



BEYOND THE BELL

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE SCHOOL DISTRICT 34 COMMUNITY • SPRING 2026

EARLY LEARNING SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE COMING IN 2028



WITH SITE SELECTED, D34 IS ON THE WAY TO BRINGING NEW MKM TO LIFE

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District officials have started the process of designing and building a state-of-the-art school that will replace the nearly 100-year-old Mary Kay McNeill Early Learning Center (MKM). The new building, expected to open its doors in August 2028, will transform D34 and better meet the needs of the community's youngest learners for years to come.

The District recently completed an extensive site selection process and announced that the new early learning center will be located on District-owned property at the corner of Tiffany Road and North Avenue in Antioch. The District's architectural firm, Legat Architects, is now working on the schematic design phase of the project, with preliminary designs to be presented to the Board of Education this spring. The Board will then assess progress and determine next steps, with the likely goal of soliciting bids next fall and breaking ground in spring 2027.

"Our goal is to meet the educational and operational needs of young students by creating a modern and welcoming environment rooted in play-based learning, aligned with recent state changes that prioritize early childhood development, where curiosity is nurtured and learning and growth flourish," says superintendent Aron Borowiak. "The new school will serve as a lasting gift to D34 residents in Antioch, Lake Villa and Lindenhurst."

The architects have been tasked with designing a school that supports developmentally appropriate learning consistent

with the latest Illinois kindergarten and preschool curriculum mandates. The design will be shaped by extensive input gathered over the past year from stakeholders such as teachers, staff, parents and Board members. The design team is currently refining the floor plan, square footage and building systems, as well as identifying any cost-saving opportunities.

The centrally located site for the new school, which is near Antioch Upper Grade School and W.C. Petty Elementary School, was chosen due to the proximity to existing D34 buildings, resources and fiber infrastructure, as well as the high concentration of early learning students within a three-mile radius. Construction criteria also were considered, including cost, logistics, soil suitability and flexibility for potential future expansion.

MKM currently houses pre-k students, along with the Early Start program for birth to age three. The building was not intended to serve young children and presents significant space and accessibility challenges. The new school will expand to include all kindergartners, who now attend the three elementary schools. Borowiak says there are instructional advantages to having all early learners sharing resources in one building that was designed to meet their specific needs. In addition, moving kindergarten will free up space in the elementary schools, so they can accommodate future enrollment increases.

See P. 3-4 for the construction timeline, a Q&A about funding and information about the advantages of building a new early learning center.

IGNITING YOUNG MINDS

The youngest learners, such as this Early Start participant enjoying story time and pre-k student celebrating a recognition, thrive in a school designed to meet their specific needs.



FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT



It's an exciting time to bring you the latest Beyond the Bell newsletter! As you'll read on these pages, we are making great progress with our plans to build a new early learning center. The site has been selected, the design phase is well underway, and the Board of Education will determine detailed next steps in April.

This project has been in the works for a long time, and it is rewarding to see it coming together. The families of our community deserve a warm and welcoming, innovative school that supports whole-child development and Illinois' growing statewide commitment

to early childhood education. The new early learning center will have ample space to meet the modern-day needs of pre-k through kindergarten students, and the layout and building features will encourage the play-based, imaginative experiences that are essential for this age group. I'm sure you share my enthusiasm for the project. I encourage you to learn more in this newsletter, and follow the progress in the months to come by visiting our construction website (scan the QR code on P. 3).

The construction of the new school is one of many ways we are accomplishing our Strategic Plan goals. We are sustaining financial stability, improving learning environments and seeing measurable results in student achievement. We

congratulate students and staff on their hard work and thank families for their partnership. We are especially grateful to our school teams for their student-centered focus that strives for academic, social and emotional growth.

I'm pleased to announce we have hired Dr. Marie Zlotnikov as director of human resources. She comes to D34 from Plainfield District 202, where she is an elementary principal. Marie will replace Amy Mahr, who is retiring in July. We thank Amy for her years of service to D34.

I wish you a happy spring as we head toward the busy last couple months of the school year!

Aron Borowiak
D34 Superintendent of Schools

FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT



Community engagement is the ultimate component that signals a school district is thriving! The magic is in the combination of energy and learning that takes place in our classrooms and the partnership we share with you, our residents. Whether you're a current school parent, business owner or resident who has lived here for decades, we are incredibly lucky to have a community that doesn't just fund our D34 schools but celebrates and supports them. Please know, your tax dollars, volunteer hours and ability to stay patient during increased traffic during morning and afternoon drop-off has directly helped to build a strong

foundation that enables our D34 learners to excel. As a Board, we are grateful.

So, before we formally invite you to upcoming events, know that while the skills of all students get more sophisticated as they grow, that fundamental desire for an audience never actually leaves. Our students have spent these past weeks working on projects, practicing music and refining their brushstrokes to create a piece of art you'll love. They are immensely proud of their work, and they deserve an audience that extends into the greater community – and that's where you come in!

