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

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District readies strategies to strengthen student progress

With results of the first-ever PARCC tests released in fall 2015, District 68 administrators see room for improvement and are exploring ways to help lower-achieving students progress academically.

“We’re never completely satisfied with the results on any standardized test,” said Assistant Supt. for Instruction Lisa Schwartz. “Your goal is always to improve, and we have a continuous improvement model in place.”

Mrs. Schwartz discussed assessments at a school board meeting in November. Supt. James Garwood made a follow-up presentation to the board in January.

The PARCC tests measure student achievement against the Common Core Standards—national standards for math and reading intended to replace previous state-created ones. In Illinois, PARCC has replaced the ISAT exams.

The PARCC tests were administered for the first time last spring. When it comes to meeting or exceeding expectations, students in District 68 outperformed the state averages in reading and math at nearly every grade level. Dr. Garwood said, “Educators in District 68 are not satisfied with those results, however, as there is much room to grow when it comes to preparing students academically for the future.”

District officials say factors that affect learning are complex, and improving scores for students who do not meet standards presents a sizable challenge. For example, demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, family mobility and the language spoken at home affect student achievement. “There is definitely a high correlation between high-risk factors and low scores,” Dr. Garwood said, “and the No. 1 demographic factor tied to student achievement is income.”

Dr. Garwood believes children from families with comparatively low incomes can achieve at high levels. However, they often face challenges that many of their classmates do not.

For example, a study from the 1980s found that children whose parents were professionals (doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.) heard an average of more than 1,500 more spoken words per hour than children from more affluent backgrounds. That’s a difference of nearly 8 million words in one year, or a gap of 32 million words by age 4.

Children with less exposure to experiences and who have heard and used fewer words at home have smaller vocabularies than some of their peers. “When they start school they’re already behind,” Mrs. Schwartz said.

Dr. Garwood added that risk factors are

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Early childhood program set to expand

District 68 is planning to make preschool available to more children who need it the most.

Beginning next year, the district will charge tuition on a sliding scale based on income, reducing the cost for families who cannot afford preschool now. The program also will feature open enrollment, so parents can get their children started at age 4. Parents of 3-year-old children who are interested in enrolling will be put on a waiting list in the event that space is available after the 4-year-old enrollment process is complete.

Director of Special Services Peg Lasiewicki said, "Our goal is to reach as many kids as possible and start educating them as early as possible." Dr. Lasiewicki is also director of the district's Early Childhood Center (ECC) at 9300 Kenton Ave.

Supt. James Garwood noted that research shows that experiences through age 5 are critical for a child's development. "What research also tells us is the people who need early childhood education the most can't always afford it," he said. "We need to open up our preschool and get more kids in."

District 68 has three early childhood classrooms, each with its own certified teacher and teaching assistant. Classes run for 2½ hours a day, five days a week and follow the school calendar. There are morning sessions from 9–11:30 a.m. and afternoon sessions from 12:15–2:45 p.m.



The ECC offers outdoor play when weather permits.

ECC adds secure entryway

Over the winter break, District 68 finished a new entryway for the Early Childhood Center like the type of secure entrance in place at other district schools.

Visitors must now pass through two doors to get into the ECC. They must wait at the locked second door until they are cleared by office staff. A new window in the wall between the entry and the office allows staff to see and talk to visitors before buzzing them through the second door into the building.

Two sections serve a mix of general education and special education students; two serve both general education and ELL students (English language learners); and two are for students identified as needing special services by the Niles Township District for Special Education.

Special education placements are determined at an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meeting with parents, NTDSE and district staff. The district is required by law to serve children who have an IEP beginning at age 3, with no tuition charge.

Current enrollment is 83, although that number can change during the year. The ECC could accommodate 100 students, enough capacity to handle increased enrollment due to reduced cost.

The Board of Education has approved a revision to the fee schedule so that families who qualify for the free or reduced lunch program will have access to the early childhood program at a lower cost. The district expects that families who might previously have found the cost prohibitive will now be able to afford the same quality programming offered to those who can afford the full tuition.

Next year, if space is still available, preschoolers would be able to start at any time as soon as they are eligible, rather than having to wait for the beginning of the school year after they turn 4.

School officials say they have begun publicizing the changes, and parents have already started to inquire.

District takes steps to communicate better

District 68 officials say improvements to the district's web presence will quickly deliver information to the school community, while embodying the district's renewed mission and vision.

