

# BEYOND THE BELL

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE SCHOOL DISTRICT 34 COMMUNITY • FALL 2025

## EXCELLENCE IN D34

PERFECT TEST SCORES AND STRONG STATE REPORT CARD RATINGS REFLECT IMPRESSIVE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE AND STUDENT GROWTH



District 34 is on a positive trajectory, celebrating recent significant milestones that indicate student growth and academic achievement at all four schools. This includes nine elementary and middle school students receiving perfect scores on the spring 2025 Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR), as well as the schools earning Commendable designations and showing significant math and reading progress on the recent Illinois Report Card.

• **Perfect IAR Scores:** Four students from Oakland Elementary School and Antioch Upper Grade School (AUGS) received perfect scores in math, and six students from Hillcrest Elementary School and AUGS received perfect scores in English Language Arts (ELA). One AUGS student scored perfectly in both. The IAR is the annual state assessment for public school students in grades three to eight. It provides data that helps educators achieve equity and excellence, identify trends and address gaps.

“We’ve had a few students with perfect scores before, but it’s rare to have this many,” says superintendent Aron Borowiak. “The results these students achieved, along with their peers who did well, is a testament to their determination to learn and grow and the staff’s commitment to helping them get there.”

Students with perfect math scores were

Aurora from Oakland and Dean, Aiden and Charles from AUGS. Students with perfect reading scores were Zoey from Hillcrest and Jonathan, Bretton, Kennedy, Aiden and Dominic from AUGS.

• **Strong Report Card Performance:** D34 schools grew ELA and math proficiency and achieved Commendable designations on the 2024-2025 Illinois Report Card. Commendable is the second-highest designation and means there are no underperforming groups. The Illinois State Board of Education releases the Report Card each October, providing

a snapshot of student achievement at the state, district and school levels. The designations measure how well a school is serving students.

D34’s ELA proficiency is 58%, compared to 48% last year; math proficiency is 42%, compared to 33% last year. Borowiak says this solid growth is the result of students and staff working hard, as well as

the District reviewing student performance and making adjustments where needed, including providing targeted support for anyone struggling and enrichment for those performing well.

“We’re proud of everything we’re doing to ensure students are learning and advancing, and we’re grateful to all who play a role in these successes, including the families who provide essential support,” he says.

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### ADMINISTRATION

**Aron Borowiak**  
Superintendent

**Maria Treto-French**  
Assistant Superintendent/CSBO

**Josh Coon**  
Director of Technology

**Anita Hernandez**  
Director of Curriculum  
& Instruction

**Carole Jennings**  
Director of Student Services

**Amy Mahr**  
Director of Human Resources

**McKenna Gomez**  
Coordinator of Student Services

**Sara Nelson**  
Coordinator of Communication  
& Curriculum

**Aimee Redding**  
Coordinator of  
Multilingual Services

**Chrystal Duffy**  
Coordinator of Technology

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Students who received perfect scores on the IAR were recognized at an October Board of Education meeting. Pictured with the students are superintendent Aron Borowiak, AUGS principal Joe Koeune, Oakland principal Lindsay Burns and Hillcrest principal Debbie Johnson.

# FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT



This issue of Beyond the Bell is packed with important news about initiatives that are enhancing learning for D34 students – today and in the future. You'll also find fun items about innovative school events and projects that are promoting creativity, collaboration and critical thinking skills. Thank you for reading and for staying engaged and involved in your school district. Community support is essential to our progress and success!

I want to thank our Board of Education members for their guidance and commitment to D34 students, staff and the entire community. Please join me in welcoming the new members who were elected last spring – Cheryl Henning and Tanya Karner. They join Mary Beth Hulting (president), Michelle Ruminski (vice president), Angela Baronello (secretary), Kelly Beall and Lori Linck. We're thankful for our Board's volunteer service and dedication!

We also welcome new administrative team members and celebrate those who have moved to new positions, including director of curriculum and instruction Anita Hernandez, Hillcrest principal Debbie Johnson and assistant principal Brianne Berry, and Oakland principal Lindsay Burns and assistant principal Natalie Molidor. I am grateful to partner with such a talented team of administrators, as



*Superintendent Aron Borowiak helps MKM students get ready for the school day. Read the story on P. 5 to learn about exciting plans to replace the existing MKM with a new, updated school building.*

well as our amazing staff, as we live our mission of Inspiring Students to Dream and Empowering them to Achieve.

