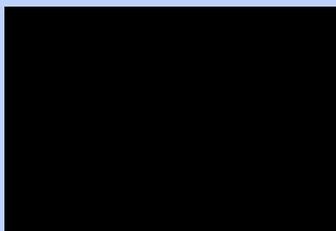




These Scarecrows Don't Need a Brain— They're Building Them!



Willow School's early childhood and pre-kindergarten classes recently held their first "brain builder" activity of the school year. Students and their parents made seasonal scarecrows. The activity challenged students to figure out how to piece their scarecrow together while practicing crucial fine motor skills. Above, Mia Rose Hess gets help from mom, Jennifer, in using a pair of scissors.

Thank You Homewood Rotary



Jack Edwards, President of the Homewood Rotary Foundation, presents a \$2,500 donation to Erika Holliday, President of the Homewood Foundation for Educational Excellence. The Rotary donation will support the education foundation's work funding special projects throughout School District 153.

A Letter from the Superintendent

This edition of our newsletter focuses on two crucial inter-related issues that together present the biggest challenge to the future of our school district: finances and student achievement.

How can we meet increasing expectations for student achievement—our own high expectations as well as those mandated, but not adequately funded, by federal and state government—with the resources available to us?

Systems and infrastructures within our schools are aging and need replacement. Costs for energy, insurance and other necessities continue to rise dramatically. Newer and better

equipment is not expendable if we want our students to be prepared for life beyond school in our increasingly high-tech world. Most importantly, the district's ability to attract and retain the best teachers will hinge on maintaining competitive salaries and benefits, the lion's share of the school district budget.

Moreover, projections for future revenues from taxes and state education dollars are bleak.

Using current revenue and expenditure estimates, the school district will experience growing deficits over the next few years. We recognize that our funding primarily comes from your real estate taxes. Please know that we will strive to remain good stewards of those resources as we plan for an uncertain future.

Dr. Dale Mitchell

2009-2010 Budget Passed: Deficit Projected

The School Board's newly-approved 2009-10 budget anticipates a budget shortfall of about \$790,000. Superintendent Dale Mitchell said the new budget reflects the educational priorities established by the district's five-year strategic plan. It also honors the district's collective bargaining agreement without staff layoffs.

"Obviously this is not an ideal scenario. No one is comfortable carrying a budget deficit, and this course of action is not sustainable over a longer period of time. However, we are convinced that our current staffing is at the right level to meet the needs of our students," said School Board President Shelly Marks.

Cuts to building, department budgets

The district's reserves will be able to absorb a portion of the deficit. However, about 85 percent of the school district budget is devoted to staff salaries and benefits, so Mitchell said the district is tightening its belt elsewhere. Budgets for each school building and department were cut by five to ten percent. These cuts will be felt differently at each school, as principals determine how to best restructure their budgets based on their unique needs.

The \$790,000 figure is much better than the \$1.2 million deficit administrators had feared just a few weeks ago. The better-than-expected outlook is largely due to a newly-enacted state

law that increases the first installment of property tax bills from 50 to 55 percent. The law, intended to cushion property owners from spikes in their second installment payments, has the added benefit of providing more revenue to local taxing bodies earlier. About \$360,000 in new federal stimulus money also contribute to the more positive projections.

Several factors contribute to the negative side of the estimated ledger. District administrators suspect that tax collection rates will be down next year due to the poor economy. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) that determines increases in the tax levy is expected to remain at historic lows around *one-tenth of one percent*. Moreover, the state is reducing its contributions to education. District 153 will receive \$103,000 less in general state aid as well as cuts to grant programs such as early childhood education, reading improvement, and the textbook loan program.

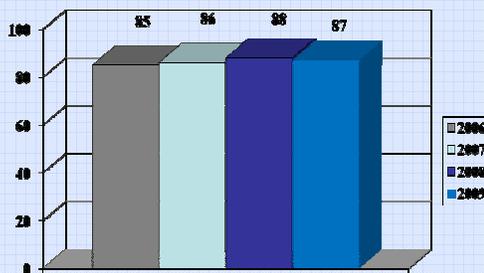
Surplus posted for FY 2008-09

There was good news to be found in the final numbers from the last fiscal year. The school district ended its year with a \$629,000 surplus instead of the \$267,000 deficit projected at the beginning of the year. School District Business Manager Jacqui Parisi credits the unexpected surplus to higher interest rates and tax receipts than had been anticipated in the original budget.