To celebrate these achievements together, we encourage families to check their school calendars and attend the upcoming spring concerts and other school-wide celebrations that showcase your students' hard work. In addition,

we invite all residents to join us at D34's annual Art Crawl on Saturday, May 2 (9 a.m.-2:30 p.m.). This gathering is a community favorite where we can all come together to admire student artistic creativity! It's an outside concert at the Antioch Bandshell combined with a gallery opening that features student art on display in downtown businesses.

Your attendance gives our students the validation that hard work is best admired when shared. Thank you for being the fan club they need. We promise upcoming school and district events will be more entertaining than anything on TV, and you won't even have to remember a password to get in!

Mary Beth Hulting
D34 Board of Education President

EMBRACING ARCTIC RECESS

Not everyone has loved the extreme winter weather this year. But many D34 students, like these Oakland Eagles, are not complaining! They have embraced the snow and cold, building connections, staying active and boosting their creativity while taking advantage of time outdoors.



FUNDING THE FUTURE... YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q: Will the construction of a new early learning school require a tax increase for residents?

A: No, there will be no tax referendum, and the cost of the project will not be passed on to taxpayers. The project will be funded through existing bond capacity and new state-permitted self-funding.

Q: What kind of bonds, how much, and how will they be repaid?

A: The Board of Education has authorized the issuance and sale of up to \$51.5 million in General Obligation School Bonds and up to \$11 million in Working Cash Fund and Refunding Bonds. The funds will be used to build and equip the new school and for additional facility improvements in the District. These are Alternate Revenue Bonds, not referendum-approved bonds that are funded by property taxes. The District is pledging to repay them through operating revenues (state aid revenues received under Illinois School Code).

Q: How does the District prioritize the funding of capital projects?

A: The Master Facility Plan guides decision making as the District works to upgrade aging buildings. The prioritized projects in the plan range from essential maintenance to renovations to new construction. The plan includes an implementation timeline for the next 10 years, with the construction of a new early learning school highlighted as a priority for year one to three. Find the plan at this link: <https://www.antioch34.com/district1/master-facility-planning>.

Q: Will the District provide additional information about the cost of construction, the bidding process, progress, etc.?

A: Yes, regular updates on all aspects of the project will be posted on the website that can be accessed by clicking the QR code on this page.

NEW SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION TIMELINE

- Concept design phase: Completed January 2026
- Schematic design phase: To be completed spring 2026
- Designs finalized and construction documents created: Summer 2026
- Bidding process: Fall 2026
- Groundbreaking: Spring 2027
- New school completed, students welcomed: August 2028

BUILDING MAINTENANCE THIS SUMMER

This summer, in addition to planning for the construction of a new school, D34 will be busy making important upgrades to AUGS, Hillcrest and Oakland. The projects, which align with the Strategic Plan goal of Providing State-of-the-Art Learning Environments, are top priorities in the Master Facility Plan. The summer maintenance work includes:

- AUGS: Replace roof
- Hillcrest: Replace sprinkler suppression system
- Oakland: Upgrade HVAC system

BIG CHANGES COMING! STAY INFORMED!

Scan this QR code to access the website that will have regular design and construction updates, along with detailed information about the new early learning center. Or find the site at www.antioch34.com. Community members are encouraged to stay informed and involved throughout this exciting period of change.



100 DAYS OF LEARNING, LAUGHING AND GROWING TOGETHER

Hillcrest first graders in Andrea Pantke's class commemorated the 100th day of school on Feb. 3, dressing up as 100-year-olds and enjoying a day filled with themed activities, lessons and games. It was a fun celebration of how far they've come in this fast first 100 days!

PURPOSEFUL PLANNING: NEW SCHOOL WILL GIVE EARLY LEARNERS A BOOST



When the new-and-improved Mary Kay McNeill Early Learning Center opens its doors at the start of the 2028-2029 school year, students, staff and families will notice changes large and small. And every one of those details will be the result of purposeful planning and the effort to create a vibrant school community that targets early learners.

The building that currently houses MKM was constructed in 1928. Many staff members say they have loved their time at their school, but they look forward to transitioning to a modern building that has many advantages for the pre-k to kindergarten population. Some of those advantages include:

- **More space for pull-out instruction and student services:** When MKM became a school, there were no social workers, instructional coaches or other support

positions that are required in educational settings today. As a result, there is limited space, with staff working with students in hallways or sharing tiny rooms. The new school will have adequate space for the functions that are essential in a modern early learning environment.

- **A focus on age-appropriate, play-based learning:** The thoughtful design of learning spaces will support experiences that are proven to be most effective for young children. This means a focus on imaginative learning, which is making a comeback nationwide, as educators and states prioritize play-based pre-k to kindergarten curriculum rooted in creative expression and socialization. This aligns with Illinois' broader commitment following the creation of the state's new Department of Early Childhood, which consolidates



early learning programs and prioritizes coordinated, high-quality services for young children and families statewide.

