



Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Spring 2020



Dates to remember

See <https://www.sd735.org> for up-to-date information about plans for reopening schools in the fall. See <https://www.sd735.org/calendar> for all events.

July 13—Registration begins for school year 2020-21. See <https://www.sd735.org> for registration for details.

Aug. 24-25—Teacher Institute Days, no school.

Aug. 26—First day of school.

Sept. 7—Labor Day, no school.

Oct. 8—Parent-teacher conferences p.m.

Oct. 9—Parent-teacher conferences a.m., no school.

Oct. 12—Columbus Day, no school.

Board meetings—The Board of Education meets at 7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month at McCracken unless noted. All community members are invited to attend. Meetings also are live-streamed via YouTube with links posted in advance at the district web site. Public comments emailed to contactboe@sd735.org will be made part of the public record.

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Donegan leaves strong legacy

Outgoing Supt. Kate Donegan started in District 73 1/2 as a special education teacher in 1996, became the special education coordinator, then was assistant principal and principal at McCracken Middle School. She has served as district superintendent since 2007.

Kate is also a community member and district parent, having had each of her three sons attend district schools. One now attends Niles North High School.

"I am so grateful for the opportunities I've been given in the past 24 years," Donegan said. "I think about board members, parents, staff and students I have had the opportunity to work with. There are so many wonderful board members I have worked with, that's why this place is as good as it is."

Donegan's contributions to the district have been numerous. While maintaining historical support for salient features such as the band program and experiential education, she re-envisioned and developed strategic plans, the district's new STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) program, professional development in equity and diversity such as the Seeking Educational in Equity and Diversity (SEED)

program, implementation of trauma-informed practices, and the formation of the District's Equity Leadership Team.

She also reached beyond district boundaries to partner with entities such as the Village of Skokie, the Skokie Public Library, the Skokie Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, Niles Township District for Special Education, ED-RED, National-Louis University, and the Illinois Association of School Boards. The Skokie village board declared June 1 "Kate Donegan Day" to recognize her efforts.



Kate Donegan

A board resolution noted, "Donegan's contributions to the academic excellence of our community have been invaluable, and her leadership has provided a strong foundation for the future of District 73 1/2."

Donegan will become superintendent of Kenilworth School District 38 as of July 1.

She believes District 73 1/2 is a special place. "It really is like a small town in an urban setting. For kids who go to school here, the friends they make at Meyer are the friends they have when they are adults. They have experiences that bind them for a lifetime."

Pandemic forces teaching and learning to go digital

Since mid-March when Illinois schools were ordered to close due to the coronavirus pandemic, District 73 1/2 has had to reach students and their families outside the classroom. To do that, the district launched a remote learning program for students and teachers to carry on educational activities from home.

"Like most districts we did not have a lot of

time to prepare, but we already had a very robust remote-learning capability in place," said Becky Mathison, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Students in grades 1-8 were supplied with Chromebooks to use at home and families who lacked internet access were given wi-fi devices to connect from home. "We also had a carefully

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Remote learning

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selected battery of online instruction tools that teachers and students were already familiar with. That was a huge benefit," Mathison said.

The district's existing E-learning program was intended for short-term emergencies such as snow days. "That was a challenge facing all districts, and I think we did a nice job of implementing full-scale remote learning, evaluating it and tweaking it as needed," Mathison said. She added that the district made adjustments based on feedback from parents.

Mathison also noted that the district has been utilizing a standards-based curriculum for years, so conforming to Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) guidelines was feasible, even remotely.

The instructional day ran from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday-Friday. Students were

"Based on their check-ins and reflections, students definitely missed being in school, seeing their friends and their teachers," Kaimakis said. "They loved seeing each other during our morning meetings and that seemed to be a highlight for them."

Joy Di Zillo, a 7th grade English language arts teacher, said her day started with office tasks such as responding to emails, documenting contacts with students and parents, and providing feedback on student work. Then came office hours, when teachers were available to respond to students and parents.

Di Zillo held Google Meet sessions with students who needed one-to-one attention, and twice a week she scheduled optional Google Meets for students to check in, ask questions and receive reteaching on difficult topics. "I found that a lot of students just wanted to say hi and see each other, which is great," she said. "It seemed like many of them were signing in, not because they needed

students as well."

Most students kept up with assignments, Di Zillo said. "And the special education teachers, EL teachers, administrators and support staff worked hard to support students who needed more help. If anything, I think that we hyper-focused on reaching those students because we wanted to ensure they were physically and emotionally safe, and had all the tools and supports available."

