The JAGUAR

LINCOLNWOOD 74 SCHOOL DISTRICT

Fall 2025



Lessons from fourth grade: Recess is always better together!

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... and more!

From the Superintendent



David L. Russo, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Dear Lincolnwood School District 74 Learning Community:

I am writing this introduction on a brilliantly blue-skied day as I observe trees bursting with color all around our campus. At this time of the year, in particular, I am reminded about the beauty of our District and just how fortunate we are to have all three schools on the same grounds. It makes for a truly joyous day to hear our Pre-Kindergarten students playing on the playground right outside my office and then walk across to Lincoln Hall to see what middle school students have dreamed up in their classes. Our school year is off to a wonderful start as students and staff are firmly immersed in achieving this year's learning goals. Teachers did a tremendous job of using the beginning weeks of the school year to build classroom routines and community, creating environments where students feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, allowing them to excel in their academics and develop lasting relationships with their peers.

In this edition of *The Jaguar*, we have a sampling of articles highlighting programs and initiatives both in the classroom and behind the scenes that keep the District consistently moving in a positive direction. One of the major points of focus in the past three years has been the variety, freshness, and quality of menu items served to students. Director of Food Services Peter Lembessis and his entire kitchen team have been doing an outstanding job of meeting these goals to ensure we have the highest quality food service program. In addition to the menu, kitchen staff and students have been saving food scraps from landfills through a composting initiative that has taken off in the past 18 months. We are proud of the progress made in our kitchens, as a quality meal is a key foundation for learning.



To kick off the school year, every SD74 staff member received a T-shirt branded with the District's vision statement.

Teaching and learning remain at the core of what we do as a District. That commitment is reflected in our recent adoption of new literacy materials for students at Todd Hall and Rutledge Hall. Under Dr. Lupo's leadership, our Literacy Committee methodically researched trends in best practice for literacy instruction and chose materials believed to develop key reading skills and strategies for all students. You will also be introduced to the workings of our instructional coaching department, which assists with program implementation and supports individual teachers to build skills to improve their craft. We feel extremely fortunate to have the resources to provide students with new materials on an ongoing basis and support teachers with professional development and mentorship.

These topics are just the tip of the iceberg for this edition! I appreciate your taking a few moments to become familiar with the District's happenings.

Never miss important notifications, such as transportation alerts, event reminders, and emergency communications.
Opt in to District text messages.



Every Moment Matters

Absences add up.

Missing one day every two weeks equals 20 days per year. That's nearly ***1.5 years of lost learning time*** by graduation.

Daily student attendance plays a critical role in the overall success of all Jaguars.

Be prepared for inclement weather.
Review the District's Emergency Closing information and e-learning plan.

Curriculum and Instruction Update

Leading academic excellence through innovative instruction

Fall is always my favorite time of year. Students come back to school with renewed energy as they meet their new teachers and reconnect with friends. I share that same excitement as I see many of the projects we have initiated during my four years as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction come to fruition.

In line with our strategic vision to lead academic excellence through innovation, our instructional teams have been actively researching and implementing the most effective, standards-aligned programs available.

Over the past three years, we have adopted new science programs and new math materials for kindergarten through eighth grade, and, most recently, new literacy programming for kindergarten through fifth grade. Our staff has done an incredible job of learning and rolling out these new programs, and data shows students are beginning to demonstrate growth as a result of this work.

A key factor in the success of these programs is our instructional coaching team. Now an integral part of our professional development department, coaches have redefined the support and services they provide and play a leading role in helping teachers effectively use the latest materials and instructional strategies. We're already seeing meaningful progress as a result of the consistent, high-quality guidance they provide each day.

With so much happening across the District on the curricular front, I am eager to see the continued growth and learning experiences yet to come!



Dominick Lupo, Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

District Happenings

First day of school *snapshots*

Welcome to the 2025 2026 school year!



