



Young students gain from focus on science

District 68 officials hypothesized that a revamp of the elementary science curriculum would result in more learning for students. So far, in the first year of the change, the results of this real-life experiment are very encouraging.

Instead of having each grade-level classroom teacher teach science as they do literacy, math and social studies, as was done in the past, each elementary school now has a dedicated science classroom and teacher. School officials say this not only creates a focus on inquiry-based learning in science, but also makes it easier for classroom teachers to teach their other subjects.

“Our classroom teachers work very hard to provide rich learning experiences across multiple content areas,” said Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. “Moving science instruction to dedicated science teachers has lessened the workload on classroom teachers, allowing them to concentrate on fewer content areas.”

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Fourth graders (from left) Atalia Haido, Esther Toma, Aaliyah Khalil and Lydia Khalil work on an assignment in the new science classroom at Jane Stenson School.

At the same time, “Our science teachers have done a wonderful job of creating science communities within their science classroom and we are proud of the work they are doing with our budding scientists,” she added. “Students are reporting that they like coming to a dedicated science room, they like the experiments and collaboration with their peers and they say science is fun now.”

Megan Looney, science teacher at Highland School and a four-year veteran in the district who has taught for more than two decades overall, sees students responding very well to the new science structure. “The students are curious, and each day

they enter the science room, they notice new things that other grade levels are studying around the room,” she said.

Heather Peterson, science teacher at Devonshire School, has been with the district since 2001. She thinks it’s been an eye-opening experience for her pupils. “I think the students were surprised to see how much data collecting, analyzing data, literacy and math are involved in science,” she said. “Science is not always the explosions that they may see on the internet.”

Looney said that students are making concrete gains, citing this example: “They have improved their

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Tips, resources for families at 'Parent U'

While their main focus is on students, District 68 officials are increasing their emphasis on helping parents this year as well.

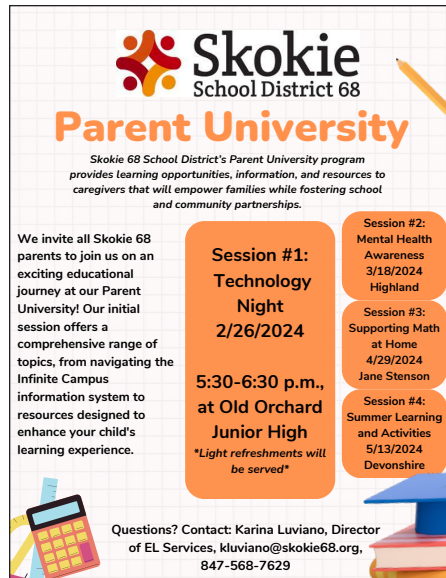
Karina Luviano, director of English Learner services, and Diana Juarez, coordinator of family services and engagement, are spearheading this effort. They planned four "Parent University" sessions this spring to share information and resources with interested families.

The first, "Technology Night," took place in February; the second, "Mental Health Awareness," was in March. Two more are on the schedule—"Supporting Math at Home" and "Summer Learning and Activities."

"Our goal is to provide learning opportunities, information, and resources to families while fostering school and community partnerships," Luviano said. "Ultimately, we want to continue to build meaningful relationships that will positively impact our students' lives."

School officials are reaching out to all district families in a number of ways, by distributing fliers through the schools and Juarez's office, and also via the ELL Parent Center and the district's Bilingual Parent Advisory.

Luviano said the district is asking attendees for their reactions, and responses are encouraging. "The feedback has been positive and include comments like, 'Thank you! I got all my technology questions answered' and 'This is just what I needed support, my child is struggling with mental health,'" she said. "We are definitely making an impact for those families that attend." She noted that, based on comments from the first session, the district offered childcare for the March presentation on mental health,



