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Letter from Dr. Gary Mical

# Educational Success Has Many Facets

This issue of The Author celebrates what is happening in District 21. Throughout the year, our Professional Learning Communities have explored many routes to increased educational achievement. We are particularly proud of the work we have done with our service learning and family learning programs. We are building a mutually-beneficial bond between our schools and our community. This bond plays an important part in student achievement.

Service Learning projects take center stage in this issue. You will read about how Cooper and London Middle Schools have embraced an inspiring program called Rachel's Challenge, to join our students with children all over the country who are incorporating acts of kindness into their school day. Frost School is both building character and providing role models with its Student Ambassador program. Students at Poe School are raising funds to contribute to their school, community and global relief, while Whitman School's Helping Hands Manos Amigas is giving service learning an invigorating bi-lingual focus.

You will learn about family reading nights at Kilmer and Longfellow Schools that are not only increasing awareness of our school library resources but also reinforcing reading skills at home. This year Twain School's Mighty Math Minds

has added a parent-education component as well. Tarkington has implemented school-wide guided reading to make sure every student is getting the challenge they need to succeed. Students and staff at Field School will be weaving a multi-cultural exploration called A Cultural Tour of Field into their learning plan this spring. Holmes Middle School and Riley Elementary are reaching beyond traditional school hours. Riley's Homework Club is blooming in its second year, and a.m. @ Holmes provides its students with a Saturday option to reinforce academic and social skills.

Through these different programs, the District's Professional Learning Communities are continually exploring new ways to provide the best opportunities for our students. Learning specialists define indicators of educational success such as: a plan for student achievement, community participation, sound fiscal management, staffs that work together for their students, and recruitment and retention of such quality staff. This issue helps to celebrate and define these indicators in our schools.

*Service Learning projects take center stage in this issue.*





Cooper Middle School

## Rachel's Challenge

When Cooper Middle School called its students together in October for an assembly on Rachel's Challenge, every person in the room was so involved and actively listening, you could hear a pin drop.

Rachel Scott was the first person killed at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. The Friends of Rachel Program has been spreading her mission to start a chain reaction of kindness and compassion ever since.

Cooper 6th grade teacher Kim Stoltman spearheaded the introduction of Rachel's Challenge into Cooper Middle School. "I made summaries and lesson plans using the website, and the staff was able to introduce the program the week before the assembly," Stoltman says. The message of the assembly, dramatized with re-enactments of typical school scenarios, is that one person can

make a positive difference and each act of kindness can grow into more and more.

"Now every Friday, each grade level watches a video clip provided by the Rachel's Challenge Foundation illustrating situations, such as a new student coming to school, or giving a seat to an elderly person on a crowded bus," says Stoltman. "After the clip, we discuss it in class. Now the kids want to make their own video clips to show what we can do in Cooper to make a difference."

"Middle school is a good time for this message," says Cooper Principal Dr. Maureen Reilly. "The students really take it to heart. They see a video of a child sitting alone, and they think about what it would feel like and they are reaching out, which is exactly what we want."



Field Elementary School

## A Cultural Tour of Field

This spring, Field Elementary School will be replacing its traditional portfolio night with a multicultural celebration called A Cultural Tour of Field. "We are embracing the diversity of our community and the strengths of the different cultures we have here," says 5th grade teacher Rosemary Gavin.

Each grade will focus on a different continent, and after spring break, teachers will weave study of the customs, celebrations, food and clothing of each geographical area into their class curriculum and Power Standards.

On April 22, the Cultural Tour will kick off with an assembly where 2nd and 3rd graders will perform songs from various cultures. Then April 23, the students will be giving passports to visit other grade levels and ex-

plore each continent. Finally, on April 30, a Parents Night will showcase the entire project. "We want to reach out to all our parents and celebrate our diverse community."

"We may make a school mural to illustrate the Cultural Tour," says Gavin. "We are also planning to make at least one I-movie by taking digital photos, downloading them into a computer and turning it into a moving collage of our kids working on their projects, researching, role playing the traditions they are learning about and also include photos students have found of their continents. We are talking about an I-movie of the eyes of all the children in the school which would run on the class monitors during the event because each child's eyes are unique, just like the places we come from are unique."

