability to do sustained work in a classroom setting.

“When students come to first grade from a half-day kindergarten program, many don’t have the stamina for a full-day program,” said Ms. Kosek. “In the beginning of the year, some of them are still used to taking naps and are not able to sit still for long periods of time.”

She continued: “I previously taught first grade at another district that had full-day kindergarten, and the students were much better prepared for first grade, which is always a big adjustment for kindergartners. It’s really about building their stamina, making sure they do have break times and times to play and explore.”

Parents, too, will benefit from the full-day program, Mr. Seibel said. “It will give working parents a secure place for their students in an educational setting all day,” he said. “Parents will have a solid day-long option.”

Building on Success

The move to full-day kindergarten represents another major initiative by D401 to ensure a common and equitable learning experience for students within and across elementary buildings.

Examples of other recent and ongoing efforts toward this goal include:

- **Articulated Curriculum**

An articulated, shared curriculum has been established in K-5 English language arts (*ReadyGEN*), K-5 math (*GO Math!*) and K-8 science (*STEMscopes*).

- **Specials for Kindergarten**

As noted previously, specials were introduced to kindergarten students this year, giving them early exposure to systematic instruction in art, music, technology, enrichment and physical education.

- **Acceleration**

Enrichment is now offered as a special for grades 1-2, and additional acceleration opportunities are available for grades 3-6.

- **Coaching**

Two instructional coaching positions were created and numerous professional development opportunities are being provided to assist staff in learning and implementing the new curriculum programs.

- **Technology**

Expanded technology access is in place in all buildings, with the possibility of 1:1 computing reaching some elementary grade levels.

- **Standards-based Grading**

A District committee is developing a standards-based report card for K-6 students that could be piloted in 2019-20 for those who wish to participate.

- **Supports**

Supports, primarily in reading, are being flooded to students in grades K-2 to better prepare them for intermediate grades 3-5.

Placed within this larger context, the transition to full-day kindergarten signals the District’s commitment to its vision of creating “an invitation to opportunity” for all students.

“There is palpable excitement about this new program, and I am confident our talented staff and administration will continue to provide a quality learning experience for all,” said Dr. Wade. “We have addressed some of the most significant barriers prohibiting our ability to realize this opportunity, and I am confident the District, the Board and the community will continue to work together to further enhance the learning environment and experience for all of our students.”

Mr. Seibel added: “The ECC staff is extremely excited. They understand the benefits for the children. I believe full-day kindergarten will help make Elmwood Park a very sought-out community in which to live. We have good schools, and we are on track to improve them immensely. As a resident myself, I’m excited about the things we’re doing. It’s going to be awesome.”

District Program to Provide Help with Transition to Independent Living

A transition program for young adults with special needs who are 18 to 21 will begin at Elmwood Park High School in August 2019. The program, which will be voluntary for participants whose need is determined by their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team, will focus on teaching the functional academic, social, communication and employment/vocational skills required for independent living after high school.

"This program will be extremely valuable to not only the participants but also their families," said EPHS special educa-

tion teacher Ms. Hilary Coia, who will be working with the program next year.

"During high school, students and families receive a lot of support from the school," Ms. Coia continued. "Once students graduate, they and their families are almost left to 'fend for themselves.' For students who need more support, this program not only smooths that transition into adulthood, but also provides families with additional community support and services available to their child."

An Experienced Team

Seven participants are expected for the inaugural year of the program, according to District 401's Director for Student Services, Dr. Kari Smith.

Created by a committee of special education teachers and administrators under the leadership of Dr. Smith, the program will draw upon the talents of several current EPHS educators and specialists.

Dr. Smith and Ms. Sara Barrick, the District's special education coordinator for grades 7-12, will oversee the program as a whole, which will be housed in Room 166 of the high school.

Ms. Coia will be the program's full-time transition teacher, and another EPHS special education teacher, Mr. Paul Fredericks, will serve in the afternoons as vocational coordinator.

The school's speech & language pathologist, Ms. Megan Bremer, will help participants weekly with their communication skills.

Ms. Nina Limbeck and Ms. Agnes Stankiewicz, the school's social workers, will assist the program by providing consultative social-emotional support as needed.

Up to three special education paraprofessionals will work with participants on a daily basis. Together, the transition team members will work toward achieving the program's seven major goals (see table below:)

PROGRAM GOALS

- Improve academic and functional outcomes
- Increase independence in adult living situations
- Improve self-advocacy and awareness skills
- Improve social and communication skills
- Increase leisure, recreation and life skills opportunities
- Experience work-based learning, volunteer work, and/or supported/independent employment
- Prepare for community living and participation

Developing Essential Skills

In her role as transition teacher, Ms. Coia will concentrate on education or training and daily life skills, such as self-advocacy, problem solving, budgeting, social relationships and health/fitness.

