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

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District weighs boundary changes to relieve elementary space issues

The District 68 board and administrators are considering changing elementary-school attendance boundaries to address space constraints at Highland and Jane Stenson schools.

“We are seriously thinking of redistricting, mainly to relieve the pressure on Highland,” said Hank Schneider, Board of Education president. “All of the schools have initiatives that require more space, but Highland will be hard-pressed to get through another year.”

“Before we do anything, we want to engage the community in this conversation,” said Supt. Frances McTague. The district has heard from about a quarter of parents on the issue and asked the PTA to discuss it at meetings. “Trend data so far indicates that parents are open to redistricting and think we ought to do it,” McTague said. Schneider added that parents he has heard from are not averse to the idea, “but they want to be clear about why we need to do it.”

Administrators brought the issue to the board’s attention in October, presenting enrollment information and recommending that the board take up the issue. Highland has had the highest enrollment in recent years. This year, for example, it has 383 students enrolled, compared to 357 at Jane Stenson and 313 at Devonshire. District enrollment is approximately 1,700, up by about 100 students over last year.

All three elementary buildings have about the same amount of physical space and each was designed to accommodate three sections per grade level (K-5). However, Devonshire has two grade levels with only two sections and Jane Stenson has one grade with two sections, while Highland has two grades with four sections. Finding space outside regular classrooms for special education, computer labs and other purposes has exacerbated the problem since redistricting last took place 13 years ago.

“Highland and Stenson have been ‘maxed out’ for the past five years, while Devonshire, with the lowest enrollment, has available space,” McTague said. “This year, Highland hit the highest enrollment we’ve seen over this period.”

According to Highland principal Leslie Gordon, “The first issue is that we have no storage space left; we have been using our stage for storage. The bigger problem, however, is that we don’t have flexible space for small groups. We also have moved the special education classes to smaller rooms that are about half-size.” Gordon added that the lunch room is overcrowded and that some staff members have cramped offices—“like our psychologist, who’s working in what used to be a closet.”

At Jane Stenson, said principal Sue O’Neil, “We hired a bilingual Spanish tutor

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Students explore assistive technology

A small group of students from Old Orchard Junior High spent the first part of this year learning about the interface between technology and the human body. Seventeen students in the gifted and talented program met twice a week during science class to participate in Project CARE, a program developed by faculty and staff at Northwestern University and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, in collaboration with teachers at OOHJ.

CARE stands for Cyber-physical Applications for Rehabilitation and Education. The project gives students insights into ways technology can be used to help people with neurological impairments. It gives students access to experts in the field as well as opportunities to make their own contributions. The primary liaison is Eric Perreault, director of the Neuromuscular Control and Plasticity Lab at Northwestern and a District 68 parent.

The students were exposed to concepts ranging from engineering design to neurophysiology. They visited research labs and patient clinics. They designed wheelchair prototypes that can be controlled by people with spinal cord injuries, and presented their findings during a Challenge Day in December 2010.

Now in the second half of the school year, Project CARE has expanded to include nearly all of the 60-plus students in the OOHJ gifted program. “Dr. Perreault wanted to start small and see how it went,” said Ellen Gaffney, who heads the gifted and talented program. “It went so well that when it came time for the second module, we emailed the math and science teachers to say we were looking for more students.”

The larger group will study two programming languages—Python and StarLogo TNG (both free and both web-based)—and then use what

they learn to create projects that tie in with their classroom science studies. They will make two presentations later this year, one to the District 68 Board and another to teachers in Niles Township during an Institute Day in the spring. Participation in Project Care counts toward students’ science grade and they are required to keep up with regular classroom work.

Project CARE is a spin-off of Reach for the Stars, a National Science Foundation program that places graduate students in K-12 classrooms where they collaborate with teachers to

expand the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) curriculum. Locally the program operates out of Northwestern, which has placed graduate students at several area high schools and one junior high school—Old Orchard.

Matt Schuchhardt is the Northwestern student assigned to OOHJ for Reach for the Stars. Since winter break he has been working with Gaffney and Lisa Westman, the other gifted and talented teacher, to design the programming module for the second phase of Project CARE.

“Matt has a background in computer programming, which is an area where I have no real training. This gives me a wonderful opportunity to grow as a teacher,” Gaffney said.

“There are numerous benefits to our students as well, starting with hands-on learning and exposure to experts in areas such as computer-aided engineering and assistive technology. They’re learning concepts that will prepare them well for the computer-related offerings at the high school,” Gaffney added. “Oftentimes junior high students want to know ‘why do we have to learn this?’ With the students in Project CARE, no one has asked that question. They’re creating something that’s real and relevant and completely feasible.”