- **Support of full-day kindergarten mandate:** Illinois law now requires all districts to offer full-day kindergarten by the 2027–2028 school year, with developmentally appropriate programming that incorporates play-based learning experiences. The design of the new early learning center supports these requirements through flexible learning spaces, natural light, sensory elements, indoor-outdoor connections and room for movement, creativity, collaboration and exploration.

- **Bringing all early learners into one school with a shared mission:** Traditionally, D34 kindergartners have been spread among the three elementary schools, while MKM was for younger children. Bringing all kindergarten together with pre-k under one roof will facilitate efficiency and the sharing of early learning resources, foster staff collaboration, increase stability for students and engagement for families, and, overall, improve readiness and development of the youngest students. In addition, moving kindergarten will create flexibility in the elementary buildings, especially when there are enrollment increases.



Play-based learning is essential for young children like these pre-K students at MKM. The new school is being designed with this in mind, with modern spaces that encourage creativity, exploration and socialization.

TAKING THE STAGE THIS SPRING

Students and staff have worked hard on their spring concerts, including these upcoming performances:

- **AUGS Orchestra (D117 Pops Concert):** 7 p.m., 3/13, Antioch Community High School
- **AUGS Jazz Band (D117 Jazz Night):** 6:30 p.m., 3/18, Lakes Community High School
- **Kindergarten Concerts:** 6:30 p.m., 3/19, Hillcrest, Oakland, Petty
- **4th/5th-Grade Band:** 7 p.m., 4/22, AUGS
- **Art Crawl:** 5/2, Antioch Bandshell and Downtown Businesses

In addition, families are invited to Spring Showcases at AUGS (6 p.m., 3/31), MKM (5 p.m., 4/6), kindergarten-grade 2 (6 p.m., 4/7, elementary schools) and grades 3-5 (6 p.m., 4/9, elementary schools).



SCHOOL NEWS



1 WARRIOR PRIDE ALL AROUND AT CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Both of AUGS' girls softball teams advanced to the championship game in the fall and competed against each other. The stands had green and gold as far as the eye could see! Both teams played great, with the gold team taking the championship trophy.

2 YOUNG SCIENTISTS CONDUCT HANDS-ON INVESTIGATION

Oakland fourth graders in Kristin Newman's class dissected a lily as part of a real-world science lesson that helped them understand how flowers grow and reproduce.



3 PETTY POETRY CAFÉ WARMS HEARTS

Petty first graders in Dr. Rachael Walshire's class turned their library into a cozy Poetry Café on a cold winter day. They welcomed their families and shared their original poems. It was a joyful celebration of creative expression, with the young poets gaining confidence and perfecting their fluency and public speaking skills in front of a very proud audience.

EARLY RESULTS ARE IN: AUGS CHANGES LEAD TO BETTER BEHAVIOR

AUGS administrators recently shared positive results from the schedule changes, new instructional structures and phone-free rules that went into effect at the beginning of the school year. During the first half of the year, the middle school experienced a meaningful reduction in student behavior incidents, including far fewer major and minor discipline referrals and fewer days of in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

Administrators believe the improvements can be attributed, in part, to the new daily schedule that increases time for core classes and provides more targeted and inclusive support for all students. Administrators also credit the Yondr Phone-Free Schools Program, which aims to remove digital distractions during the school day and improve mental health and well-being overall. Students now use Yondr pouches to secure their mobile phones when they arrive at school.

"The school climate improvements mean that students are able to learn in calmer, more focused classroom environments and are more likely to be invested and engaged, which contributes to their long-term academic success and confidence," says AUGS principal Joe Koeune.



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



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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

**D34 ART CRAWL,
SATURDAY, MAY 2**

Antioch Bandshell and
Downtown Businesses



BIG HEARTS

STUDENTS GIVE BACK THIS WINTER,
MAKING A DIFFERENCE FAR AND WIDE



D34 schools have found ways to help others during the cold winter months, including: Oakland held a school-wide Coat Drive in January and February, as part of the national Great Kindness Challenge (Student Council members pictured with sponsors Julie Higginbotham and Kristin Newman); Hillcrest fifth graders in Corrine Zajac's class collected 276 pounds of food for Open Arms Mission before the holidays; and Hillcrest students packed meals for Feed My Starving Children in December, sending boxes off to Burkina Faso and Ukraine.

IN THIS ISSUE

- Transformative Change: Site selected and designs underway for new state-of-the-art early learning center
- School Finance 101: Explaining how D34 will fund construction
- School News: Arctic recess at Oakland, 100 days of learning at Hillcrest, big behavior strides at AUGS, poetry in motion at Petty
- And more!

