



Community Digest

Building a foundation for learning, leadership and life

Winter 2023



Dates to
remember

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

March 1—Choir concert, 7-8 p.m., McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Rd.

March 5—Preschool open house, 10 a.m.-noon, Meyer School, 8100 Tripp Ave.

March 27—Spring break begins. No school.

April 3—School resumes.

April 10—Kindergarten registration, all day, Meyer School.

April 28—Middleton School Musical, 7-8 p.m., McCracken.

April 29—Middleton School Musical, 2-3 p.m. and 7-8 p.m., McCracken.

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 alumni return to pass knowledge to next generations

The District 73 1/2 school community strives to make all feel welcome in its buildings. An indicator of how much people feel “at home” is the number of graduates who now work for the district.

There are 18 alumni on staff this year, including support staff, teachers and administrators. All say they work hard to bring today’s students the same benefits they received.

Favorite memories revolve around the activities they were able to engage in, the teachers who taught them, and the students they went to school with. Katie Hollenberg, a second-grade teacher, attended Oakview Junior High (whose name was changed to McCracken Middle School in 1991) for two years before her family moved. She said, “When I went to Middleton the halls were filled with animals. There were ferrets, tarantulas, chinchillas, parrots, guinea pigs, hamsters, fish, lizards and opossums.” She added that every year on Field Day, the principal would take out Alfie, the

24-foot boa constrictor, and drape it on the necks of some students.

Meyer School Principal Helen Wei (Oakview class of 1987) agreed. “One of my favorite memories was taking care of the Middleton school pets, which were everywhere in the school,” she said. “The principal really liked animals and believed students could benefit in learning to take responsibility for their care.”

Several alumni mentioned their participation in music. “I am so grateful for the band program,” said Maggie Price, seventh- and eighth-grade special education teacher (McCracken class of 2002). “Not only was it fun but the life skills learned around independence and responsibility were priceless. I have amazing memories of traveling on coach buses with my peers and performing for large audiences. I felt accomplished and proud.”

Kristine Paulson, Middleton School instruc-

Continued on next page



Joy Di Zillo (circled) was an eighth-grader when the Swing Choir performed at Oakton Community College. She graduated from McCracken in 1991.

District alumni

Continued from previous page

tional coach (McCracken class of 2000), also reflected on the music program's benefits. "Mr. DeStefano's quiet confidence in our ability is startling to me as an adult," she said. "As a kid, I believed that we were an excellent group of musicians, because he talked to us like we were."

Many cited the impact individual teachers had on them. Price said, "As a kindergartner I was lucky enough to have the amazing Karen Wylie. I can remember sitting down with her with a composition notebook and telling her story after story. She would write them down with her undivided attention. She cared so deeply about us and what we had to say."

Field trips such as the visits to White Pines and Washington, D.C., are fond memories as well. The experiential education program stood out in particular. "I could probably tell you most of [her classmates'] first and last names to this day," Paulson said. "Not because of the books we read in class, or the curriculum that was taught, but because threaded throughout our nine years together was the same theme—we can do hard things together, we are capable, responsible people, and we are to be trusted to take care of ourselves and each other."

Anajé Silva, fourth-grade teacher (McCracken class of 2013), remembers the school community's diversity. "In fifth grade, we rotated classrooms on the day before break for 'Holidays Around the World.' We learned about how different cultures celebrate holidays in the wintertime. I specifically remember playing dreidel with chocolate coins, weaving art for Kwanza, and eating sugar cookies. It was so fun!"

Asked what they value most about their jobs, alumni focused on their relationships with students and colleagues. Said Joy Di Zillo, eighth-grade ELA teacher (McCracken class of 1991), "The students are the best part of my job. They are so kind and smart and funny!"

Jeff Priban, P.E./Health/E.E./Fitness teacher (McCracken class of 2000), said, "I love being able to work with students from the same community that I grew up in. I also appreciate that I am able to interact with students in a variety of classroom settings."

"I value the personal interactions I have with the students and staff," said Dave



Meyer School Principal Helen Wei as a kindergartner. She graduated from Oakview Junior High in 1987.

Waskin, Middleton recess supervisor (Oakview class of 1977). "I hope to make a positive impact on the children and make them feel good about themselves."

"I value being able to help the students and have open communication with them as much as possible," said Marryann Warda, McCracken school nurse (McCracken class of 2012). "The nurse's office will always be a safe place for these kids."

Paulson had high praise for her colleagues. "One thing I value about my job is the ability to think and problem-solve with other adults for kids every day," she said. "Teachers in District 73½ are truly unique in how much they are willing to think, plan, try, rethink, retry and make better the learning experiences they put in front of students."

Sarah Hampton, fourth-grade teacher (McCracken class of 2008), agreed. "Everyone is so welcoming and helpful, and working together to do what is best for students is a daily practice here," she said. "I am surrounded by teachers who are experts in their field and that level of expertise has motivated me to learn new skills and strategies."

Many alumni agreed that their experiences in the district set them on their career paths. "Being a student here made me want to become a teacher, and that decision never changed," Hampton said. "My teachers were some of the most compassionate,

hard-working, thoughtful and smart people I know. They really took the time to get to know me as a person, as well as my family, and they made me love learning."

Di Zillo noted, "The district has always had a reputation for excellent teachers, and my time as a student in Mr. Don Stahlberg's band and Ms. Beth Lehner's choir inspired me to pursue a career in education."

