



## Students get busy in school gardens

**T**he gardens at all three District 68 elementary school blossomed as spring turned to summer.

At Jane Stenson School, “We chose to do a garden to help students learn important science and health concepts, to provide families with access to fresh vegetables that were not previously available at local food pantries, and to share the common experience of gardening across cultures,” said Principal Susan O’Neil. The school earned a \$2,000 grant to get started, she said. “In addition to many Midwest favorites, we include items in our garden each year that appeal to the culturally diverse families in our school and neighborhood. We have items like lemon grass, Japanese eggplants, jalapeno peppers, okra, Thai basil, horseradish and mustard greens.”

She added, “Our students help plant our garden each year with the help and instruction of the teachers. Our Jane Stenson Brownies Troop added a splash of color by painting large pots and adding beautiful



*Students take in a science lesson in the Jane Stenson School garden.*

flowers. Families are invited each Wednesday to help with the gardening throughout the summer.”

At Devonshire, principal Hal Schmeisser said, “This project grew out of the creative thinking and imaginative designing of Heather Peterson’s 4th grade class. It began with students engineering an indoor garden for our library. The success of this initial project bloomed into its expansion outside. Thank you to our Garden Club, who helped construct and maintain the beds during the first phase. The ultimate vision for this space is to develop an outdoor environment where students and families can interact, engage with, and learn alongside one another.”

At Highland, “Our strawberries have just gone under the protection of netting (from animals) and

are starting to produce their fruit.

On warm days our kiddos are in full watering-mode,” said kindergarten teacher Molly Olson, noting that the Highland PTA has been a strong supporter of the garden.

“Kindergartners at Highland have been answering the question, ‘How can we make our garden grow?’ On May 1, we started seeds indoors. We planted sunflowers, beans, carrots, lettuce and various other plantings. Students eagerly watered and observed the plants, preparing them for the garden. Outdoors, students worked together, using their time, energy and muscles to weed, prepare soil, plant and transplant,” she added. “Each day, many Highland students volunteer to help keep our plantings alive with water. It takes many Highland hands, but together we have helped our garden grow.”

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# All schools ready to apply SEL program

For the past year, schools in District 68 have been using a new approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) known as RULER. Developed by Marc Brackett at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, RULER promotes emotional intelligence for administrators, staff, students and families.

RULER stands for **Recognizing** emotions in oneself and others, **Understanding** the causes and consequences of emotions, **Labeling** emotions accurately, **Expressing** emotions appropriately and **Regulating** emotions effectively. The district's SEL curriculum aligns with Illinois standards. The State Board of Education notes, "There is a strong research base indicating that these SEL competencies improve students' social/emotional development, readiness to learn, classroom behavior, and academic performance."

"District 68 demonstrated its commitment to increasing our emotional intelligence when it sent district social workers and me to the Yale campus for a two-day training last July," said Peg Lasiewicki, director of special services. The training was led by Dr. Brackett and included educators from around the country who are also using the RULER approach.

Craig Hobson was one of the social workers who attended the training. "We learned about the foundational basis for the RULER approach and about the primary tools that staff and students will use to transform our district into one that emphasizes emotional intelligence skills across all settings in our schools," he said.

Educational and psychological research has demonstrated that emotions affect success and thriving at all stages of human development, Dr. Lasiewicki said. "All individuals have experienced the daily feelings of anxiety, nervousness and stress that come with jobs and maintaining a successful family life. Students experience these feelings too."

She noted that unchecked anxiety and stress can lead to problematic interactions with teachers, and that chronic stress has been proven to lead to poor health indicators such as diminished sleep, weight gain and a compromised immune system.

Research at Yale indicates that teens across the country are experiencing negative emotions such as stress and boredom nearly three-quarters of the time they are in school, and their stress levels are edging up higher than adults. These negative emotions are keeping students from achieving personal and academic

success. At the same time, teachers and principals are also experiencing greater stress and burnout than ever.

RULER provides tools staff members can use to develop their own emotional intelligence and model it for students. "RULER puts great emphasis on developing teachers' strengths and abilities in the broad range of emotional intelligence skills," Mr. Hobson explained.

Studies have shown that students in schools using SEL programs show increased social and emotional skills, improved academic achievement, lower emotional distress and fewer behavior problems. Research by the RULER team extends these findings to include positive shifts in classroom climate and instructional quality.

The District 68 RULER team trained other staff members on using the new SEL tools during the past school year. In 2018-2019, teachers and staff will bring these tools to their students. All staff members have received a timeline for implementing the tools, and will continue to receive training and support.

"Students will be better able to learn from their teachers next year now that those teachers have been learning about RULER in multiple professional development opportunities and practicing the skills in our interpersonal exchanges, in staff meetings and in our interactions with students," Mr. Hobson said.

District 68 has had a long-standing awareness that students learn best when they develop skills such as empathy, emotion management and social problem solving, Dr. Lasiewicki said. "We will continue to provide supplementary social-skills instruction using Second Step, a research-based social skills curriculum. The unique RULER approach will help

our students build on those skills, and equally importantly, cultivate similar skills in staff members, administrators and family members."

She added, "RULER embeds social-emotional learning into the daily academic curriculum. As a result, students in our district will be better able to analyze the emotional themes of literary characters during language arts instruction, write stories that include a sophisticated emotional vocabulary, match their own emotional states to the learning demands of the classrooms, and regulate their own emotions during the daily challenges that accompany academic learning."

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 in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. You are invited to attend.

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

# District committed to equity, inclusion

In a school community as diverse as District 68, equity is a critical issue. The district has made “Cultural Responsiveness, Equity and Inclusion” one of the five key goals in its latest strategic plan. The plan cites “diversity, inclusion and equity” as well as a “nurturing and culturally responsive learning environment” among the district’s core values.

