

Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Spring 2023



Dates to remember
3

See *The Weekly* (<https://www.sd735.org/newsletters>) for up-to-date district information.

July 27—District Finance Committee meeting, 7 p.m., McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.

August 7—District PTO meeting, 6:30 p.m., McCracken.

August 20—Back to School Bash, 1-3 p.m., McCracken athletic field.

August 23—District Finance Committee meeting, 7 p.m., McCracken.

August 23—First day of school, first through eighth grades, Middleton School, 8300 St. Louis Ave., and McCracken.

August 24—First day of kindergarten, Meyer School, 8100 Tripp Ave.

August 28—First day of preschool, Meyer 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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District sets out ‘big aims’ for next five years

After nearly a year of work, District 73½ has a new strategic plan to guide its efforts over the next five years.

Completing a process that began last September, the school board approved the new plan in May. It sets out objectives in four areas of concentration: welcoming environment; hiring and retention; infrastructure and fiscal responsibility; and teaching and learning.

In each area, the district identified “big aims” — overarching objectives (see *Strategic plan summary*, page 2). Under those, the 12-page plan lays out a series of related strategic objectives and notes the ways the district will measure growth for each one. Among other things, the district plans to feature a public “dashboard” on its website to display progress.

Measures of progress are a critical feature of the plan, according to Shelby Cosner, professor of education at the University of Illinois-Chicago and the consultant hired to help guide the process. “This plan will really drive the district’s work for the next five years,” she said. “It’s not vague. It includes objectives that are all measurable, and the teams had to think about how they would be measured.”

The Strategic Planning group who worked on the plan details included teachers, administrators, staff, board members and community members, who further divided into teams focused on each of the four areas of concentration. They sorted through comments and suggestions made in four community engagement meetings, one staff engagement event, and an online survey open to district families and residents. In a series of planning sessions, the teams created a first version of the plan, sought further feedback from district stakeholders, and hammered out the final document.

“The planning process was thought-provok-



Attendees in Strategic Planning Community Roundtables brainstormed about issues and solutions. Here, Board Vice President Kelli Nelson added to the discussion on hiring and retention.

ing, centered on community, well-organized and overall, successful,” said Victoria Wolfinger, a school board member. She considers the welcoming environment aspect of the plan a critical element.

“A welcoming environment is essential for the success of a district. Whether we are welcoming students, staff, potential new staff, or community members, it is essential that they feel like they are part of our district community,” she said. “Our children succeed when the community has a buy-in and supports our dis-

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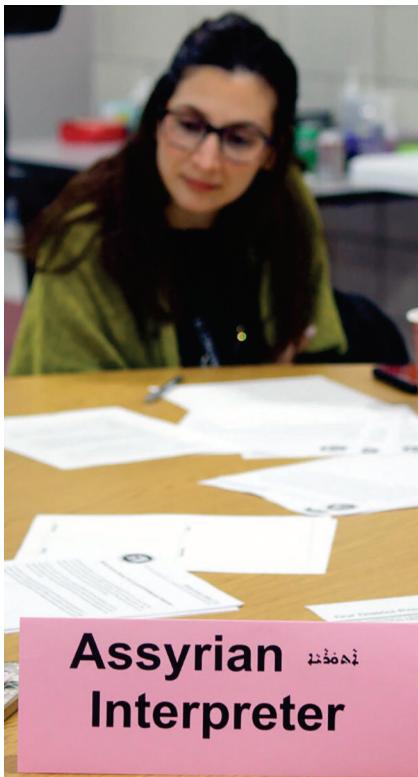
'Big aims'

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trict. Our children succeed when they feel that they have a stake in their education and have a voice. Our children are inspired to achieve their goals when they feel supported, welcomed and nurtured. Our staff succeeds when they are welcomed into the buildings they spend so much time in and feel heard and respected."

