

Press Clippings - 11/13/2023

- Daily Herald -

How students connecting with trusted adults on campus is raising high school graduation rates

By: Elgin Area School District U-46

11/10/ 2023



Palatine High School Assistant Principal Michelle Bremehr, left, visits with students including junior Sunsurae Brandon during a recent lunch hour.(Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer)

A 13-year high in the state's high school graduation rate is being attributed to a number of factors, but one common element among some suburban schools experiencing success are their efforts to build relationships between students and staff members.

"I believe it has an impact on their performance in school," Wheaton Warrenville South High School Principal Lorie Campos said. "We have amazing staff that put in the time and make sure no student is left behind."

According to 2023 Illinois School Report Card data, the state's 87.6% graduation rate last spring -- up from 87.3% in 2022 -- was driven in part by gains among Black and Hispanic students.

Some suburban schools experienced even greater strides.



Graduates are seated during the Wheaton Warrenville South High School graduation, held at the College of Dupage in Glen Ellyn. - Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer, May 2023

Wheaton Warrenville South saw an increase of 21.5% among Black students and 5.7% among Hispanic students, Palatine High saw a 7.9% gain for Black students and 1% for Hispanics, and South Elgin High experienced a 29.3% gain for Black students and 6.8% for Hispanics.

While the pandemic led to widespread learning loss and declines in standardized test scores, that hasn't been the case with graduation rates.

Wheaton Warrenville South's 95.5% graduation rate for Black students is 3.5% higher than 2019 and its 90.8% rate for Hispanic students is only 1% lower. Palatine's Black graduation rate of 97.4% is 29.9% higher than 2019 and its Hispanic graduation rate of 83.2% is 3.4% lower.



Palatine High School Assistant Principal Michelle Bremehr, center, visits with students Jaylynn Coleman, left, Halle Onyekonwu, Sunsurae Brandon and Jermyia Williams during lunch. Building relationships between students and a trusted adult who will encourage them is seen as one reason for the school's improved graduation rate. - Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer

South Elgin saw gains in both categories. Its Black graduation rate of 97% is 18.9% higher than the year before the pandemic and its Hispanic rate of 89.2% is 13.2% higher.

"Some students were more highly affected by the pandemic than others," Campos said.

An emphasis on building relationships between students and adults in school is among the approaches shared by the three schools.

"These personal connections are what inspires students to make an effort to finish," Palatine High School Principal Tony Medina said. "They're making a strong connection, knowing that people are here going out of their way to support them."



Graduates of South Elgin High School collect their diplomas May 27 at the Now Arena in Hoffman Estates. South Elgin High's graduation rate for Black students was 97% -- 18.9% higher than the year before the pandemic -- and 89.2% for Hispanic students, up 13.2% from 2019. - Courtesy of John Konstantaras/School District U-46

He pointed out that the school has 600 English learners who often name the teachers of those classes as their trusted adults.

South Elgin High School Principal Kurt Johansen said efforts to build a sense of belonging among the

student body have been under way for a few years already. It's seen as a way of keeping students on track academically from the earliest weeks of freshman year and setting up practices and expectations aimed to see them all the way through graduation.

He said he's pleased by evidence of progress, but there's also a natural sense that more improvement is possible.

"It didn't happen overnight, and we're still not where we need to be," Johansen said.



Palatine High School Assistant Principal Michelle Bremehr, right, talks with senior Jaylynn Coleman during a recent lunch hour. Close bonds between students and staff have been credited for higher graduation rates. - Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer

Combating chronic absenteeism and early detection of students who are falling behind are additional elements of the school's community-building efforts, he added.

Campos named absenteeism as the top negative influence on graduation rates. Its causes can be anything from anxiety or depression to substance abuse, and they must be overcome if students are to benefit from the academic recovery programs the school has designed, she said.

"If we have them here, we can help them," she added.

At Palatine High, outreach efforts included 300 home visits during the pandemic-plagued 2020-21 academic year, Medina said. Teachers and counselors found circumstances such as siblings sharing Wi-Fi hot spots for simultaneous remote classes and other problems as reasons behind some students' growing disconnection.

Johansen said there's no approach he'd advocate to everyone as a universal solution.