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*"We are embracing the diversity of our community and the strengths of the different cultures we have here"*

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## Frost Elementary School

# Student Ambassadors Build Character

Frost Elementary School's Student Ambassadors are building leadership skills while reinforcing the school's character education program. Working with a national program called Ignite Empowering Youth for Life, the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade ambassadors visit first and second-grade classrooms every month to lead discussion about the character trait being emphasized.

Ignite provides two-minute clips from Disney movies that illustrate concepts like friendship and responsibility. Principal Rick Herrejon previews the clips with one of Frost's social workers, Diane Anstadt to select clips that best fit the school monthly theme.

Ambassadors meet weekly with the Happiness Club, a group designed to enhance character education through performing arts. Happiness Club is open to all students from the third grade up. Student Ambassadors are recommended by teachers because they are

good role models. Some are at-risk children who teachers feel can benefit from confidence building skills. At Happiness Club, the Ambassadors take attendance, pass out treats and work on the lessons they will present in classrooms.

Ambassadors also serve as lunch room helpers and recess buddies, where they are paired with younger kids whose teachers think they can use help developing social skills. This year's Ambassadors will be invited to continue next year, and every year new third graders will be added, to build an experienced core.

"The kids love it," says Anstadt. "At first, they were very nervous about speaking in front of the other kids, but classroom teachers help keep the discussion going. The experience does wonders for their self confidence, and the younger children look up to them."



## Holmes Middle School

# a.m. @ Holmes

When Holmes Middle School students are wondering what to do on Saturday mornings, they have a great option – a.m. @ Holmes, an enrichment and recreation program offered to all Holmes students from 9 a.m. to noon two Saturdays a month.

"The main components focus on building positive relationships with adults and peers, providing a safe place with enriching activities," explains Holmes Principal Martin Hopkins. "We average between 75 to 100 kids on any given Saturday."

Students start by choosing an academic activity, such as computer lab, science experiments, whacky math, crafts, story telling and working with technology and end with a snack and hour of recreation. Depending on the weather, they may be

outside playing soccer, inside with volley ball, in the game room or computer lab.

"We encourage students to explore their interests and make new friends," says Liza Kessler, program facilitator and 8th grade special education teacher. "Many times, the kids who say, 'I don't like school,' are the ones who come on Saturday. Teachers get to see the kids in a different light and get a new appreciation of them."

"It can be challenging for teachers to come up with ideas, especially with busy schedules, but they somehow find a way," says Kessler. "It's also an opportunity for teachers, as well as students, to break out of their routines. They can try teaching something outside their normal range. It could be arts and crafts, or science. One teacher is planning a service project."

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*"We encourage students to explore their interests and make new friends"*

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## Kilmer Elementary School

# Encouraging Family Reading

“We like to encourage families to read together because we know kids read better as books become a regular part of their life,” says Kilmer Principal Kim Zinman. That is the focus of Kilmer’s Family Reading Night. “As I walked around, I saw a lot of reading together, and a lot of great discussion and interaction.”

Families not only got to read books, they got to make kits the school provided. “Every family made a book, or took the kit with them. These books about families become treasures,” says Zinman. “The books could be any number of words in any language. Parents and kids interacted to create something they can go back and read over and over again.” For many students, the highlight of the

evening was a chance to read to a dog. Volunteers brought two therapy dogs. “This encourages kids to read in an environment where they don’t feel uncomfortable or self-conscious or inhibited,” explains Zinman. “Dogs don’t correct or interrupt you. They just listen. The kids were very serious when choosing which book to read to the dogs.”

At 7:45, Zinman gathered all the kids together in the media center’s warm and inviting reading pit and read books to them. One of her favorites is *The Principal from the Black Lagoon*.

“As they were leaving, each student got to take a free beanie baby we had left over from a reading promotion. Of course, we encouraged them to read to their beanie babies.”

## London Middle School

# Snowflake Includes Rachel’s Challenge

London Middle School has been presenting a smart choices program called Snowflake on Saturday for six years. “This year we decided to do it on a school day so all students could participate,” says London Principal Jim Parker.

It’s a program that a lot of schools use to help students build self esteem and make healthy decisions on issues including drugs and alcohol. “We talk about the kinds of decisions they need to make and what kind of school we want to have,” Parker says.

This year the program also included a presentation on Rachel’s Challenge. Rachel Scott was a kind-hearted young girl and the first student killed in the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School.