As you'll read in this newsletter, we are approaching an exciting period of change in District 34. We are beginning to implement our Master Facility Plan, with projects that range from new construction to renovations to essential maintenance. These projects will enhance learning and address major issues in our aging buildings, including the 100-year-old Mary Kay McNeill Early Learning Center (MKM), which will be replaced with a new school on a different site. There will be no additional taxpayer

burden as a result of this work, as we will fund it using General Obligation School Bonds that will be repaid with operating revenues. Watch for additional updates as the projects get underway.

I've enjoyed gathering with many of our staff and community members at school events so far this year, and I look forward to seeing more of you in the coming months. In the meantime, I thank you for your partnership, and I hope you and your families have a happy holiday season!

**Aron Borowiak**  
*D34 Superintendent of Schools*

# FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT



Every year, our school community experiences moments that remind us of the power of kindness, especially during challenging times. Whether

families are facing unexpected challenges or simply need a little extra support, we have the opportunity to make a real difference together.

During these "snapshots in time" – around the holidays, at the start of the school year or when unexpected needs arise – we can lift one another up in simple yet meaningful ways. Donating non-perishable food, gift cards, gently used clothing or holiday gifts can ease a family's worries and remind them they're not alone.

Even small gestures matter, such as a warm coat for a child, a grocery card for a parent or a thoughtful holiday gift, all of which can spark hope and gratitude. By sharing what we have, we build a stronger, more caring school community, one where everyone feels seen, supported and valued.

So far this season, our schools have participated in projects that demonstrate the importance of giving back. We are so proud of students, families and staff for making a difference at a time when so many are in need, and we thank community members who have participated in these projects as well.

As we approach Winter Break and the holidays, let's all continue to look out for one another and spread generosity whenever we can. Together, we can make every season a

little brighter, especially this one.

In that spirit of giving, I encourage residents to support our local nonprofit partners, including Antioch Traveling Closet, Penny's Purpose, Open Arms Mission and Veterans' Path to Hope. Whether you donate warm clothes, non-perishable food, blankets, toys or gift cards, you will know you're helping your neighbors by meeting essential needs.

Let's all remember this Lao Tzu quote during this season of giving: "Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love."

Happy holidays!

**Mary Beth Hulting**  
*D34 Board of Education President*

## BACK TO BASICS: NEW AUGS SCHEDULE MEANS MORE TIME FOR CORE CLASSES AND BETTER LEARNING OUTCOMES

AUGS has rolled out a new daily schedule that increases time for core classes, with the goal of enhancing students' foundational skills and confidence so they are better prepared for high school and beyond. Students in grade six to eight are now receiving 62 minutes of instruction each day in math, English Language Arts (ELA), science and social science, allowing for deeper learning, critical thinking and collaboration. They previously spent 50 minutes in these classes.

In addition, there is more inclusive and targeted support for all students, including those receiving special education services. Instructional-level classes have been expanded from just ELA and math to all core subjects to help all students move closer to grade-level skills. The District also has expanded co-taught classes, with core subjects now having special-education teachers in the classroom full time. Students with IEPs also have access to more Encore classes, which are designed to spark creativity and curiosity.

To allow for the increased time for core subjects, minutes for Encore classes and PE moved from 50 to 40. Encore includes classes such as Spanish for all grades, PLTW: Design and Modeling for sixth, Our Digital World for seventh and American Music History for eighth, to name a few. Students rotate through these and other Encore offerings, as well as year-long Encores like band, orchestra, choir and eighth-grade Spanish. Students have two Encores per quarter, giving them ample opportunity to explore a variety of subjects, interests and potential career pathways.

Staff and administrators who served on the committee that developed the new schedule know that having longer focused learning time in core classes will improve academic readiness for D34 students, some of whom have struggled with the rigorous high school coursework. For example, 63% of AUGS students are placed in entry-level high school math and 25% require math remediation. The new schedule is expected to accelerate growth, by allowing more time for support and providing meaningful opportunities to explore, discover and thrive.

The District will gather feedback on the new schedule and analyze performance and achievement gap data. This information will be used to evaluate the impact of the changes, so administrators can determine future adjustments.

## AUGS SAYS NO PHONES

AUGS is removing mobile phone distractions by participating in the Yondr Phone-Free Schools Program. The program, used in all 50 states, has been found to improve focus, achievement, mental health and well-being by ensuring students don't access their phones while at school.