"It's not a one size fits all," he said. "I tend to focus on what I can control, and that's South Elgin High School."

- Daily Herald -

Suburban TIF districts collect \$300 million in property taxes

By: Jake Griffin

11/12/ 2023



A tax increment financing district that helped convert an old gravel quarry in Bartlett into the thriving Brewster Creek Business Park is being terminated after 23 years. (Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)



Parts of downtown Batavia along the riverfront benefitted from a tax increment financing district, which is coming to an end after more than three decades that generated more than \$5.6 million in additional property taxes used to cover infrastructure improvements there. (Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)

For the past 23 years, the vast majority of property tax revenue generated within the boundaries of the Brewster Creek Business Park in Bartlett paid for infrastructure improvements there.

That amounted to nearly \$70 million since 2000, including \$7.7 million in 2022, according to village financial reports.

But next year, that property tax revenue is set to shift back to nearly a dozen underlying local governments like Elgin Area **School District U-46**, the Bartlett Fire Protection District, DuPage County and other taxing bodies as Bartlett village officials plan to retire a tax increment financing (TIF) district next month that helped convert an old gravel quarry into a thriving commercial asset.

"This has been one of the most successful TIFs in the state," said Tony Fradin, Bartlett's economic development director. "The taxing districts within the village are very eagerly anticipating collecting the added revenue."

In addition to the property tax revenues used to develop the business park, another \$240 million in private investment funds were spent there during the TIF district's life span, records show. Fradin said the reports don't take into account the millions of dollars more that were spent to develop adjacent to Brewster Creek to support the needs of the 7,000-plus people who work there daily.

"There's tens of millions more coming post-TIF," Fradin said of additional economic development deals in the works in and around the business park.

The Bartlett Quarry TIF is one of 170 such special taxing districts in 64 suburbs that collected nearly \$300 million in property taxes in 2022, according to a Daily Herald analysis of state-mandated annual financial reports for the district. It's only one of a few that is coming to an end, though. Another 14 TIFs are so new that they haven't begun collecting tax revenue yet, the reports to the Illinois comptroller's office show.

"The scrutiny of TIF districts is really important because often they don't produce the results that they're touted for and sometimes produce very little in the way of results," said David Merriman, interim director of the University of Illinois' Institute of Government and Public Affairs. "In many instances, TIFs can shift the tax burden and are used to give subsidies to developers without sufficient transparency or quid pro quo for the subsidies."

He also complained that reporting requirements for spending are lacking. He suggested private developers and public agencies should be required to detail how money was spent within the district.

The comptroller's reports are limited by what information the legislature mandated be included and don't require detailed spending.

It's often unknown how public funds were spent. Some towns, like Wood Dale, have even ignored filing the reports with the state. Wood Dale officials did not respond to requests for information about the missing reports.

"How the money was spent is often something we don't have good data on," Merriman lamented.

A TIF district works by freezing the assessed value of properties within the district for other taxing bodies while allowing a municipality to collect any additional property tax revenue derived from an increase in the value of the land over the 23-year life span of the TIF. The tax revenue generated by that increase must be spent on infrastructure or building improvements within the TIF, something developers would normally have to cover otherwise.

Properties within a proposed TIF district also generally have to be considered "blighted" to be eligible.

Since their inception, the 170 suburban TIFs have generated more than \$1.3 billion in property tax revenues, financial records show.

"It's hard to discuss TIFs on an average basis because there's not an average TIF, there's a bunch of different ways to go about doing them," said Chris Goodman, associate professor of public administration at Northern Illinois University. "One of the better ways to judge whether a TIF is working is whether it's generating surplus revenue. If you're generating more revenue than you're sending out, then in theory that's a success."

But Merriman said gauging success can be tricky. Oftentimes, municipalities will borrow millions of dollars, assuming successful redevelopment within the TIF will eventually generate the property tax revenue to pay off those loans.

"It all depends on how much risk these municipal governments want to take on," he said.

Financial uncertainty seemingly fueled TIF creation.

In the wake of the Great Recession that ended in late 2009, several suburbs created new TIF districts, state records show. Between 2011 and 2016, 56 of the current 170 suburban TIF districts were created.

