



School improvement plans get SMART

Officials in District 68 are trying to be smart about how to make schools better. In the district's formal approach to school improvement, the "smart" part is literal.

The district has embraced the SMART school improvement process created by Wisconsin-based SMART Learning Systems. SMART stands for Strategic, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results Oriented and Time Bound.

The district began investigating the process last year, according to Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Four top administrators underwent eight days of training, then principals took their building leadership teams (BLT) to further training last spring. The administrators and team determined that the focus for 2019-2020 would be math education (*see related story, page 2*).

Dr. Samojedny sees significant benefits to the process. "The systematic manner really breaks down the steps of how a school can approach improvement," she said. "It can be difficult for a group of 10-12 or more to make decisions. SMART really streamlines the process."

Brian Ritz, the district's coordinator for curriculum and school improvement, is familiar with the process from his previous position as a consultant. He, too, believes in the SMART process. "SMART is based on trying to be scientific about how schools go about getting better," he said.

In consulting, Mr. Ritz found that even with a plan in place, schools often didn't seek data to demonstrate that they were doing well, nor data that showed they weren't achieving their goals. "You want a clear idea of

what you're trying to accomplish, use the decided-upon strategy with fidelity, then collect data that shows what's going on," he said. "It's important to focus on the greatest area of need."

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Math education is this year's emphasis in the district's school improvement plan. Here a student shares a strategy for solving a subtraction problem with the class.

This year, the process is spreading. Mr. Ritz said SMART math goals were developed for each building, and each BLT is working on implementation. "The teams are still grappling with this and what it means," he said. "It takes time to 'breathe' and customize." He and Dr. Samojedny are coaching the BLTs and principals.

The ultimate goal is positive impact on students. "School improvement should completely align with teaching and learning," Dr. Samojedny said. When administrators presented the process to the staff, they included details on curriculum and instruction.

"It's pointless if it doesn't come back to teaching and learning. The process informs teaching strategies to use, and the professional development that flows from that," Dr. Samojedny said. She added that, in addition to math, the district is em-

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New K-5 math curriculum adds up

District 68's new K-5 math curriculum is the first test of the district's SMART school improvement process.

Dr. Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, said the process of revising the math curriculum began two years ago, when a committee of teachers and administrators was charged with conducting the first review since 2012.

The committee, Dr. Samojedny said, "put together a list of non-negotiables a new curriculum needed to offer. It had to be engaging, rigorous, accessible to all students regardless of level or language, offer a good entry point for all students, but also challenge kids as appropriate."

The committee narrowed its search to two — Bridges in Mathematics and Math Trailblazers — and tested out both in classrooms last year. Bridges was the final choice.

Kristen Hoch, math instructional coach at Highland School and a member of the committee, said, "Teachers were very happy to see we would have something more consistent. While there's always a learning curve

with a new resource, teachers found students were engaged."

The program's consistency is a big plus for teachers, Ms. Hoch said. "It means we have the same goals regardless of grade level, the same expectations," she said.

Bridges offers teachers examples of how to use models or manipulatives, even providing sample dialogue to use with students. "It's right there in the lessons," Ms. Hoch said. "That's beneficial for teachers."

Ms. Hoch said Bridges also benefits students. "It allows a lot of opportunities for students to engage with math," she said. "There are multiple points of access — some students might draw a picture, some might just use numbers."

She added, "There is lots of collaboration — such as games or sharing strategies to solve problems."

Dr. Samojedny noted that teachers have had extensive preparation. For three years, the district has

partnered with the Metro Chicago Mathematics Initiative (MCMI) at the University of Illinois at Chicago, which supports teachers and districts in math education. Bridges was integrated into ongoing professional development, and representatives from Bridges' creator, the Math Learning Center, also have worked with teachers.

School officials concede that progress will take time. "We recognize that it may take more than just one year to see a noticeable impact of this work," said Karen Bradley, principal at Highland.

Ms. Hoch has high hopes. "We expect engagement of students in problem solving, collaborative activities and critical thinking around math," she said. "Those are lifelong skills that will benefit them in the real world. We will also see students who can persevere, keep working when they're stuck. Those would be huge positive impacts."

SMART

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phasizing teacher clarity. "They share expectations and measures with students. Professional development is completely aligned with school improvement and curriculum and instruction," she said.

Highland School Principal Karen Bradley noted, "The most significant work being done is in the areas of 'unpacking' the standards so teachers are very clear about what they are teaching, how it falls in a learning progression, and what success for students looks like."

At the junior-high level, the process has an added focus. "There are two key domains of the school's work that are being targeted within the

SMART school improvement process: SEL and math," said Old Orchard Junior High Principal Greg Hanson.

"What we are working on is trying to get people to make the connection between a leading indicator of behavior, such as defiance or conflict, and the lagging indicator of SEL growth," Mr. Hanson said. He noted that the RULER program begun last year has provided tools to help students manage social and emotional issues in school.

"The best outcome of the SMART process this year is for everyone to realize that good intentions and wishful thinking are not substitutes for targeted improvement strategies and adult learning," he added. "My hope is people realize improvement doesn't come easy."