Marty Behm, assistant principal at McCracken Middle School, was drawn to the hiring and retention aspect of the plan. "People make a school district and to have the opportunity to be on the ground floor for how a school district hires is very challenging and rewarding to me," he said. "I've also been working on our Teach Plus team that looks at our efforts in working to hire a more diverse staff, so this seemed like a natural fit to me. I think it's a good time to look at what our district is doing to hire and retain our staff, as well, as the work landscape looks a bit different in the post-COVID era."

He said important strategic objectives in the plan include improving how the district presents itself to candidates, making the application process clearer and simpler



Interpreters played a key role in helping residents participate.

Strategic Plan summary

The plan includes four areas of concentration: Welcoming Environment; Hiring and Retention; Infrastructure and Fiscal Responsibility; and Teaching and Learning. Within those, planners set out "big aims" — strategic objectives for the next five years.

Welcoming Environment

- We will welcome and engage staff, students, families and community members in our schools.

Hiring and Retention

- We will recruit and hire a diverse workforce.
- We will retain a diverse workforce.
- We will improve our human-resource process, procedures and materials.

Infrastructure and Fiscal Responsibility

- All financial decisions and investments will meet the needs of our diverse learners and staff as well as promote academic and social growth.
- We will provide a safe, inclusive, flexible and innovative space for teaching, learning and growing.

Teaching and Learning

- All students will engage in learning experiences that are cohesive and articulated across preK-8, flexibly designed to engage all learners and leading to rigorous outcomes for all.
- We will be a future-focused, real-world learning environment that is responsive, accessible and meaningful for all.
- We will become a model district on the use of data for making instructional, curriculum and programmatic decisions.

For an overview of the district's planning process, visit <https://www.sd735.org/strategic-planning>. To see the full strategic plan document, visit <https://bit.ly/735-StratPlan>

for applicants, and making the entire process more equitable and inclusive.

Board President Emily Twarog Miller believes the plan process succeeded in involving district residents. "We had lots of new faces in the planning sessions and we also had interpreters available to assist with language accessibility," she said. "I think we still have work to do in terms of engaging with more community members, but we made a lot of progress that will help us over the next five years."

Miller also said the infrastructure and fiscal responsibility concentration area is critical. "I feel that we need to be sure we are creating plans that use our tax dollars to their fullest and that the spending we do is going to prioritize our students and their education," she said. "There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to education and we need to make sure that our teachers and staff have the resources and training necessary to meet the needs of all of our students."

She added that school officials will

emphasize seeking public and private grants to supplement the district's budget.

In the area of teaching and learning, the plan's strategic objectives prioritize creating an instructional framework that would apply from pre-K through eighth grade, encouraging teachers and administrators to collaborate to improve teaching, and reviewing and improving student assessments. "I think all four objectives are important and connected to one another," said Kristine Paulson, instructional coach at Middleton School. However, she noted, "In my opinion, the professional learning community objective is the most important, because we cannot successfully implement an instructional framework or an assessment review without teams of teachers talking together about kids and curriculum and instruction, looking at student work, talking about student strengths, and making changes based on our shared learning."

Now that the plan, designed to guide
Continued on page 4

Music program helps students find their voices

Middleton School's halls were alive with the sound of music during the spring semester, as students performed vocal concerts and the annual musical play.

About 70 fourth- and fifth-graders were part of the cast of "The Little Mermaid Jr.," which the students performed three times at the end of April, under the co-direction of vocal music teacher Angela Merrier and drama teacher Stephanie Anderson. An additional 20 McCracken Middle School students handled crew positions, under Anderson's direction. Instructional coach Anne Bond served as assistant director.

"Being a part of a theatrical production is a wonderful opportunity to experience an 'art form superfood' (combining music, language arts, dance, visual arts and digital arts) and to perform as an ensemble, and, of course, to have some fun!" Merrier said. "Especially in this post-COVID era, we have noticed that this is a particularly valuable bonding experience for our students."

Families, fellow students and even community members attend, she said. "We are fortunate to have an incredibly supportive community that looks forward to our shows each spring. Even families that no longer have students in the district attend the performances. This year, all three musical performances were sold out, with more than 370 people attending each show. It was an amazing turnout for our talented cast and crew."