"I had an amazing fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Paulsen, who inspired me to be a teacher," remembered Hollenberg. "She was funny, loving, kind, and had very high expectations for her students. She treated us with respect and saw who we really were as people. She seemed to love teaching and I wanted to grow up to be just like her."

Others had that same desire. "Growing up, I admired the job Mary Madigan (former school nurse) did," Warda said. "Since the seventh grade, I have always wanted to be the school nurse here at McCracken."

"I kept in touch with some of my teachers long after I had graduated from eighth grade, and they were very encouraging when I began to think about becoming a teacher," Wei said. "Mr. Stahlberg, my band director, foresaw my becoming a school administrator long before I ever did."

Price saw her own future in special education early on. "In fourth grade, I befriended a peer with a disability. He had difficulty communicating clearly and would go to another classroom for most of the day. He loved being with our larger class and his happiness and energy were so amazing. I loved playing with him," she said. "At a parent-teacher conference, my teacher told my mom about my relationship with this student and how he felt I would make a great teacher. I knew then what my career path would be and it never wavered."

Paulson credits the school community with helping to shape her career. "I definitely believe a few things about growing up in Skokie and going to such a small, tight-knit K-8 school district impacted my path," she said. "I think the opportunities through band, and the adventure trip, and experiential education helped me find my leadership voice. And growing up somewhere where so many languages are spoken, and kids don't all look like me, and so many social justice causes are championed, gave me an important lens to walk into high school and college with, where I eventually decided that teaching was going to be my path."

Robotics competition offers fun, learning

For many children, building with LEGO blocks is not only a way to play, but also an introduction to ways of thinking about science and technology. A group of Middleton School students took that further in December, when they competed in a FIRST LEGO League (FLL) robotics competition.

The Raging Bulldogs robotics team was made up of 10 fifth graders coached by Nate Pratt, elementary STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) teacher, and Wendy Maa, a second-grade teacher.

As part of the competition, the team had to build, program and modify a robot to complete specified tasks. They also had to develop and present a project related to energy, for which they designed a Chromebook cart that could charge devices using wind and solar energy. Competing teams were judged on these challenges, and also rated against the LEGO Core Values—discovery, innovation, impact, inclusion, teamwork and fun. The coaches said the team did



Middleton's Raging Bulldogs, along with coaches and parent volunteers.

well, but against tough competition, not well enough to go on to the state level.

There was no lack of interest in the team, which the coaches manage as an after-school activity. Rules limited teams to 10 members each, so they had to hold a lottery to choose the team. Parents also helped out as science experts and as chaperones during the competition itself.

But the hard work was done by the students themselves. In an email, Pratt and Maa wrote, "We as coaches try to keep the group a student-led team, so we try our best to just facilitate and let them make all

decisions and problem-solve on their own." They added, "This club gives students the ability to practice and learn great skills that they will use throughout their lives. The focus on the LEGO core values is important, as these are skills that they will use to be successful citizens in our society."

It's an enjoyable activity for all involved. The coaches noted, "It is great to see the excitement, teamwork, and learning of the students. The team really comes together for a fun purpose and to be able to witness how they work together to overcome problems is fun."



McCracken's merry music makers

McCracken Middle School performers took to multiple stages in recent weeks.

(Above left) More than 40 McCracken students performed and sang this fall for the school's musical, "Mary Poppins Jr." Parents and community members enjoyed three performances in November.

(Above right) In December, The McCracken Symphonic



Band performed for an impressive range of peers and colleagues just before winter break. The band devoted two days to performing as a demonstration group for two sessions of the 76th Midwest Clinic, an annual event convened by the International Band and Orchestra Conference at McCormick Place that draws music educators from around the U.S. and abroad. (See back page for more about performances.)

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Skokie School District 73½
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Music programs take spotlight at IMEC

McCracken Middle School's Eighth Grade Singers and Symphonic Band earned the honor of performing for their peers in January at a statewide gathering of music educators.

The annual Illinois Music Education Conference, sponsored by the Illinois Music Education Association (IMEA) was held in Peoria Jan. 26-28. Thousands of choir and band directors from middle school through college attend the gathering for three days of knowledge-sharing.

Choirs and bands submit competitive applications to perform during the conference. Once selected, they cannot reapply for four years. McCracken's choir and band returned to the conference for the first time since 2019. They applied, and were accepted, last spring.

"IMEA chose exemplary programs," said Amy Keipert, McCracken vocal music/chorus teacher. She added that McCracken's



Both the Symphonic Band (above) and the Eighth Grade Singers (at left) performed during the annual Illinois Music Education Conference in January.



eighth graders were the only middle school choir chosen to perform.

The two groups were bused to Peoria on Friday, accompanied by parent chaperones. They enjoyed dinner and bowling before performing on Saturday morning.

The Eighth Grade Singers, led by Keipert, performed seven numbers: "Come To Me, O My Love," "Bella Ciao," "Woodsmoke & Oranges," "Marujo do Rosário," "The Slender Moon," "Fly Me To The Moon" and "The Cuckoo." The Symphonic Band, directed by Chip DeStefano and Cesar Mendoza, performed five pieces: "Emblem of Unity," "Nostalgia in the Air," "West Side Story," "Negative Split" and "Choreography."

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