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Board welcomes two brand new members, one returnee

Three new members have joined the District 68 school board as a result of the April election.

Katrina Bell-Jordan is a professor at Northeastern Illinois University where she chairs the Communication, Media and Theatre department. She and her husband have lived in the district for eight years. They have one child who attends Devonshire School, where Bell-Jordan has been active on the PTA.



Katrina Bell-Jordan

Bell-Jordan said she ran for the board “because of my strong belief that all children can succeed with support and nurturance, and because of a simple desire to contribute to the important work of educating the children in our community.” She wants to gain a better understanding of the district’s needs and goals, and would like to use her teaching and administrative experience to help address important educational issues.

“In my opinion, the strengths of the district are its strong curriculum and instruction and its diverse student body, which taken together will give the children a

solid educational foundation and tools for living in a competitive global society,” Bell-Jordan said. She sees three main challenges confronting the district: economic uncertainty, responding to the role of new media technologies in educating children, and maintaining student engagement and excitement about learning.

Richard Berk, who was a board member during the 1980s when his children attended district schools, returns for a second stint. Berk is a retired oncology surgeon who serves as a surgical consultant at the Northwestern University Health Service and as a cancer program surveyor at the American College of Surgeons. His wife was a teacher at Jane Stenson School until her retirement a few years ago. They have lived in the district for 27 years.



Richard Berk

Berk explained, “I ran again because I still live in the district, I have a vested interest in the quality of education afforded to students here and I have the time to participate. Also, since our children graduated long

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Early childhood special ed program planned

District 68 will launch its own early childhood special education program at the start of the 2011-12 school year. The program is open to children between the ages of 3 and 5 whose families live within the district. It will operate at the Early Childhood Center (ECC), 9300 Kenton Ave., Skokie.

The Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE) provided services for pre-schoolers with special needs at the ECC during the 2009-10 school year. This past year, special education students eligible for classroom placements attended other schools within the township. According to Jac McBride, District 68 director of special services, "When we looked at the number of pre-school students we were serving, we realized we had enough students to fill two classrooms."

With that in mind, the administration and school board decided District 68 could staff and operate the program rather than paying NTDSE to educate district residents in a district facility. The new program will be virtually identical to the previous one and students will continue to receive the same services they were getting from NTDSE. However, the classroom teacher and aides will be district employees.

"We are constantly looking at the needs of our students. Bringing this early childhood special education program into the district enables us to provide a continuum of services from pre-school all the way through eighth grade. It's an effective way to meet the needs of our students," McBride said.

There will be a blended pre-school class from 9 to 11:30 a.m. and an instructional class from 12:15 to 2:45 p.m. The morning program will give children opportunities to play and learn with their peers in the general ECC pre-school program while receiving targeted services in their own classroom. The afternoon program will offer academic and play-based activities in a self-contained setting for children with more pronounced developmental delays. All students will play on the new playground installed last year at the ECC.

Each early childhood class is limited to 10 students, and McBride expects both classes to be filled by the start of school. One teacher will cover both

classes, along with one or more teaching assistants, depending on students' needs. Children who require speech, occupational, or physical therapy will receive those services through the pre-school program.

Unlike the regular pre-school at the ECC, the early childhood special education program is free for families who live in the district. Most children eligible for the program are referred following a screening and evaluation by NTDSE. The screenings are held every month between September and May. All Niles Township school districts participate in developmental screenings for pre-school-aged children.

The new early childhood program follows the launch of the district's special education kindergarten at Highland School last year. That kindergarten classroom can accommodate as many as 15 students, depending on the degree of service required. After the kindergarten year, children enter first grade in their neighborhood schools.

"The special education kindergarten went very well this first year," McBride said. "We hired the teacher who taught the class when it was an NTDSE program. It's been a smooth transition."

With the opening of the special education kindergarten and now the early childhood program, the district will have fewer students receiving services directly from NTDSE. "It allows us to provide a much smoother transition back to district schools, and it's more cost-effective," said Supt. Frances McTague. "The cost of using the co-op has increased, so we're trying to bring back as many of our own children as we can."

Nevertheless, District 68 is continuing its membership in NTDSE. As McBride explained, "We're able provide such high-quality services in part because we remain in NTDSE. They have expertise and a wide variety of specialized services that we simply couldn't provide."

