



SEARS

Community

Kenilworth School District 38 - Quarterly Newsletter

FALL 2025



UPCOMING DATES

Mark your calendar with these upcoming important dates.

Little Panthers Early Childhood Program

Launching in the 2026-2027 School Year at The Joseph Sears School

The Joseph Sears School is proud to welcome our youngest learners through the Little Panthers Early Childhood Program—an inclusive and nurturing educational experience for three- and four-year-olds.

Led by certified early childhood educators and grounded in research-based best practices, the program is designed to foster both academic and social-emotional growth. Students will benefit from:

- Purposeful, play-based learning experiences
- A balanced curriculum spanning literacy, math, science, the arts, and social studies
- Daily opportunities to strengthen language, interpersonal, and decision-making skills
- A supportive environment that encourages curiosity, confidence, and connection
- Alignment with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards
- More spots available for District 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds to attend Sears

The District has a legal responsibility to serve students with disabilities who become eligible for special education services at age three. Given recent changes to the District's special education cooperative, TrueNorth, it was critical that Sears develop a program to meet these needs in-house. The new Little Panthers program not only allows Sears to serve these learners but also increases total four-year-old enrollment from 14 to approximately 20 students across the two classrooms, thereby allowing more District four-year-olds to participate in the program and increase their familiarity with Sears before Kindergarten. As Superintendent Kate Donegan explained, "This programming shift allows for continuity between the District's preschool



offerings and the K-8 program, while also ensuring efficient use of resources. District 38 is committed to meeting our community's early childhood needs, serving students with IEPs, including three-year-olds, in their neighborhood school."

Building a Strong Foundation

District 38 leadership is committed to ensuring that the program reflects the District's mission, vision, and strategic plan, while serving as many in-district preschool students as possible. By developing in-house capacity, the District can meet the needs of all eligible students while maintaining compliance with best practices in early learning and state standards.

After extensive research into preschool offerings, including studies of peer districts, parent surveys, and site visits, the District chose a blended-age classroom model to achieve its goals. Key findings from the team's research included:

- Balanced classrooms, with three-year-olds making up no more than 30-40% of enrollment, support four-year-olds' academic outcomes with high-quality instruction

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- **OCTOBER 9**
Board of Education
Building & Finance
Committee Meeting
8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.
- **OCTOBER 20-23**
8th Grade
Washington D.C. Trip
- **OCTOBER 23**
Parent-Teacher
Conferences
(No School for JK)
(1:00 Release for K-8)
- **OCTOBER 24**
Parent-Teacher
Conferences
(No School)
- **OCTOBER 27-31**
Spirit Week
- **OCTOBER 31**
Halloween Parade
2:15 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.
- **OCTOBER 31**
Halloween Parties
2:30 p.m. - 3:15 p.m.

VISIT THE WEBSITE

www.kenilworth38.org



Budget/Triannual Assessment

Kenilworth School District Fiscal Year 2026 Budget

The Kenilworth School District 38 Board of Education approved the Fiscal Year 2026 budget following a public hearing at its meeting on September 22, 2025. The budget focuses on updated, innovative educational programming while maintaining the District's commitment to fiscal responsibility.

The District is grateful for the many voices that contributed to the budgeting process. The Joseph Sears School's mission is to provide a quality education for each child in the District and ensure all students meet the *Portrait of a Sears Graduate*. The approved budget and tax levy are vital components in achieving this goal, ensuring Sears is fully aligned with the District's strategic plan and allocating funds to its key priorities.

After a public hearing last November, the Board of Education approved a General Tax Levy of 4.49% for all funds. The new General Tax Levy will be presented during the meeting on November 17, 2025. The Illinois School Code establishes the tax levy formula, which is calculated using the prior year's tax rate, the current Consumer Price Index, the Equalized Assessed Valuation (EAV) of the properties within the district's boundaries, and anticipated new property growth.

Cook County Triannual Assessment

On April 23, 2025, Cook County Assessor Fritz Kaegi released the initial assessments of residential and commercial properties in New Trier Township. In Cook County, property assessments operate on a triennial cycle, meaning every property is reassessed once every three years, with one-third of Cook County reassessed every year. The purpose of reassessment is to determine a property's fair market value, which is then used to calculate the property tax bill. During reassessment years, homeowners may see changes in their assessed value based on market conditions and neighborhood trends. The total assessed value in New Trier Township increased by 39%, reflecting three years of real estate market changes.

School districts have no control over the reassessment process or the property values assigned to homes and businesses; that authority rests entirely with the county. Districts can only set their annual tax levy within limits established by state law; they do not receive additional funds due to the triannual assessment.

The District's fiduciary responsibility is to spend the funds received from property taxes in a responsible and transparent manner, and we take several steps to ensure that we do so. One way we do this is through a zero-based budgeting process, which requires all expenditures to be reviewed and justified annually. We further ensure that every expenditure is tied to a pillar of our five-year Strategic Plan. In addition, our bookkeeping is reviewed each year by an outside auditor. Please visit the school's website for more information about the budget and other District financial information.