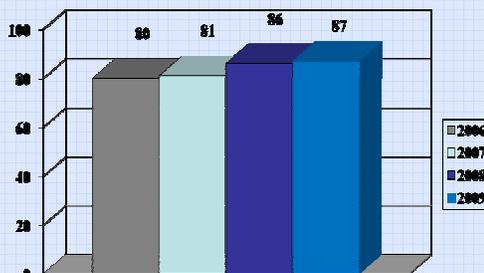
2009 ISAT Scores

How Do District 153 Students Measure Up?

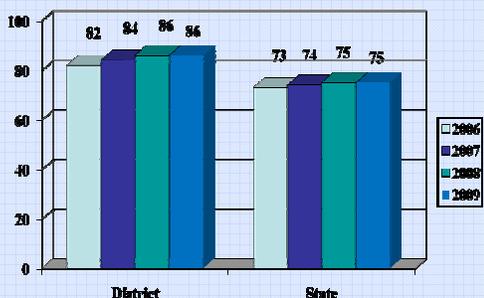
% Meeting or Exceeding State Math Standards



% Meeting or Exceeding State Reading Standards



% Meeting or Exceeding State Standards: All State Tests (Reading, Math, Science)



***District and individual school report cards can be found on our website at www.hsd153.org/academics**

Data from the 2009 Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) show that students in District 153 continue to excel academically. About 87 percent of all our students are meeting or exceeding state standards for both reading and math.

Achievement gap continues to diminish
 Superintendent Dr. Dale Mitchell says he is especially proud of the progress the district has made in closing the “achievement gap.” Achievement gaps are defined as a persistent, pervasive and significant disparity in educational achievement among groups of students as determined by a standardized measure. Wide gaps between the test scores of low-income students and their peers and between minority and white students have been a source of concern for schools and school districts nationwide.

Within the past four years, the gaps in the reading and math test scores between District 153 black and white students were cut in half, from about 20 percentage points (the national and state average) in 2006 to about 10 points in 2009.

Similarly, test scores of the school district’s low-income students have progressed over the same period. In 2006, 63 percent of low income students met or exceeded state standards in reading, and 68 percent met or exceeded math standards. This year, 76 percent of low income students met or exceeded standards in reading, and 80 percent met or exceeded math standards.

Moreover, academic gains by low-income students have continued in the district even as the overall percentage of students classified as low-income continues to grow. In 2006, 17 percent of District 153 students were classified as low-income. Today, almost 22 percent are.

“Unfortunately, we expect that trend to continue as more families are affected by job loss and other financial pressures,” said Dr. Mitchell. “As study after study shows, family income is one of the most reliable indicators of a student’s success in school. Our challenge will be to ensure that our children continue to excel at school even as their families are under

Within the past four years, discrepancies in the reading and math scores between black and white students in District 153 have been cut in half.

more stress at home.”

Dr. Mitchell says it is important to note that these academic disparities between these groups of students are narrowing because of the accelerated achievement of the lower-performing groups, not a slide in the achievement of other groups of students.

Monitoring, supports key to successes

Mitchell attributes the school district’s educational progress to its ongoing and periodic monitoring of students to identify those children who are on track academically, those who need extra help or those who need more challenging work. That process, called Response to Interventions (RTI), enables staff to match students with appropriate supports.

Among the wide range of supports offered in the school district are its early childhood and pre-kindergarten programs, help from reading specialists, specialized instruction during media center time, homework labs and Saturday school, and the Excel program for gifted students.

“Another huge factor is the culture of this school district that makes it unacceptable for any student to not do his or her schoolwork,” said Mitchell. “Failure simply isn’t an option here.”

School District 153
 Needs Substitute
 School Nurses!

Requirements: current RN license, CPR certification, and a love of children!

Contact Dianne Lauterbach at (708) 647-5648.



Learning Blooms at District's Outdoor Classrooms

Innovative and dedicated staff, students and community members are behind efforts throughout the district to convert previously under-used outdoor spaces into hands-on, al fresco classrooms. These spaces, they hope, will enhance the district's curriculum as well as provide an aesthetic and peaceful setting for both students and staff to enjoy.

At Millennium

The transformation of the school's inner courtyard began this fall thanks to Team Clover, a Homewood-based 4-H Club. The club which consists of nine students from Millennium and James Hart Schools provided the labor and secured a \$250 grant to purchase the initial plantings.

With guidance from University of Illinois Cooperative Extension master gardeners, Team Clover planted numerous native plants and a few trees, laid flagstone, and reused old newspapers to mulch the newly-planted beds.