“Her family has taken it upon themselves to spread her word – that random acts of

kindness can start a chain reaction,” Parker explains. “We all listened closely to the presenter who emphasized eliminating prejudice and daring to dream. Every student signed a banner accepting Rachel’s Challenge. It is hanging where students can see it the moment they walk into our school, and it reminds them.”

The Lightening Club is now doing fund raisers and activities to help students pass on the chain reaction. “Teachers did activities before hand and are following up with discussions,” Parker says. “Teachers are talking about Rachel’s Challenge and so are students. The whole school has become more aware. The presentation has given kids strategies and languages to use in difficult situations. We want to maintain that momentum.”

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*“We talk about the kinds of decisions they need to make and what kind of school we want to have,”*

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## Longfellow Elementary School

# Family Reading Night

Longfellow Elementary School fills with parents for open houses and concerts, which come to school without ever seeing the library. That changed when around 100 families turned out for two Family Reading Nights in November during National Family Reading Week.

“We opened our library and filled it with literature activities,” said Dyanne Wallner, Library Media Center Director.

Families began by treating their own name as if it were the title of a fiction book and finding where they would be located on the shelf. Students shared authors they have been studying with their parents and looked them up to demonstrate how they use computer skills to find the books they want.

Parents were invited to name their own childhood favorites and see if they could find them. Many succeeded. “Of course parents often remember the classics like

*Curious George,”* Wallner said.

A grandmother found her favorite, *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes, about a Polish-American girl who overcomes prejudice. “Her granddaughter checked it out that night,” said Wallner.

Parents also got a chance to see the Birthday Book Cart where students can donate a book to the library with the donor’s name in the front of the book.

The library is a place to find out things we don’t know, so families played a game among themselves to see who could find information soonest in the almanac, like how many feet tall is the highest waterfall.

“We’ll definitely have more Family Reading Nights,” Wallner said, “and we’ll add more activities.”







## Poe Elementary School

# Service over Self

At Poe Elementary the school theme is: Make a difference for myself and make a difference for others. “We want our students to learn how to give back to their community,” says Principal Pam Lindberg, “that includes the school community, the local community and our world community.”

One of the ways Poe students express that theme is through Service over Self. Organized by teachers at Poe, students can work with other service organizations in a partnership of giving back.

Last year students raised funds to add an extra piece of climbing equipment to the school’s playground makeover. They collected Poe Pennies from their fellow students totaling several hundred dollars, which they presented to the PTO.

With the Fraternal Order of Police, students promoted a campaign to provide infant seats

at Northwest Community Hospital for new parents who can’t afford one. “The students did a poster campaign in local businesses to collect Poe Pennies,” says Lindberg. “We contributed about \$1,200 for infant seats.”

This year Service over Self raised funds during Valentines time by selling heart-shaped erasers instead of candy-grams and delivering them to purchasers’ friends and favorite teachers. They also collected school supplies, shoes and hard candies from their fellow students to be sent to needy students in an Afghanistan refuge camp.

Lindberg says they are now considering raising funds for Heifer International, an organization that provides assistance to small farmers around the world. “We have about 33 different languages here at Poe,” says Lindberg. “This would be a chance to teach international culture.”

Frost and Poe students perform for the Board of Education in anticipation of their performance at a nursing home



*“We want our students to learn how to give back to their communit,”*

## Twain Elementary

# Mighty Math Minds

Mighty Math Minds is in its second year at Twain Elementary. Meeting twice a week from 3:30 to 5 p.m., this program is offered to third, fourth and fifth graders who can benefit from additional math support.

“The kids are eager to be here,” says Twain Principal Gwen Gage. “They enjoy the individual attention.” Up to 100 students participate, so to keep groups small, Twain teachers offer Mighty Math in six different sessions, two at each grade level, from December through March.

Mighty Math Minds doesn’t use the students’ regular math books. It’s a supplemental course that focuses on teaching math strategies.

“We are excited about the program,” Gage says. “We have new materials this year. We are testing the students before they begin and at the

end of the program, so we will be able to see how they benefit from these materials.”

This year the program has added a parent-education component. Parents are invited to attend two sessions to learn about the curriculum, then take away math activities they can do with their children at home.

Math book bags, which students check out, reinforce the school/home connection. Each bag contains literature with a math focus, as well as a math game. Parents sign off as they read the books together and play the games while they have the bags at home.

