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

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Early Childhood Center thrives, adds ELL class for next year

Children in District 68 preschool classes studied a lot of things during the 2013-2014 school year, but one of their favorite subjects was penguins. Next year they may learn how to say “penguin” in Assyrian, Urdu, Spanish and a variety of other languages. That’s when the district plans to launch a new preschool program at the Early Childhood Center (ECC) for 4-year-olds who are learning to speak English.

With so many families coming from other countries, the district will pilot a preschool program for English language learners (ELL). That’s in line with the most recent strategic plan goal to “ensure kindergarten readiness for all students.”

District 68 has offered a tuition-based preschool program since 1973, and began delivering its own special education services to preschoolers in 2010. (Before that, pre-kindergarten special education had been provided through the Niles Township District for Special Education.)

Some preschool classes are made up of students whose parents pay tuition while others are only for special education students with IEPs (individualized education plans). Still others are “blended” classrooms, where children with developmental delays learn and interact with children in the general education program. All preschool students play together, have music



Preschoolers' interest in penguins last year became a classwide learning opportunity.

class together, and take the bus together.

As preschool teacher Katie Colianne pointed out, “You could come into my classroom and you wouldn’t know who’s in gen ed and who’s on an IEP.”

ELL in District 68

Now, with ELL students in district schools outnumbering those in special education, the time is right to add ELL to the preschool mix.

“Schools are a reflection of their com-

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Summer construction adds space, security

Construction has begun at both Devonshire and Highland schools to add approximately 1,600 square feet at each building over the summer. While the additional space will be used for several purposes, the primary reason for the projects is to create secure vestibules at the entrances to the buildings.

“We recognize that in this day and age there is an increased need for security,” said Beth Millard, District 68 assistant superintendent for business. “All the experts we hear from tell us that the first line of defense is a secure vestibule.”

The district already employs

vides a small, locked area where visitors can wait until they receive a pass without actually entering the building.

According to Board President Una McGeough, “The board voted to authorize the enhancements to our already good security measures in response to recommendations following a security audit of all our schools with Skokie police and fire department representatives. I believe that the Board has struck a good balance between being thoughtful and proactive about appropriate security measures, without going overboard.”

The other two district schools—Old Orchard Junior

on the front of each building. Besides the security vestibule, the additions will house new offices and conference rooms. In the process, existing space inside the schools will be freed up for classrooms.

“We were pleased that the design process added much-needed space to the buildings in addition to the increased safety, making it a wise use of district financial resources,” McGeough said.

Both Highland Principal Leslie Gordon and Devonshire Principal Randy Needlman agreed that, while enhanced security is the primary reason for the additions, more space for meetings and instruction will be welcome in buildings that are now close to capacity.

“We’ve been looking at how we can best use the space that’s available and we’re excited about the additional instructional space we’re getting,” Millard said. “Right now space is at a premium and this will take some of the pressure off at those schools.”

Other improvements being carried out over the summer include improving emergency communication capabilities at the schools, adding some security cameras and applying safety film on some doors and windows to make them shatter-resistant.

Additionally, a long-standing issue with an electrical feed at Devonshire will be resolved and the track at the junior high will be renovated.



Architect's rendering of the addition at Highland School.

the Raptor system to conduct speedy background checks from state and federal databases on visitors who show up at any of the schools. After a visitor's ID has been checked and cleared by Raptor, that person is issued a badge which must be worn while in the building and turned in before leaving.

Adding the vestibules pro-

High and Jane Stenson—are already configured so that adding a second set of doors just inside the main entrance will create a waiting area that requires little further alteration to the building.

At Devonshire and Highland, however, the existing design does not lend itself to such a simple solution, so the board authorized building an addition

Early Childhood Center

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munity and we believe we need to meet community needs in our schools,” said Director of Special Services Jac McBride, who oversees the ECC.

McBride noted that District 68 is succeeding with its existing ELL program, where most students spend about three years getting ELL services before they make the transition into general education classes. For ELL students in most other districts in the state, it takes four to seven years.

However, until now ELL services in District 68 have started in kindergarten. If a child begins an ELL program in kindergarten, three years later she would be entering third grade—a turning point in elementary education when conceptual thinking becomes much more important and language skills are crucial. So if the same child were to start ELL services in preschool, she could probably enter general classes in second grade and have an additional year to get up to speed.