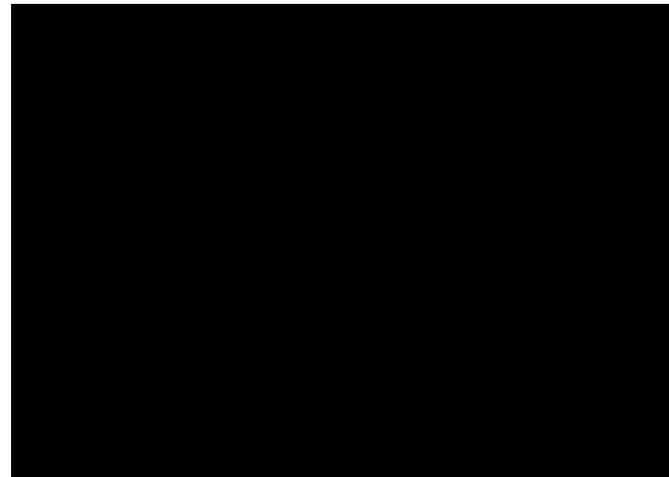
Future plans include the construction of a gathering space where classes can meet for lessons or lunch and the installation of a water barrel and attractions for wildlife.

At Willow

Willow School's west courtyard has been converted into an inviting and colorful space for the district's youngest students. The school's garden boasts butterfly, prairie and vegetable gardens as well as spaces for students to learn their colors and about measurement.

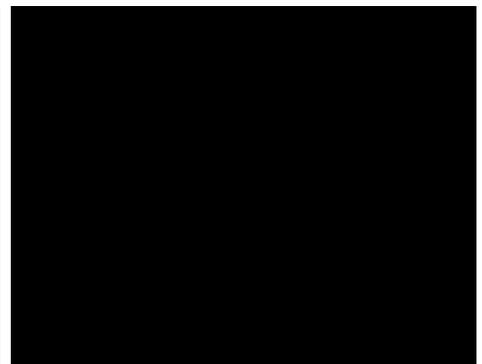
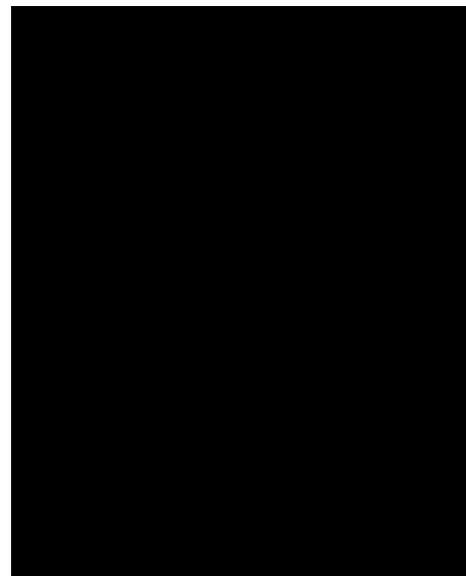
Work at Willow started in earnest during spring break last year. Under the guidance of two local Master Gardeners, staff members, parents, and volunteers from the HF National Honor Society, met to dig, till, mulch, and create planting beds. Funding for plants and other materials was obtained from the Homewood Foundation for Educational Excellence (HFEE), the Village of Homewood and the local chapter of the National Audubon Society.

Since then, Willow students have been thrilled to see gold finches and cardinals at the bird feeders. They have been treated to the smells of various mints, balms and herbs. Edibles also grow in this pesticide-



Left, 2nd-graders Grace Keigher, Erica Bjorklund, Gloria Ikoh, and Aaron Thompson get help harvesting corn husks in Willow's courtyard from assistant Regina Zofeld. The 2nd-grade will use kernels from this year's "crop" to plant corn for next year's classes to enjoy.

Below, 8th-graders Stacy Johnson, Skylar Hildebrand, Kaleb Johnson, and Jesse Camera conduct a science experiment on the deck of the James Hart Courtyard.



Left, University of Illinois Extension master gardener Maureen Guger (far left) oversees the work of 4-H Club members Catherine Wassilak, Kristy Sinwelski, and Grace Bialobok at the Millennium School courtyard garden.

free garden. Beans, corn, squash and baby melons have been planted to supplement the school's Bee Healthy, Bee Smart nutrition education initiative.

The school's 2nd-graders will harvest the potatoes they planted last spring as 1st-graders and turn those potatoes into French fries.

At James Hart

After three years of work, school officials, staff and students recently cut the ribbon marking the completion of the James Hart courtyard. The courtyard, paid for with both school district and HFEE funding, has been planted with many native flowers, bushes and trees and now provides a pleasant alternate space for teaching science lessons and eating lunch.

