A COLLECTION OF STORIES THAT

SHINE

FROM OUR WEST COOK DISTRICTS & CO-OPS



WEST40
COMMUNICATIONS
SERVICES

SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Celebrate the wins. Tell your stories.
Let's change the conversation
about education, together.

LET'S GET STARTED
communications@west40.org

STITCHED AT WEST40



YOUR LOGO. A SHARED STORY.

Under professional mentorship, students design, produce, and deliver work for real businesses with real expectations. Each order builds confidence, teamwork, and becomes part of a student's story.

What can we stitch for you?

stitchedatwest40.shop

YOUR DISTRICT HAS ENOUGH VENDORS. YOU NEED A PRINT PARTNER.

Schools run on details. That's why every Alisun print project is personally managed by a dedicated account team focused on delivering accurate, consistent, and professional materials every time.



Alisun Business Printing

937 S. Mannheim Rd.
Westchester, IL 60154

www.AlisunPrinting.com | 708-571-3451

A WEST40 WELCOME

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Shine*! West40 has long believed in the power of stories to celebrate the students, educators, and communities we serve. This magazine is our way of sharing those stories in one easy-to-find place.

West40 is focused on being a catalyst for transformative change. The opportunity to highlight our districts' successes fuels future work in many areas as we live out our mission:

We will meet you where you are.
We will be what you need.
We will walk further with you.
We will stand strong with you.

We are clearly stronger together, and there are so many stories from our region to share. Thank you to everyone who played a role in designing and compiling this wonderful collection, and to those who helped produce it. It is with great pride in the West40 region that I will share this magazine throughout my travels.

Please enjoy this opportunity to read, learn, and celebrate the amazing things happening in education across West Cook County.

All the best,
Dr. Mark Klaisner
Executive Director
West40



"A kid's success is in the hands of us all."

West40 Contributors

Editor
Chris Coffey

Art Director
Evy Makris

Creative Director
Marianna Delinck Manley

Additional Support
Ryan Stage
Monica Medina
Heidi Bellm

Special Thanks

Dave Porreca
Karen Geddeis
Karin Sullivan
Antonia Lippitt-Hill
Dr. Kristin Kopta
Dr. Jennifer Ban
Rodney Bien-aime
Emily Lahti
Jillian Thomas
Dr. Ed Condon
Noemi Mendieta
Jackie Pisano
Kiley Fletcher
Mary Lin Muscolino
Jennifer Pasko
Rachelle Ernst
Kristopher Rivera
Stephanie Barba
Marisa Lopez
Kevin Wolf
Michael James
Ellie Ambuehl
Nia Lackland
Dr. Jennifer Kelsall
Candice Barrett
Katherine Manganello
Michele Guzik
Jodi Meyer
John Munch
Dr. David Katzin
Dr. Diego Giraldo
Robert Junna
Amanda Siegfried
Dr. Philip Salemi
Dr. Todd Fitzgerald
Dr. Sarah Coffey
Molly Castor
Ryan Evans
Dr. Jan Rashid
Zuzel Garcia

Printed By
Alisun Business Printing
orders@alisunprinting.com

West40 ISC #2
415 Lexington Street
Maywood, IL 60153
communications@west40.org

© 2026
West40 Intermediate Service Center #2
All rights reserved.



















TABLE OF CONTENTS

Bellwood 88 29

Berkeley 87 52

Berwyn North 98 30

Berwyn South 100 44

Brookfield-Lagrange 95 12

Cicero 99 13

Elmwood Park 401 14

Forest Park 91 26

Franklin Park 84 20

Hillside 93 52

J. S. Morton 201 10

Komarek 94 50

Lagrange 102 43

Lagrange 105 38

Lagrange Area Department
of Special Education (LADSE) 41

Lagrange Highlands 106 9

Leyden 212 34

Leyden Area Special
Education Cooperative (LASEC) 33

Lindop 92 48

Lyons 103 16

Lyons Township 204 49

Mannheim 83 21

Maywood 89 45

Norridge 80 8

Oak Park 97 42

Oak Park & River Forest 200 46

Pennoyer 79 17

Pleasantdale 107 24

Proviso 209 18

Proviso Area for
Exceptional Children (PAEC) 36

Rhodes 84.5 51

Ridgewood 234 6

River Forest 90 48

River Grove 85.5 22

Riverside 96 25

Riverside-Brookfield 208 5

Rosemont 78 47

Schiller Park 81 37

Union Ridge 86 40

Westchester 92.5 32

Western Springs 101 28

FROM THE EDITOR

To compile and share all of the wonderful stories happening in schools across the West40 region during the 2025–26 school year would take a newsroom staffed with writers, photographers, and editors working five days a week. What we discovered during this process, however, is just how eager our partner districts are to shine a light on their students and staff to help make this magazine a reality.

Together, the content submitted by West40 districts and co-ops weaves a common theme: schools across West Cook County are places where students belong, learn, and create—and where educators innovate, adapt, and prepare the next generation for a changing world.

There is a genuine commitment to positivity and hope among our districts, and it shows.

From a fourth grader recognized as a national math star, to new construction projects, to the quick-thinking high school juniors who helped save their friend's life—and so much more—we hope you enjoy the incredible success stories in the pages ahead.

These stories offer only a glimpse into the great work and success stories at our partner districts. But they reflect the spirit of the students, educators and community members who make learning in West Cook County truly exceptional.

Chris Coffey

Meet Harley:

RB's New Facility Dog

Submitted by Kiley Fletcher

Harley is a friendly face that provides a calm and welcoming presence every day at Riverside Brookfield High School. In fact, he can often be greeting students during arrival and dismissal, attending staff meetings, and showing school spirit at football games and other events.

The three-year-old golden retriever joined the RBHS staff in the fall of 2025 and so far has been a wonderful addition as the school's full-time facility dog. Harley's duties include providing comfort and social emotional support for students and staff. He can also assist in de-escalating stressful situations while helping promote a supportive environment for all students.

"Having our own facility dog on campus to provide ongoing comfort and social-emotional support has been an important project, not just for the administration, but also for the Board of Education," said Dr. Kevin Skinkis, RBHS Superintendent. "The staff is excited to have Harley here, and we look forward to a successful 2025-2026 school year with our newest team member."

Adding to his "local celebrity" status, Harley was featured in a local CBS News Chicago segment.

Harley comes to RBHS through a partnership with Canines 4 Comfort, a Gurnee-based nonprofit organization that trains facility and therapy dogs for schools and community organizations. Unlike service dogs, which are assigned to a single individual, facility dogs like Harley work with many people in a shared environment.

RBHS would like to thank Dave Mannon for helping to bring Harley to RB and serving as his primary handler.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Kevin Skinkis

STUDENT POPULATION

1,663

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Riverside-Brookfield High School

FUN FACTS

- Founded in 1909
- 78% of students involved in at least one extracurricular activity
- Students enrolled in Dual Enrollment programs such as HVAC, EMT, Criminal Justice, Sports Medicine, CNA, Welding, Fire Science, and Education



Students Help Save Friend's Life With Skill Learned at School

Written by Chris Coffey

Long time friends, Nick, Frank, Jerome, and RJ share an experience few teenagers ever have. They used a skill learned in school to save a life.

"You don't think anything could happen to you. You just think, like, oh, I'll be fine. I'm still young, and when it does happen to you, it's like, I don't know, you feel more cautious about things," said Nick.

The four Ridgewood juniors were running the Des Plaines River Trail when they stopped to rest on a bridge. That"s when the unthinkable happened as Nick collapsed.

"Once I got to the top, I was exhausted and my vision just started going blurry," Nick said.

Nick said that's the last thing he remembered before waking up several minutes later.

"He hit his head on the pavement on the ground," said RJ.

Friends say Nick was bleeding near his eye and he stopped breathing.

.

"His face started to turn purple-ish, like a different shade. And that's like when we started giving him CPR, because that's when we realized that something's wrong, and like we have to do something," said Frank.

The boys performed CPR on Nick until paramedics arrived.

"And then when they took over, it was just like a sense of relief that Nick's life is in the great hands of the paramedics," said Jerome.

Nick spent four days in the hospital and learned how his friends helped save him.

"They said it was a cardiac arrest, and my heart stopped for a minute. But then there, my friends gave me CPR," Nick said. "I'm really thankful that it did work. It's impressive that they did that."

The boys learned CPR at school, since Illinois law requires all high school students complete CPR training before graduation.

Their teacher, Kate Connelly, said she is proud of them for stepping up.

"It would have been easier to just call 911 and let the professionals take over, but the fact that these kids felt confident enough to take matters into their own hands was just incredible, really incredible," Connelly said.

The school has honored the boys for their actions. Meanwhile, Nick said things are getting back to normal.

"Everything's going good. I can't play football anymore because I have this defibrillator on my heart, which, if I play football, it'll break. So I can't play anymore, but I still show up to practice. I will help out."



SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Jennifer Kelsall

STUDENT POPULATION

943

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Ridgewood High School

FUN FACTS

- Opened in 1960
- Known for individualized instruction, team teaching, flexible scheduling
- 25 languages spoken in the school

“

These kids felt confident enough to take matters into their own hands...



Belong. Believe. Be Happy.

Submitted by Michele Guzik

Norridge School District 80, like school districts everywhere, faced challenges in the years following the pandemic. The 2021–22 school year became a time of transition as our school community worked together to adjust to new systems, new procedures, and new expectations. The years that followed focused on building strong relationships and fostering collaboration.