The flyer features the Skokie School District 68 logo at the top, followed by the title "Parent University" in a large, bold font. Below the title is a quote: "Skokie 68 School District's Parent University program provides learning opportunities, information, and resources to caregivers that will empower families while fostering school and community partnerships." The main text reads: "We invite all Skokie 68 parents to join us on an exciting educational journey at our Parent University! Our initial session offers a comprehensive range of topics, from navigating the Infinite Campus information system to resources designed to enhance your child's learning experience." The central focus is "Session #1: Technology Night" on 2/26/2024, from 5:30-6:30 p.m. at Old Orchard Junior High, with a note that light refreshments will be served. To the right, three smaller boxes list other sessions: Session #2 (Mental Health Awareness, 3/18/2024, Highland), Session #3 (Supporting Math at Home, 4/29/2024, Jane Stenson), and Session #4 (Summer Learning and Activities, 5/13/2024, Devonshire). At the bottom, contact information for Karina Luviano is provided: "Questions? Contact: Karina Luviano, Director of EL Services, kluviano@skokie68.org, 847-568-7629". The flyer is decorated with icons of a calculator, a pencil, and a book.

and hopes to do so for all future sessions.

Turnout so far has been about as expected for a new program, Luviano said. Officials are hoping to reach more families as time goes on. "Although we are not completely basing the success of the program on the number of participants, we do want to expand our reach," she said.

The district is already looking at ways to improve the program, she added. Ideas under consideration so far include offering remote access to sessions and recordings, and offering "science-fair style" presentations

about community resources timed to coincide with other district events such as concerts and parent-teacher conferences.

For more information, contact Karina Luviano at 847-568-7629 or kluviano@skokie68.org.

Science

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ability to analyze data. This means that as we analyze each group's experiment results, students can identify the results that don't seem to fit. Then they pose questions about the conditions that were present during an experiment."

Samojedny and the science teachers are always looking to see what needs to be revised for the future. While it's too early to be sure what should be changed, she said that, once district fifth graders have taken the Illinois Science Assessment this spring, and results are reported in the fall, they will examine that data to see what could be improved.

As part of that review process, Looney noted that the science team has met with a science coach during the year, and that ideas are emerging from those discussions. "Some goals for next year include providing further hands-on opportunities for all grades and room for more student-driven inquiry," she said.

For now, the science teachers are giving the new plan a high grade. Jim Hamilton, the science teacher at Jane Stenson School and a 20-year veteran at the district, said, "We have a lot of young scientists here. Seeing our district has a commitment to teaching our kids science is exciting."

HIGHLIGHTS is a community newsletter published three times a year by Skokie School District 68.

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. All are invited to attend.

HIGHLIGHTS is written and produced by Complete Communications, Inc. Skokie, IL.

District sustains drive to reduce energy use

As they pursue their strategic plan goal of making operations more sustainable, District 68 officials are touting the double benefits of reducing energy use—helping improve our environment while also saving money.

It's what Ryan Berry, the district's assistant superintendent of business services/chief school business official, calls "a win-win." The district has been driving down energy costs in large and small ways over the past few years. For example, an energy audit reported to the school board in January showed that electrical energy consumption in all three elementary schools dropped by more than 20 percent between 2021 and 2023. For Old Orchard Junior High and the Educational Service Center, that number held steady over the same period. The audit also showed decreasing natural gas use in all buildings between 2020 and 2023.

Berry said the district has kept reducing energy at the forefront in all recent projects, including renovations completed last summer at Jane Stenson School and projected renovations upcoming at Highland, Devonshire and Old Orchard schools. He said the district has worked with its energy providers and contractors to add building insulation, upgrade control systems and introduce energy efficient options such as LED lighting. "Little things like that add up over time," he noted.

And there are more improvements to come. The district plans to install solar panels to the roofs at Highland and Jane Stenson, and will add them at Devonshire after that building's new roof is put on this summer. Drilling has also begun at Devonshire to put in a geothermal heat pump system, with plans for a similar system next year at Highland. Since HVAC systems at Jane Stenson are newer than the other two

elementary schools, the district will hold off on geothermal there for now. Berry said the process at Old Orchard would probably have to be done in phases over several years.

The geothermal project holds the promise of greatly reducing energy costs over time, while allowing the district to keep costs in line in the short run by taking advantage of tax incentives and rebates. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, geothermal heat pumps take advantage of constant below-ground temperatures that are cooler than above-ground temperatures in the summer, and warmer in winter, to moderate a building's environment year-round.

Altogether, Berry said, these efforts help the district with its long-term strategies. "The aim under our strategic plan is to reduce our carbon footprint," he said. "The ultimate goals are energy efficiency and sustainability."