At the outset of the pandemic in 2020, 12 new TIFs were created. The most in a single year dating back to 1997.

Two of the oldest suburban TIFs are also coming to an end soon. The Batavia Riverfront TIF, created in 1989 and extended for another 12 years, is being retired, city officials said. It generated \$15.2 million during its lifetime in property taxes and another \$22 million in private investments, according to financial reports.

Libertyville's Downtown TIF was created during Ronald Reagan's second presidential term in 1986. It finally ended this year as well.

The village and underlying taxing districts previously agreed to extend the district another 12 years to help cover the cost of "parking improvements," village officials said. Meanwhile, the village agreed to pay the underlying taxing districts, like Libertyville High School District 128, 70% of what the school district

was due from the increase in property tax revenues within the TIF during the extension.

"We got about \$1 million each year," said Dan Stanley, District 128's assistant superintendent of finance.

"Last spring, we received our last check from the village. Going forward we'll get the full amount."

Merriman said he is leery about designating downtown areas as TIF districts.

"It's downtown, so there's lots of money that's been invested already, and you'd expect a lot of money to be invested there. Why are you subsidizing it?" He criticized.

Several suburbs have recently turned mall properties into TIF districts, but those efforts don't appear to be generating much additional revenue. Aurora's Fox Valley Mall TIF began in 2020 and has generated just \$84,393 so far. Bloomingdale's Stratford Square Mall TIF district has generated \$39,745 since 2019. Northbrook Court's TIF has generated \$219,156 since 2019.

Carpentersville's Spring Hill Mall TIF, created in 2016, was so unsuccessful that village leaders terminated it in 2021 and approved a larger TIF district in 2022. No report for that district is available yet.

- Daily Herald -

Five U-46 high school seniors named National Merit semifinalists

By: Elgin Area School District U-46

11/10/ 2023

Elgin High School's Samantha Havener and Bartlett High School's Raiyan Hasan, Bailey Jones, Macy Medendorp and Arav Patel are among about 16,000 semifinalists nationwide.

They will continue in the competition to be awarded one of 7,140 National Merit Scholarships worth nearly \$28 million that will be offered next spring.

The U-46 students placed among the top 1 percent juniors nationwide who entered the 2024 National Merit Scholarship Program by taking the 2022 Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying

Test (PSAT/NMSQT) which served as the initial screening.

To be declared a semifinalist, students must have an outstanding academic record through high school, be endorsed and recommended by a high school official, write an essay, and earn SAT or ACT scores that confirm the student's earlier performance on the qualifying test.

To become a finalist, the students will need to submit a detailed scholarship application including information about their academic record, participation in school and community activities, demonstrated leadership abilities, employment, and honors and awards received. Drawing from the group of finalists, National Merit Scholarship winners will be announced in stages starting in April 2024.

- Daily Herald -

Documentary on 'Teaching the Holocaust' by South Elgin High students wins film fest prize

By: Elgin Area School District U-46

11/10/ 2023



South Elgin High School students and teachers do a stage reading last January. It is featured in the Beacon Academy of Media and Digital Arts documentary called "Teaching the Holocaust: Beyond Facts and Figures." (Courtesy of Elgin Area School District U-46)

A documentary filmed and edited by students from the Beacon Magnet Academy of Media and Digital Arts at South Elgin High School, called "Teaching the Holocaust: Beyond Facts and Figures," won the grand prize in the "Best Documentary Short" category at the 2023 Silicon Beach Film Festival.

The documentary is centered around a series of activities that South Elgin High students and teachers engaged in last January.

Student actors did table readings of a nonfiction theater project called "The Thin Edge of the Wedge," written by Elgin High School graduate Phyllis Zimbler Miller.

It was presented at Congregation Kneseth Israel in Elgin as well as part of a professional development program for history and social studies teachers. The students also visited the Illinois Holocaust Museum, an emotional trip captured in the documentary.

The film was produced by Miller, Beacon Academy teacher Brian Erlich, and Jacob Vandemoortel, coordinator of K-12 Social Studies and World Languages for U-46.

Miller created her play based on firsthand accounts she published, and interviews she conducted, while working as a reporter and editor for the Jewish Exponent, an English-language weekly newspaper in Philadelphia in the 1970s.