AUGS has provided students with secure Yondr pouches for storing their personal devices. Students place their phones in their pouches upon arrival, then lock them in front of staff. Students carry the pouches with them and unlock them at the end of the day at designated locking stations. The process is simple and fast and has become part of the daily routine, according to AUGS principal Joe Koeune.

If parents or guardians need to reach their child during the day, they can contact the main office. In an emergency, schools will communicate with parents through the mass notification system, and the school will make every effort to quickly unlock phones. Every location in the school is equipped with a phone that can dial 911.

Koeune says the Yondr program is off to a great start: "Teachers do not need to spend instructional time enforcing phone rules, and students are benefiting from having a learning environment free of phone distractions."

### PHONE-FREE SCHOOLS

- 86% report improved safety and student wellness
- 84% see increased engagement in class
- 68% experience academic gains
- 44% reduce behavioral referrals

*\*According to Yondr*

## NATURE'S CLASSROOM: LEARNING AND MAKING MEMORIES AT OUTDOOR ED

During the annual Outdoor Education trip in Wisconsin, AUGS eighth graders were immersed in the great outdoors. They spent two October nights at Camp Timber-lee, where they got up close and personal with turtles and snakes and enjoyed team-building challenges, ziplining adventures, nature hikes, campfires and more.



## PEN PALS FOREVER!

Fifth and second graders from Hillcrest are discovering the joy of having a pen pal. Students from Corrine Zajac's fifth-grade class and Tiffany Jones' second-grade class have teamed up to write letters to each other, practicing their writing and communication skills, while enhancing their teamwork and building friendships. The collaboration also included some of the fifth graders joining the second graders for center time, where they learned and read together.



## FOURTH GRADERS BECOME BALLOON-BUILDING ENGINEERS

Oakland fourth graders prepared for Thanksgiving by sketching, designing, building and presenting their own mini floats and balloons for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The project was part of their PLTW (Project Lead the Way) STEM lesson, which incorporated design and engineering and focused on skills like problem solving and collaboration.



## FRIDAY HIGH FIVES FROM THE FRIENDLIEST WELCOMING COMMITTEE

Officer Charlie (right, front), D34's school resource officer, and other community partners from the Lake Villa Police Department and Fire Protection District recently kicked off the school day by welcoming Oakland students with some Friday high fives.

## NEW BILINGUAL TEACHING MODEL STRENGTHENS SUPPORT FOR SPANISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS

District 34 is stepping up efforts to meet the needs of its large Spanish-speaking student population, by implementing a model for bilingual education that provides deeper support in core subjects. The new Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) Program targets students who come from Spanish-speaking homes and qualify for the additional support based on testing.

The TBE Program is offered at AUGS and Petty. Hillcrest and Oakland students who qualify were given the opportunity to switch to Petty so they can take part. At Petty, up to four students are clustered in one classroom per grade level – an English Learner (EL) teacher works with students on English language skills and concepts, and a bilingual teacher rotates in to support in the core academic areas. At AUGS, EL and bilingual teachers rotate into core classes as needed, as well as work with students in the daily Success class.

The programming changes are the result of an Illinois State Board of Education audit that required enhanced services and support for D34's large number of English Learners. In each elementary school, there are at least 20 students from homes where Spanish is a primary language.

The TBE Program is all about working more efficiently and more effectively to allocate bilingual resources, according to Aimee Redding, D34 multilingual education coordinator. "We're identifying students who need extra support in transitioning between their two languages, so they can be more successful in core content areas," she says. "We're hearing positive feedback from families, and we're finding the program helps students who are new to the country feel more supported, connected and part of the school community."

Superintendent Aron Borowiak agrees that the TBE Program is a valued addition for many elementary and middle school learners. "We're proud to provide this needed support for our growing bilingual population of students," he says.

## D34 SCHOOLS



Mary Kay McNeill  
Early Learning Center  
Pre-K  
Jodi Lax, Principal



Hillcrest  
Elementary School  
Grades K-5  
Debbie Johnson, Principal



Oakland  
Elementary School  
Grades K-5  
Lindsay Burns, Principal



W.C. Petty  
Elementary School  
Grades K-5  
Joanna Gerritsen,  
Principal



Antioch Upper  
Grade School  
Grades 6-8  
Joe Koeune, Principal

## D34 MOVING FORWARD WITH PLAN TO BUILD NEW SCHOOL FOR YOUNGEST LEARNERS

OTHER CRITICAL BUILDING IMPROVEMENTS ALSO ON THE WAY

D34 is finalizing its plan to build a new school that will replace the aging and outdated Mary Kay McNeill Early Learning Center (MKM). Officials are working on selecting a site, as they conduct environmental studies on potential properties. Once the site is finalized, a construction timeline will be developed.