District 68 has scheduled a "meet and greet" for families in the new program on Aug. 24. Parents and students will visit the classroom and meet the teacher prior to the first day of school.

Parents with concerns or questions are encouraged to contact Jac McBride by phone at 847-677-4560 or by email at jmcbride@skokie68.org.

District taps new information technology leader

Technology plays a crucial role in District 68, not just in the classrooms but in the offices as well, and that role will continue to grow in the years ahead. To coordinate services and guide that growth in the future, school officials have chosen Irina Ziemann to fill the newly created post of Director of Information Technology (IT).



Irina Ziemann

"I am thrilled to be joining District 68. I look forward to moving the district further towards the goals of a 21st century learning environment," Ziemann said.

In a sense, Ziemann is coming home. She went to school in District 68 during the 1980s, attending Highland Elementary School and Old Orchard Junior High, and her parents still reside

in the community. "We are delighted to bring one of our own back to the district in a leadership position," said Supt. Frances McTague.

Ziemann went on to obtain a bachelor's degree in finance and organizational management from the University of Illinois in Champaign. She also has a master's degree in educational technology from Harvard Graduate School of Education, as well as an administrative

certificate.

For the past four years, she was the technology director in Elmwood Park School District 401. Before that she served for six years as the technology coordinator at Baker Demonstration School in Evanston. Earlier, she was an educational tech-

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Board members

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ago, I can be more objective regarding issues that come before the board."

Besides getting information from his wife while she was still teaching, Berk has kept up with school matters through district mailings and local newspapers. He says the biggest challenge facing the district is preparing students for rapid change while continuing to teach "the 3 Rs."

Berk said, "District 68's strengths remain what they have been for years: a strong teaching staff with a dedication to students' learning, a supportive administrative staff, an eye to the future that keeps the district aware of the changing milieu of education and its processes, and a diversity of students."

Darius Zakeri has lived in the district for six years with his wife and two children. His older child has been attending Highland School while the younger one will move from the Early Childhood Center to Highland in the fall. Zakeri is a manager at the Chicago Board Options Exchange. He comes from a family of educators and has served on the District 68 strategic planning committee.

Explaining why he ran for the board, Zakeri said, "We will be in District 68 for many years (my oldest is only 7), and I have a personal interest in ensuring they get the best education they can."

He added, "We have really been pleased with the ECC. Both of my children went through the pre-school/pre-K program and the learning and kindergarten preparedness was phenomenal. Class size is a huge priority for this district and in tough financial times, that has remained a priority which I appreciate and my children benefit from."

While Zakeri sees negotiating teachers' contracts as the most immediate issue facing the board, he said, "From what I understand, District 68 has been fortunate to have a professional and respectful relationship between teachers and school board and administration. I am really looking forward to working with all segments and using my personal and professional skills when facing any upcoming issues."



Darius Zakeri

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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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Technology leader

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nologist for two years at Georgetown Day School in Washington, D.C., and worked for four years as a process consultant and systems analyst for the consulting firm Accenture in Chicago.

According to McTague, the board and administration recognize the need to “prepare for the exponential growth of technology applications for both instructional and business operations. New curriculum materials, student achievement data, communications, and business services are now all dependent upon a sophisticated technology interface.”

In January 2011, the district contracted with Revere Group, an IT consulting organization, to assess the technology department and help develop a technology road map for moving the district forward. One of the key recommendations that grew out of the assessment was to bring on board a single leader to oversee the entire technology department.

In that capacity, Ziemann is charged with determining responsibilities and ongoing tasks for the department and supervising existing technology personnel. She will coordinate all aspects of IT within the district, including instructional technology, network administration, student database management, and technical support.

McTague explained, “We must be able to support increasingly advanced technology applications for 21st century teaching and learning, for fluid electronic communication between district stakeholders—especially between students and their teachers—for more efficient business applications, and for more secure informational and data warehousing. Overseeing the interdependence between instructional technology and network capability requires both technical and project-management leadership.”

McTague added, “Irina Ziemann brings both the management and technical expertise to lead our technology department and to ensure efficient and effective technology operations across the district.”