Vandemoortel said South Elgin High School's relationship with Miller and her play has led to U-46 being a partner with the Gail Borden Public Library's "Violins of Hope" exhibit, which showcased instruments played before or during the Holocaust, and plans for a joint kickoff event in January 2024 to mark the International Holocaust Day of Remembrance and Black History Month.

"This project has been remarkable from the start. There have been so many incredible pieces that have come from it," he said. "I'm so proud of everything we've accomplished so far and excited about the work we are still doing!"

The documentary is available to watch on the school's YouTube channel as well as on the "Shorts Daily" channel on Roku, a streaming video player.

About 24 South Elgin High School students participated in the project, either as actors or as part of the film crew.

- Daily Herald -

'A unifying force': Elgin honors veterans during annual ceremony

By: Rick West

11/10/ 2023



Samuel Manisack and other members of the American Legion Post 57 Honor Guard salute on Friday during Elgin's annual Veterans Day ceremony at the Heritage Ballroom in The Centre of Elgin. (Rick West | Staff Photographer)



Members of the American Legion Elgin Post 57 fire a volley during the rifle salute during Elgin's annual Veterans Day ceremony on Friday at the Heritage Ballroom in The Centre of Elgin. (Rick West | Staff Photographer)



Navy veteran Bob Balsamo listens contemplatively to the guest speaker on Friday during Elgin's annual Veterans Day ceremony. (Rick West | Staff Photographer)



Guest speaker Jill Smith, vice commander of American Legion Post 57, addresses the audience on Friday during Elgin's annual Veterans Day ceremony. (Rick West | Staff Photographer)

Roughly 100 people gathered Friday at the Centre of Elgin to honor the city's veterans.

Elgin's annual Veterans Day ceremony, hosted by the city and American Legion Post 57 in the Centre's Heritage Ballroom, featured music by the **Larkin High School** band and comments from Mayor David Kaptain and guest speaker Jill Smith, senior vice commander of the Elgin American Legion post.

Smith hailed not only what veterans have done but what they represent.

"In this era of uncertainty and division, it is our veterans who serve as a unifying force," she said. America would not be America without them, she said.

"Our debt to these heroes can never be repaid, but our gratitude and respect must last forever," Smith said.

Originally, Veterans Day was known as Armistice Day, commemorating the end of World War I when major hostilities were formally ended at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 and the armistice with Germany went into effect. It was renamed Veterans Day in 1954 at the urging of U.S. veterans organizations.

"Veterans Day is not just a day of celebration and remembrance. It's a day of action," Smith said. "It's a day when we must recommit ourselves to the well-being of veterans and their families."

Mayor David Kaptain told the audience that the city is committed to helping veterans who are dealing with issues like PTSD, depression and homelessness.

"We will honor you by honoring them," he said.

The Post 57 honor guard offered a rifle salute outside the window of the ballroom, followed by the playing of taps by band members.

AL Post 57 Commander Mark Smith closed the ceremony by recognizing and thanking more than a dozen members of the post's honor and color guards with commemorative American Legion coins.

"They're the face of the American Legion," Smith said. "They're out there in the community, putting us in a positive light, doing things on a daily basis."

- Daily Herald -

South Elgin High School alerts students, parents to expect random searches for weapons and 'contraband'

By: Mike Danahey
Nov 10, 2023



South Elgin High School officials have sent a letter to parents notifying them that the school will be conducting random searches for weapons and "contraband" now through the end of the year, as is allowed by School District U-46 policy. (Rafael Guerrero/The Courier-News)

South Elgin High School administrators have notified parents they plan to do random searches in the school as a deterrent to students who might be tempted to bring in weapons or other "contraband."

In a letter sent to parents Oct. 31, Assistant Principal Marilyn Mattei said school staff plan to conduct periodic classroom and student searches through the end of the school year.

"The purpose of implementing random searches is to deter individuals from bringing weapons, contraband and other items to school or school-sponsored activities which are prohibited," Mattei said in the letter. "Conducting random searches not only curtails the threat of violence but also offers a safe learning environment for all."