She added, "A silver lining is that almost every student reported that one of the best things about the stay-at-home order is that they were getting more sleep!"

Teachers communicated with parents in a number of ways. And staff meetings that ordinarily went on during the school day took place via Google Meet.

"I'm very proud of our teachers," Mathison said. "They worked very hard and collaborated to provide meaningful learning experiences. I know this was challenging for families, but the students seemed to be engaged and parents thanked us for providing lunches, making the technology available, and simply communicating. It's hard to balance, but we tried not to overwhelm them."

The district's technology team, led by Director of Innovation & Instructional Technology Nathan McBride, worked hard to create and maintain the remote learning platform. Besides working with teachers and administrators to make the needed resources available online, they provided devices to students, helped families gain access to the internet, and offered online tech support to teachers, students and parents.

"As a result of remote learning, I feel like I had much more communication and a closer relationship with many of my parents this year than I have in my last 12 years of teaching," Kaimakis said. "It was great seeing my students in their home environments and I think that brought us all closer together as a classroom community."

Nevertheless, Kaimakis continued, "I missed my students and my coworkers. Seeing my students' smiling faces every day on my computer was great and truly made my day, but it just wasn't the same."

Di Zillo agreed. "My husband teaches at the high school, so we were both working from home while also managing our own four children and their remote learning. We had never been busier! I think I can speak for all teachers and parents when I say we can't wait to get back to traditional school!"

"I know this was challenging for families, but the students seemed to be engaged and parents thanked us for providing lunches, making the technology available, and simply communicating."

expected to participate daily and to fill out an online attendance form each day before 9 a.m. If a student's form was not received, a nurse or other member of the school staff checked in with the family.

Teachers posted lessons on their classroom pages within the district website, and emailed students and families each day with a link to their pages and other information. Packets for pre-K and kindergarten students were available for families who preferred hard copies.

Online tools including Seesaw, Flipgrid, Google Meet and the Google Suite of applications enabled students and teachers to interact. Teachers conducted their virtual classes in a variety of ways.

Whitney Kaimakis, a 2nd grade teacher at Middleton School, hosted daily meetings. "We had sharing time, daily announcements, the students played games together and they listened and discussed the picture book of the day. From there, small groups of students remained for guided reading."

help with the academics but because they missed seeing their friends and teachers."

Still, academics were at the heart of remote learning. Di Zillo explained, "First, there are must do activities that specifically supported student growth on our priority learning standards. These included reading, writing and grammar skills lessons, a research project, independent reading and a whole-class novel. ISBE also recommended that middle school students have a variety of optional enrichment activities, so we created activities that students could choose to do. These provided additional reteaching to students who needed more work in some area, or enrichment for students ready to explore reading and writing on a deeper level."

Wrapping up their research projects, Di Zillo said, "My students posted their work on a Google Doc and used the comments tool to provide each other feedback." During class discussions, "we still got to discuss big ideas together. As we got used to remote learning, I added fun engagement tools with

Longtime staff members retire

Mary Jane Amato was a physical education teacher and coach in Chicago before coming to McCracken 29 years ago. She taught PE and experiential education, served as athletic director and coached girls volleyball, basketball and soccer. "I am proud to say that I, along with Gus Pausz, Mark Petriko and Gayle Fitzgerald, was one of the founders of our experiential education program and also started the Camp MacLean trip, which is still going strong," she said.



Mary Jane Amato

For the past 15 years she has been the McCracken school counselor. "The hardest part of retiring during this pandemic is ending my career without getting a chance to say goodbye the way I would have liked," Amato said.

Maureen Even has been a special education teacher in District 73½ for 36 years. "I started as a student teacher in 1983 and never left the district. [Former superintendent] Dr. McCracken hired me and I found my forever job!" she said.



Maureen Even

She served on several leadership teams, was an active member of the teachers association and participated in work that led to McCracken School being awarded Blue Ribbon status by the Illinois State Board of Education.

She remembers "working on the first referendum many years ago. I saw how the community came together for the good of the students and the future of the district. We were able to partner with residents and work together with a common goal."

Retiring during a pandemic "is a very strange way to end my teaching career," she said. "I have worked with so many wonderful students over the years who have taught me how to be a better teacher. Now I am thankful for the technology that is available to allow me to continue to connect with and 'see' my students. We are all in this together!"

Persephone Kelly has taught kindergarten for 32 years in District 73½. During that time she served on numerous committees at both the district and building level, mentored student teachers and new teachers, and was the McMEA building representative for Meyer School.