Little Panthers Early Childhood Program Continued

- Multi-age settings promote social-emotional growth through peer modeling and leadership opportunities
- Full-day programs consistently produce stronger gains in literacy, math, and overall school readiness compared to half-day models
- Differentiated instruction allows pre-school teachers to meet the needs of every learner



Program Structure

Building on the strengths of the current Junior Kindergarten program, the new model features:

- Morning sessions with blended-age classrooms (3s and 4s together)
- Afternoon sessions reserved for four-year-olds, focusing on extended academics, social-emotional readiness, and project-based learning
- Specialized staff and an additional instructional assistant to support small-group and individualized instruction

Lead teachers will co-teach small-group rotations with support from additional specialists, including a Special Education teacher, Speech Language Pathologist, social worker, Occupational Therapist, and an extra instructional assistant, ensuring differentiated, developmentally appropriate learning for both age groups.

Enrollment Details for 2026-2027

- **Three-Year-Old Half-Day Program:**
8:15 a.m.–11:00 a.m.
- **Four-Year-Old Full-Day Program:**
8:15 a.m.–2:00 p.m.

Students will also enjoy specials, including World Language, Music, Art, PE, and structured play, while families can look forward to events such as classroom parties, sibling day, school-wide assemblies, and music concerts.

Important Dates

- **Pre-Registration Opens:** October 1
- **Lottery and Waitlist Notifications:** Week of November 1



Welcome -Back- to School!

2025-2026 School Year introduces new faces to Sears

The Joseph Sears School welcomed several new staff members this school year. We are thrilled to add these professionals to our talented team and to continue strengthening our Culture of Collaboration to ensure all students meet the *Portrait of a Sears Graduate*. **Welcome to Sears!**

Mrs. Amy Cappochi joins The Joseph Sears School as an Instructional Assistant. Amy earned her degree in International Business from Pepperdine University. She then spent time living in Australia. During her time in Australia, she earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and practiced as a Registered Nurse. Before joining Sears, she worked as a special education assistant in Northbrook District 28.

Ms. Natalie Findley (not pictured) joins The Joseph Sears School as an Instructional Assistant. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Theology from Appalachian Bible College and a Master's in Ethnomusicology from Bethel University. Her most recent role prior to joining Sears was as a paraprofessional and substitute teacher at Avoca District 37.

Mr. Daniel Galis joins The Joseph Sears School as a 6th and 7th-grade Grade Social Studies Teacher. Daniel earned his Bachelor's in History/ Social Sciences Teacher Education from Illinois State University and is currently completing his Master's of Education at National Louis University. Prior to joining Sears, Mr. Galis taught seventh-grade social studies in Waukegan.

Ms. Abbie Gorman joins The Joseph Sears School as a Junior High ELA Teacher this year. Abbie earned her Bachelor's degree from St. Norbert College, with majors in Secondary Education and English and minors in Spanish and ESL. She recently completed her Master's in Curriculum and Instruction through Western Governors University. Prior to joining Sears, Abbie taught 7th-grade ELA for four years in Waterford, Wisconsin, and 6th-grade ELA for two years in North Chicago, Illinois.

Ms. Emma Helgeson joins The Joseph Sears School as an Instructional Assistant. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Exceptional Education from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She was also a Division 1 student athlete and swam mid-distance freestyle events during her 4 years at Milwaukee. Before joining Sears, she was in an instructional assistant/co-teaching position in

Kingsport, Tennessee, working with students aged 18-22, teaching & assisting with life skills, functional skills, and social skills.

Mr. Louis Kotvis joins The Joseph Sears School as a 2nd Grade Teacher. He earned his undergraduate degree from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and later completed his Master's Degree at Concordia University, along with multiple certifications in instructional coaching. Before joining Sears, Louis taught various elementary grade levels and most recently served as the principal of Edgewood Middle School in Highland Park.

Ms. Gabi Latulippe joins The Joseph Sears School as a 2nd Grade Teacher. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2022. She recently worked as a second-grade teacher in Wauconda District 118 for three years.

Mrs. Nicole Roman joins The Joseph Sears School as a teacher in the Comprehensive Support Classroom. She has an undergraduate degree in Administration of Justice and holds a Master's of Education in Special Education. Most recently, she worked as a special education teacher at a therapeutic day school, where she taught in a self-contained life skills classroom.

Ms. Denise Rubenstein joins The Joseph Sears School as an Instructional Assistant. She earned her Bachelor's degree from Northeastern Illinois University in Elementary Education. Her most recent role prior to joining Sears was as a special education teacher assistant at Skokie School District 68.

Mrs. Joanne Walgreen joins The Joseph Sears School as an Instructional Assistant. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, and later completed an associate degree in Interior Design at the Harrington Institute of Interior Design in Chicago. Most recently, she served as a Level 3 Instructional Assistant at Glenbrook South High School. Fun fact, her father is an alum of Sears!



The Joseph Sears School

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KENILWORTH BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Dr. Carrie De La Cruz, Director of Student Services

Dr. Stephanie Helfand, Principal

Mr. Geoffrey Perlman, JK-4 Assistant Principal

Mr. Jeff Rosen, 5-8 Assistant Principal



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JOSEPH SEARS

OPEN HOUSE

October 18, 2025
10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.
Sears Celebrations

Our school community celebrated the first day of school on August 28. It was a pleasure to see students back in the newly renovated schoolhouse. We want to thank our JSSPVA partners and all our local stakeholders for their support in making this day and the surrounding Family Fun Day festivities successful.

In addition, to celebrate the completion of the school's multi-year Master Facilities Plan, you are cordially invited to join us for a very special Fall Open House on Saturday, October 18, from 10:00 a.m. to noon. The community will be able to explore our new spaces, celebrate the beginning of the new school year, and look ahead to the bright future of The Joseph Sears School.