Our priority was helping everyone feel that they Belong. We strengthened that sense of belonging by embracing a simple but powerful theme: Believe. We focused on believing in one another, believing in our students, and believing in our community. This belief led us to our next theme, Be Happy, by finding joy and purpose in every day. We placed an emphasis on taking care of ourselves, staying connected, and finding joy in our work and learning.

During the 2025-26 school year, Norridge School District 80 proudly stands behind WE ARE DISTRICT 80: BELONG, BELIEVE, and BE HAPPY. Our staff, students, and community are committed to growth, well-being, and taking care of one another. Even Illinois State Superintendent Tony Sanders is on board and believes in NSD 80.

As we look to the future, District 80 remains dedicated to fostering a community where students and staff continue to belong, believe, and be happy. With collaboration, kindness, and a shared commitment to growth, we are ready to embrace new opportunities, celebrate achievements, and support one another every step of the way.

SUPERINTENDENT

Michele Guzik

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 1,100

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Giles School (Grades 5-8)
- Leigh School (PreK-4)

FUN FACT

- The name Norridge comes from "Nor" (Norwood Park Township) and "Ridge" (Park Ridge)





Celebrating a World of Culture

Submitted by John Munch

LaGrange Highlands SD106 hosted its first annual Family Multicultural Night in December 2025. This was an incredible event and a wonderful opportunity to learn about the lives and experiences of the district's families who make up the Highlands community.

There were 50 students in 32 families proudly representing 17 countries. Hundreds of families attended and listened to stories, created art, learned about other cultures, and tasted many new and delicious global flavors.

The rich diversity of the Highlands community is one of its strengths. This event was an amazing way to learn about, celebrate, and embrace that diversity.

SUPERINTENDENT

John Munch

STUDENT POPULATION

1,000

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Highlands Middle School
- Highlands Elementary School

FUN FACT

- District established in 1935



Morton District 201 Receives the 2025 Public Education Award

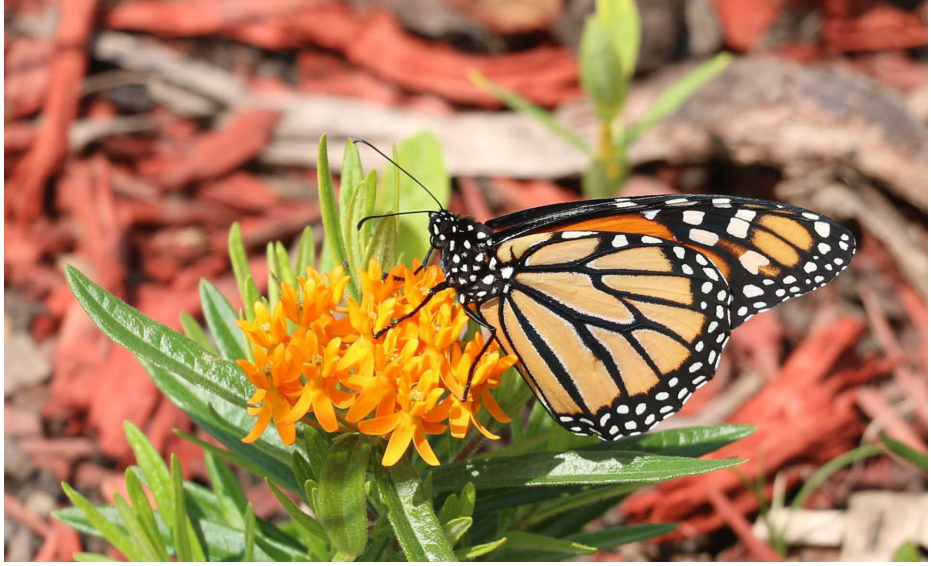
Submitted by Zuzel Garcia

Morton District 201 received the 2025 Public Education Award at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District's (MWRD) 13th Annual Sustainability Summit on November 13th, a recognition that highlights the district's commitment to sustainability and transformative education.

At the heart of that commitment is the Monarch Butterfly Garden at Morton Freshman Center, a 5,000-square-foot Citizen Science Monarch Butterfly Ecological Engineering Project that was initially conceived by Kevin O'Toole and brought to life by students, staff, and community volunteers on the north side of the campus.

The garden, which features native milkweed, over 100 native plant species, and several trees, offers vital habitat and nourishment for migrating monarch butterflies and other pollinators. Its impact has reached a national stage, as the Monarch Butterfly Garden has been permanently included in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in





Washington, D.C., as part of the Warner Age of Humans Gallery within the Deep Time exhibit.

More than a habitat, the garden has become a living classroom where students learn ecology, environmental science, native planting, and community stewardship. Its many benefits for students, community, pollinators, and local biodiversity demonstrate how the Monarch Butterfly Garden continues to create powerful learning experiences and make a lasting difference.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Michael Kuzniewski

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 8,000

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

Five Total Campuses:

- Morton East High School (Cicero)
- Morton West High School (Berwyn)
- Morton Freshman Center (Cicero)
- Morton Alternative School (Cicero)
- Morton Transition Center (Cicero)

FUN FACTS

- Joe Mantegna, Tony Award-winning actor and best known for CBS's Criminal Minds, is a Morton East alumnus
- Jim Peterik, founder of bands The Ides of March and Survivor, is a Morton West Alumnus and is best known for co-writing the song 'Eye of the Tiger'
- J. Sterling Morton High School District 201 has been around since 1893



BROOKFIELD-LAGRANGE 95



SUPERINTENDENT

Ryan Evans

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 1,300

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- S.E. Gross Middle School
- Brook Park Elementary

FUN FACTS

- Proudly serving the Brookfield - LaGrange Park communities for generations
- Early childhood program recognized for high-quality programming and student support
- Recently completed facility upgrades to support hands-on learning, accessibility, and student wellness



S.E. Gross Renovation Brings New Energy to Learning

Submitted by Ryan Evans

Students and staff at S.E. Gross Middle School began the school year with something exciting: beautifully renovated learning spaces designed to better serve both early learners and middle school students. The renovations, which were completed ahead of schedule, focused on creating welcoming, functional, and student-centered spaces that support both academic growth and daily routines.

The newly redesigned Family and Consumer Science (FACS) lab includes multiple student workstations and modern equipment, giving students hands-on opportunities to build real-world skills in cooking, nutrition, and life management. The project also created a dedicated early childhood wing, allowing younger learners to begin their school experience in a dedicated and developmentally appropriate environment. Grouping these classrooms together helps provide smoother transitions, stronger support systems, and a welcoming start for families entering District 95.

Additional improvements included a new accessible entrance and reconfigured interior spaces to better support student flow and safety throughout the building. A sensory room was incorporated to meet the developmental needs of the students of our ECE program and also our partner LADSE classrooms.

The renovation reflects District 95's commitment to maintaining facilities that match the quality of instruction happening inside them.

Unity's Athletes Excel at Special Olympics Summer Games

Submitted by Jackie Pisano

The Cicero District 99 community bursted with pride after Unity Jr. High's Special Olympics athletes brought home medals and a state championship from the 2025 Summer Games held at Illinois State University in Bloomington.

The soccer team battled through rain, heat, overtime, and even a shootout — and emerged victorious as 2025 Special Olympics State Champions!

The victories didn't stop there.

Two athletes brought home gold medals in the Javelin and one earned a silver medal.

These athletes showed unshakable determination, heart, and resilience, pushing through challenging weather and pressure-packed moments. They proved that no challenge is too big when you compete with courage and unity.

District 99 is so proud of our athletes, our coaches, and the entire Special Olympics program at Unity. This is more than a win — it's a testament to the power of perseverance, teamwork, and community support.





SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Aldo Calderin

STUDENT POPULATION

8,470

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Unity Jr. High
- Columbus East Elementary
- Early Childhood Center
- Lincoln Elementary
- Cicero East Elementary
- Columbus West Elementary
- Goodwin Elementary
- Roosevelt Elementary
- Warren Park Elementary
- Cicero West Elementary
- Drexel Elementary
- Liberty Elementary
- Sherlock Elementary
- Wilson Elementary

FUN FACTS

- District established in 1890
- Educator Toya Rodriguez has written two children's books over the past year
- Burnham Elementary, built in 1911, was recently demolished to make way for Early Education Center

John Mills Elementary Fourth Grader Recognized as National Math Star

Submitted by Krista Kerber and Dave Porreca

Fourth-grade student Michael Swiderski of John Mills Elementary School was recently selected as a 2025 National Math Star and will receive ten years' worth of support to accelerate his education.

The National Math Stars program recognizes students across the country with exceptional math talent. Each year, thousands of elementary students are nominated, but only a small fraction are chosen for this opportunity.

Swiderski is one of only 11 students from Illinois selected as a National Math Star.

"I like math — it's really easy for me," Michael said about his passion for the subject. "I really like doing challenges, puzzles, sequences, and patterns. It's really exciting to me."

This award came as no surprise to Michael's math teacher, Angela Lynam.

"Michael is highly intelligent and is a very critical thinker," Lynam said. "He thinks very deeply, outside the box. He's always able to find an alternate way to solve a problem that his classmates may not have thought of."

As a National Math Star, Michael will receive long-term support through high school at no cost to his family including, weekly one-on-one math mentoring, advanced math learning opportunities, STEM enrichment materials and opportunities, and invitations to math competitions and summer camps.

Michael was nominated by Amy Fishman, John Mills' enrichment teacher.

"I nominated Michael because he consistently shows exceptional skills in math and consistently excels beyond grade-level standards," Fishman shared. "He seeks out challenges and he perseveres in the face of a challenge."

Michael's hard work and love for learning, paired with staff dedication and guidance, helped this achievement become possible. Together, their efforts represent the kind of collaboration that helps students excel beyond the norm.