Indian Prairie School District 204, with schools in Naperville and Aurora, hired company in 2018 to search for drugs, alcohol and weapons with dogs at its high schools to supplement the search programs available through local police departments. South Elgin High School, part of Elgin-based District U-46, has told parents and students it will occasionally be doing the

same. (Indian Prairie District 204/ HANDOUT)

Karla Jiménez, District U-46's director of school and community relations, said the district policy allows for "generalized or suspicionless searches" at all schools and school buildings so the district can provide "a safe and secure learning environment for all students and staff."

The policy is in the student handbook, she said, and the possibility that such searches may be conducted announced at the start of the school year, per the policy.

There's also a reference to use of random searches included in the Student Code of Conduct, which all parents and high school students receive at the beginning of each school year, she said.

Jiménez said there was no specific incident that led to the letter being sent.

"These random searches are a proactive measure aimed at deterring any potential threats and ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone within our buildings," she said.

Jiménez, when asked if similar letters have been sent to parents at other schools, said the district and schools "have launched a campaign encouraging parents to talk with their children about making good choices and understanding the potential consequences."

The district has conducted random searches at schools periodically since 2008-09, she said.

Mattei's letter said the searches will be conducted by school administrators, someone designated by an administrator or an authorized staff member, but not by police.

"The process used in these random searches is consistent with a search one would undergo when preparing to board an airplane, enter a government building or attend an event at a performance venue or theme park," Mattei wrote.

Occasionally trained safety dogs may be brought in to randomly sniff student belongings.

"If a dog alerts to the presence of contraband, reasonable suspicion will exist to justify a more thorough search. At no time will a canine be used to sniff a person during a school search, and every effort is made

to keep students separated from dogs being used during a search,” the letter said.

Students who do not comply will be subjected to school discipline just as if they have violated other school procedures, the letter said.

Ed Yohnka, communications director for the American Civil Liberties Union, said such searches are legal but the question arises as to how often they’re actually random.

“Even so-called random searches can be infused with unconscious bias that results in the targeting of young men, students of color and those with disabilities, even if they do not have weapons or other contraband,” Yohnka said.

The vagueness of the terms used in Mettei’s letter raises further concerns, he said.

“What is a random classroom search? What is random — the classrooms selected or the students searched within the classroom. The message does not make that clear,” Yohnka said.

He also pointed out that the letter doesn’t say if police might be called in if contraband is discovered.

“While the courts have given some latitude to school officials to search lockers and have metal detectors at school doorways or even do random drug testing for those in extracurricular activities, it is not clear how a court might weigh this unspecified program at South Elgin,” Yohnka said. “School officials ought to be able to make the plan more clear as a first step.”

Beyond that, while the school is understandably concerned about student safety, he said, officials should consider what kind of message these searches send when trying to foster a place where teens can learn, mature and grow.

“Creating a chasm between students and school officials by having those administrators act like law enforcement professionals does not serve that overall goal,” Yohnka said.

- Daily Herald -

Paul Johnson's top 10 girls basketball teams and 25 players to watch in Aurora-Elgin area for the 2023-24 season

By: Paul Johnson

Nov 10, 2023



Batavia's Brooke Carlson (2) drives into Geneva's Caroline Madden (20) during the Class 4A Glenbard West Sectional championship game in Glen Ellyn on Thursday, Feb. 23, 2023. (Mike Mantucca / The Beacon-News)

Brooke Carlson-led Batavia and Class 4A powerhouse Geneva look primed to battle at the top, but don't count out Hampshire and Aurora Central Catholic.

Top 10 Teams

1. Batavia (21-12)

Senior combo guard Brooke Carlson, the reigning DuKane Conference's player of the year, signed Wednesday with Colorado State. That's a good place to start. Kylee Gehrt, Addi Lowe, Addie Prewitt and Natalie Warner also return for Bulldogs, who have won back-to-back regional titles.

2. Geneva (31-4)

DuKane Conference champions are reloaded for another deep postseason run. Senior guards Kinsey Gracey, Caroline Madden and Leah Palmer all return to form a talented core. Gracey (Wisconsin-River Falls) has committed, but Madden and Palmer are undecided.