Persephone Kelly

"I've spent more than half my life teaching here and have formed many close ties and friendships with colleagues and families," Kelly said. "I never imagined that my last year of teaching would end during a pandemic. I miss being with the children and I think that's the hardest part of this situation for me. I am very sad that I cannot say goodbye to my wonderful students and families in the way that I would like to. The memories that stand out the most for me are my students' faces of wonder and excitement when they discovered or learned something

new. That makes my day!"

Sally Maurer began as a teacher in Michigan City, Ind., and then worked as a math consultant for a publishing company in New York. She came to District 73½ 24 years ago, working as a substitute teacher and reading tutor at Middleton School, and as a receptionist and then a teacher for kindergarten art, PE and music at Meyer.



Sally Maurer

"I'll never forget the absolute joy I felt when I moved my office and equipment into the new addition at Meyer School," Maurer said. "For the first time I had a real art room and a beautiful new gym with lots of storage. It was a dream come true!"

Now, she said, "I am so disappointed that I wasn't able to finish the year with my 109 students. None of us had any idea that March 13 would be our last day together. I am very grateful that I've been able to keep in touch with most of them through remote learning. It's been a challenging time for all of us."

Debbie Mosher began her career in District 73½ in 1988 and taught 4th grade for all but the first year. Outside the classroom, she served on numerous committees and participated in several districtwide initiatives.

She also served as president of McMEA, the District 73½ teachers association, for 12 years. "This gave me the wonderful opportunity to collaborate with our union members, administration, the school board and community members," she said.



Debbie Mosher

"I did not envision that my final year would take place during a worldwide pandemic, but who does?" Mosher said. "It has made this year more challenging in that I haven't had all the time I wanted with my students and my colleagues. However, I know that when we have moved beyond this time, I will plan something special for my students, and I will meet up with my friends from school. I have met the most wonderful students, staff members and families in my time here and it is going to be very difficult to leave."

Barb Yablonsky has worked in District 73½ for 30 years as the administrative assistant and scheduler at McCracken. "When I started here, I was actively involved in the PTA and all three of my children were attending Middleton School," she said. "They are now all in the 30s. Once I retire and the whole virus thing is under control, I plan on being a full-time grandma. I will be making lots of trips to Michigan to visit my daughter's family and to Krakow, Poland, to visit my son and his family. I've had a really great time working here and have made lots of life-long friendships."



Barb Yablonsky

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District News

Interim leaders named for upcoming school year

The District 73½ school board has approved a plan for transitional leadership during the 2020-21 school year.

With the departure of Supt. Kate Donegan to take effect July 1, the board has hired a husband-and-wife team of retired former superintendents, Dr. John Correll and Ellen Correll, to run the district on an interim basis. The Corrells are currently serving in a similar interim capacity in Antioch School District 64. Prior to that, John Correll was superintendent for the Salt Creek School District 48 in Oak Brook, and Ellen Correll was superintendent for Grayslake School District 46 for 12 years.

“Our consultant gave us a fantastic choice with the Corrells,” said Board President Nicholas Werth. “They stood out and connected with the board. We really look forward to working with them.”

The board also has chosen Dr. Dawn Green to assume the role of interim director of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Becky Mathison is leaving the position to move to West Northfield School District 31. Green is currently interim superintendent in LaGrange School District 105, and has served as superintendent/curriculum director in Palos Heights and Somonauk.

Werth said the board will commence its search for a per-

manent superintendent in the fall, assisted by the Libertyville-based educational consultants B.W.P. and Associates. B.W.P. assisted with the searches for interim superintendent, interim curriculum director and Middleton principal.

District to issue \$5 million in bonds

The school board has approved the intent to issue \$5 million in working cash bonds to pay for a range of needs. Those include the district’s share of the proposed addition to Molloy School, part of the Nilus Township District for Special Education (NTDSE); some general operating costs; and maintenance in all three district school buildings. Expected maintenance projects include bathroom renovations at Middleton and McCracken Middle School, addition of a boiler at Meyer School, and roof repairs at all three locations.

In a memo to the board, Anthony Ruelli, the district’s chief school business official, said the timing is good for the bonds because interest rates are low. “These bond proceeds would significantly help the district and allow us to continue to provide a safe environment for staff, students, and the community,” he wrote.

The bonds’ principal and interest will be repaid with property taxes. Ruelli estimated that the sale would increase taxes on a \$300,000 home by about \$11.

District 73½ guiding principles

- ◆ Our schools will support and inspire our students
- ◆ Our students will be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers
- ◆ Our community will demonstrate integrity and respect
- ◆ Our graduates will help make the world a better place