Swiderski is one of only 11 students from Illinois selected as a National Math Star.



SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Leah Gauthier

STUDENT POPULATION

2,880

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Elmwood Park High School
- Elm Middle School
- Elmwood Elementary School
- John Mills Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- All District 401 schools are within a 2-mile radius
- District 401 has a robust College and Career Pathways program, starting in middle school all the way through high school graduation
- At John Mills Elementary, students can join the One-Way Dual Language program, learning half the day in Spanish and half in English
- Students can enroll in Elmwood Park High School's award-winning drone program, where they work toward earning their FAA Part 107 pilot license



LYONS 103

Investing in Peace of Mind

Submitted by Kristopher A. Rivera

Lyons School District 103 is taking a monumental step forward in protecting its community after being awarded a $500,000 federal grant through the 2025 COPS Office School Violence Prevention Program (SVPP). This competitive program, authorized by the STOP School Violence Act, provides funding directly to school districts to improve security through evidence-based safety programs and technology.

With a total project budget of $671,110, the district will use these funds to implement a comprehensive safety plan that addresses critical vulnerabilities identified during site assessments. Families can look forward to a significantly more secure learning environment through several key potential initiatives: advanced video surveillance to allow police to monitor schools in real time during emergencies; AI weapons detection to provide immediate alerts; distress noise detection to alert staff to aggressive decibel levels in hard-to-supervise areas like hallways and bathrooms; classroom security upgrades to lock rooms instantly during a lockdown without stepping into the hallway; and safety support tools to assist in safe, non-invasive searches when necessary.

By securing these funds, the district is not just buying equipment; it is building a foundation of safety that ensures students can focus on learning, staff can work without anxiety, and families can have peace of mind knowing their children are in a protected environment.

SUPERINTENDENT

Kristopher A. Rivera

STUDENT POPULATION

2,050

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- George Washington Middle School
- Home Elementary
- Robinson Elementary
- Edison Elementary
- Lincoln Elementary
- Costello Elementary

FUN FACTS

- Former professional baseball player and World Series winner Luke Gregerson attended District 103
- District founded around 1890
- Robinson Elementary named in honor of local Medal of Honor recipient James William Robinson, Jr.



Community Support Helps Shape Pennoyer's Future Learning

Submitted by Dr. Kristin Kopta

Pennoyer School District 79 recently completed the first and second phases of a major building renovation project at its one school district to ensure students have a state-of-the-art learning environment for decades to come.

Voters approved a $9.7 million referendum in 2023 to add a two story addition to the school and many other improvements. The completed projects include physical education changing rooms, music rooms, flexible learning hubs, small learning spaces, an elevator, new bathrooms, new water fountains, a Spanish classroom, renovations to special education classrooms, new HVAC in the multipurpose room and gymnasium, upgrades to the building fire and security alarms, and renovations to the media center, science lab, and art room.

"Pennoyer students and faculty have reimagined teaching and learning in our new, beautiful collaborative spaces," said superintendent Dr. Kristin Kopta.

The district thanks the support of local voters to make its vision for modern learning a reality.





SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Kristin Kopta

STUDENT POPULATION

430

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Pennoyer School (PreK-8)

FUN FACTS

- District was established in 1839 by the Pennoyer Family
- District serves Harwood Heights, Norridge, and unincorporated Norwood Park Township
- 90% of Pennoyer students attend Maine South HS and 10% attend Ridgewood HS

Images Courtesy of ©DLA Architects, Ltd./Alexander Romanosvsky

Legacy and the Quiet Power of a Signature

Submitted by Nia Lackland

There are days when history whispers. And there are days when it speaks through the actions of young people signing their names.

On Feb. 17, 2026, the halls of Proviso West High School carried more than the movement of students between classes. They carried intention. They carried out the possibility. They carried the quiet, powerful shift of young people stepping into something greater than themselves. Throughout the day, students ages 16 to 18 registered to vote; many preparing to cast a ballot for the very first time once eligible.

Students gathered at campus registration tables, guided by community leaders and volunteers who understood that democracy is not inherited. It is practiced. The event was rooted in purpose. To register eligible students. To elevate student voices. To remind them that their presence in this moment matters.

For students as young as 16, pre-registration became an introduction to civic responsibility. For 17- and 18-year-olds, it marked something deeper. A crossing point. A recognition that their voice carries weight, and that their decisions ripple beyond the classroom walls. What began at Proviso West did not remain within its walls.

In the weeks that followed, the effort expanded across all Proviso Township High Schools District 209 campuses. A shared movement took shape. Students across the district stepped forward, not only to register, but to claim their place within a larger story. One rooted in voice, in access, in action.

Then came the next step.

The district hosted a second event. This time, not just to prepare students, but to witness them. To celebrate them. To affirm what had already begun. Students who once stood at registration tables returned having cast their ballots, completing the journey from intention to action. What started as preparation became participation.

Superintendent Krish Mohip spoke to the significance of that moment.

"Our responsibility is not only to educate students academically, but to ensure they understand their role in shaping the future of their communities," Mohip said. "Seeing our students take that step from registration to voting is exactly the kind of impact we strive for as a district."

That impact did not happen in isolation. It was strengthened through partnership. The Glen Ellyn Area Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and the Office of Cook County Commissioner Tara Stamps stood alongside the district, helping guide students through both moments. From registration to voting. From learning to lived experience.

The day also held space for leadership already in motion.

Principal Jeremy Christian was recognized as the West Cook Region Principal of the Year, a reflection of leadership that does more than manage a building. It shapes a culture. Under his direction, Proviso West continues to grow not only scholars, but citizens. Students who understand both achievement and responsibility.

In recognition of this impact, the Office of Cook County Commissioner Tara Stamps issued a formal resolution honoring his contributions to education and community. A reminder that leadership is not defined by position alone, but by the people it prepares to lead next.

And then, as the day unfolded, the world paused.



News spread that the nation had lost civil rights leader Jesse Jackson Sr., a lifelong advocate for voting rights and civic participation. The timing was unplanned, yet it carried weight. As the country reflected on a legacy rooted in justice and access, students across Proviso were living that legacy in real time. Not in words. In action.

Together, these moments formed something larger than a single day. They revealed what happens when leadership, opportunity, and student voice align. They showed that civic engagement is not a lesson confined to textbooks, but a lived experience shaped by courage and choice.

Students across Proviso Township High Schools District 209 did more than register to vote.

They turned preparation into participation.
They turned their intention into action.
They honored legacy not only by registering, but by voting.
They wrote themselves into the enduring story of democracy.

SUPERINTENDENT

Krish Mohip

STUDENT POPULATION

4,175

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Proviso West High School
- Proviso East High School
- Proviso Mathematics and Science Academy

FUN FACTS

- District established in 1910
- Students have access to AP courses, dual credit opportunities, Career and Technical Education Pathways, a STEM-focused academy at PMSA, and robust fine arts and extracurricular programming



FRANKLIN PARK 84

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. David Katzin

STUDENT POPULATION

1,247

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Hester Junior High School
- North Elementary School
- Passow Elementary School
- Pietrini Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- District 84 schools have earned seven exemplary ratings in the past three years
- This year the district rolled out three new electric school buses at no cost thanks to an EPA grant
- District 84 has only had five superintendents since 1941



Music to Our Ears:

Franklin Park School District 84 Students Earn State Honors

Submitted by Dr. David Katzin

Franklin Park School District 84 is excited to share that two Hester Junior High students received very special news over the winter break. Ethan Hanc (tuba) and Gustavo Escobedo (saxophone) were selected out of more than 24,000 live auditions to perform during the Illinois Music Education Association (ILMEA) State Conference on January 30, 2026 at the Peoria Civic Center Arena.

While this is an amazingly impressive achievement, it gets even better.

Gustavo and Ethan were chosen as the first chair for their respective instruments. That means that their auditions were determined to be the best tuba and saxophone auditions in the entire state of Illinois!

The district is incredibly proud of these talented all-state musicians!

Student-Created Mural Leaves a Lasting Impression

Written by Chris Coffey

A new mural inside Mannheim Middle School is sure to leave a lasting impression on anyone who walks past it. The colorful images span the length of an entire hallway and represent what MMS is all about: strength and togetherness, music and drama, and sports and culture.

Students of art teacher Terri Hafertepe designed, sketched, and painted the mural over the course of three years before it was unveiled in 2025 at an official ribbon cutting ceremony.

"They really feel like they have accomplished something that's going to be here and made history and made their mark on the wall," Hafertepe said.

Images on the mural include a symbol of unity, sports settings, a cityscape, and a school bus.

The mural stands as a permanent reminder of student voice and is a gift for generations of students and staff to come.