3. Hampshire (22-10)

Whip-Purs finished second in the Fox Valley Conference last season and have beefed up their nonconference schedule. They welcome back plenty of firepower with senior guards Avery Cartee (Wisconsin-Whitewater), Ashley Herzing and Whitney Thompson.

4. Aurora Central Catholic (26-7)

Chargers revved up for conference and regional titles last season. Much of that push was created by returnees in junior guard Sofia Corral, junior guard/forward Riley Cwinski and senior guard Anna-Marie Godina. Junior guard/forward Brooklyn Murphy also transferred in from St. Charles East.

5. Waubonsie Valley (24-8)

Warriors were young and suffered through injuries last season but return a couple of key pieces intent on keeping the puzzle in place. Sophomore guard Danyella Mporokoso, who averaged 15.8 points, has multiple Division I offers. Hannah Laub, a 6-foot senior guard/forward, is back and healthy.



Waubonsie Valley's Hannah Laub (2) drives against East Aurora's Anastasia Bellamy (23) during a Class 4A Naperville North Regional semifinal game on Monday, Feb. 13, 2023. (Jon Cunningham / The Beacon-News)

6. St. Charles North (26-7)

North Stars set a program record for wins and took a regional title last season. What's on tap next? Well, Reagan Sipla signed with Division I Quinnipiac. Katrina Stack also returns, as does Laney Stark, a Green Bay recruit for soccer.

7. Burlington Central (22-11)

Rockets had a sustained run of success under Collin Kalamatas, who left to become Huntley's boys basketball head coach. Mike Carani takes over the program. Senior forward Emma Payton (Trine) is the top returnee, while sophomore guard Jordyn Charles looks for a breakout season.

8. Kaneland (15-17)

Knights ended up below .500 overall but took third place in conference before losing in the regional final. Things are trending upward, however. Junior guard Kendra Brown averaged 13.5 points to lead team. Senior guard Lexi Schueler (Benedictine) adds to the mix.

9. Yorkville (19-13)

Led by senior guard Aliesha Peterson, Foxes tout five key returnees in Lainey Gussman, Brooke Spychalski, Madi Spychalski and Makenzie Sweeney. They will try to replace the production of graduated standout Alex Stewart.

10. St. Charles East (10-19)

Saints have had a tumultuous few seasons, but first-year coach Katie Claussner hopes to bring some stability to the program. Indiana Kokomo recruit Lexi DiOrio, a senior guard/forward, returns to guide transition on the court.



St. Charles East's Lexi DiOrio (5) makes a turn against West Aurora during a nonconference game in St. Charles on Monday, Dec. 12, 2022. (H. Rick Bamman/The Beacon-News)

The 25 Players to Watch

Kendra Brown, Kaneland, junior, guard.

Brooke Carlson, Batavia, senior, guard.

Avery Cartee, Hampshire, senior, guard/forward.

Izzie Castro, **Elgin**, junior, guard.

Sophia Corral, Aurora Central Catholic, junior, guard.
Riley Cwinski, Aurora Central Catholic, junior, forward.
Lexi DiOrion, St. Charles East, senior, guard.
Kylee Gehrt, Batavia, senior, guard.
Anna-Marie Godina, Aurora Central Catholic, senior, guard.
Anna Herrmann, Hinckley-Big Rock, sophomore, guard.
Ashley Herzing, Hampshire, senior, guard.
Hannah Laub, Waubonsie Valley, senior, guard/forward.
Maggie Lewandowski, Oswego East, junior, guard.
Caroline Madden, Geneva, senior, guard.
Amadea Montijo, **Bartlett**, senior, guard.
Danyella Mporokoso, Waubonsie Valley, sophomore, guard.
Leah Palmer, Geneva, senior, forward.
Emma Payton, Burlington Central, senior, center.
Addie Prewitt, Batavia, junior, guard.
Josephine Rader, Somonauk, senior, guard.
Lexi Schueler, Kaneland, senior, guard.
Reagan Sipla, St. Charles North, senior, guard/forward.
Katrina Stack, St. Charles North, senior, forward.
Whitney Thompson, Hampshire, senior, guard.
Isabella Turner, Indian Creek, junior, guard.