



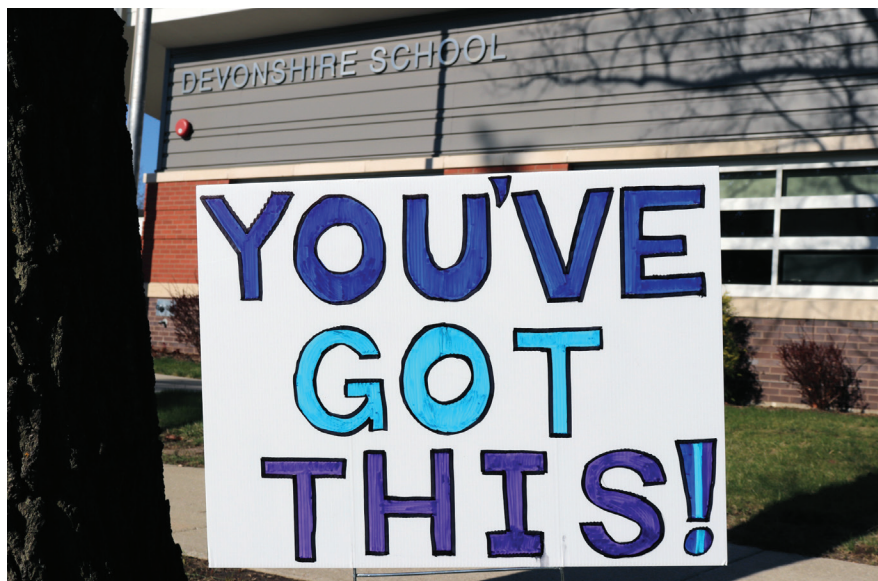
School remains in session — online

As the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown has turned from weeks to months, the District 68 school community has stepped up to maintain the vital activities of teaching and learning online. As Old Orchard Junior High School Principal Greg Hanson put it, “This is truly a ‘there’s no I in team’ moment.”

While it’s clear that remote learning cannot fully substitute for steady in-person, in-class instruction, teachers and administrators say their virtual efforts have been rewarded with continued learning in most cases.

The work of creating a structure for remote learning began even as Gov. Pritzker ordered schools to close in mid-March. Administrators and teachers began writing content, while the district’s technical staff created a web portal (<http://www.skokie68.org/alert/1605594/coronavirus-covid-19-information-click-on-this-header>) to make the content available. They also worked with families to ensure that every student had access to a device that would connect them to their schoolwork and their teachers.

It took about three weeks in April to get the portal for students up and fully running, according to Brian Ritz, coordinator of curriculum and school im-



Teachers made signs outside District 68 school buildings to encourage their students.

provement. “The opening scene from the ‘Wizard of Oz’ comes to mind,” he said. “One day we were enjoying our normal way of life, next comes a twister that brings you to a whole new landscape to navigate.”

He said the portal has worked well for the most part. About 80 percent of students are participating daily, and school officials reach out to the rest. Moreover, he said, “a recent student survey, where most of the students in the district responded, showed 80 percent felt the workload for e-learning was ‘just right,’ and 85 percent or more felt they had learned something through the e-learning content.”

During the remote learning experience, teachers and administrators have emphasized addressing the social and emotional needs of students and their families, whose lives have been turned

upside-down. “We know that we can’t educate kids if they’re not in a good social and emotional state,” said Dr. Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. She cited the example of a junior high student who said in a district survey that she’s stressed all day long, caring for younger siblings as she worries about the health of a parent who continues to leave the house for work.

While most students and families are coping, officials have made adjustments to help those who struggle. The district reduced the number of assignments presented to students, while turning Fridays into “catch-up days,” with no new material presented.

Maintaining connection has been vital for teachers. “My students’ social and emotional needs are my first

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District supports families with meals

One theme that has been heard throughout the coronavirus epidemic is: “We’re all in this together.” As an integral part of the community, Skokie School District 68 has been doing its part to support students and their families during this period.

While continuing educational activities while schools are closed (*see article, page 1*), District 68 has been providing free meals to any district residents 18 years old or younger at distribution spots throughout the community. District 68 was the first school district in Niles Township to initiate such a program, which started March 23.

“The program has been very successful and continues to grow,” said Ernie Nelson, the district’s director of buildings and grounds. “Recently two of our three routes ran out of food, which required me to bring them more from our central pick-up location at Old Orchard Junior High. We have not run into one person who has not appreciated everything we are doing.”

Starting at 6 a.m. weekdays, the district’s food service provider, Arbor



Packaged meals are available every weekday along district school bus routes.