The District has hired architects from Legat, who have started the design process, and an owner's representative from CCS International, who will ensure the project stays on time and on budget.

"It's an exciting time for D34, as we address the most urgent priorities in our Master Facility Plan so we can better serve students today and for years to come," says superintendent Aron Borowiak.



"This aligns with our Strategic Plan goals of providing state-of-the-art learning environments and safe and secure facilities, while

being responsible stewards of the community's financial resources."

The District is involving staff members in this early stage of the MKM project. They have visited other schools and have met with the architect to provide feedback on building features that are important for pre-k students. MKM principal Jodi Lax says the staff was pleased to contribute ideas that will guide the design process. "These changes will strengthen our learning environment and create new opportunities for our earliest learners to thrive," she says. "We are building more than a school, we are building a place where students and staff feel valued, supported and ready to explore."

Lax adds, "Change is never easy, but it is worth it, and we cannot wait to celebrate every step until we enter the new school on our first day."

In addition to replacing the nearly 100-year-old MKM, D34 will soon begin to update the main office and entry at Hillcrest to enhance security, as well as improve playgrounds at Hillcrest, Oakland and Petty so they are safer and more accessible. These projects are top



priorities in the Master Facility Plan, a strategy and roadmap prioritizing facility work for the next 20 years.

To fund the projects, the Board of Education has authorized the issuance and sale of up to \$51.5 million in General Obligation School Bonds. These are Alternate Revenue Bonds, not referendum-approved bonds that are funded by property taxes. This means the District is pledging operating revenues to repay them, and the cost of the projects will not be passed on to taxpayers.

For more information and updates, visit the Master Facility Plan page at [www.antioch34.com](http://www.antioch34.com).

## SALUTING OUTSTANDING STAFF MEMBERS

The Inspiring to Dream awards recognize one certified and one non-certified staff member from each school for going above and beyond to live out the D34 mission: Inspiring students to dream and empowering them to achieve. The 2025 recipients are (left to right): Valorie Revere (MKM), Kathy Buxton (MKM), Rachel Brown (Hillcrest), Shelly Barker (Petty), Merideth Wagner (Petty), Dawn Erber (AUGS), Becky Ingram (Hillcrest), Valerie Gorsline (Oakland), Lindsay Paprock-Landon (AUGS) and Komal Soni (Oakland, not pictured).



## BEYOND THE BELL RECEIVES NATIONAL HONOR

District 34 has won an Award of Excellence from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for this newsletter, Beyond the Bell. The District was honored for distinguished achievement in the

Newsletter category of the Publications and Digital Media Awards. The awards program recognizes outstanding publications and outreach that "exemplify the impactful, innovative work shaping the future of school communication." Beyond the Bell communicates district and school news and issues. It is posted online and mailed to residents living in District boundaries.





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### D34 MISSION:

We inspire our students to dream and empower them to achieve.

### SERVING THE COMMUNITIES OF:

- Antioch
- Lake Villa
- Lindenhurst

### CONTACT

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847-838-8400

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## FESTIVE FALL FUN IN THE SCHOOLS



1



2



3

- 1 Students throughout the District, like these Oakland Eagles, celebrated the season in style, showing off their creative costumes during festive Halloween events.
- 2 Hillcrest third graders enjoyed using their pumpkins for hands-on math, science, reading and writing lessons. Parent volunteers made the day extra special and helped students express their creativity and teamwork.
- 3 Petty and Hillcrest Boosters teamed up to participate in the Antioch Community High School Homecoming Parade. The Bobcats and Hurricanes were proud to bring their energy and school spirit to this Antioch fall tradition.

## IN THIS ISSUE

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- **A New School and Infrastructure Updates** Coming to D34: District making progress on site selection and building design
- **A Boost to Academic Readiness:** Increasing time spent in core classes at the middle school
- **Distraction-Free Learning:** AUGS says no phones at school
- **And more!**