



Young gardeners learn as they plant

This year, Heather Peterson gave her fourth-grade students at Devonshire School a challenge. “I wanted to explore project-based learning by introducing a question and letting students work on it. In this case, the question was how to create an indoor garden for the school,” Mrs. Peterson said.

The project followed the Design Thinking approach, which lays out five steps for solving a problem: empathize, ideate, define, prototype and test. Students brainstormed problems they might encounter in creating a garden, such as what are the best plants to grow in this area and how do you go about growing them. Mrs. Peterson acted as a facilitator but let the students do the work and make the decisions.

They broke into groups. Some focused on design, some were builders, some were responsible for planting and others took care of maintaining the garden. Starting at the end of January, they began researching different aspects of creating a garden. They learned about costs and growing zones and plant classifications, doing much of the research online.

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Students in Heather Peterson’s fourth grade class at Devonshire School work on frame structures for their indoor garden.

They created a design and a budget, and even put together a grant proposal. They wrote persuasive letters, created a video and presented their ideas to staff members, including Supt. James Garwood and Devonshire Principal Hal Schmeisser.

Throughout the process, the students were using math, technology and language arts as well as science. “It’s been a wonderful learning experience, and the students loved it because they were leading it. But it wasn’t always pretty,” Mrs. Peterson said. “Sometimes it wasn’t easy for them to get along or agree. They had to learn to cooperate.”

The proposal was approved — with compliments from administrators — and the students went on to create the garden. They started indoors, using an area in the school

library that has been revamped as a maker space. They grew a variety of plants from seed using plastic containers suspended from a wooden framework. They devoted a full day to the project on Earth Day, April 22, with some construction assistance from Mrs. Peterson’s husband.

Now that the plants are sufficiently hardy, the garden is moving to a permanent site outside the building that was also designed by students.

“Our hope is to get all classrooms involved and to build up the garden landscape every year,” Mrs. Peterson said. “It’s fun to see the kids learning so much and using all our academic subjects together.”

Visit www.skokie68.org to see upcoming events on the school calendar.

District tackles equity issues

One of the goals in District 68's priorities for 2016-17 was to begin a districtwide equity initiative. That initiative is well under way.

"In a district as diverse as ours, equity is a major focus," explained Lisa Schwartz, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "We are trying to take a look at the needs of all students and adults in our community and ensure those needs are being met."

Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family circumstance are not obstacles to children achieving their potential in school. Depending on their background, different students need different tools to be successful.

According to the latest figures, district families are 37 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 32 percent white non-Hispanic, 17 percent Hispanic, 10 percent black non-Hispanic, and 4 percent multiracial.

But other factors besides race can

contribute to social and educational marginalization, including socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation. Students also come from many different backgrounds, and their experiences can vary widely.

These factors can affect the classroom as well as in the broader community. Even teachers with the best intentions can find themselves treating students differently because of expectations based on who they are and where they come from.

In the past, District 68 partnered with Loyola University and National Louis University to provide professional development for teachers that focused on equity and creating a culturally responsive environment.

As a first step, District 68 created a program called Connections. Once a month, a group of 15 staff members representing all four district schools meets to talk about their own cultural identities and reflect on how that can influence their interactions with students, parents and colleagues.

These sessions are led by Mike

Flood, a social worker at Old Orchard Junior High trained to facilitate conversations about equity, identity, stereotypes, privilege and unintentional biases. Much of the time is devoted to self-reflection.

In addition to Connections, other equity initiatives include training for the district leadership team by an outside consultant; professional learning communities (PLCs) that allow groups of teachers to meet to discuss equity issues and the impact on instruction and school climate; participation in the Illinois Coalition of Education Equity Leaders; and professional development and institute days that target equity issues.

The District is now developing a long-term equity plan that will include more professional development as well as job-embedded experiences. Part of the process will involve reviewing a cultural audit that was completed by Connections participants. The Connections group will continue to meet and play a role in the equity initiative.

English learner services under study

Barbara Marler wants you to know that EL teachers are flexible. In a school system as diverse as District 68 where more than 60 languages are spoken, they have to be.

"EL" is educator shorthand for English learner, referring to students who come into the system speaking languages other than English at home. District 68 has a robust EL program in place for students regardless of their English proficiency or country of origin.

Now finishing her first year as District director of EL services, Dr. Marler has been leading a review of the program to ensure that EL students receive the best services possible.

"We started by collecting qualitative data from EL teachers and administrators, asking them how they perceive the services the EL program is providing. We concluded that we needed to conduct a more in-depth study that brings in quantitative data," Dr. Marler explained.

She assembled a team of 20 volunteers that includes EL teachers, general education teachers, special education teachers, specials teachers, board members, administrators and parents of EL students. The team met several times during the spring and will resume in fall 2017.

After reviewing applicable laws and regulations, the team will examine research to learn what are currently considered to be best practices. "Then, the team will take a hard look at our own internal data," Dr. Marler said. "We want to see where our community sits, what works well, what we can do better and what we should explore."

Dr. Marler has spent 36 years as an EL teacher, administrator, author and consultant. She has seen many changes as EL instruction evolved, including increased accountability following the 2001 No Child Left Behind law.