Anderson added that parents contribute to the success of the shows by volunteering with photography, set construction and costume creation.

While the musical is an after-school activity, the grade-level music concerts staged throughout the year reflect themes the students work on during their music instruction classes.

Merrier said that, this year, fourth- and fifth-graders engaged in a "Passport Project," during which they learned about different countries and cultures around the world. At each stop, Merrier taught them a representative piece of music. "This resulted in an exciting multicultural music concert with students singing in six different languages," she said.

Younger students also had themed concerts. For third graders, "A Night at the Movies" had students learning and singing songs from familiar movie favorites. Second graders learned about different U.S. music styles through the theme, "American Made." First graders learned and sang songs related to friendship via the theme, "Be a Friend."

Merrier has overarching objectives through all her instruction and activities. "As a music teacher, I hope to deepen each student's knowledge about music, to inspire continuous growth, and to spark a lifelong love and appreciation for music," she said. "I believe music helps learning come to life through creating, performing, responding and connecting to the world around us. Since music is as varied as each individual student I teach, my goal is to find ways to make music relatable to everyone."



Scenes from "The Little Mermaid Jr." (Photos by Justina Lee Photography)

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STEAM program earns honors

McCracken Middle School's science, technology, engineering, arts and math (STEAM) program earned national recognition this spring.

McCracken was named a 2022-23 Gateway Distinguished School by Project Lead The Way (PLTW), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting learning and skills in computer science, engineering and biomedical science.

"As the year wraps up, I'm excited that the STEAM program at McCracken earned the PLTW Distinguished Award again," said STEAM teacher Lisa Repp. "We are continuously modifying and adapting robotics, programming and engineering for each group of students, but every group has made huge progress with innovation, collaboration and problem solving. Students should be feeling so much pride in their accomplishments this year!"



PLTW honored more than 200 middle schools this year. In a statement announcing the awards, the organization noted, "The PLTW Distinguished School recognition honors schools committed to increasing student access, engagement and achievement in their PLTW programs. To be eligible for the designation, McCracken had to meet a variety of criteria such as a certain percentage of the student body participating in PLTW Gateway, participate in two or more units during their time at school, offer at least one PLTW Gateway unit at each grade level, and have strategies in place to ensure equitable access to students."

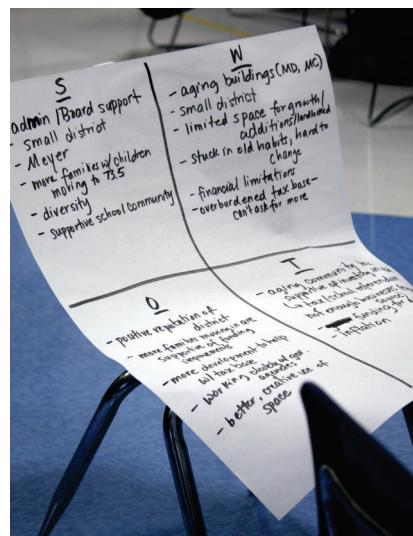
PLTW brings together schools, colleges and universities, and corporate and philanthropic partners to provide students with important learning opportunities. For more information, visit pltw.org.

'Big aims'

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the district over the next five years, is complete, more hard work lay ahead. "We need far more student and family input in order for this plan to meet the needs of our actual students," Paulson said. "It's one thing to write goals down, it's another to monitor and adjust based on how those strategies are actually working. Student and parent feedback is a really important piece of knowing if we're on the right track."

For now, school officials said those interested in details should go to <https://www.sd735.org/> and click on "Strategic Planning Information." "I would encourage everybody to look at the plan to see what the district is driving toward. It is going to require work by many, many people," Cosner said. "The real challenge is to get organized to make this work well. The community had to come together, now it has to stay together."



At the session on infrastructure and fiscal responsibility, participants reviewed the district's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

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