The district has contacted families of ELL students who have siblings of preschool age to inform them about the new program. It has posted information in schools and at the district website (www.skokie68.org), and distributed flyers in several languages. It has also begun taking applications for the program and started screenings in May. “Every parent we talked to said they know other parents who would be interested,” McBride said. Additional screenings will take place in August.

“I hope a lot of families sign up for ELL preschool,” said Colianne, who just finished her third year at the ECC. “We do so much together, and we’re all looking forward to having the ELL students and their families be a part of it.”

The ELL preschool will be housed in the ECC, with classes running for 2½ hours in the morning or afternoon. The district has started interviewing teachers with ELL and early childhood licensing to staff the classes.

The ELL preschoolers will be working with the same “Creative Curriculum” materials used in the other ECC classes.

“Most of my career as a teacher was in early childhood, and I’ve found that using Creative Curriculum captures kids’ interest and provides a variety of different experiences,” McBride said.

ELL Preschool Facts

District 68 is starting a new preschool program for English Language Learner (ELL) students in 2014-15.

- Located at the Early Childhood Center, 9300 N. Kenton Ave.
- Eligible students must be four years old by Sept. 1.
- Morning class from 9-11:30 a.m.
Afternoon class from 12:15-2:45 p.m.
- Transportation will be provided by the district.
- A limited number of students can be accepted.
- Fees will be on a sliding scale.

Only families who live in District 68 can apply for the ELL preschool program. Parents must register their children at the ECC and be interviewed (translators will be available). Parents will be notified if their child meets the eligibility requirements within one week of a developmental and language screening.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, call 847-677-4560.

Now about those penguins...

In 2013-2014, the preschool teachers began using a project approach with Creative Curriculum. Instead of moving from one preordained unit to the next, the monthly themes that they explored grew out of the children’s own interests.

During the year, Kathren McKnight, a preschool teaching assistant who volunteers at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, suggested that the ECC adopt a Magellanic penguin in the aquarium’s collection. When she showed the preschoolers some photos and told them about the birds, it struck a chord.

“They wanted to know where penguins live and what they eat—they were really fascinated,” Colianne said. They named their adopted penguin Floppy. They used a smartboard to research penguins. They transformed their classroom into an aquarium, and invited parents to see their handiwork. Throughout the process, almost without realizing it, they were learning.

“We’re so lucky to have such an excellent early-childhood team. They support each other and know each others’ kids and are so willing to collaborate with parents,” McBride said. “We try to build partnerships with families and that starts with building trust at the early childhood level.”

IN BRIEF

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ECRWSS POSTAL CUSTOMER

Board of Education meetings are held at 7:30 p.m. on the third Tuesday 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.

District's 'strong leader' retires

After a decade as superintendent, Dr. Frances McTague is bidding District 68 goodbye.

McTague is retiring from a 36-year education career that began as a fourth-grade teacher, progressed through special education teaching and included service as an assistant principal and principal on the North Shore before arriving in 1999 as principal of Devonshire School. After three years, she was named assistant superintendent for instruction, and took the district's top job in 2004.

"I've been very fortunate to work in excellent school districts," McTague said. "In District 68 I've worked with the most professional, most dedicated, most child-centered group of teachers and support staff. It just doesn't get any better. We've had outstanding Boards, very involved parents. The District represents what's right about public education."

Board President Una McGeough said, "Fran has been a strong leader, dedicated to improving education and learning for all of District 68's students, and to that end, she has spearheaded many improvements in curriculum and professional development that have had important results for all students. She has fostered and developed District

68's spirit of collaboration and excellence. She is a leader who listens well to others."

During McTague's tenure, the district and its students have changed, with sizable increases in English Language Learners (ELL) and low-income students. She said the district has maintained a high level of student achievement, remained secure financially, upgraded its facilities, and thoroughly updated its curricula. "It's been wonderful to be in a place long enough to carry on a change process, to watch new programs take root and grow," she said.

McTague is particularly proud of the collaboration that resulted in the Niles Township ELL Parent Center, housed in the district. She said the center "helps public education by engaging the family." Watching the center develop and expand has been "a high point of my career," she said.

McTague and her husband, also an educator who retired last year, hope to travel and enjoy their "golden years," adding, "my next adventure is to figure out what to do next."

She believes District 68 will prosper under incoming Supt. James Garwood. She said, "The district is poised to continue to do great things."