Reflections from a summer intern

"This summer, I had the opportunity to serve as the communications intern for Lincolnwood School District 74. I pursued this internship because I wanted to learn more about how a school district connects with its families, staff, students, and overall community. I quickly discovered that SD74 does this with so much heart, putting their best foot forward to serve the community in the best way possible.

One of my favorite memories during my time at the District was visiting the Summer Adventures program to take photos of the students in their summer school classes. Their energy was contagious, whether they were building Legos, tackling math problems, or whipping up creations in the kitchen. Those moments reminded me why community is so important to a school district.



In the District office, I worked on newsletters and social media posts, sat in on meetings, and organized information for orientations, all with the goal of keeping our community informed and involved. Along the way, I strengthened my writing, editing, and design skills, and learned how clear, consistent communication can build trust.

Thank you to the SD74 staff, students, and families for welcoming me so warmly. This internship was such a meaningful step in my journey toward a fulfilling career, and I'll carry the lessons I learned well into my future."

Sophie Nasby, Communication major at Denison University



Summer Adventures combines fun with learning!
Look out for the Summer 2026 Course Brochure in the early spring.

District Happenings

Keeping food waste out of landfills

SD74 students go green with new composting program

The District piloted a cafeteria composting program, through Chicago-based WasteNot Compost, at Lincoln Hall last winter. The goal? Reduce the amount of food waste that is thrown out every week.

The program quickly showed promise. Under the direction of Director of Food Services Peter Lembessis, middle school students began learning what could and couldn't be composted, and less waste was being sent to landfills.

Rutledge Hall and Todd Hall received their own compost bins this fall. With colorful signage and gentle reminders from teachers, even the District's youngest Jaguars are now doing their part to reduce waste and protect the environment. By turning their lunchtime leftovers into something useful, students are developing lifelong sustainability habits.

About 90% of the compost originates from the kitchen prep process, including fruit peels, vegetable ends, and other scraps. The remaining portion comes from salad bars and uneaten portions of student lunches. Once bins are collected from the District, they are weighed and the compost is turned into nutrient-rich fertilizer. To date, the District has kept nearly four tons of food scraps out of landfills.

Small changes can make a big impact. By introducing composting, SD74 is helping to reduce its environmental footprint one lunch at a time.

















Jaguar Kudos Corner

Recognizing behind-the-scenes heroes

Thank you, SD74 Food Services Department!

For the past two years, the SD74 food services department has worked diligently to bring a fresher, made-from-scratch menu to the District's students. Under the leadership of Director of Food Services Peter Lembessis, affectionally known as "Chef Pete," the kitchen staff has introduced nearly **40 new items** to student menus. These include garden burgers, Italian beef (a favorite of Dr. Russo!), Mandarin orange chicken, and broccoli cheese soup.

"It's hard work, but the students enjoy the food, so that makes it worth it," said Jeni Ibraham, a 21-year veteran of the department. "It's better to prepare it fresh. I'm happy they can eat these meals."



Fresh vegetables are on offer daily in each school cafeteria.



Vickie, Matt, Jeni, Tara, Barbara, and Chef Pete
Lincoln Hall kitchen staff



Martha, Farahnaz, and Madline
Todd Hall kitchen staff



Kanou, Sotiria, and Maria
Rutledge Hall kitchen staff

District Happenings

Whimsical Rutledge Hall art installation delights families

All-school showcase continues to be a beloved fall tradition













Rutledge Hall's annual art installation took students and families on a trip deep under the sea, where bright coral gleams and colorful creatures come out to play.

The installation featured artwork from every single student in third grade through fifth grade!

For the one-night-only viewing, the Specials hallway was transformed into an underwater world bursting with color, creativity, and imagination. From clownfish and pufferfish to jellyfish and starfish, there was so much to discover!

Families admired the students' attention to detail and inventive use of materials, which brought this ocean adventure vividly to life.