The revamped website is expected to be online before the end of March.

According to Supt. James Garwood, "We're looking to do all we can to support student achievement. We

want to increase the effectiveness of our communication with the public, primarily parents and teachers, but the broader community as well. We want our website to reflect who we are and what we do: an organization that is about people, serving children."

The first thing you would notice at the revamped site is likely to be the new logo (*see above*), to be featured at the top of the page.

"We interviewed several designers and found one who seemed to understand how we wanted to represent our district," said Technology Director Nancy Battaglia.

Dr. Garwood explained, "The rich, warm earth tones help to convey the diversity of our student body and the design, representing four children holding hands, symbolizes the synergy of cultures we see reflected in our schools."

The logo designer was part of the team rebuilding the website. That team is from Design Suite, a national firm specializing in websites and other online applications for schools. "They do the design work and put all the pieces in place, and then turn it over to us to manage," Mrs. Battaglia said.

The process began in October 2015 when the district surveyed "super-users"—current staff, retired teachers and members of the community who were familiar with the district's web presence.

Respondents said they wanted easier access to staff directories, calendars and lunch menus. They wanted a more standard look from page to page and from school to school. And they wanted more photos.

Professional photographer Jan Beladi, who lives in Skokie and whose children attended District 68

schools, spent a day taking photos at the schools.

Per the survey, the new site will be optimized for platforms including cell phones and tablets as well as computers. It will also offer a general search function and a Google Translate feature on each page.

The new site's content management system

will enable staff members at the district office and at schools to update content and add new material.

Mrs. Battaglia said, "We listened to what parents and staff requested, and I hope they like what we've done."

* * *

District 68's new vision and mission statements are in the same spirit as the transformed website. They were adopted by the school board in October. They read as follows:

Vision: District 68 strives to be a learning community that inspires our students' fullest academic and human potential, encourages continuous improvement, and contributes positively to our diverse, multicultural society.

Mission: 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.

"We wanted to articulate very clearly the guiding vision for our work as a school board and school district," said board President Una McGeough, "so that we could rely upon those statements as a means for evaluating any given proposal or course of action and holding board members, individual employees and the district as a whole accountable."

Board members Katrina Bell-Jordan and Frank Alkyer, along with Supt. James Garwood, developed the statements. Dr. Bell-Jordan is a professor of communications and associate dean at Northeastern Illinois University; Mr. Alkyer is a publisher of magazines covering the music industry.

"I appointed them to be on this committee

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ECRWSS POSTAL CUSTOMER

Board of Education meetings are held at 6:30 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. You are invited to attend.

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Student progress

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not excuses, and school leaders are actively seeking remedies. Dr. Garwood, Mrs. Schwartz and Director of Special Services Peg Lasiewicki believe making preschool available to more families will help (*see story on page 2*).

The district is also revisiting its Response to Intervention (RtI) process. RtI seeks to identify students with learning deficits and behavioral difficulties early on and provide them with tailored support.

“Some students are years behind when they get to us,” Mrs. Schwartz said. “We talk about students making a year’s growth in a year’s time. But if they start out four years behind, even if they make a year’s growth in a given year, they’re always behind. What we’re really expecting from students who are behind is that they make more than a year’s growth every year until they catch up. We’re asking ourselves, what do we have in place to help them?”

PARCC exams are coming up for District 68 students in April. They will differ from last year, when two sets of exams were given at two different times. This year there will be one set of exams. “Potential changes in the test will make

it difficult to compare last year to this year,” Mrs. Schwartz said. “That’s one reason we continue to look at MAP data.”

As before, the district will inform parents about the upcoming tests. Mrs. Schwartz said, “We stress, and our teachers believe, that the best preparation is good teaching, aligned to the standards, every day. That is our focus.”

Communicate better

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because of their expertise in communications and mission/vision statement development,” Mrs. McGeough said.

“The review of the district mission and vision is something the superintendent and board have wanted to revisit for some time,” Dr. Bell-Jordan explained.

The committee began working in August 2015 and finished in the fall. “I am incredibly grateful for and proud of the work done by Katrina and Frank, who carefully considered their knowledge and experience of District 68 in crafting excellent draft statements for consideration by the full board,” Mrs. McGeough added. “I was also pleased and impressed by the way the full board was able to agree upon a collective vision in the final statements.”