MANNHEIM 83

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Diego Giraldo

STUDENT POPULATION

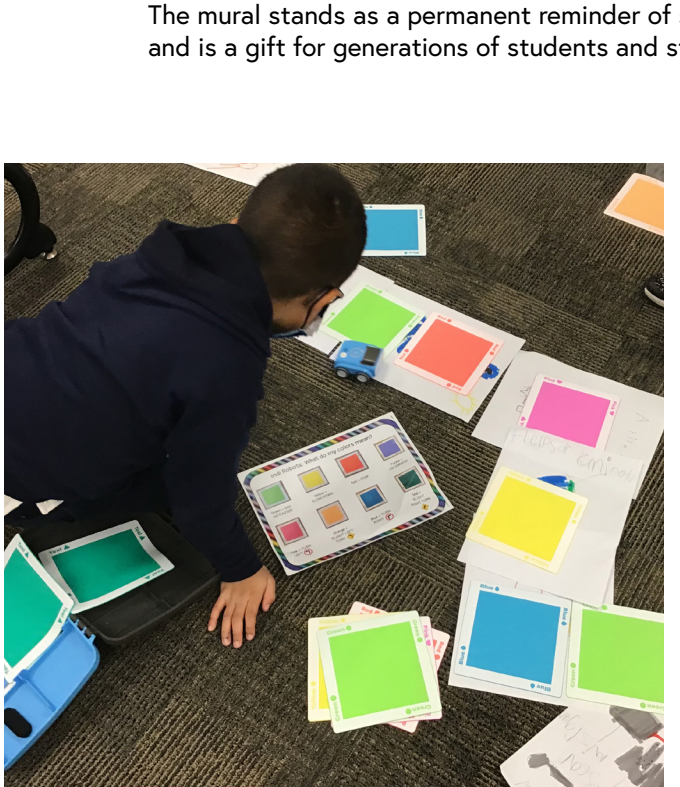
2,390

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Enger School
- Mannheim Early Childhood Center
- Mannheim Middle School
- Roy School
- Scott School
- Westdale School

FUN FACTS

- Started as a small two-room schoolhouse in 1936
- A strong student-first focus, supported by dedicated educators and staff
- Former Vice President Al Gore visited Mannheim Middle School in 1999





SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Jan Rashid

STUDENT POPULATION

715

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- River Grove School

FUN FACTS

- River Grove School is the only middle school that marches in the Chicago Columbus Day Parade
- Board President Marlene Flahaven has served on the Board for 44 years
- River Grove School students publish a newspaper each Winter and Spring that is mailed to all households in River Grove, highlighting activities and celebrations from the school

How a Generous Family Brightened Our School Year

Submitted by Dr. Jan Rashid

Running a K–8 school isn't easy. How do they have enough supplies?

River Grove School received a sizable donation that supported students and staff throughout the school year, thanks to Enchanted Backpack and the generosity of the DeTomaso family.

Enchanted Backpack is an organization that believes all children deserve the tools they need for a good education. After school staff members completed an application and an interview with the organization, River Grove School was selected to receive the donation.

Enchanted Backpack connected the school with the DeTomaso family. David DeTomaso, a River Grove School graduate, was an executive at Alberto Culver, a major manufacturing company that supplied many jobs in the community. After he passed away, his family wanted to honor him by giving back to the community. By fate, they had already connected with Enchanted Backpack before River Grove. With their help, the family generously donated truckloads of supplies, including board games, playground equipment, classroom rugs, clothing, school supplies, backpacks, gym equipment, and much more.

"This family was so generous in their husband's and dad's name to donate these supplies to River Grove School," said Natalie Winiarski, an 8th grader.

These donations allow River Grove School to give every student and teacher the tools they need to succeed.





“

This family was so generous in their husband’s and dad’s name to donate these supplies to River Grove School.

A Commitment to Student Well-Being

Submitted by Dr. Jennifer Ban

The health program at Pleasantdale Middle School has been awarded the prestigious Health Blue Ribbon by the Illinois Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance (IAHPERD). This recognition reflects excellence in health education and a deep commitment to student well-being.

Earning a Health Blue Ribbon is no small feat. The designation is awarded only when a school meets rigorous requirements outlined in the application process, including letters of support from stakeholders, one-on-one interviews with staff, students, and parents, a site visit, a curriculum review, and the submission of extensive program artifacts. The process is time-consuming and demanding, and only a small number of schools ever reach the Blue Ribbon level.

In fact, this year, Pleasantdale Middle School was the only school in Illinois to receive the Health Blue Ribbon Award. Because of the complexity of the process and the significance of the honor, a school may receive the Health Blue Ribbon only once every five years.

This award also reflects the leadership and dedication of Ms. Jennifer Driscoll, who has spent 12 years developing a health program that is relevant to students' lives and grounded in the knowledge and skills they need to make informed, healthy choices. Over the years, she has earned the title of "favorite teacher" from countless students—not because she seeks the spotlight, but because of her calm presence, caring spirit, and the trust she builds with kids every day.

Pleasantdale Middle School was honored at the IAHPERD awards banquet during the annual conference. The program will also be featured in the Illinois Journal, and the district will have the opportunity to present at the IAHPERD convention in the spring.



SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Dave Palzet

STUDENT POPULATION

819

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Pleasantdale Middle School
- Pleasantdale Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- Both schools have won National Blue Ribbon Awards
- The first school serving the Pleasantdale community was built in 1843
- Pleasantdale's first teacher was Mary McNaughton

District 96 Playground Improvement Projects

Submitted by Molly Castor

District 96 has worked to improve school playgrounds and, most importantly, to separate play from parking to provide the safest areas for our students.

Over the last five years, four of the district's campuses have received playground and outdoor space upgrades. Blythe Park is the last school up for a playground refresh as of 2026. Working with the Village of Riverside and DLA Architects, Blythe Park students shared their ideas in an interactive visioning session where they designed their dream playground.

District 96 is looking forward to the completion of this project that will serve the Riverside community and District 96 for years to come.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Martha Ryan-Toye

STUDENT POPULATION

1,751

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Hauser Junior High
- Ames Elementary
- Blythe Park Elementary
- Central Elementary
- Hollywood Elementary

FUN FACTS

- Hauser students launched the district's first-ever composting program in 2025 with support from Waste Not Compost and the Illinois Green Schools Project
- Central's multi-purpose room sits on top of a swimming pool closed in the 1920s
- Graduate Dana Rettke won a silver medal in the 2024 Summer Olympics for women's volleyball



Day of Service Brings Community Together to Pack 35,000 Meals



Submitted by Rachelle Ernst

Forest Park School District 91 and the Forest Park PTO once again turned Martin Luther King Jr. Day into a powerful "day on", not a day off, through their 3rd Annual Day of Service. Held at Forest Park Middle School, the all-ages event brought together students, families, and neighbors with a shared goal of serving others and supporting those most in need.

Nearly 200 volunteers filled the Forest Park Middle School gym, working side by side to package non-perishable meals and collect essential household and toiletry items for local neighbors experiencing food or housing insecurity. Donations from the event support the Forest Park Community Fridge, Forest Park Food Pantry, and the Forest Park Library Comfort Cabinet, ensuring the impact stays close to home.

"One of the most powerful parts of the Day of Service was seeing students working alongside parents, staff, and community members," said Rachelle Ernst, Director of Engagement. "That shared experience sends a powerful message to our students about empathy, responsibility, and the impact of coming together to help others."

This year's Day of Service reached a new milestone, with volunteers packaging nearly 35,000 meals, exceeding the original 30,000-meal goal. The significant increase in meals is credited to the combined support of Forest Park School District 91, the Forest Park PTO, business community sponsors, and individual family contributions, which brought a new level of engagement and expanded the reach of the event.

"There was so much energy in the air during our Day of Service as volunteers came together to package nearly 35,000 meals," said Interim Superintendent Dr. Robert Hubbird. "In the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., our service is measured not by position or power, but by our collective impact in creating a more equitable and compassionate school community—and this event exemplifies this message."

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Robert Hubbird

STUDENT POPULATION

706

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Forest Park Middle School
- Betsy Ross Elementary School
- Garfield Primary Elementary School
- Field-Stevenson Intermediate School
- Forest Park Preschool

FUN FACTS

- Field-Stevenson Intermediate School is named in honor of renowned authors Eugene Field and Robert Louis Stevenson
- District staff participate in annual Forest Park Casket Races every October
- When I-290 was constructed in the 1950s, Forest Park families were displaced from their homes and even graves were relocated to make way for the highway. District records still reflect students whose families once lived where I-290 runs

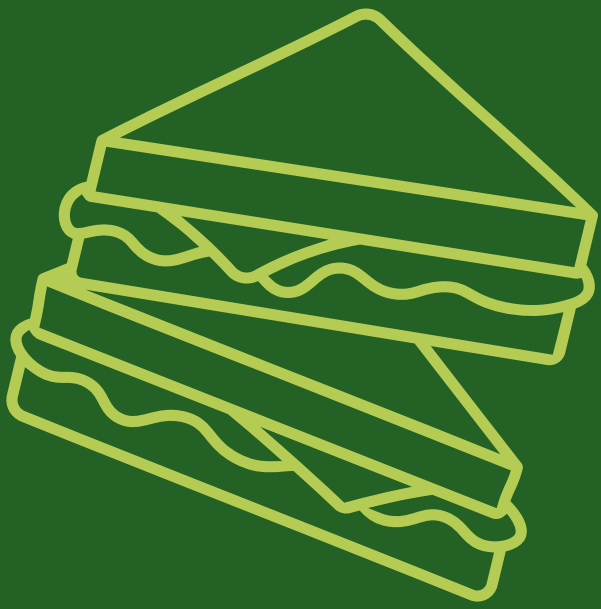




“

There was so much energy in the air...





Discovering Western Springs Through Student Eyes

Submitted by Dr. Sarah Coffey

At McClure Junior High, a unique class turns a classroom of questions into real-world exploration. Curious City: Western Springs Edition started as a quarter-long elective three years ago and has quickly become a community project to ask great questions, record firsthand stories, and share the heart of Western Springs with the world.

Participating students build relationships with business leaders and historians from the Western Springs Historical Society, visit village landmarks, and interview residents for their ongoing Oral History project. Students learn how the local government solves puzzles like traffic and potholes. They also explore the police and fire departments to understand public service up close. And they tour the Thomas Ford Library to trace how community knowledge is collected and shared. Beyond this local research, students also build cultural bridges across continents by writing letters to their sister city in England (Rugeley).