On any given day, students are out in the courtyard collecting weather data from the newly-installed weather station,

composting, or performing science experiments on the deck. Students on Hart's Courtyard Committee maintain the area by weeding, watering, and labeling the names of the plants.

At Churchill

The first of phase of Churchill's outdoor learning space was completed as a local Eagle Scout candidate's project. Planters were built and filled with sunflowers. A thermometer and rain gauge were installed. In the fall, Churchill's 3rd- and 4th-grade students look up in awe at the garden's sunflowers that grow taller than the school's rooftop!

Churchill staff say they are continuing to plan and develop the space with the long-term goal of gaining certification from the National Wildlife Federation as an official "Schoolyard Habitat."

Homewood School District 153

Dr. Dale Mitchell, Superintendent
Jacqui Parisi, Business Manager
Gail Huizinga, Coordinator for Teaching, Learning
and Accountability
Sue Mecozzi, Director of Student Support
Services
Beth White, Director of Technology
Shelley Peck, Communications Coordinator

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Shirley Watkins, Principal
Mary Kay Gardiner, Asst. Principal
David McAtee, Dean of Students

James Hart School

18220 Morgan Street
708.799.5544
Michael Klein, Principal
Laura Ugo, Asst. Principal
John Ugo, Dean of Students

Churchill School Implements “Peaceful Playground”

A peaceful playground? Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? But Churchill School is discovering that peace can reign on the playground thanks to a new approach to recess time.

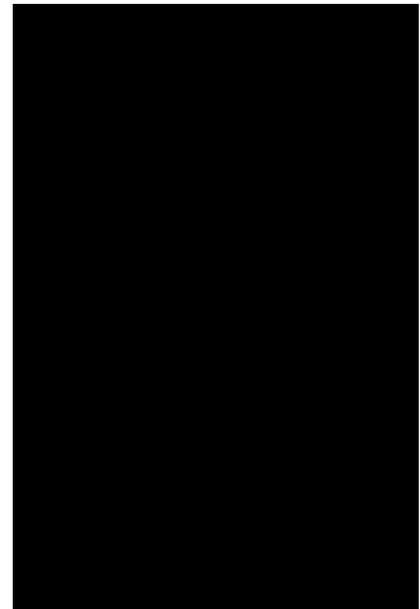
Over the summer, the school began its implementation of Peaceful Playgrounds, a program designed to provide students with purposeful play and conflict resolution strategies for their recess time.

Led by teachers Jan Coules, Gail Doderio and Wendy Milnes, a group of parent volunteers and staff members spent a hot, summer Saturday morning painting a portion of the north playground. The result is a series of game templates painted on the blacktop surface.

Now that school has resumed, Churchill students are busy learning a variety of games and activities they can play using these painted game boards during their recess time.

In the coming months, Churchill staff hopes to expand the templates on the playground to include more game boards and activities, add additional templates on the east blacktop and paint both U.S. and world maps.

Right, 4th-grader Gabrielle Caldanaro plays hopscotch, one of Churchill School's new Peaceful Playground games.

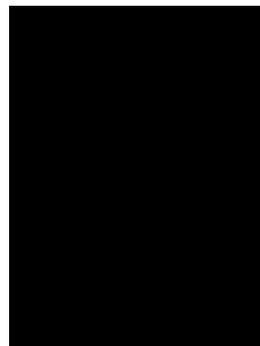


James Hart Students Accept “Rachel’s Challenge”

The James Hart students assembled in the school's gym on October 9th had not even started kindergarten when Rachel Scott became the first student killed in the Columbine School shooting in 1999. Yet, in learning about Scott's short life from *Rachel's Challenge*, an organization and grassroots movement developed as a memorial to the Columbine student, Hart students were inspired to take up the group's call-to-action and start a “chain reaction of kindness and compassion” in their school and community.

After the PTA-sponsored assembly, hundreds of Hart students signed a banner pledging to treat each other with kindness and respect.

Also, over 50 students attended the first meeting of the “Chain Links” after-school club. The club is developing a program to welcome new students to the school and facilitate their transition to Hart. Club members also will plan activities to help all students show their appreciation for each other, their school and their community.



Above, Derek Kilgore from the Rachel's Challenge organization talks to Hart students about creating a positive school and community environment in which alienation and violence is unthinkable.

Left, 8th-grader Kendall King adds his name to the list of Hart students who vowed to accept Rachel's Challenge.