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

HIGHLIGHTS is written and produced by Complete Communications, Inc. Skokie, IL.



Welcome, new teachers!

New teachers for the 2019-20 school year include (from left) Jacob Ninan, 7th grade language arts, Old Orchard Junior High School; Anakin Morris, drama, Old Orchard; Adlin Dominguez, EL/bilingual Spanish resource, Jane Stenson Elementary School; Jennifer Jeon, speech/language pathologist, Stenson; Hannah Berkowicz, 3rd grade, Stenson; Jane Berg, 3rd Grade, Devonshire Elementary School; Savannah Hemminger, music, Devonshire; Danny Alvarez, culinary science, Old Orchard; and Eric Robb, special education, Old Orchard. Not pictured is Rebecca Silverman, health, Old Orchard.

New administrator has been a familiar face

As District 68 officials attended conferences last year on school improvement (*see story, page 1*), they expected to gain knowledge they would bring back to district schools. They did indeed learn, but they also gained a colleague.

At those meetings, they encountered Brian Ritz. Mr. Ritz, a consultant for the Lombard-based Consortium for Educational Change, had expertise on the SMART goals process. Often, they would sit together.

"After a while, they asked if I would consider a full-time job," Mr. Ritz said. He accepted and became the district's first coordinator for curriculum and school improvement.

In his consulting work, he "helped districts and schools establish goals and employ data to see how they're doing," Mr. Ritz said. That's what he's now doing for District 68.

A former math teacher, Mr. Ritz is working with Dr. Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, to introduce the SMART process in each school building and to keep its first product, the new math curriculum, on track.

"My previous experience was with a lot of districts, so this has been quite a change," he said. "So far, it's been great. This is a district with a team approach. We're trying to set up kids to be successful."

* * *

In other administrative changes, Robyn Huemmer, former principal of Old Orchard Junior High School, takes over at Jane Stenson Elementary School, replacing Sue O'Neil, who retired. Greg Hanson, former assistant principal at Old Orchard, replaces Dr. Huemmer. Alison Jenski moves from dean of students at Old Orchard to assistant principal. Her previous position was eliminated and replaced by a second assistant principal, Christopher Robinson.

Substitute teachers wanted

School District 68 is seeking substitute teachers for the 2019-20 school year. Individuals who qualify can earn daily pay, choose which days they wish to work, and contribute to the success of our students.

Full-day pay for substitutes in District 68 is \$120; half-day rate is \$60. After 50 work days in a school year, the daily rate increases to \$135. Substitutes must pass a criminal background check, including fingerprinting, at their own expense. Substitutes must also hold a valid license or be in the process of obtaining one.

To learn more or to apply, visit <http://www.skokie68.org/personnel/substitute-teachers>.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

I am excited to share that the Skokie 68 Board of Education has approved a new position, Coordinator of Family Services and Engagement. A goal of our 2018-2022 Strategic Plan was to strengthen school, community, and family

connections by focusing on family engagement.

The idea of creating a position focused on family engagement generated an enthusiastic consensus during strategic planning discussions. This addition will help address three of our goal areas: Focus on Whole Child; Cultural Responsiveness, Equity, and Inclusion; and Communication and Engagement.

The Coordinator will help develop and implement a comprehensive program to increase engagement by providing families with learning opportunities and resources to promote their children's academic and social success. The Coordinator will work to involve all families in program activities, with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse family groups, as well as other underrepresented communities.

I am even more excited to announce that we have identified the ideal candidate for this new position and that she is a familiar face in District 68. At its Oct. 17 meeting, our School Board approved the hiring of Diana Juarez. Ms. Juarez has been Director of the ELL Parent Center for the last 6.5 years.

Ms. Juarez earned her Bachelor's Degree in Communications from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Master's Degree in Linguistics from Northeastern Illinois University. She worked as an Outreach Coordinator for the Latino



Diana Juarez

Resource Center at Chicago State University for seven years. Throughout Ms. Juarez' professional career she has made it her mission to help families help their children succeed. Ms. Juarez also serves on the Board of Directors for Turning Point Behavioral Health Care Center in Skokie.

Through her leadership the Center has continued to grow as an excellent resource for ELL parents. The Center supports

those parents in advocating for their children's academic achievement. The Center offers English classes, access to community services, and workshops. Programs are crafted to meet parent needs and encourage their involvement and leadership in the community at large. Ultimately the Center strives to provide the skills and tools to navigate the U.S. educational and health systems.

Through Ms. Juarez' work with the Center she engages with parents, as well as with a host of Village entities and community resources, and is keenly aware of the challenges parents in our community face. The knowledge and experience that Ms. Juarez has gained while working in the Skokie community, along with her warmth and compassion for families, make her the perfect fit for this new role.

Ms. Juarez is slated to start in her new role after the first of the year, giving the ELL Parent Center Governing Board time to identify her replacement. Once her replacement is hired, Ms. Juarez will have the opportunity to help that person learn their new role and ensure a seamless transition, so that the Center can continue to provide high-quality service to ELL parents from member districts.

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.