Calendar Reminders

Dates and events are subject to change.
Please check the District calendar online for the most up-to-date information.

November

11/24 - 11/28: **Thanksgiving Break**

December

12/3: **Rutledge Hall PE Night**
12/8 - 12/10: **FastBridge and MAP testing**
12/9 - **RED OUT for girls varsity basketball**
12/19: **AM-Only Student Attendance**
12/22 - 1/2: **Winter Break**

January

1/19: **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day - District Closed**
1/22: **Rutledge Hall Family Literacy Night**

February

2/13: **AM-Only Student Attendance**
2/16: **Presidents' Day - District Closed**
2/24: **Fourth Grade STEM Night**
2/25: **North Cook Spelling Bee**















In a massive display of Jaguar pride, students bring big energy to our annual RED OUT events, which support Lincoln Hall's varsity student-athletes.

Eye on Education

Helping teachers help students

The collaborative coaching approach transforming teaching and learning at SD74

Across the District, learning isn't just happening for students; it's happening for teachers, too. Central to that progress are SD74's instructional coaches, who partner with educators to strengthen instruction, support professional growth, and ultimately enhance student experiences.

Instructional coaches wear many hats, but their primary focus is simple: help teachers help students. "We work alongside teachers to build collaborative relationships focused on student learning," explained Becca Smoot, instructional coach at Rutledge Hall. On any given day, coaches might be leading professional learning, meeting with grade-level teams, visiting classrooms, or co-teaching lessons.

A recent example of coaching impact can be found in the District's adoption of the Carnegie ClearMath curriculum for grades K-5. As the program shifted the focus from memorization to collaboration and problem-solving, coaches designed a series of hands-on professional learning sessions to help teachers prepare.

"During these sessions, we led teams through a backward-planning process by analyzing assessments, learning targets, and instructional best practices," Smoot said. "By engaging in focused, collaborative planning, teachers were able to design lessons that truly met the needs of their students."

That partnership is built on trust and a shared commitment to the District's mission to prepare, inspire, and empower learners. According to Lincoln Hall instructional coach Steve Gerber, coaches serve as thought partners, encouraging teachers to try new ideas and bring them to life.

"If a teacher wants to test out a new lesson, we'll co-plan and co-teach it with them, then reflect together on what worked," he said. "Sometimes we see a great strategy in one classroom and connect teachers so they can learn from each other."

This peer-to-peer model not only strengthens teaching practices but also fosters a culture of continuous learning.

A Community of Learners

The District's approach to professional development at SD74 is to ensure it's engaging, hands-on, and relevant, mirroring the learning experiences teachers strive to provide for their students. "Much thought is given to how to bring PD to life so that learning is meaningful and concrete," Todd Hall instructional coach Mark Laske said.

Annual TeachCON events, executed by the coaching team in collaboration with Dr. Dominick Lupo, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, are prime examples of that philosophy in action. Featuring teacher- and facilitator-led sessions on various topics ranging from 'Timely Transitions' to 'Positive Incentive Systems,' TeachCON offers professional learning that is practical, actionable, and directly connected to classroom instruction.

Meeting Teachers Where They Are

Just as students learn in a myriad of ways, coaching is also not one-size-fits-all. Whether working with a first-year teacher or a seasoned veteran, coaches tailor their approach to individual needs. "Our job is to grow all teachers' practice, no matter if they are novices or masters," Laske said.

"We keep our work focused on student learning targets and scaffold instructional practices based on each teacher's style and goals."

For those new to the profession, this includes participation in the District's mentorship program, which pairs them with an experienced educator who provides guidance and encouragement during their early years in the classroom.

Looking Ahead: Innovation in the Classroom

This year, SD74 teachers and coaches are exploring new ways to make learning even more engaging. One growing trend is *Building a Thinking Classroom*, a framework originally developed for math that encourages students to collaborate and think critically. "Students like it because they're standing at whiteboards and working together to solve problems," Gerber said. Its success has even inspired teachers to adapt the approach for science, reading, and other subjects.