Management, prepares meals for that day in the kitchen at Old Orchard. Food service staff bag up individual meals -- breakfasts and lunches -- and Mr. Nelson, transportation coordinator Cozeake Nelson and assistant superintendent of business Ryan Berry load them onto buses.

Working in rotation, three district bus drivers deliver the meals to pre-arranged locations on a schedule that begins at 8:25 a.m. and ends at 10 a.m. There are four routes with three stops on each route. Some meals remain at the junior high until 11 a.m. for parents who wish to pick them up by driving past the school.

Each day, three volunteers help serve the meals. Most are teachers, but there are also teacher aides, secretaries, health clerks, custodians and maintenance staff. Everyone involved practices social distancing and wears face coverings and gloves.

“Kudos to all our drivers and all the volunteers who have stepped up during these uncertain times,” Mr. Nelson said. “Everyone is on the same page to help and we are committed to seeing this through to the end.”

When the bus routes are com-

pleted, the drivers return to the transportation facility and disinfect their buses. Custodians clean the food preparation areas for the following day.

To receive the free meals, residents simply have to find a school bus parked at one of the drop-off locations and tell an employee on the bus how many students need meals.

The district has distributed more than 50,000 meals to date, and has been negotiating with its food service provider to extend the program into the summer. Mr. Berry noted, “The meal service isn’t having a material financial impact on the district finances. The USDA is covering a majority of the costs for the meals served, and the district is already paying bus drivers for their time.”

The meals appear to be going to families most in need. About half of district students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and at this point “we are serving approximately 50 percent of our student population, with about 1,300 bags distributed per day,” Mr. Berry said. Any leftover meals are donated to the Niles Township Food Pantry.

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

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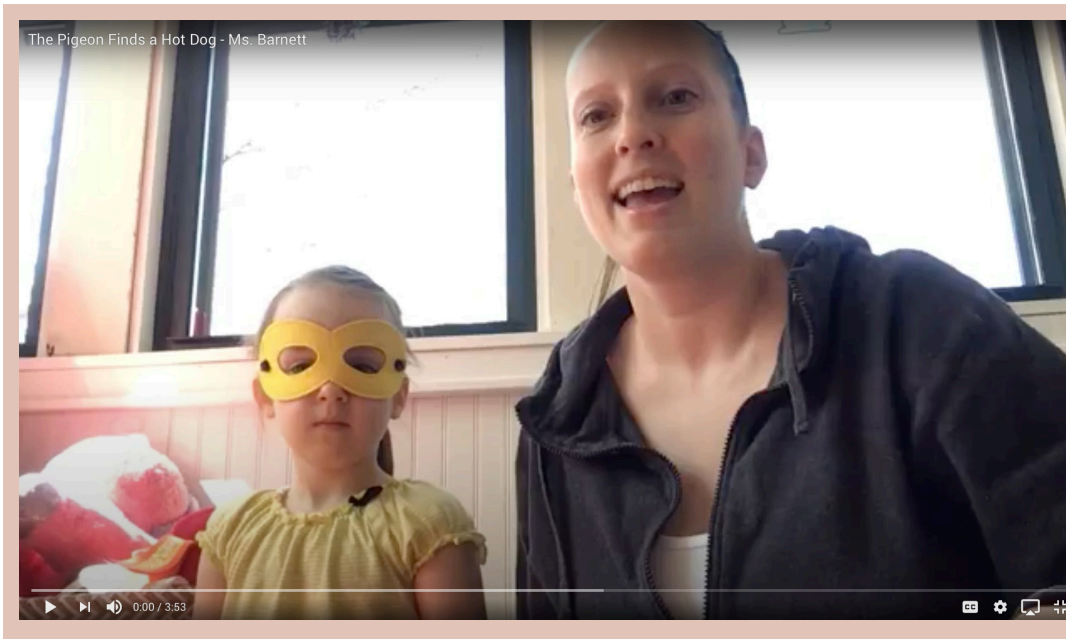
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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month in the Educational Service Center at 9440 Kenton Ave. All are invited to attend.

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



District 68 on the air: Since the shutdown began, staff members have posted videos on the district's YouTube channel with stories, music and activities for students. Here, Brandi Barnett, first grade teacher at Highland School, reads "The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog," accompanied by her daughter.

Online

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priority," said Lynn Rubin, a first-grade teacher at Jane Stenson School. "I have a very good sense of how my students and parents are coping. Each morning I send them a video message which I do to show them that even though we are not together, I care about them and am here for them always."

Ms. Rubin said her daily contacts offer her young students a little normalcy: "I started doing daily video chats so we could all see familiar faces, socialize, have some routine, and be together as a class. We always do a fun activity, a brain break, and a read aloud. At the end of each meeting the students are put into smaller breakout rooms and they have a chance to talk with their friends."