A Project CARE student tries out a device at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

District web site now more user-friendly

If you haven't checked out the revamped District 68 web site, you should. The district, its schools, and teachers are making far more information available to students and parents, and doing so in a simpler, more user-friendly format.

The district home page highlights upcoming events and provides access to an overall monthly calendar, a community bulletin board, and the Niles Township ELL Parent Center. It also offers payment options and school board news along with quick links to district forms and pertinent policy information.

Users can navigate from the district home page to pages for each of the district schools.

There they can find information about individual schools and connect to individual teachers' blogs. At Old Orchard Junior High, there are additional blogs maintained by each grade-level team.

Teacher blogs contain information about upcoming areas of study, homework, quizzes and projects; teachers can attach PDFs of worksheets or other assignments so students can access them at home. The team blogs offer more general information about curriculum, special events, and expectations for students.

"With the blogs, we went from about 25 percent of our teachers having some kind of web presence

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Boundaries

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and the only space we had to offer her for a classroom was our conference room. We already use the lunch room, library, and teachers' lounge for small-group instruction. We have been pretty creative, but we're using every available space. Now when families come in to meet with a teacher, the meetings are being held in the principal's office, which is very small."

Overcrowding also makes it difficult to staff P.E., music and art classes, and causes traffic-control problems during student drop-off and pick-up.

In December, administrators presented three possible options for alleviating the pressure. "We asked the board a philosophical question: Does it prefer a more large-scale overhaul, or the least disruptive option?" McTague said. "We also have to weigh the impact on student diversity. It's pretty even across all three buildings now, and we'll try not to change that, whatever else we do."

All three options involve adjusting attendance within a triangular area bordered by Skokie Boulevard, Dempster Street and Gross Point Road, where all students currently attend Highland. The triangle has a high proportion of multiple-family apartment buildings.

Highland and Jane Stenson are located toward the outskirts of district boundaries, so getting to and from school for some students involves travel-

ing by car or bus, no matter what the closest school happens to be. "Students who live in the triangle could theoretically attend any one of the district schools," Schneider said. "At our last meeting, the general feeling was that if we're going to do this, let's do it in a way that's least disruptive. The sentiment is that we really need to help Highland in particular, and Devonshire seems to be able to absorb some more students without upsetting the demographic balance we already have."

The administration recommended extending the Devonshire attendance area on the west side of Skokie Boulevard one block north to Davis Street, and moving the ELL kindergarten from Jane Stenson to Devonshire. According to Schneider, the board is leaning toward that option. Given current numbers, that solution would send 358 students to Devonshire, 357 to Highland and 340 to Jane Stenson.

No decision will be made, however, until a more detailed plan has been worked out and district families have a chance to weigh in. Schneider noted, "We'd like to get it done this year. If we have to go another year we would, but it's not desirable."

"Whatever we do, we want to ease the transition for students," McTague said. "We wouldn't separate a younger sibling from an older one. If we're moving children, we'd try to move them with their neighbors. The board is sensitive to the allegiance families may have to a school. That can be powerful and we need to take it into consideration."

IN BRIEF

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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.

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District web site

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to 100 percent,” said Jennifer Anderson, Director of Instructional Technology. “We’ve asked teachers to update their blogs at least once a week, to provide a forward look at what’s going on in the classroom, and some are doing it a lot more frequently. They’re finding that it’s all pretty simple and user-friendly—which was important for getting teacher buy-in.”

The new web site is part of the district’s overall effort to enhance communication with families and the district community. An important component involves reducing the volume of email and paper communications parents receive. “People were being overwhelmed with emails,” said Supt. Frances McTague.

With the new system, parents can keep tabs on what’s going on, or opt to receive email notification when teachers post assignments or new information goes up on the community bulletin board. Families without web access at home—un-

der 10 percent, according to a district survey—will continue to receive paper notifications. “The district will still send emails to parents when there is important information to impart, but the flow will be drastically reduced,” McTague said.

Anderson used web-based tools to create the new web sites and teacher blogs. She will continue to oversee the sites and manage the community bulletin board. She has been working with administrators to develop a communications vision for the district and draft a formal communications plan. “It’s a work in progress,” McTague said.

A note for parents of private school students

If your child attends a private elementary school (K-8) and you reside within the boundaries of District 68, your school may be eligible for Title I funding through the federal government. Please contact Assistant Superintendent Barbara Phillips at (847) 676-9000, so that she can contact your child’s private school to discuss eligibility for this funding assistance.