



Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

FALL-WINTER 2024



Dates to Remember

Check *The Weekly* newsletter at SD735.org/newsletters for current district information.

DEC 23-JAN 3: Winter Break

JAN 6: School Resumes

JAN 8: Policy Committee Meeting, 5 p.m., McCracken Middle School

JAN 14: Board of Education Meeting, 7 p.m., McCracken Middle School and Livestream

JAN 15: Finance Committee Meeting, 6 p.m., McCracken Middle School

JAN 20: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Observed (No School & District Closed)

JAN 22: Finance Committee Meeting, 7 p.m., McCracken Middle School

Board meetings: The Board of Education meets at 7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of the month at McCracken Middle School unless noted otherwise. The community is invited to attend. Regular meetings are livestreamed on YouTube; the link is posted in advance at SD735.org/boe. Public comments emailed to contact-boe@SD735.org will be made part of the public record.

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McCracken teacher prepares to bring the world to the classroom

It may be said that teachers bring the world into their classrooms. This year Melissa Arkin will have an opportunity to do exactly that.

Arkin, who teaches Spanish at McCracken Middle School, has received a Global Learning Fellowship from the Washington, D.C.-based NEA Foundation. According to the foundation, the purpose of the year-long fellowship is to provide public school teachers with “the knowledge and skills to integrate global competency into their daily classroom instruction, advocate for global competency in their schools and districts, and help students to thrive in our increasingly interconnected world.”

Now in her ninth year teaching in District 73.5, Arkin embraces the goals of the program. In her application, she had to explain how she would apply the lessons of the fellowship in her teaching. The program’s 10-day field trip to Costa Rica in 2025 will be a particular point of connection.

“I’m going to be so excited, thrilled beyond belief,” she said of the opportunity. “I teach a unit in 7th grade comparing the U.S. to Costa Rica. I’ll be able to tell my students, ‘This is what I saw.’ It’s mind-blowing what I might be able to do.”

The program brings together teachers from all 50 states—more than 500 have participated since it began in 2011. Arkin applied for the fellowship last spring, and learned she had been accepted shortly before this school year started.

Besides the field trip, it entails an orientation meeting that was held in October; online seminars and a capstone project, all with an

emphasis on understanding global perspectives. That’s a major plus in a district where families come from diverse backgrounds and speak dozens of different languages. “In the program, we discuss cultures, language and citizenship,” she said. “We learn about differences, but celebrate the commonalities.”

Arkin learned of the program when reviewing professional development opportunities in her role as a mentor to younger teachers. “I applied for the fellowship, never in a million years thinking I was going to get it,” she said.

Seeking out learning experiences and sharing what she’s learned with her mentees and her students fits a lifelong pattern for Arkin. “Teaching is something I always enjoyed doing, even as a child,” she said. Although she is not a native Spanish speaker, she holds a bachelor’s degree in Spanish and a master’s in linguistics, along with her teaching degree. She also serves as a translator for the district.

She is particularly keen to learn more about how teaching is done in Spanish-speaking Costa Rica, and she anticipates that the first-hand experience will help shape her curriculum in the future.

Above all, she is sure her experience will prove to be a boon for her students. “I think they’re going to be better at global competencies and as global citizens,” she said. “I always try to bring the students’ cultures into the classroom—to show that the world is connected, to embrace those connections, to open their minds.”



Ms. Melissa Arkin

Welcome to our new District 73.5 staff!



Ninhursag Avakian
Middleton Inclusion
Specialist



Nicole Axon
Meyer
Paraprofessional



Kera Bridges
McCracken
Paraprofessional



Sarah Cardenas
Middleton
Administrative Asst.



Jacqueline Chis
McCracken
Interventionist



Greg Cunningham
Middleton Recess
Supervisor



Owen Douglas
Middleton Special
Education Teacher



Dr. Perry Finch
ECE, Special Education
& MTSS Coordinator



Jennifer Frankfurter
Middleton Special
Education Teacher



Garrett Gloede
5th Grade
Teacher



Mary Hallerduff
Meyer Special
Education Teacher



Paula Kim
McCracken
Paraprofessional



Julie Kudzia-Serilla
Meyer Lunch/Recess
Supervisor



Nico Mirabelli
McCracken
P.E. Teacher



Bethany Mullins
Meyer
Administrative Asst.



Michael Nelson
Meyer
Paraprofessional



Chizolum Nwanko
Meyer
Paraprofessional



Elizabeth Parker
Middleton
Asst. Principal



Mia Stavrou
2nd Grade
Teacher



Stefani Tenenbaum
Middleton Reading
Specialist



Cassidy Tennyson
1st Grade
Teacher



America Torres
Administrative Asst. to
Superintendent & BOE



Kathy Vaselopoulos
Middleton Special
Education Teacher



Arait Zamudio
Middleton
Recess Supervisor

Superintendent's Greeting

Over the Thanksgiving break I took time to reflect upon all I am truly thankful for. On a personal note, the obvious came to mind: I am thankful for family, friends, and good coffee!

As I reflected on the District 73.5 community—our district, schools, staff, families, and partners—I realized how truly grateful I am to work alongside so many talented people who genuinely love our students.

However you spend the winter season, may the days be filled with good friends, family, and joy.

Thank you for your commitment to the children of Skokie School District 73.5.

Sincerely,

Dr. Zipporah Hightower

District and school administrators bring new leadership

Dr. Perry Finch brings a wealth of experience to a sizable list of responsibilities as District 73.5's newest administrator.

Since last summer, Finch has been Early Childhood, Special Education & MTSS Coordinator for the district. "I will be leading the planning and implementation of the three Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) offered to general education students in both academics and social emotional learning," Finch said. (For more information about MTSS see www.sd735.org/cia/mtss).

