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IN BRIEF is published three times a year by Skokie School District 68.

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Student musicians in the Old Orchard Junior High band played a concert in February.

Junior high musicians to meet, play with working professionals

The Old Orchard Junior High band and orchestra concerts in May will feature something special. Sitting among the student musicians and playing along with them will be professional players from the Chicago Philharmonic.

“The kids are excited about the prospect but they’re a little nervous,” said OOJH band director Julie Liebman. “I have to admit I’m a little nervous myself at the thought of conducting professional musicians.”

The concerts will be the culmination of a series of master classes and rehearsals in which Philharmonic players will provide instruction and mentoring for students.

“We’re approaching this as a pilot program that we hope to expand to other

schools, primarily in areas where there is a greater need for outside resources and where we can make a significant difference in students’ lives,” said Chicago Philharmonic Executive Director Donna Milanovich.

OOJH has developed a relationship with the orchestra through its “Families to the Phil” program. Students and their families receive free tickets to Philharmonic concerts at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at Northwestern University in Evanston. Schools are usually offered 20 free tickets, but the program has been so popular at OOJH that when additional tickets were requested, the orchestra was happy to provide them when it could.

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Three new administrators set for 2015-16

District 68 welcomes three new administrators who will take up their positions July 1, 2015.

Margaret (Peg) Lasiewicki will be the new director of student services. She is replacing Jac McBride, who will retire at the end of this school year. Lasiewicki is principal at John G. Conyers Learning Academy, the therapeutic day school and early childhood center in Palatine District 15. She has worked there for 15 years, the last 11 as principal.

Before that she taught for four years in a 7th grade self-contained class for students with emotional and learning disabilities in District 15 and for two years in a junior high self-contained class in the Northwest Suburban Special Education Organization.

Lasiewicki worked closely with District 68 Supt. James Garwood when he was deputy superintendent in District 15.

“Dr. Garwood is such a strong leader and I respect him immensely. I am honored to be working with him again in such an outstanding school district,” Lasiewicki said.

“It is clear that District 68 is a student-centered district and will do what is best for all students,” she added. “I am excited for this next step in my career and to be working in such a great district.”

Hal Schmeisser will become principal at Devonshire School next year. He comes to District 68 from Attea Middle School in Glenview District 34, where he has been assistant principal for three years. Before that he was a teacher and administrator at Edgewood Middle School in Highland Park. He will be replacing Randy Needelman, who will be the next principal at North Park Elementary, an independent school in Chicago.

“The beliefs and values of District 68 and the Skokie com-

munity deeply align with my own,” Schmeisser said. “The diversity of the district and community provide a unique educational environment for both students and adults to learn and grow. Inquisitive and caring students, dedicated teachers, supportive parents and engaged community members make Devonshire an incredible school with a rich history.”

The third new administrator is Ryan Berry, who has worked as director of business services since January 2011. He will become chief school business official, replacing Beth Millard, who is retiring after 33 years in the district.

Berry said his new position means added responsibility. “I will be overseeing more departments and more people than I currently do,” he said.

“Beth has done a great job mentoring me,” he added. “I think it will be a very smooth transition.”

Four candidates on the ballot for April 7 board election

District 68 voters will choose three school board members in the April 7 election. Three current members—Richard Berk, Katrina Bell-Jordan and Darius Zakeri—are each running for a second term and have been endorsed by the district’s nominating committee.

The committee interviews interested candidates and makes recommendations to the public. It includes representatives from all four district schools, and a community member with no children in the district. The nominating committee seeks to identify qualified candidates who will represent the interests of the entire community, rather than advocating for personal agendas.

The board consists of seven members who live in the

district and serve four-year terms. Ordinarily, three are elected in one odd-year election and the other four are elected in the next odd-year election.

“Voting for our school board members is an investment in the future of our children,” said Meghan Espinoza, president of the Old Orchard Junior High PTA and chairperson of the nominating committee. “I hope everyone will participate in this important task on election day.”

Aside from Espinoza, the members were Frank Alkyer, Pazit Burstin, Karen Koehler-Davis, Edie Hertel, Margo Jacquot, Jason Malina, Lisa Omori, Chris Rivero, Carima Salameh, Kari Susens, Christine Toy and Allison Zidek.

A fourth candidate, Menucha Levy, is also running.

Y.O.U. leads new after-school program

A new program that focuses on academic enrichment and social-emotional learning is getting under way at Old Orchard Junior High School. The program is led by Y.O.U. (Youth Organizations Umbrella), a youth development agency that has worked for years in Evanston schools and recently expanded to Niles Township.

Two Y.O.U. staff members working at the school will direct an after-school program from 3:20-6 p.m. five days a week. With an emphasis on teamwork, activities are organized around leadership, health and nutrition, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), art and sports. The program addresses students' social and emotional needs so they can succeed in school and in the community.