'Thoughtful' planning key for new ECC

Any new building or major renovation doesn't spring fully formed from the mind of an architect or builder. Designers and contractors must get clear direction from their clients before creating the final plan.

In the planning of District 68's new Early Childhood Center, the design and build team has been getting that direction in a continuing series of meetings with the superintendent, business manager, operations manager, head of curriculum and Sharon Jacobellis, the district's director of student services.

"I feel like the planning is moving quickly, but very thoughtfully," Jacobellis said. School officials envision a 15,000-square-foot addition to Old Orchard Junior High School that will replace the current ECC. The anticipated cost of \$14.5 million would be covered

within the district's existing bond limits.

Cost is a key part of the ongoing discussions with Chicago-based architectural firm STR Partners LLC. "We know we are handling the taxpayers' money and the school district's budget," Jacobellis said.

There are other priorities as well. "We're thinking about design, but also safety and functionality. I'm thinking about my students and staff," she said. "We're also trying to put lots of elements of 'green' into the project." In that vein, the district wants the design to be inspired by nature, as officials have seen in tours of buildings in other districts.

"Research shows a more tranquil, quiet setting helps with learning," Jacobellis said. "Where colors are more subdued, emotions are more subdued."

Design considerations range from

broad concepts related to learning to specific needs. She noted that the group has discussed where to locate offices, therapy rooms, collaborative spaces, even bathrooms. Looking at classrooms, she said they've considered "How many sinks? What should the flooring be like? Where do kids put wet coats and boots?"

The new ECC is expected to include eight classrooms, and provide space for staff, therapy sessions, meetings and parent education. It's driven by the need for more slots for preschoolers, and by the district's desire to improve upon the preschool experience for all children, regardless of ability. Plans are to have the addition ready by fall 2025.

In the meantime, "We're excited," Jacobellis said. "Our kids deserve it, our community deserves it. I can't wait to actually break ground."

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

Teacher Appreciation Week in Skokie School District 68 starts on Monday, April 29 and runs through Friday, May 3, 2024 with Tuesday, April 30 being Teacher Appreciation Day. Nationally, Teacher

Appreciation is celebrated the following week but since a number of our teachers will be at Outdoor Education with their students, we celebrate early here in District 68 so that all of our teachers can be here to feel the love.

Teachers are one of the most essential components of a high-functioning democratic society, alongside nurses, police, doctors, fire workers, etc., and they are absolutely deserving of our thanks and appreciation. Ask anyone you know to name the most influential people in their lives and you are sure to hear teachers' names mentioned alongside parents.

Teacher appreciation is the acknowledgment and gratitude shown towards educators for their dedication, hard work, and impact on students' lives. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the future by imparting knowledge, skills, values, and care to their students. Recognizing and appreciating their efforts is important to foster a positive learning environment and to encourage them to continue making a difference. As we approach the annual rite of acknowledging teachers this spring, changes in recent years have made appreciating teachers more urgent than ever before.

You have probably seen the news articles on your phone over the last few years about how teaching has become increasingly difficult while teachers' perceptions of the

public's gratitude are at a low point. Teaching has long been an all-consuming and challenging profession, even when taking the generous amount of time off the profession enjoys into account. The experiences of recent years working through COVID, working to address the academic and behavioral fallout of COVID, and culture war attacks aimed at educators, to name a few, have taken an alarming toll. Nationally we are seeing an exodus of teachers from the profession while interest in going into teaching has diminished at most colleges. While we may be doing better locally, District 68 has not been immune to this looming crisis. We have seen more teachers leave the profession in the last few years than I have seen over my 30 plus years in education, and while we are still finding quality candidates, the number of applicants for our openings is less than half of what it once was.

While it is great that so many of us point to teachers as having so much positive influence on our lives, this moment in time we are living through is making it hard for teachers to hear just how much we all owe them for their contributions.

As we recognize our teachers' invaluable contributions, I invite you to join me in expressing gratitude for all that they do for our students. Whether it is a simple thank-you note, a heartfelt message via email, or a small token of appreciation, your support means the world to them. The joy and gratitude you will create by doing so will be much appreciated, both by teachers and by our students as well.

Sincerely,
James E. Garwood, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.