He added, "As coordinator of early childhood education I will help organize the preschool special education assessments for the youngest learners in our district. My special education coordinator role takes me where I am needed in all three of our schools as these needs arise."

He said a thread runs through all three areas: "The common theme among all of my roles is to help teachers and building leaders accurately determine students' individual needs through assessments, and support the development of effective instruction to meet these needs."

Finch spent 17 years at Blackhawk Middle School in Bensenville, first as a behavior interventionist, then assistant principal, then principal for the final 12 years. Before that, he was a special education teacher and then dean of students at a Chicago public high school.

"My near 20 years in educational leadership have given me many experiences," he said. "I have designed successful change-leadership plans, supported the growth of students, teachers, and other administrators and of course have overcome challenges along the way, too."

He's spent a lot of time learning so far. "My greatest challenge in my new role is learning a new organization's culture and gaining the much-needed institutional knowledge of a new district," he said. "I am so grateful for the warm welcome I have received so far from educators, the community and students."



Dr. Perry Finch

Finch wasn't sure exactly what to expect from "a three-pronged job," but he's adjusting comfortably. "I guess a surprise I've experienced is how fun it is to be around preschool and kindergarteners and their teachers," he said. "The entire experience has been very uplifting, and I am grateful for the opportunity to work in such a fine district and community."

He added, "The diversity of this community reflects all of the power and value of the American 'melting pot' that makes our country so unique and magnificent. I look forward to learning, growing and contributing to District 73.5 for years to come."

They don't come any more home-grown than **Kristine Paulson**, the new principal this year at Middleton Elementary School.

Paulson grew up in Skokie, attending District 73.5 schools and Niles North High School. Her mother, now retired, served for years as school nurse at McCracken Middle School.

Given her background, Paulson appreciates what she has in her new job. "Middleton is a really unique and special place," she said. "Our students and our families come from so many different backgrounds, and kids grow up seeing those backgrounds."

She added, "We have staff who were students here. Parents volunteer for lunch support. A lot of staff members wear a lot of different hats. That speaks to how many people care about this place."

Paulson served as an instructional coach in the district for three years before being named principal. Before that, she

taught early grades in the Chicago Public Schools and in suburban Lisle. She lives in Mount Prospect with her family, which includes three school-aged daughters. "I try very hard to keep my mama hat and my teacher hat separate," she said with a laugh.

Paulson's new job fits well with a particular career goal. "I did not apply for a principal job anywhere but here. I wanted to be in a job that has an impact on students," she said. "As a coach, I had an impact—when teachers have what they need, then kids can grow. I knew I wanted to be in a leadership role, to help kids grow."

She wants everyone—students, parents and staff—to feel they belong to a school community. She's confident that most do. "Having worked here for the last three years, I have seen and felt how much passion and care staff have for teaching and learning, and how much passion parents have," she said.

Paulson believes she can help empower students. "I think kids can have a voice in their learning," she said. "I felt that really strongly when I was a student."

One challenge she is ready to take on relates to the diversity among the district's students and families. "We have to be able to teach students to learn and accept differences," she said. "Not all children get that opportunity."

She also believes the post-COVID era presents challenges and opportunities. "I think a lot of things paused during COVID," she said. "We're positioned now to update curriculum, with coaching support for teachers. Curriculum review had to pause during COVID. We're in a great position to have conversations across K-8 to look at materials."

Overall, Paulson is pleased with the reception she has received so far. "I'm grateful for the family outreach and communication, the staff response," she said. The best part of the job so far? "Kids are so fun."



Ms. Kristine Paulson and family

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Concert Band earns Citation of Excellence award

The District 73.5 school community's support for music programs was evident once again this fall when the McCracken Middle School Concert Band received national recognition.

The Foundation for Music Education has awarded a 2024 Citation of Excellence to the band, under the direction of Band Director Cesar Mendoza. The Lubbock, Texas-based foundation supports music education around the country with training, grants and recognition programs.

While McCracken's Symphonic Band, under the direction of Bands Director Chip DeStefano, has been recognized by the foundation before (including earn-

ing state-level honors this year), Mendoza said this is the first time for the Concert Band, which is made up primarily of sixth graders. The group numbers about 50 students.

"More than 140 schools submitted for the citation of excellence," Mendoza said. "It's pretty neat for the younger kids. It really is a testament to the support the program has in the district."

He noted that McCracken was the only school outside of Texas recognized in its category. "Texas is highly thought of around the country," he said. "It's kind of cool that we're up there." He pointed out that most of the bands in the category are made up of seventh and eighth graders.

Band programs compete by sending in two recordings that represent their best work. Mendoza said the recordings are judged on musicianship, balance and cohesiveness. Schools rated among the top 25 percent earn citations.

Mendoza, who has taught at McCracken for the past seven years, said the honor affirms the impressive depth of the district's band programs. "It showcases the level of musicianship happening at all grade levels," he said. "Every group has something to work towards, something to achieve."

For the students, "It means a lot," he said. "In talking to some of the kids, they mention the symphonic band as something they're working toward."

For Mendoza, "It feels really great. I feel really proud of the work that Chip and I are doing. We're helping to elevate the program to a higher standard."

Mendoza thinks the community should also take pride in the recognition. "I'd like people to know just how big of a deal it is to be able to compete with the large Texas programs," he said. "It takes a village—administrators, teachers, parents and students. It's a testament to the great support the district provides for music education."

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Scan the QR code below to view a video interview with Mr. Mendoza and a preview of the Concert Band in rehearsal.



Mr. Cesar Mendoza

District 73.5 Guiding Principles

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