Students learn that by asking questions they can reveal extraordinary facts about everyday life while shining a light on the accomplishments of friends and neighbors.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Sarah Coffey

STUDENT POPULATION

1,433

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- McClure Jr. High
- John Laidlaw Elementary
- Forest Hills Elementary
- Field Park Elementary

FUN FACTS

- District established in 1888
- McClure Junior High celebrated its 101st anniversary this year

Scan for Western Springs stories







District's Grow Your Own Program Seeks to Fill Teacher Vacancies

Submitted by Jillian Thomas



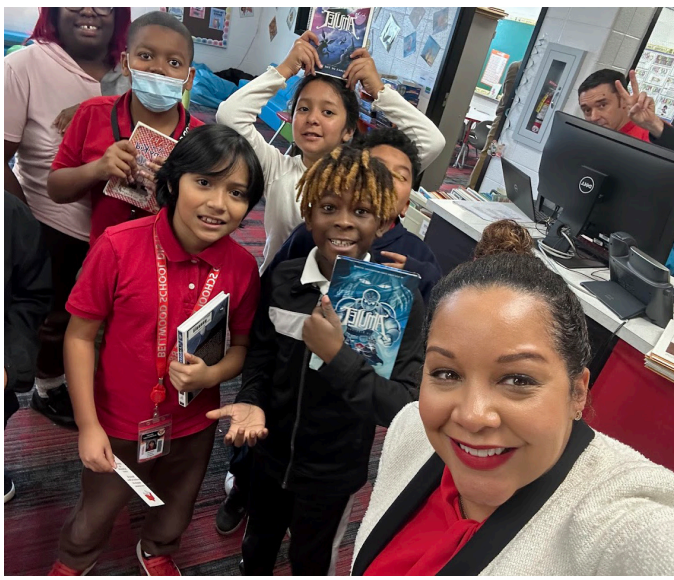
The shrinking teacher pipeline across the country is real and Illinois is no exception. But Bellwood District 88 is taking the initiative to fill openings from within through its Grow Your Own program headed by superintendent Dr. Victoria Stockton.

The district partnered with BloomBoard to create a pathway that allows paraprofessionals and staff to earn teaching degrees while continuing to work and get paid in their schools. This allows teaching candidates to build portfolios based on real classroom experience. They also receive feedback from accredited universities and take steps toward earning their licensure.

Funding is provided through the state's teacher vacancy grant pilot program.

"Changing the model from time-based or lecture-based into entirely portfolio-based allows our employees to integrate their work towards their degree directly into their day job without having to do coursework on nights and weekends," said Stockton.

So far District 88 has had seven graduates and there are eight staff members in the program as of early 2026.



SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Victoria H. Stockton

STUDENT POPULATION

1,900

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Roosevelt Middle School
- Early Childhood Center at Lincoln and Grant Primary
- Grant Elementary
- Lincoln Elementary
- Marshall Elementary
- McKinley Elementary

FUN FACTS

- Illinois House Speaker Chris Welch is an alumni of McKinley Elementary
- Dr. Stockton named a 2025 NSPRA Superintendent to Watch
- One of the only school districts in the state to have full implementation of the Ron Clark Academy House System

The Spindle: Berwyn North's New Community Hub Takes Shape

Submitted by Stephanie Barba

Tucked directly across the street from Berwyn North's middle school, a transformation is underway. What will soon emerge is The Spindle, an indoor recreational facility designed to serve as a gathering place for students, families, and the broader community.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Michelle Smith and with the full support of the Berwyn North School District 98 Board of Education, this project represents a bold commitment to student wellness and community connection. It's not about checking a box or filling space—it's about creating something our kids actually need: a place where they can play, connect, and just be kids.

The Spindle is designed for children Pre-K and up. The facility will feature built-in electrical infrastructure throughout, supporting everything from gaming consoles to interactive tech setups. It's a modern approach to recreation—one that recognizes how kids actually want to spend their time.

"These are the kinds of spaces our kids deserve," Dr. Smith and district officials noted during early celebrations, community gatherings—all under one roof.

The center will house a mix of active and quiet spaces, each serving a distinct purpose: gaming rooms will offer interactive experiences and esports-style setups, giving students access to the kind of competitive gaming culture that's become central to youth recreation. A dedicated table games area encourages face-to-face interaction, whether that's board games, cards, or collaborative play that doesn't require a screen.

For physical activity, there's a jungle gym and active play area alongside climbing walls designed to challenge students safely while building confidence and coordination.

Recognizing that not every child thrives in high-energy environments, Sensory Rooms will offer



calm, supportive spaces for students who benefit from quieter, more controlled settings.

A TV lounge provides comfortable seating for group viewing, while the family greeting and seating area at the entrance ensures parents have a welcoming place to wait, chat, and feel connected to the space their children are enjoying.

The exterior of The Spindle will feature a custom mural created by a local artist—a visual representation of Berwyn North's creativity, diversity, and community spirit. It's a deliberate choice to make the building itself a reflection of the people it serves.

Construction was progressing toward a May 2026 completion date, with an official ribbon-cutting ceremony anticipated in the Fall of 2026. That event will mark not just the opening of a building, but the launch of a new chapter for recreation and connection in Berwyn North.

The Spindle represents something bigger than square footage or amenities. It's an investment in the idea that our students deserve dedicated space to grow, play, and belong—space that meets them where they are and supports who they're becoming.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Michelle Smith

STUDENT POPULATION

2,483

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Lincoln Middle School
- Jefferson Elementary
- Havlicek Elementary
- Prairie Oak Elementary

FUN FACTS

- A highly diverse district, with about 79% Hispanic/ Latino, making it one of the more culturally rich districts in the Chicago suburbs
- The district offers unique fine arts programs including Ballet Folclórico, Mariachi, Band, and Theater, reflecting its vibrant Latino cultural identity
- After completing 8th grade, students from the district feed into J. Sterling Morton High School West, part of the J. Sterling Morton High School District 201
- The district spends $20,230 per student annually
- Jefferson Elementary achieved Exemplary status this year, the highest designation awarded by the Illinois State Board of Education









SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Philip Salemi

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 1,100

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Westchester Middle School
- Westchester Intermediate School
- Westchester Primary School

FUN FACTS

- In 1928, District 92.5 was created by including sections of Bellwood, Broadview, and Hillside
- 63% of teachers have a Masters Degree or higher
- Average student/teacher ratio is 18:1

Keeping Students on the Move

Submitted by Dr. Philip Salemi

One of the quiet strengths of Westchester District 92.5 is its Transportation Department. The district owns its own buses and is able to be flexible, responsive, and connected in ways that may not be possible otherwise.

The district is regularly recruiting and filling positions to keep routes running smoothly as student needs and staffing change over time. Drivers and mechanics know the routes, know the students, and build real relationships with the kids they see every day. That connection matters, especially for students who start and end each school day on a bus.

That commitment was on full display during a recent stretch of heavy snow and extreme cold. While many people were at home on a Sunday, members of the transportation team came in to clear buses, check equipment, and make sure everything was ready so students could arrive safely on Monday morning. Their work behind the scenes ensured that school could open on time and that students could learn in a warm, safe environment.

It is easy to focus on what happens in classrooms, but schools do not run smoothly without dedicated people doing critical work out of sight. District 92.5's Transportation Department shows up every day with professionalism and care, and the district is better because of it.





A Commitment to Inclusive Practices and Comprehensive Programming

Submitted by Kevin Wolf

The Leyden Area Special Education Cooperative (LASEC) is committed to educational excellence for all through ongoing collaboration and partnership in service to its nine member school districts: Rosemont SD 78, Pennoyer SD 79, Mannheim SD 83, Franklin Park SD 84, Rhodes SD 84.5, River Grove SD 85.5, Union Ridge SD 86, Leyden CHSD 212, and Ridgewood CHSD 234.

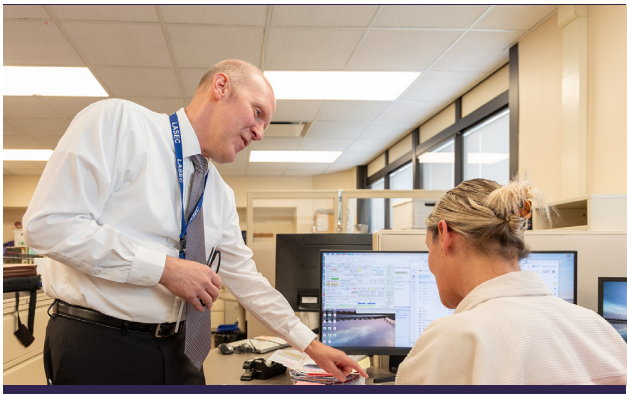
LASEC provides technical assistance to ensure compliance with federal and state regulations while supporting high-quality programming for students with disabilities. The cooperative also delivers essential resources to member districts, including specialized staff such as special education leaders, school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, a youth services coordinator, and educational support personnel. In addition, LASEC offers ongoing professional learning and services to ensure a full continuum of special education support is available to all students.

As part of this continuum, LASEC operates Phoenix Academy, a public therapeutic day school designed to meet the needs of students requiring more intensive support than a general education setting can provide. The cooperative also facilitates early intervention transitions for children and families moving from birth-to-three services into school-based programming. At the secondary level, LASEC, in collaboration with member districts, connects students with resources through the Illinois DHS's Division of Rehabilitation Services, supporting successful transitions to postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.

The strength of LASEC's member districts is reflected in their commitment to inclusive practices and comprehensive programming. These efforts include extensive in-district services for students with the most significant learning needs, meaningful inclusion opportunities, participation in Special Olympics, engagement in social programs such as Best Buddies, and the development of employment skills that prepare students for active participation in their communities.