"There is no question that our youth are growing up in a socially complex world. Y.O.U. helps build social maturity that is age-appropriate, from our 3rd graders to our 12th graders," said Y.O.U. Niles Township director Brian Williams. "We help kids build healthy, positive relationships with each other, with adults and with their families."

OOJH staff will identify students who can benefit most from the program. This year, only 8th graders are expected to take part in the after-school program, designed in part to help them make the transition to high school.

Y.O.U. expects about 20 students to take part this year, based on experience at Lincoln Junior High School in District 69, where it runs a similar program. Next year, it will be open to students in all three grades, and about 50 are expected to attend regularly. "If more kids sign up, Y.O.U. will add more staff as needed. We'll take as many as are interested," said Robyn Hawley, OOJH principal.

Students are expected to attend at least three days per week, leaving time for them to participate in other after-school activities if they wish.

"Our program will serve as an extension of the school day," said Seth Green, Y.O.U. executive director. "We will provide daily academic assistance, enrichment activities structured to advance college and career readiness, and life skills education that promotes health and personal development."

The program is free, but parents must agree to attend parent nights, share information and help

their children make the most of the opportunity. The Y.O.U. staff spend time building relationships with parents and caregivers. "The idea is to get the whole family engaged and involved," Hawley said.

Besides the activities that take place at school, the program will also give students opportunities to meet with business and professional mentors. Y.O.U. can provide clinical counseling when needed as well.

In addition to the after-school program, Y.O.U. is offering a nine-week full-day summer program to current 5th, 6th and 7th graders that will include programming offered during the regular school year, along with field trips and recreational activities.

Y.O.U.'s activities in Skokie began in 2013 at Lincoln Junior High. The idea for that partnership came from staff at United Way North-Northwest, who identified a gap in services in Skokie and connected Y.O.U. and District 69.

In 2014, Y.O.U. proposed a similar program to District 68. Y.O.U. staff met with Hawley and Supt. James Garwood to discuss student needs, identify gaps in existing services and put together a collaborative plan. Y.O.U. and District 68 then submitted a joint application for a 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grant through the Illinois State Board of Education, which receives federal funds.

Y.O.U. was awarded \$504,000 to run after-school and summer programs at OOJH and three other schools in the area. The grant is renewable for up to five years. Overall, Y.O.U. funding comes from a variety of sources, including federal, state and municipal agencies, foundations and private individuals.

In its partnership with District 68, Y.O.U. will handle administration, implementation, fiscal management, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of the after-school and summer programs. OOJH will help identify and recruit students and families, provide academic data and furnish facilities.

Williams will oversee the program at OOJH and other Niles Township schools from his office at Niles North High School.

Green said, "Since our initial expansion, we have built strong partnerships within the Skokie community, collaborating with community organizations for an even greater impact on youth and families."

IN BRIEF

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Board of Education meetings are held at 6:30 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. You are invited to attend.

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

Musicians

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“We love it because it’s such a family activity, and that includes families who don’t typically go to classical music concerts,” Liebman said. “One mom told me her son said what he wanted for his birthday was tickets to a Chicago Philharmonic concert. How many junior high students would say that? I told the Philharmonic, they provided tickets for the whole family and just rolled out the red carpet.”

“Old Orchard teachers and students have been very responsive and enthusiastic, and the teachers and students have shared their appreciation with us through emails and letters,” Milanovich said. “This enthusiasm piqued our interest.”

Liebman and OOJH orchestra director Ingrid Nevinger wanted the professional musicians to work with students and serve as mentors. It took time and a lot of planning, but “together we developed a program we think is meaningful, educational and fun for all involved,” Milanovich said.

The plan begins with a Chicago Philharmonic concert at Pick-Staiger on April 19. OOJH will receive 50 free tickets to the event.

Philharmonic musicians will visit the school over the following two weeks and hold master classes for students in the band and orchestra. Professional

players will work intensively with groups of students who play the same instruments.

Most of the Philharmonic players teach in some capacity already, and the master classes will be taught mainly by players who live in or near Skokie.

The OOJH band will play its spring concert in May, followed a day later by the orchestra. In each case, the musicians from the Chicago Philharmonic will be there playing along with the students.

“There is a terrific response and excitement among our musicians about working in the school. We can’t wait to start,” Milanovich said. She said they particularly welcome “the opportunity for real relationships to develop and for the musicians to become role models for the students.”

The Chicago Philharmonic hopes to expand the program to other Chicago-area schools. Support and funding come from Philharmonic backers, including the Charles and M.R. Shapiro Foundation, J.W. Pepper and Wintrust. District 68 is enlisting local support of its own. “We want to sustain this for at least the next five years,” Liebman said.

The OOJH band concert under the direction of Julie Liebman will take place at 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 12 at Old Orchard Junior High School, 9310 Kenton Ave. The string orchestra concert, conducted by Ingrid Nevinger, will take place at 7 p.m. May 13 at the school. Both concerts are open to the public.