Another area of excitement is the use of AI for teaching. With the integration of the *MagicSchool AI* platform this year, teachers now have access to a variety of artificial intelligence tools to design lessons and classroom materials. "We're still exploring the possibilities," Gerber said. "But we have many enthusiastic teachers who are finding new uses every day."

At SD74, instructional coaching is about more than professional development; it's about partnership, innovation, and the shared belief that effective teaching leads to limitless learning. Whether they're planning lessons, mentoring new educators, or introducing cutting-edge teaching practices, the District's coaches are helping to shape classrooms where both teachers and students thrive.

CONGRATULATIONS!

Todd Hall Principal Chris Harmon and Rutledge Hall Principal Aliaa Ibrahim successfully defended their dissertations in the spring and fall, respectively. Their doctoral degrees will be conferred later this year.

Congratulations, Dr. Harmon and Dr. Ibrahim!



Community Connections

Reintroducing PALS

PEOPLE ACTIVE WITH LINCOLNWOOD SCHOOLS

Meet your PTO!

PALS is the District's parent-teacher organization dedicated to enriching the educational and social experience of SD74 students, families, teachers, and the broader Lincolnwood community. Now in its fourth year, PALS is a registered 501(c)(3) organization that is served by an executive board of seven members, which meets monthly at the District's schools. Meetings are also livestreamed on the PALS Facebook page. Whether you're a parent, guardian, teacher, staff member, or friend of SD74, PALS offers a welcoming way to join hands in building a stronger, more connected school community.

How does PALS make a difference?

In the 2024-2025 school year, PALS raised approximately $26,500 to fund a wide range of program enhancements, including the **PALS Mini-Grant Program**, which awarded eight teachers funding to bring innovative ideas to life. Projects ranged from an aeroponic growing tower to a Gaga ball pit.

PALS also doubled the **Cahill Community Service Scholarship** award amount, enabling five alumni graduating high school seniors to receive $1,000 scholarships each.

So far, in the 2025-2026 school year, PALS has already awarded seven teacher mini-grants totaling nearly $2,900, hosted the biggest **Ice Cream Social** yet, organized two book fairs for students, and stocked school lounges with healthy snacks for staff to enjoy during parent-teacher conferences.

How can you get involved?

Joining PALS is simple and there is no membership fee.
Scan the QR code to complete a brief form and be added to the mailing list. You'll receive updates on upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, and more.







The Ice Cream Social brings together District families with community organizations for a memorable kickoff to the school year.









Sixth grade reading teacher Mrs. Codell received a PALS mini-grant for classroom reading cushions to give middle schoolers a comfy place to get lost in a book.

Connect with PALS

@sd74_pals

@SD74 PALS

sd74pals@gmail.com





Students look forward to the SD74 PALS book fair every year!









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*****ECRWSSEDDM*****
Residential Postal Customer

Halloween Hijinks!

Students showed off creative costumes at the District's annual parties and parades.



SAVE THE DATE

Growing Up in Public:

Milestones of Growing Up in the Digital Age

A parent presentation on digital wellness with Dr. Devorah Heitner



Dr. Devorah Heitner is the author of ***Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World*** and ***Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World***. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and CNN Opinion. She has a Ph.D. in Media/Technology & Society from Northwestern University and has taught at DePaul and Northwestern. She is delighted to be raising her own teenager and lives with her family in Chicagoland. You can follow her on Substack and on Instagram **@devorahheitnerphd**.

January 29, 2026
7:00 p.m.

Lincolnwood SD74
Lincoln Hall Auditorium
6855 N. Crawford Ave.
Lincolnwood, IL 60712

Hosted by Lincolnwood SD74, in partnership with: PALS , Fairview SD72, East Prairie SD73, Skokie SD 73.5, and Morton Grove SD70 PTO