Using a special District 21 grant, this after-school program also offers bus transportation to participants. “Families are comfortable with the program because they know their kids can get home,” says Gage.







(top) Riley 2nd grade students explain the Independent Investigation Method to the Board of Education

(bottom) Student work together in the Riley Homework Club

## Riley Elementary School

# Homework Club

*“It’s nice for the kids. Some really bond if they are assigned one on one, and it provides our kids with really good role models,”*

Homework Club provides a supportive environment for Riley Elementary students to complete their assignments. About 70 students, or 25% of the students, participate in the after-school program on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Last year when the program was started, about 15% attended. “We’ve really seen it bloom,” says Riley Principal Carrie McCulley. “Last year we tracked certain students, and we saw 50% of those kids went from below grade level to meeting standards.”

The program’s goal is to increase understanding of school material, build good study habits and time management skills. “Students often work with their classmates, they don’t lose the momentum of what they were working on in class,” McCulley says. “All of our

grade level teachers send extra practice worksheets in math and reading, so even if kids don’t have homework that night, we have activities they can work on at their grade level.” The program also includes structured group and one-on-one tutoring with about 25 high school volunteers from area schools. “It’s nice for the kids. Some really bond if they are assigned one on one, and it provides our kids with really good role models,” says McCulley. Homework Club is held in the LMC, where the kids have access to computers, library books and other resources. “We have tables and also a section that’s divided into carpeted risers for doing RAH (Reading at Home),” McCulley says. “We also have a classroom attached to the LMC, and some of the tutors work with small groups in there.”





## Tarkington Elementary School

# Guided Reading Focuses on Each Student

Guided Reading allows every student at Tarkington School to read material targeted to their level. “Readers have to read at their level to be successful,” says Tarkington Principal Dr. Joe Arduino. “By assessing students while they are doing guided reading, teachers can see how they are doing on the spot and respond instantly with reading that is more or less challenging.”

Traditionally a teacher teaches at one level, which misses students above or below that level. “The teachers are thrilled,” says Dr. Arduino, “because they can address the reading levels of all their students. Each classroom is now divided into three or four reading groups.”

Guided Reading is now school-wide, but it looks different in every classroom. The teacher can go over a skill such as summarizing with one group, while the other students are working on

their own skill with activities like writers’ workshop.

“We have done staff development on guided reading, and most of our teachers have visited other classes in our district and beyond to see how it works,” Dr. Arduino says. “Our learning coach has provided materials to support the teachers as well.”

Studies have shown that students using this method improve their reading scores. Student success is monitored through the district-wide MAP scores from 2nd and 5th graders in the spring and fall, and also by tracking students as they move through the levels.

“I like that we can monitor progress,” says Dr. Arduino. “It helps teachers know their students better, and it’s a proven approach. We are using something that works.”

## Whitman Elementary School

# Helping Hands Manos Amigas

Helping Hands Manos Amigas, the new bilingual service club at Whitman Elementary School has attracted so many members that the club had to be divided into five groups, each meeting five weeks. “Five weeks is a good amount of time,” says club co-founder Rachel Berkson, “and this way we can accommodate everyone.”

“Service learning seemed like a great opportunity to get bilingual and mono-lingual students interacting in a positive way,” says co-founder Erin Schlenger. “We do all activities in both English and Spanish. We usually speak first in Spanish, and we are noticing that the monolingual kids are starting to understand.”

The club also brings students of different ages together. “It’s interesting to watch a 1st grade bilingual student help a 5th grade mono-lingual student understand Spanish,” says Schlenger.

Club activities are based on student suggestions. “It’s child centered,” says Berkson. “We just give them the tools. They have made get-well cards for people who visit the nurse’s office and written letters to soldiers in Iraq. One second-grader said she was going to organize a game at recess so that everyone could play together.”

Helping Hands Manos Amigas meets once a week during lunch hour, but the kids are now taking service journals home with them. “They share what they are doing outside school with the rest of the club. It’s an on-going process for them,” says Berkson.

“They are branching out to help the community at large,” says Whitman Principal Ralph Cook, “which is a goal here at Whitman.”

