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Charter group leader talks about Elgin School's progress

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY



The main classroom building of the former Fox River Country Day School will house the Elgin Math and Science Academy. *Rick West | Staff Photographer*

The group opening an Elgin charter school is close to finalizing a contract to hire a principal, officials said.

In October, a state panel sanctioned the Elgin Math and Science Academy charter school primarily to serve at-risk students in the area. The decision reversed Elgin Area School District U-46's denial of the proposal in June.

The academy is scheduled to open in August under state oversight. Its leaders plan to have 200 students in kindergarten to third grade the first year, adding grades each year through eighth grade. Enrollment will be capped at 400 by the fifth year.

Kerin Kelly, an estate lawyer and president of the Elgin Charter School Initiative, recently provided an update on the school's progress:

Q. Who will be principal?

Kelly: We have agreed to wait until (later this month) to announce the name. She has 11 years' experience, is an award-winning principal of an Illinois school district and will start Jan. 15. The salary range is \$105,000 to \$115,000.

Q. Who will manage the school?

Kelly: We have seven members on the board. They are all community leaders. They represent multiple fields: business and finance, education, arts and design, marketing, and legal professions. We would like 11 board members.

Q. Any financing issues?

Kelly: For this first planning year, we have \$150,000 in expenses planned. The charter group is promised \$950,000 in federal reimbursements for initial startup costs associated with the facility's opening, planning, program design and implementation of the expeditionary learning model. Salaries for an interim chief financial officer, special education consultant and principal will be paid for through the grant. The state will pay 100 percent of tuition costs -- roughly \$10,300 per student -- plus categorical funding, such as special education and Title I funds for low-income students, for a total budget of roughly \$2.1 million yearly. Operational costs are expected to be \$4.8 million at full enrollment. The group also has been preapproved for an up to \$200,000 line of credit from Triumph Bank in Elgin.

Q. When will you begin hiring teachers, school staff and support personnel?

Kelly: That starts as soon as the principal comes on board. We have been getting a lot of resumes for teachers and some of our leadership team. The leadership team will comprise a bilingual coordinator, special education director, chief financial officer and an instructional coach. Hiring of a social worker and classroom teachers will be done in the first quarter of the year, with teachers starting in June. We also are going to hire an outreach coordinator to recruit prospective families, and who will be fluent in Spanish. Job descriptions and applications are available at elginmathandscience.org. Teachers will undergo five days of training on expeditionary learning curriculum in July.

Q. How are you reaching out to prospective students?

Kelly: We've been going to events ... Boys & Girls Club of Elgin and Salvation Army holiday events. We will be at Kiwanis and Rotary clubs. We are focusing our outreach in places where at-risk families are found. We plan to have an open house in February. We will be at the Gail Borden Public Library preschool fair Jan. 20. Our big push is to get all 300 pre-enrolled families to register online. April 4 is when they have to have their registration on paper or online. April 11 is our lottery date.

Q. The school site is the former Fox River Country Day School campus on Dundee Avenue, leased from the city of Elgin. What needs to be done to get it ready?

Kelly: Architect Eric Pepa has been drawing plans for classroom buildings. They are pricing out the cost of repairs now. Everything will be well within \$200,000 or less for renovations of the Neill building. Built in 2005, the building houses 13 classrooms. The school might utilize other buildings on campus, including a dining hall, administration building, field house, and gymnasium that require substantial repairs. ... We would love to get that art barn operational in the first year or two. Needed repairs are estimated to cost \$200,000. We are fundraising. We have a Mardi Gras fundraiser 7 p.m. Feb. 24, at the Dream Hall, 51 S. Grove Ave., Elgin. This is going to be focused on startup costs (with) a goal of \$5,000.

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Gene Wohlert-Timber Trails Elementary School

BY SUSAN KLOVSTAD



Gene Wohlert teaches physical education at Timber Trails Elementary School in Hoffman Estates, part of Elgin Area School District U-46. *John Starks | Staff Photographer*

Blaine "Gene" Wohlert, 54, has spent his entire career -- 32 years -- teaching physical education to elementary students in Elgin Area School District U-46.

A resident of South Elgin, Wohlert has taught at Woodland Heights, Hanover Countryside and Otter Creek Elementary, but for the past eight years he has taught at Timber Trails Elementary in Hoffman Estates.

Wohlert received a teaching degree in physical education from the University of Northern Iowa and a master of science in education from Chicago State University.

"My senior year of college, U-46 came to Northern Iowa on a recruiting trip to start an elementary P.E. program," Wohlert recalls. "I still remember my first day of teacher orientation when they said, 'Welcome to school district U-46, where we have 30,000 students and our community speaks 54 different languages.' Born and raised in Iowa, it took me a minute to wrap my head around that statement."

Over the years, Wohlert has spent time as a coach and mentor as well.

"I coached a few years of basketball and softball at the high school level and several years at the elementary level with after-school basketball and volleyball programs," he said.

"Once my wife and I started a family, all my coaching time went to coaching my own kids. I am actively involved in the Teacher/Mentor program and have been for several years."

The Daily Herald caught up with Wohlert to find out more about teaching physical education at the elementary level.

Q. How did you decide to become a physical education teacher?

Wohlert. I knew by my freshmen year of high school that I wanted to be a P.E teacher. Sports played such a crucial role in helping me make good decisions at difficult times in my life; I wanted to provide that same outlet for children.

Q. What do you enjoy about teaching P.E., or what is most rewarding?

Wohlert. I've turned into a "softy" over the years. I'm constantly trying to instill confidence in my students, especially the one-third of each class who I know is out of shape and struggling with their skill set and body image. You look for that moment to praise them in front of their peers, and that reaction is what has kept me in teaching for the last 32 years. What I appreciate most about the elementary level is the continuous excitement and passion the kids have every time they walk in the gym.

Q. What is your favorite game or sport to have the kids play?

Wohlert. I enjoy teaching the high jump. I know it may sound a little crazy at the elementary level, but all my students participate, grades K-6. I have sixth-graders that jump as high as 4'8.

Q. What is most challenging about teaching P.E.?

Wohlert. Without a doubt, it is trying to meet the needs of each student in a once a week P.E. program. U-46 elementary students need more physical education, period.

Q. How has teaching P.E. changed over the years?

Wohlert. Over the years, my focus has moved toward the one-third of students in every class who really need my attention. These P.E at-risk students are always at the forefront of my mind, and I work hard to praise them in individual ways to build their self-esteem. In U-46, elementary P.E. has moved to a standard base grading system. Due to these changes, we now have some continuity of what's being taught at each grade level throughout the district, and it all aligns with state standards. With the new grading system comes a lot of new equipment to implement the curriculum. Our program is moving forward.

Q. How do you motivate kids to get moving?

Wohlert. Kids will not continue to move unless the activity is enjoyable, challenging, new, or they understand the benefit of it. I add a twist or motivational element to almost everything I teach. For example, I always play music in my classroom, I utilize a motivational board that allows students to visually see their progress, and it's mandatory that I have the class laughing at least once a period.

Q. What is your own favorite sport to participate in and to watch?

Wohlert. I would say basketball was once my favorite sport to play, but that changed at the age of 45. Now, I love tennis with my wife. March Madness is by far my favorite sporting event to watch.