Other classes have used video to emulate experiences students are missing. Stenson Principal Robyn Huemer said she and her staff offered fifth graders a "virtual campfire" in lieu of the students' spring outdoor education trip to Wisconsin. She said about 50 students were on the chat, constructing tents in their rooms, performing for a talent show and singing songs. "It was a feel-good experience," she said.

Teachers and students alike have worked hard to adapt to a new reality. "There is so much wrapped up in how information is communicated in person that cannot be accounted for through the dissemination of tasks or any amount of video meetings," Mr. Hanson said. "But I would say teachers have gained some perspective about how a simple lesson can hold profound meaning and learning. And I think students have shown an incredible amount of adaptability and resilience. Teaching and learning, in the traditional sense, has been disrupted, but I think important habits of mind and skills are being developed that will transfer to future success for students and teacher."

That adaptation has offered some unexpected benefits. Dr. Samojedny asked teachers what the "bright spots" have been. "They are learning about their kids in different ways, getting an inside peek into their home lives, and that has been enlightening," she said. "They're also collaborating with their colleagues in different ways than ever before — trying new technology, experimenting, learning how to be a risk taker, to try something new, to learn a new skill that they might carry into the future." They're doing this while dealing with their own families and managing their own anxieties, she added.

Mr. Ritz noted, "I have been blown away by the grit and flexibility I have seen in teachers, families, and kids. I have seen kids navigate technology and learning activities independently at remarkably young ages. I have seen teachers creating learning activities in ways that are totally new to them and maybe completely out of their comfort zone. I have seen teams of people work together in ways that no one could have expected, and worked together without being able to be physically next to each other."

Ms. Rubin found the challenge invigorating. "I love trying new apps, programs, and creating digital content that my students will enjoy and learn from," she said. "I have learned so many neat ways to share information with my students and families that I never would have had the chance or reason to learn."

Looking ahead is difficult, given that no one knows when schools can reopen. Dr. Samojedny said the district plans to offer expanded summer school offerings through the portal. She said the district will work to bring students up to speed as soon as they can return to class. "Educators are really good at meeting kids where they are," she said. "The whole country is going to be grappling with that exact same issue."

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear School District 68 Community,

Now that we know how the 2019-2020 school year ends, and plans for our virtual summer school are in full swing, the question on everyone's mind is, what will the fall look like? While I don't

know for certain yet, I can share a broad sweep of the options on the table, all of which depend upon the course of CO-VID-19 and health care recommendations, as well as political, social, and economic pressures.

At this time it is not clear whether a state-wide or a region-wide order will come from the governor's office as we saw in March, or whether individual school districts will have to make decisions for their communities as typically happens for school closures. If the decision to open schools is left to superintendents and school boards, District 68 will collaborate closely with our neighboring districts in Niles Township, as well as with school districts in the North Cook County Region.

School districts have been told to plan for multiple possible outcomes simultaneously so that we are prepared once decisions are made. In District 68 our priority focus areas for any option will be safety, social-emotional learning (SEL), academic learning, and the provision of food resources to families, all through the lens of equity.

One possible scenario is that schools could remain closed in the fall and students will continue with remote learning. In this scenario, safety will be covered by reducing physical interactions, and our teachers and administrators will focus on expanding remote SEL and academic learning so that more new content is taught while teachers help students process

the stress and anxiety that occur while sheltering in place.

The other scenario is a return to school in the fall. If we do that, we know safety measures and precautions will be a primary concern. To that end we are acquiring masks for students and staff that may need them, forehead scanning touchless thermometers for temperature checks at our doors, hand sanitizer and disinfectant, gloves, etc. We are also constructing plexiglass screens for our offices and are making plans for lunch in the classroom, as well as other measures for reducing the number of people in our spaces. Additionally, we are developing safety protocols for when students or staff test positive. Along with academic learning, SEL will be critically important to help our students deal with the stress and anxiety of living with all of the safety measures and protocols.

I know that this spring's shelter in place has been hard on everyone, and we will all need to dig deep for additional fortitude as we prepare for the fall. Each scenario will come with great challenges and the staff at District 68 will continue to meet them to carry out our mission. Over the summer we will prepare both for remote learning and for in-person learning.

While I can't say exactly when a decision for the fall will be made, I can assure you that our teachers, administrators, and the Board of Education are working hard to prepare for whatever the future may bring. I cannot thank them enough for their hard work and professionalism over the last months, as well as the positive words of encouragement that have come from the community! Please have a wonderful and safe summer, regardless of the limitations you are experiencing. Now more than ever, it is an honor to be your superintendent.

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.