The District 21 Celebrate Excellence Honorees

## Celebrating Excellence

District 21 salutes the hard work and efforts of our teachers. In selecting candidates to nominate for Celebrating Excellence, we gather feedback from all staff members to highlight members of the District Team who represent the values of our Professional Learning Communities. Twice each year the principals nominate a staff member or team to be recognized at a Board meeting, given a pin of excellence and acknowledged at their school’s staff meeting.

### December 2007 Awards:

**Cooper Middle School:**  
Teresa Daleske, Special Education Teacher

**Field Elementary School:**  
4th Grade Team: Amy Kuras, Char McLennan, Jane Rideout, Ellen Swartz

**Frost Elementary School:**  
2nd Grade Team: Susan Chmiel, Debbie Dingboom, Lynda Riggs

**Holmes Middle School:**  
Christine Wolff, 7th Grade LA & Reading Teacher

**Kilmer Elementary School:**  
Christine Happ, Music Teacher

**London Middle School:**  
7th Grade Team: Ali Friedman, Ellen Razzoog, Chris Schieffer

**Longfellow Elementary School:**  
Laura Werneske, 1st Grade Teacher

**Poe Elementary School:**  
Jaehee Pak, Grade 2 & 3 ESL Teacher

**Riley Elementary School:**  
1st Grade Team/Support Team: Paris Abel, Winnie Baik, Bev Barton, Jeri-Lynn Koehler

**Tarkington Elementary School:**  
Kathy Switzer, LMC Director

**Twain Elementary School:**  
Joyce Abel, 2nd Grade Teacher

**Whitman Elementary School:**  
Nancy Zurek, 3rd Grade Bilingual Teacher



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Arlen S. Gould, *Vice President*  
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Staci Allan  
Kathy Edmonds  
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Pat McAndrews, *Asst. Supt./Human Resources*  
Rosemarie Meyer, *Asst. Supt./Bilingual & ESL Programs*  
Dr. Candace Thompson, *Asst. Supt./Support Services*  
Daniel Schuler, *Asst. Supt./Planning*

**Dist. 21 Access Information**

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Cooper Middle School  
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Twain's kindergarten students attend a Board of Education meeting

## District Misrepresented by Federal Test Requirements

*District 21 is being adversely affected by a failed negotiation between the U.S. Department of Education and the Illinois State Board of Education.*

*AYP determinations during these years will be misleading and not reflective of the excellent instruction the teachers are providing to the students or of the students' achievement.*

District 21 is being adversely affected by a failed negotiation between the U.S. Department of Education and the Illinois State Board of Education. In the past, when most 3rd through 8th graders took the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind law, English Language Learners have instead taken the Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE).

Last October 30, as a result of this failed negotiations, the federal government said that IMAGE can no longer be used, and that all students must be tested by ISAT March 3 through 13. This will not be a fair test of the English Language Learners achievement in reading, math and science; it will only reflect their English proficiency. This is not fair to the students, their teachers or our District.

ISAT is an invalid testing instrument for students who are English Language Learners and it could result in the District not meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) standards at the majority of its schools. "This is not just an issue for District 21," says Rosemarie Meyer, Assistant Superintendent for Bilingual and ESL Programs. "Districts across the state are going to experience the same reality. Chicago's Mayor Daley has spoken out, and our senators and congressmen have written letters to the U.S. Department of Education. District 21 has been active in lobbying legislators to become involved in this issue. During the

February District 21 Board of Education meeting, Dr. Mical and the school board discussed this issue at length. Their concerns centered on both the fact that this test will not fairly measure the students' learning and that it could be emotionally damaging to the children. The Board's concern was so great that they considered not administering the test to the English Language Learners in the district."

District 21 conducts its own assessment with MAP and other tests each year to monitor student achievement. ACCESS is also administered to the students in the bilingual and ESL programs to monitor acquisition of English. The district has met all the state and federal requirements to demonstrate that our students are gaining proficiency in English at the proper rate. "We are one of the few districts in the state who has met that target all the years it has been required," Meyer says.

In the long term, the state is working on a new assessment tool for English Language Learners, but it appears that will not be available until at least 2010. "We are going to have at least two years of testing that doesn't accurately reflect the achievement of many District 21 students," Meyers predicts. "Therefore, it's important for us to keep in mind that AYP determinations during these years will be misleading and not reflective of the excellent instruction the teachers are providing to the students or of the students' achievement."