As Lisa Schwartz, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, explained, “We are trying to take a look at the needs of all students and adults in our community and ensure those needs are being met. We were doing this before, of course, but now we are being more intentional about it.”

Work on equity, inclusion and school climate began during the 2016-17 school year when a Connections committee of 15 staff members met monthly. Connections was led by social worker Mike Flood, who was trained to facilitate conversations about equity, identity, stereotypes, privilege, unintentional biases and other highly charged topics. At the same time, the district leadership team received professional development training on equity and inclusion. (*See District 68 “Highlights,” spring 2017.*)

Consultant Elisabeth “Biz” Lindsay-Ryan facilitated the professional development work for the district leaders. A professor at DePaul University’s School for New Learning, she was

director of programs at the Women’s Center at Northwestern University, and has consulted with other local districts.

“Across the country educators are investing significant time in equity, social emotional learning and school-climate work as a way to address systemic challenges that lead to achievement and opportunity gaps as well as disproportionality in discipline,” Ms. Lindsay-Ryan said.

Ms. Lindsay-Ryan continued to work with District 68 in 2017-18 as the equity and inclusion initiative expanded to include all staff members. Each school in the district formed a school-climate team made up of the principal, teachers and support staff to create action plans for their schools. They also participated in four daylong sessions led by Ms. Lindsay-Ryan.

Ms. Lindsay-Ryan facilitated professional development opportunities for all staff members throughout the year. In March, the district hosted a parent night on diversity.

The equity and inclusion initiative will continue next year, with guidance and support from Ms. Lindsay-Ryan.

Supt. James Garwood added, “We’re working on ourselves so as not to be doing things unconsciously that might limit our kids. Through this effort, we try to recognize differences and create an environment where individuals — students, families and staff alike — feel more welcome and more comfortable.”

## *New grading system to reach OOH*

Old Orchard Junior High School will convert to standards-based grading this fall. The move away from letter grades will complete a transition that began in 2016 in District 68’s elementary schools.

Standards-based grading (SBG) communicates how a student is performing against a set of standards. SBG also highlights hard-to-quantify qualities such as respectful communication, following expectations, class participation and preparation. While giving parents more information than before, SBG also provides students with feedback they can use to improve.

“In a traditional grading system, grades are averaged together. That doesn’t communicate to a student or parent what the child really knows or doesn’t know in regard to the stan-

dards,” OOH Principal Robyn Huemmer explained. “Our main goal is to accurately report to students and parents how the child is progressing towards mastering the standards.”

Report cards, issued three times a year, will indicate one of three performance levels for main academic areas: not meeting standards; approaching standards; and meeting standards. Officials say grading will be more consistent throughout the district.

The new approach was recommended by a learning team made up of teachers, administrators, board members and parents that started meeting in 2016. Teachers have received training in the new system for two years.

Most of the work to develop the new grading system has been done within departments and grade-level

content teams at the junior high, Dr. Huemmer said. After using a hybrid model for grading in 2017-2018, she said, “Teachers are ready for a pure standards-based grading system and are really excited to implement this new model next year.”

While other local middle schools have adopted the approach, some parents have been concerned about their children’s transition to Niles North High School, where a traditional letter-grade system is in place.

District 68 staff have discussed the issue with the high school. NNHS Principal James Edwards has stated that the change will not affect student placement in 9th grade.

Dr. Huemmer noted that more information will be available to parents at the fall 2018 open house.

## HIGHLIGHTS

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## Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Members,

In reviewing the District's accomplishments from this last year now that school is out, it is apparent that this has been another year of significant work to improve the learning experiences of our students in Skokie School

District 68. While I cannot begin to list all of great things that our students and staff have done this year, there are a few that I would like to highlight:

- The Board of Education developed a new Strategic Plan in collaboration with staff, parents, administrators, and students. This plan will provide the focus for the work of the school district for the next five years.
- The work of the OOHJ Grading and Learning Team concluded with the recommendation to move to a standards-based report card in 2018 to improve communication with students and parents.
- The work of the EL Learning Team concluded with recommendations to improve services to the District's English Language Learner program. The result of these changes will mean a significant increase in targeted instructional time tailored to the needs of students learning English. These changes will take place in Fall 2018.
- The District initiated teacher training on RULER, the District's powerful new social-emotional development curriculum designed to help students and staff recognize and regulate their emotions. Teachers will begin using RULER with students in Fall 2018.
- The District has concluded its second year of professional development focusing on equity. In year two all staff

have received ongoing training on Institute Days, faculty meetings, and workshops, on how to take a wide range of factors into account when working with our diverse families and when planning instruction.

- We hired the District's first reading and math specialists at the elementary schools to increase the support for all students, particularly those who need additional help to meet academic standards.
- The District completed renovations to the elementary libraries to include Maker Spaces, as well as a new common-area flexible student-learning space at Old Orchard Junior High.
- We purchased a facility for storage and maintenance.
- The District completed Phase II of the Old Orchard Junior High Track and Field renovations.
- We offered parent-education workshops on topics such as adolescent social-emotional development, standards-based grading, social media, and equity.
- We created a multi-year facilities improvement plan.
- The Board of Education and the Classified Organization Representing Employees (C.O.R.E) were able to successfully negotiate a new five-year contract.

Though the academic year is over for students, many teachers participate in professional development during the summer. On behalf of our Board of Education, as well as our teachers, administrators, and classified staff, I wish you all a fantastic and joy-filled summer. We look forward to taking the next step in providing a world-class education for our students this fall.

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.**