Collectively, LASEC member districts serve approximately 1,600 students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), with a shared commitment that ALL students have access to exceptional educational opportunities.

LEYDEN AREA SPECIAL EDUCATION COOPERATIVE (LASEC)



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Kevin Wolf

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Phoenix Academy

STUDENT POPULATION

- 1600 students with IEPs in partnership with member districts (regular school year)
- 160 students (summer session)

FUN FACTS

- LASEC formed in the 1958-59 school year
- Phoenix Academy opened 2020-21 school year
- Students develop personal insight to improve emotional health, academic success, and long term success in their community.



Leyden Makes History with Illinois Teacher and Superintendent of the Year

Submitted by Karen Geddeis

For the first time in history, one school district is home to both the Illinois Teacher of the Year and the Illinois Superintendent of the Year, during the same timeframe. Dr. Nick Polyak, Superintendent of Leyden High School District 212, was named the Illinois Superintendent of the Year by an independent panel commissioned by the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) and Mr. Víctor Gómez, was named the Illinois Teacher of the Year by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).

The highly competitive Illinois Superintendent of the Year selection process judged nominees on academic achievement, preparing students for the future, social-emotional support, teaching and instruction and leadership. This honor recognizes Dr. Polyak's exceptional leadership, visionary initiatives, and unwavering commitment to educational excellence at the local, state, and national levels.

"Dr. Polyak's recognition as the 2026 Illinois Superintendent of the Year is a testament to his dedication to student success, equity, innovation, and the development of future leaders in education," said Leyden Board President Greg Ignoffo. "Being a superintendent isn't a job, it's a calling. This is a 24/7/365 job, and we know that he is wrestling with monumental decisions on where we are going with our district, our students, and our community, and he just makes it look so simple."

Gómez, a bilingual science teacher at East Leyden, was selected through a highly competitive annual process that recognizes the best in the teaching profession and is the highest honor for Illinois educators. The honor came with a state-funded, one-year sabbatical, where he is representing Illinois across the country.

"Mr. Gómez is ready to meet the moment," said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Tony Sanders. "Illinois' fastest-growing student populations are English learners and Hispanic students. Mr. Gómez recognizes that bilingual students are poised for success in STEM – possessing the creativity, problem-solving skills, and non-linear thinking that are critical for innovation. Mr. Gómez can inspire other educators around the state with his high expectations for his students, his willingness to chart new paths, and his commitment to inclusive and culturally responsive instruction. I look forward to the ways in which Mr. Gómez will uplift the teaching profession and inspire young people to pursue careers in bilingual education."





SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Nick Polyak

STUDENT POPULATION

3,500

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- East Leyden High School
- West Leyden High School

FUN FACTS

- Recently celebrated 100th Anniversary
- 750 students enrolled in dual credit (2025)
- Nationally recognized for its "One Amazing Story" monthly video series



Unlocking Potential and Empowering Every Learner

Submitted by Michael James

Proviso Area for Exceptional Children (PAEC) believes that a disability does not define a child's potential—it simply dictates the unique path we take to help them reach it. As a Special Education Cooperative Joint Agreement, PAEC provides a comprehensive "safety net" of diagnostic services and specialized programs designed to empower students from early childhood through early adulthood.

PAEC is one of the longest-standing special education cooperatives in the region, bringing nearly 70 years of expertise to our students. Our mission is rooted in the belief that every student can excel when met with the right resources and a nurturing environment. Whether it is through research-based early intervention for at-risk general education students or our intensive specialized programs, our staff and administrators are deeply invested in the "whole child."

We operate five specialized programs—from Early Childhood through High School—ensuring a seamless, supportive transition for students at every stage of their educational journey.

"We understand that true achievement isn't just about what happens in the classroom," says the PAEC leadership team. "It's about creating an atmosphere where students feel valued and empowered to grow into their best selves."

We serve as a "hub of excellence" for five different member districts, bringing together the resources of Berkeley, Bellwood, Broadview, Hillside, and Maywood. By fostering close-knit partnerships with parents and our member districts, PAEC continues to be a cornerstone of support in our community—ensuring that every student, regardless of their needs, has a place where they belong and the tools they need to succeed.

While specific enrollment fluctuates across our five specialized programs and early intervention services, our impact reaches across the entirety of the Proviso Township, supporting hundreds of students with personalized academic and behavioral programs.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Michael James

STUDENT POPULATION

388

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- PAEC Center
- PAEC Academy
- PAEC Elementary
- PAEC Early Childhood
- PAEC Therapeutic High School

FUN FACTS

- Founded in 1957
- Serves Districts 87, 88, 92, 93, and 209
- Supports students ranging from ages 3 to 21, including students who attend their home district school

Innovative Teaching and Learning in School District 81

Submitted by Katherine Manganello

School District 81 brings teaching and learning to life through innovative practices that are the hallmark of twenty-first century schools. Grounded in the belief that students learn best when they are actively engaged, SD81 educators create learning experiences that encourage student curiosity, cultivate collaboration, and offer students a voice and choice in their learning.

Each of District 81's three schools is designed with innovative teaching and learning in mind. The learning spaces provide areas for student-to-group sharing, individual reflection, collaboration, and hands-on experiences. Students are encouraged to think critically, problem-solve, and apply their learning in authentic ways that connect to the world around them.

Twenty-first-century learning environments use physical space as an educational tool that enhances learning. District 81 schools' distinguishing features include a generous and purposeful use of natural light, vibrant color, and open space. Students enjoy areas for play and exploration, flexible, comfortable seating and nooks, and features that bring the colors and textures of nature indoors.

At the heart of the District's work is a shared commitment to student growth and continuous improvement. By designing dynamic learning experiences in modern spaces, our educators empower students to thrive and become leaders ready for tomorrow's challenges.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Melissa Kartsimas

STUDENT POPULATION

1,400

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

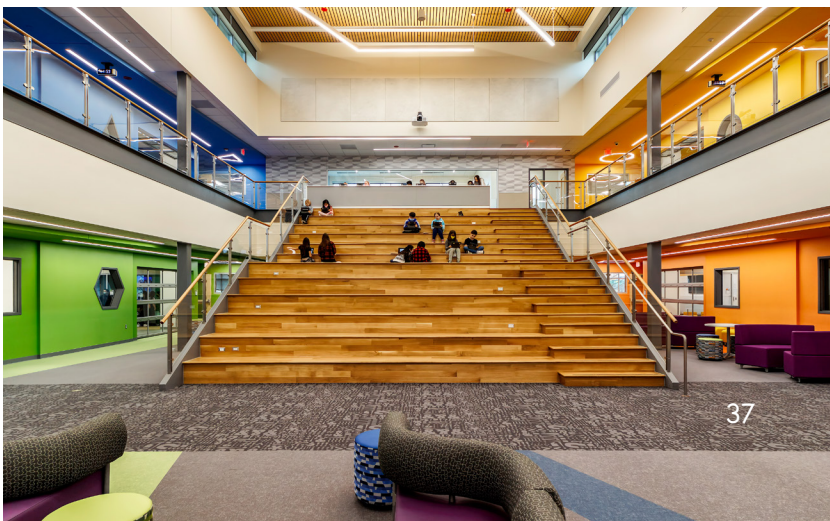
- Lincoln Middle School
- Kennedy Elementary School
- Washington Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- District 81 started as a one-room schoolhouse serving local farming families in the late 1800s
- District 81's commitment to 21st-century learning environments has earned national recognition







District 105's Battle of the Books: Inspiring Lifelong Readers

Submitted by Candice Barrett

District 105 prides itself on fostering lifelong learning, with a special emphasis on nurturing curiosity and a love of reading among students. At the heart of this commitment is the annual Battle of the Books—a beloved tradition that brings students, staff, and schools together in a spirited celebration of books and knowledge.

Each year, the district's five library media specialists collaborate to create two carefully curated reading lists: one for 5th and 6th graders, and another for 7th and 8th grade students. Participation is voluntary, yet the event consistently garners enthusiastic involvement. Many students, having spent years watching older peers compete and tackle questions about characters, settings, plots, and authors, eagerly await their own turn to join the competition.

The preparation for Battle of the Books is a team effort. Students form teams with their classmates and dive into the selected books, while the library media specialists develop grade-appropriate questions and organize an engaging Kahoot quiz for the battles.

A highlight of the Battle of the Books is the staff competition, where teachers form their own teams and read the same books as the students. These staff battles, held before the student competitions, offer a fun opportunity for teachers to model excellent sportsmanship, kindness, and proper Kahoot etiquette. Watching their teachers compete not only builds excitement but also helps students ease their nerves and prepare for their own battles.

Elementary battles are a schoolwide affair. Younger students are invited to watch as 5th and 6th grade teams showcase their knowledge. The top four teams from each elementary school earn a spot in the Elementary District Battle, where they are reorganized into "super teams" made up of students from different schools. This unique format helps students connect with future classmates and fosters a sense of district-wide community.

District 105's Battle of the Books is more than just a competition—it's a celebration of reading, teamwork, and the joy of learning that continues to inspire students year after year.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Brian J. Ganan

STUDENT POPULATION

1,223

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- William F Gurrie Middle School
- Hodgkins Elementary School
- Ideal Elementary School
- Seventh Avenue School
- Spring Avenue Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- Gurrie was a Whole Child Demonstration School during the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) National Conference in 2013
- Jeff Hornacek attended Gurrie and later played basketball at Iowa State and then in the NBA for the Phoenix Suns, Philadelphia 76ers, and Utah Jazz as well as coaching the Suns and New York Knicks
- A year after a fire destroyed the original Ideal Elementary in 1918, County Superintendent of Schools Edward Tobin made his annual visit to the new building, known only as "the new school", and called the school "Ideal" for the rural community





A Celebration of Reading, Teamwork, and the Joy of Learning





A School Powered by Sunshine

Submitted by Rodney Bien-aime

Union Ridge School is stepping energetically into the future with the recent installation of 440 solar panels on its roof. The school is not only saving money on its electricity costs, but also providing students with an important lesson in sustainability.