District 68 has 11 EL teachers with either the ESL or

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Briefly...

New teacher contract approved

At a special meeting on May 30, the District 68 Board unanimously approved a new four-year contract with district teachers that runs until 2021. Teachers voted to ratify the new contract the same day.

Negotiating teams from the Board and the Teachers Education Association began meeting in early March in hopes of having a new agreement in place before the end of the school year. "I think there was a deep commitment to collaboration and to working for the best interests of the District on both sides," said school board President Una McGeough.

"We looked at each section of the contract and we determined what sections could be interest-based — which ones we could talk about more — and which ones lent themselves more to traditional bargaining," said Matt Tomenillie, co-president of the teachers union.

"Overall, the process was positive and collegial, resulting in an agreement which honors the hard work of our teachers while balancing the need to maintain the district's financial position during uncertain financial times in Springfield," said Supt. James Garwood.

The contract calls for average annual salary increases of 3.34 percent in the first year, 3.32 percent in year two, 2.58 percent in year three and 2.23 percent in year four.

The 2017-2021 contract can be viewed at the District 68 website (<http://www.skokie68.org/personnel/documents/FINALAGREEMENT17-21-May2017.pdf>).

Athletic fields update

Improvements to the outdoor athletic facilities at Old Orchard Junior High continue apace. The track at the south end of the school is completely resurfaced and has been in use this spring. After installing a new drainage system, the soccer field inside the track was graded and planted with grass. It will be back in use when the new grass is sufficiently hardy.

Work on the field on the west side of OOHJ starts this summer. This will involve similar work to that done on the south field: new irrigation system, grading and new grass. A cricket pitch was installed in a section of that field last summer, but will not be available until next year when the new grass is sturdy enough to withstand regular activity. A new water detention pond near

the athletic fields is operational.

Overall, the \$1 million project is on budget and on schedule.

Free to Read

Every child attending District 68 schools had a chance to choose two books to take home and read during the summer through the new Free to Read program. Students received the books at Scholastic Book Fairs.

According to Lisa Schwartz, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, reading outside the classroom is important for making progress in literacy skills, especially during the summer. The goal is to let students choose books that interest them, expose them to different genres and authors, and encourage them to become lifelong readers.

Parents can help by encouraging their children to read at least 20 minutes a day and talking to them about what they are reading. District 68 is using some Title 1 funds to pay for the program, so there is no charge to families for the books.

Registration coming up

New student registration will take place on Thursday, July 27. For details and to schedule an appointment, call 847-568-7635.

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 in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. You are invited to attend.

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EL services

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bilingual education endorsement. There are also quite a few general education teachers who qualify for the ESL endorsement.

While numbers vary throughout the year, on May 1 there were 325 students (approximately 18 percent of the student body) from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade receiving some level of EL services. Students receive an English fluency assessment when they enroll in a District 68 school and receive support depending on assessment scores and individual needs. The goal is always to help students achieve a level of English proficiency — academically and socially — that enables them to participate fully in the regular classroom.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

This has been an action-packed school year. Re-viewing all we are doing to improve student learning, I get a definite sense that District 68 is on the move! I cannot list all the year's accomplishments and interactions,

but there are a few I would like to highlight:

- Old Orchard Junior High implemented the first year of a new student schedule designed collaboratively with teachers to help improve student learning.
- Our elementary teachers implemented new standards-based grading practices and a new report card to improve communication with parents about their children's academic progress.
- The OOJH Grading Learning Team researched grading practices to improve how we evaluate and report on students' work. That work will culminate in spring 2018 with new and improved standardized grading practices and a new report card for the junior high.
- Our elementary schools offered a new series of after-school enrichment programs to give every student opportunities for extended and interest-based learning.
- The District has begun a new professional development initiative focusing on equity, which will include all staff in 2017-18. See the article on page 2 for more.
- The District Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Committee has completed its first year of work to ensure that we are strongly supporting all students. MTSS is an integrated, multi-tiered system of instruction, assessment and intervention designed to meet the achieve-

ment and behavioral needs of all learners.

- An English Learning Team has begun to research best instructional practices for English language learners and in program design. Their work will continue into next year.
- Given the smooth integration of technology into classrooms, it's hard to believe this is only the second full year of TLi68, our 1:1 iPad program. This year we added 2nd grade to the program and next year we are adding 1st grade. I continue to be impressed by how teachers and students are using technology to improve student learning.
- Much of our teacher professional development this year focused on math instruction, through a partnership with the University of Illinois at Chicago. Many teachers reported having received some of the most effective professional development and coaching of their careers. We will continue this partnership in 2017-18.
- The Board of Education and the Education Association were able to successfully negotiate a new four-year contract before the end of the school year, enabling our teachers and administrators to hit the ground running with a focus on instruction in the fall.

Though the academic year is over for students, many teachers participate in professional development during the summer. On behalf of our teachers, administrators and the Board of Education, I wish you all a fantastic and joy-filled summer. We look forward to taking the next step in providing a world-class education for our students this fall.

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.