"Adjusting to life after high school is a difficult time for all students," she said. "EP's transition program will provide our participants with more individualized and specific experiences in employment, education and independent living skills."

She added: "Another main focus of the program is to build self-advocacy and self-determination skills, so the participants can not only speak up for themselves, but also make their own decisions and life choices. Our goal is to help these individuals achieve a high quality of life, living as independently as possible."

A key part of the program will be to assure that participants have adequate job skills and training. As vocational coordinator, Mr. Fredericks will guide participants through the employment process. He will help them develop a résumé, the application and interview skills to conduct successful job searches, and the on-the-job skills needed to maintain employment once they've been hired.

Creating the Right Space

To accommodate the program, Room 166 underwent extensive renovation earlier this year. The 1,652-square-foot room was originally the high school's auto shop. From Feb. 21 to March 30, contractors:

- Added a wall
- Laid new tile flooring
- Installed a new kitchen, with a stove, oven, sink, dishwasher and refrigerator
- Patched and painted the existing walls

- Installed new electrical outlets and new lighting
- Renovated plumbing to the restroom and kitchen

The District is also in the process of purchasing furniture, which will be delivered and installed prior to the start of the 2019-20 school year.

According to District 401's Assistant Superintendent for Finance & Operations, Mr. James Jennings, the renovation cost \$67,900 and was paid from the current year's operating funds. The project required no tax increase.

Room 166 now consists of a small anteroom where students will check in and store their belongings, a large inner room for academic skill-building activities, and a large outer room with a kitchen. Students will cook meals and practice independent living skills in that room.

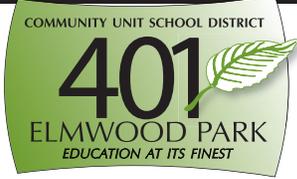
Into the Community

Although the program will be housed in Room 166, much of the participants' time will be spent outside of the high school building. Participants will be out in the community, learning how to use public transportation, shopping for groceries to make their own meals, doing fitness training at the EP Civic Center, participating in programs at the EP Public Library, or developing job skills at a worksite.

The program will be tailored to meet participants' individual transition needs. The day will begin with check-in at 8:30 a.m., but after that, the schedules will vary from person-to-person and from day-to-day.

"We created a sample schedule that we shared with parents," Dr. Smith said. "After participants check in, they're going to review their individual schedules, and then, for example, on a Monday they might go as a group to do cooking prep. On Tuesday, they might go to Elmwood Park Parks & Rec for fitness activities. Wednesday may be self-advocacy and cooking, Thursday might be for travel training, and then on Friday, they might be working on developing communication

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District Program to Provide Help with Transition to Independent Living

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skills. So it really depends on the individual participants.”

This highly individualized approach is just one of the ways the transition program will differ from traditional high school offerings, as shown in this table:

High School Program vs. Transition Program	
High School Program	Transition Program
Grades in specific courses	Progress monitored via IEP goals
Academic-based curriculum	Skills-based curriculum
7:45 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.	8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Instruction delivered in classroom	Support delivered in natural settings
Independence encouraged with staff support	Independence expected with minimal staff support
Set schedule of core academic classes	Varied schedule based on individual support
Transition program will follow the D401 school calendar	

Family Support

Current EPHS students who are eligible for graduation and who could benefit from the program were identified by their IEP teams. The District then informed the students and their parents of the transition program and how it would operate.

The reaction has been positive. “We planned ‘A Day in the Life of the Transition Program’ for all potential participants to get a real-

istic viewpoint on what the program will be like, and it was very well received,” Ms. Coia said. “We also hosted an informational parent night and toured the room,” she continued, “and parents expressed a lot of interest and excitement for their child to be involved in the program.”

Becoming Self-sufficient

Transition programs for young adults are not new. EPHS students who needed the help of such a program upon becoming eligible for graduation had previously used services provided by the Leyden Area Special Education Cooperative (LASEC).

But in a move approved by the D401 Board of Education, other LASEC member districts, and the Illinois State Board of Education, District 401 will withdraw from the cooperative effective July 1, 2020. The District then created its own transition program to assure that its students continue to receive all the services they need.

The program was formulated this year by a committee directed by Dr. Smith and consisting of Ms. Barrick, Ms. Coia, Mr. Fredericks, Ms. Bremer, Ms. Limbeck, Ms. Stankiewicz and special education teachers Ms. Kristen Carroll, Mr. Charles Curtin, Ms. Bridget Flood and Mr. Josh Heinen. EPHS Principal Mr. Douglas Wildes and Assistant Principal Ms. Kyleen Coia also contributed to the planning.

“I’m just fortunate to have such a great group of people working on this,” Dr. Smith said. “We’re a good team, and we’re super excited about the program. I think the participants, now that they’ve experienced what it is going to look like next year, are getting excited about it too. We can’t wait for it to begin.”