The project became fully operational in late 2024 and so far has made a measurable impact. As of February 2026, the solar panel system at Union Ridge School has generated 250 megawatt hours of electricity. That's enough to power 16 average homes in Illinois for an entire year.

According to ComEd, the district is projected to save approximately $580,000 in electricity costs over the next 24 years. Additionally, the school can monitor energy production through an interactive website.

Students are also using the school's new renewable energy attributes as a powerful learning tool. Science teacher Catherine Lenzini incorporated the installation into her classroom lessons by having her students create projects that explain how the sun's energy is harnessed and converted into clean electricity.

"It's for the betterment of the community and the students at this school," Lenzini sad.

ComEd presented Union Ridge School with a $62,700 rebate check in April 2025 to help offset installation costs.

SUPERINTENDENT

Michael Maguire

STUDENT POPULATION

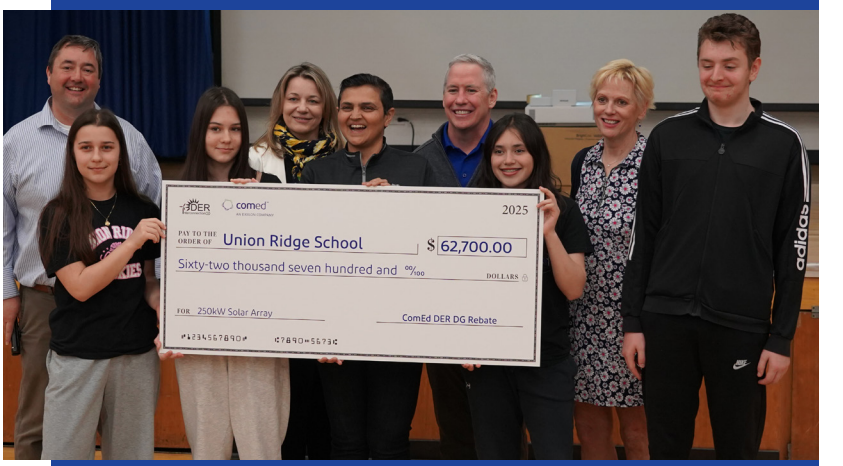
664

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Union Ridge School

FUN FACTS

- 2026 marks Union Ridge's 150th anniversary
- National Blue Ribbon School in 1999
- Nine former students are current staff members at Union Ridge School





All About LADSE

Submitted by Dr. Ellie Ambuehl

LADSE is proud of many key accomplishments. At the top of the list is our success in the development of specialized services and programs that our fifteen individual districts could not sustain alone. We have opened three schools in the past six years to serve students with significant disabilities (LADSE North, LADSE West, and LRB Academy), as well as the provision of unique programming for early childhood learners and transition age students.

LADSE also offers numerous professional growth opportunities for our membership, touching on topics such as artificial intelligence in the classroom, trauma-informed practices, and instructional strategies for autistic students.

At the core of our mission is helping students to achieve their greatest potential through partnership with our member districts.

LAGRANGE AREA DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION (LADSE)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dr. Ellie Ambuehl

STUDENTS SERVED

3431 students with IEPs in LADSE member districts receive support directly or indirectly through LADSE teachers, therapists and support staff.

SCHOOLS

- LADSE North
- LADSE West
- LRB Academy

FUN FACTS

- Established in 1957, LADSE is proud to be the first special education cooperative in the state of Illinois.
- LADSE is made up of 15 school districts which straddle two counties and over 45 square miles.
- LADSE was the 1st Place Float winner of both the 71st and 73rd annual La Grange Pet Parade (73rd winning pic below)



Beye Green Team Wins International Environmental Filmmaking Award

Submitted by Amanda Siegfried

The Beye Elementary School Green Team earned global recognition for its creativity and environmental leadership. Their short film, *The Dishwasher Quest*, was named one of just 10 winning films worldwide in the 2025 One Earth Young Filmmakers Contest. Even more impressively, Beye was one of only two elementary groups honored this year—the other hails from Ukraine.

As part of their award—the Environmental Activism Award, sponsored by the Jane Goodall Institute—Beye's young filmmakers experienced a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: meeting world-renowned conservationist Dr. Jane Goodall at the Roots and Shoots "Good for All Fair" at Lincoln Park Zoo. Students heard Dr. Goodall speak, met her in person, took photos, and even received her autograph.

The Dishwasher Quest tells the story of how Beye students turned concern about cafeteria waste into real change. Two years ago, Beye's dishwasher broke, forcing the school to switch from reusable silverware to single-use plastic utensils. Seeing how much plastic was being thrown away every day, the Green Team set out to make a difference. To start, students counted every plastic spork used during one lunch period—144 in a single day. That added up to 26,000 sporks a year at Beye alone, and nearly 390,000 across the district's 10 schools. Using this data, they created a documentary to show the environmental impact and lobby for a new dishwasher.

"We made our film because we wanted people to see how much students can do when we care about something deeply," the Beye Green Team said in its contest submission. "We wanted to show that kids have voices that matter. We're not too young to understand the problem—and we're definitely not too young to be part of the solution."

The Beye Green Team is one of the school's proudest and longest-standing traditions, with a history of student-led sustainability projects that have earned local and regional recognition. Parent volunteers Lauren Smith-MacGregor and Kara Finnegan have guided the team for more than seven years, with Lizz Kannenberg joining their leadership more recently. Together, they have inspired students to learn about environmental issues, take meaningful action, and see that their voices can drive real change.

Scan to watch the award-winning film:
The Dishwasher Quest



SUPERINTENDENTS

Patrick Robinson & Dr. Griff Powell,
Co-Interim Superintendents

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 5,500

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Brooks Middle School
- Julian Middle School
- Beye Elementary School
- Hatch Elementary School
- Holmes Elementary School
- Irving Elementary School
- Lincoln Elementary School
- Longfellow Elementary School
- Mann Elementary School
- Whittier Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- District founded in the late 1800s
- Board of Education adopted a comprehensive racial and educational equity policy in 2019
- District's Portrait of an Oak Park 8th Grade Graduate defines success beyond test scores and supports youth development



LAGRANGE 102

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Chris Covino

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 2,850

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Park Jr. High School
- Barnsdale Road School
- Congress Park School
- Cossitt Avenue School
- Forest Road School
- Ogden Avenue School
- Science Center

FUN FACT

- Park Jr. High is home to the McKinnon Art Gallery. It originated under the direction of Principal Nettie McKinnon between 1929 and 1960, when Park Jr. High was known as Oak Avenue School. The collection comprises paintings, sculptures, works on paper, and decorative art projects, and is valued at several million dollars. The collection is integrated into the school curriculum and tours are provided for children, parents, and the community.

Learning Lifelong Skills Through Play

Submitted by Jodi Meyer

Berwyn South School District 100 embraces the opportunity to have its kindergarten students explore through play-based learning. Through The Creative Curriculum for Kindergarten, the students at Hiawatha Elementary learned all about the many jobs that are required to have an effective grocery store.

Grocery stores play an important role in every community, reflecting the tastes and needs of the families they serve while providing access to food and everyday essentials.
From small neighborhood markets to large supermarket chains, grocery stores are places most families visit regularly—and now, they're becoming a source of hands-on learning in the classroom.

The students explored what happens behind the scenes at a grocery store. To introduce the unit, students went into the community and visited and purchased items at a small market near the school. Through observation and discovery, children learned how food travels from farms to store shelves, how technology helps stores run smoothly, and the many jobs and tools required to keep everything organized and operating each day.

As part of the unit, students worked together to plan and create a classroom grocery store of their own. They practiced real-world skills by arranging and pricing products, designing advertisements, and creating coupons. Along the way, students built knowledge in economics, technology, physical properties, and construction, while also learning about how people from different backgrounds live and work.

Most importantly, this project encouraged teamwork and positive social interaction. Students collaborated with classmates, strengthened communication skills, learned how to cooperate on group projects, and gained a deeper appreciation for the everyday places that support healthy, productive lives in their community.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Mary Havis

STUDENT POPULATION

2,951

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Heritage Middle School
- Freedom Middle School
- Emerson Elementary School
- Irving Elementary School
- Hiawatha Elementary School
- Komensky Elementary School
- Pershing Elementary School
- Piper Elementary School

FUN FACTS

- Berwyn South District 100 is an Apple Distinguished District
- Komensky Elementary's podcast is led by three 5th grade students
- District's Portrait of a Graduate guides its decisions and expands on the student-centered approach to education and engaging families and community









Saturday Creativity Club:

Learning Beyond the Bell

Submitted by Noemi Mendieta

District 89's Saturday Creativity Club provides students with an engaging enrichment experience centered on creativity, collaboration, and hands-on learning. Through music, digital media, STEM activities, design challenges, and interactive projects, students explore new interests while building problem-solving skills and teamwork in a fun, supportive environment.

Playing keyboard and singing boost rhythm, listening skills, and confidence. Playing guitar builds focus, coordination, and creativity.

The program reflects the district's commitment to innovative opportunities that nurture the whole child and expand learning beyond the traditional school day.



SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Algeanna Griffin

STUDENT POPULATION

4,000

SCHOOLS

- Irving Middle School
- Stevenson Middle School
- Emerson Elementary
- Garfield Elementary
- Jane Addams Elementary
- Lincoln Elementary
- Melrose Park Elementary
- Roosevelt Elementary
- Washington Dual Language Academy

FUN FACTS

- District 89 traces its origins back to 1931 when Washington Elementary was established
- The district expanded to serve the Maywood, Melrose Park, and Broadview communities

OPRF Jazz Ensemble Earns State Spotlight and Brings It Home

Submitted by Karin Sullivan

There's a rhythm to excellence at Oak Park and River Forest High School, and this year, it's coming straight from the Jazz Ensemble.

The 22-member OPRFHS Jazz Ensemble recently earned one of the most prestigious honors in Illinois music education: an invitation to perform as a featured ensemble at the 2026 Illinois Music Education Conference (IMEC) in Peoria. This rare opportunity showcases not just individual student talent but the collective artistry, discipline, and innovation that define the ensemble's work.

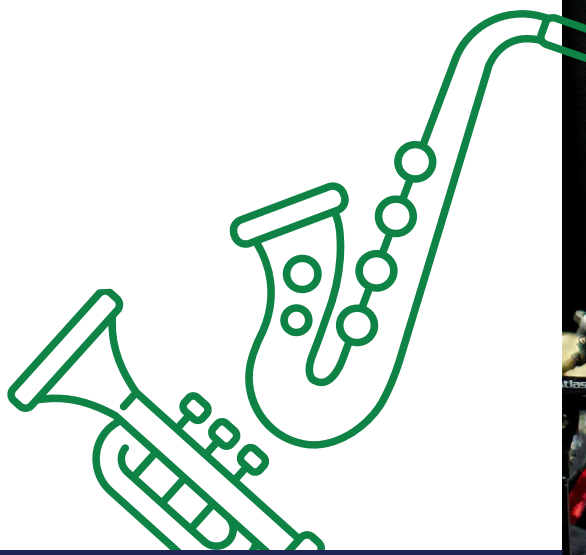
"Only a handful of full ensembles are selected to perform at the state level," said director Anthony Svejda. "It's a rigorous audition process that takes months of preparation, from recording repertoire to gathering letters of recommendation and hosting guest clinicians. Getting in is a true accomplishment."

While some ensembles stick to traditional jazz literature, Svejda is intentional about expanding students' musical horizons. One of the standout pieces in this year's repertoire? An Afro-Peruvian jazz chart titled Quadra 11, which Svejda discovered by chance, thanks to a playlist his 11-year-old son created.

"We heard it and immediately thought, 'This is something special,'" Svejda said.

Within hours, he had contacted the composer, Anibal Seminario, and secured the unpublished piece to bring it to life with his students.

The Jazz Ensemble's statewide recognition is part of a bigger story unfolding at OPRFHS. As student interest and achievement in the arts continue to grow, so does the district's commitment to supporting that excellence. Act 3, the next phase of campus construction, will transform our performing arts facilities, giving band, choir, orchestra, and theater programs the purpose-built spaces they deserve. It's an investment not just in buildings, but in the creative futures of students who continue to inspire and achieve at the highest levels.





SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Greg Johnson

STUDENT POPULATION

3,319

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Oak Park and River Forest High School

FUN FACTS

- School founded in 1873
- More than 200 different courses offered
- Alumni include Ernest Hemingway, Ray Kroc, and Dan Castellaneta (Voice of Homer Simpson)





ROSEMONT 78

SUPERINTENDENT
Dr. William Pender

STUDENT POPULATION
approx. 215

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT
- Rosemont Elementary School (PreK-8)

FUN FACT
- District is building a larger school, which is projected to open in 2027

RIVER FOREST 90

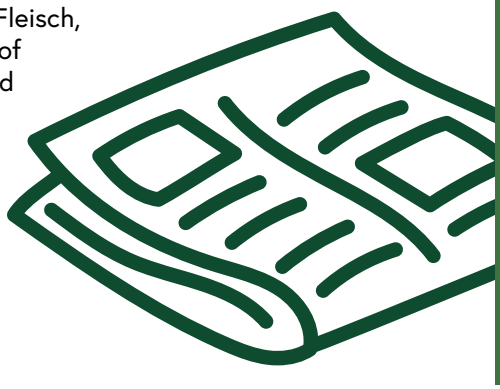
Student Journalists Learn from the Pros

Submitted by Dr. Edward Condon

Student journalism has been an area of growing interest with District 90 middle school students, and it is exciting to have the support and encouragement of professional journalists in our local community.

Student journalists in the Roosevelt Newspaper Club with Ms. Julie Fleisch discussed how reporters conduct interviews and write articles during a visit with Dan Haley, editor and founder, and Gregg Voss, contributing reporter, of the Wednesday Journal.

Under the sponsorship of Ms. Fleisch, our students find a great deal of inspiration in the stories around them at Roosevelt School.





SUPERINTENDENT
Dr. Edward Condon

STUDENT POPULATION
1,363

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT
- Roosevelt Middle School
- Lincoln Elementary
- Willard Elementary

FUN FACT
- District established in 1850

LINDOP 92

SUPERINTENDENT
Dr. Emily Betz

STUDENT POPULATION
approx. 300

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT
- Lindop School

FUN FACT
- In the late 1940s, real estate developer Edmund F. Lindop donated land to what was then called Proviso Grade School. His name was then substituted for Proviso

More space for students. Improved daily dining. A brighter future.

Submitted by Jennifer Pasko

Building improvements at Lyons Township's South Campus means students can now socialize and enjoy meals in a high-quality environment for decades to come.

The recently completed construction is part of District 204's Groundwork for a Brighter Future initiative, which includes $33,000,000 in improvements at the South Campus. In addition to the new cafeteria and common space, the project includes renovated and expanded music rooms, renovated bathrooms, and additional classroom air conditioning.

"Groundwork for a Brighter Future is such an important part of the work the District is doing to continue to enhance the learning environment for our students. With facilities assessments, community engagement, and support from our Board, the District has started an incredible journey I'm proud to be part of," said superintendent Dr. Brian Waterman.

District 204 said the newly constructed cafeteria and commons area at South campus offers a modern, flexible gathering space for students that not only improves daily dining, but also provides a collaborative space for students to socialize, study, and engage in school life.

Additional facilities improvements are expected in the next phase of construction, as District 204 strives to support high-quality in-class learning and extracurricular activities that foster the academic, physical, social, and emotional growth and well-being of its students.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Brian Waterman

ENROLLMENT

3,677

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- North Campus (Juniors and Seniors)
- South Campus (Freshmen and Sophomores)

FUN FACTS

- District established in 1888
- 135 activities offered
- 2434 students enrolled in dual credit courses





A New School and a Supportive Community

Submitted by Dr. Todd Fitzgerald

A major construction project completed at Komarek School District 94 in recent years included a new school, renovation of buildings, construction of a new gymnasium and parking lot, and updated technology infrastructure for the district.

The district thanks the Komarek School community for supporting the venture by passing a building referendum.

Additionally, the district said that the support its teachers and staff receive from the community is overwhelmingly positive and that the collegiality that exists within the Komarek staff makes this an ideal place for educators who are looking for a supportive, family-type environment to work.

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Todd Fitzgerald

STUDENT POPULATION

536

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Komarek School (PreK-8)

FUN FACTS

- Small, family-oriented, one school district that serves North Riverside and Broadview
- District prides its student diversity: 55% Hispanic, 25% White, 16% African American, 4% Asian



Elected Leaders Bring Government Lessons to Rhodes School

Submitted by Emily Lahti

Rhodes welcomed representatives from the offices of State Representative Norma Hernandez, U.S Representative Jesus Garcia, and River Grove Mayor David Guerin in October 2025.

Fourth-grade students were able to learn firsthand about their local government and meet the people who keep the government working. Staff and students are grateful for the incredible learning experience they provided.

SUPERINTENDENT

James Prather

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 500

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Rhodes School

FUN FACTS

- Split from District 84 in 1916 over a disagreement on the site of a new school, resulting in the name District 84.5
- Hired a female superintendent in the 1940s when male superintendents were the norm
- A geographical line that once separated white settlers and Native American land was later established as a boundary between Rhodes and River Grove 85.5







HILLSIDE 93

Celebrating Our School Citizen of the Year

Submitted by: Dr. Antonia Lippitt-Hill

Congratulations to Jaelynn Torres, who received West40's 2026 SCOTY (School Citizen of the Year) Award. Students nominated for this honor demonstrate leadership, kindness, and serve as model citizens both academically and socially.

Teachers nominate eighth-grade students who exemplify these qualities, and administrators then select the school winner. Jaelynn also won first place and received the Golden Mike Award for WSCAE's (West Suburban Consortium for Academic Excellence) Speech and Drama Contest.



SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Antonia Lippitt-Hill

STUDENT POPULATION

403

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- Hillside Elementary

FUN FACTS

- Dr. Antonia Lippitt-Hill is the first woman and woman of color to lead the district as superintendent
- Mayor Tambarino and Speaker of the House Emmanuel "Chris" Welch rang the school bell on the first day of school (first time in school's history)
- Hillside faces Mt. Carmel Cemetery, where Al Capone is buried
- Hosts the Annual Hillside Alumni Basketball Game in April

BERKELEY 87

SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Dan Sullivan

STUDENT POPULATION

approx. 2,050

SCHOOLS IN DISTRICT

- MacArthur Middle School
- Northlake Middle School
- Jefferson Primary School
- Whittier Primary School
- JW Riley Intermediate School
- Sunnyside Elementary School

FUN FACT

- The district's mission is to ensure its scholars are responsible, complex thinkers who embrace curiosity, diversity, perseverance and excellence