



# District 126 News

Alsip Hazelgreen and Oak Lawn  
School District 126  
11900 South Kostner  
Alsip, IL 60803  
[www.dist126.org](http://www.dist126.org)

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Craig Gwaltney, Superintendent of Schools

Winter 2020

## An Interview with Chief of Maintenance, Joann Potsic as she retires

Student representatives from Buzzin' at the Green, the Hazelgreen newspaper club, had the privilege of meeting with and interviewing Mrs. Joann Potsic in recognition of her upcoming retirement. Sixth graders Trinity G. and Crystal P. collaborated in asking Mrs. Potsic questions regarding her career with the district and her plans for retirement. The time spent here was immensely valuable.

Mrs. Potsic started her career, back in 1999, as a part-time cook at Stony Creek School while her own kids were students in the district. She described how she was hired on as part of the custodial staff and worked nights at Prairie Junior High and then worked days at Lane Elementary, before being transferred to the maintenance department. This unexpected world wind grew into the amazing opportunity to take over the position as Head of Maintenance, which she held for the last nine years. When asked what her greatest success was during her work history, Mrs. Potsic described her entire experience to these young girls, future leaders themselves. She feels very fortunate to have had this opportunity to grow within the district and community that she lives in. As she has made career strides, she is also watching her own grandchildren thrive in the district that she has worked so hard for. Mrs. Potsic believes that while students have growth opportunities in District 126, as an adult she has been fortunate to have grown within the district as well. Skills acquired while on the job include management development, managing contractors and construction projects, and learning how to drive the plow truck. Her professional strengths include communication and prioritization of building and staff needs, keeping safety a top priority. Challenges in this position have included major construction projects while preparing buildings for each new school year. When hiring employees, Mrs. Potsic looks for people who are flexible because what needs to be done can shift gears at any given moment. It is also important that they care about the school and are helpful. Seeing all the students and staff are the best parts about her job, describes Mrs. Potsic. The staff is wonderful and treats each other with a lot of respect. This has been more than just a job to her and it is very important to her that the district is as strong as it is, being so invested in the community. Even though Mrs. Potsic is retiring, it is important to her that people know just how much she cares and hopes that things continue to progress for the district, as she has been so proud to see over her years here. Advice to her successor is this--continue to strive and keep the buildings safe and clean for students and staff. Continue to hold high the standards and expectations set in place. Mrs. Potsic explains that her personal strengths are similar to her professional ones. She also shared that her close relationship with her family is her strength. She also looks forward to spending even more time with them in her retirement. In addition to bonus family time, Mrs. Potsic intends to get back to spending time on her hobbies, pottery and painting. When she was asked what she thought the district would miss the most about her she stated that she hoped we wouldn't realize she was gone and that the transition would be smooth.

Congratulations on your Retirement Joann!



## **Column: Bill Smith founded spelling bees and loved learning. ‘He was a walking encyclopedia before Google.’ (By Ted Slowik Daily Southtown)**

Bill Smith was so knowledgeable, a former colleague once dreamed that when he asked his phone a question, it answered in Smith’s voice. “He was like Siri,” Apple’s virtual assistant, said his daughter, Lisa Smith. “He knew everything about everything.”



Smith, a longtime resident of Orland Park, passed away on November 22, 2020 . He was 92.

He was superintendent for 31 years of Alsip-Hazelgreen-Oak Lawn Elementary District 126. He founded the Orland Park Spelling Bee, an all-ages event that marked its 41st anniversary in 2019.

Smith’s family members, friends and former colleagues said he was a lifelong learner who inspired others with his infectious passion for education and thirst for knowledge. His praise helped build confidence of children and adults alike. “His letters are legendary,” said Craig Gwaltney, who has been District 126 superintendent since 2010. Smith led the district from 1959 until 1990. Smith sent Gwaltney a handwritten letter before the start of the school year, expressing confidence in his ability to lead during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I have the letter on my bulletin board,” Gwaltney said. “He was always positive and very proud of the work being done in the district.” Smith told Gwaltney it was important for a superintendent to maintain good working relationships with school board members and the community. Smith would share his expertise and provide updates about his life in an annual Christmas letter to family and friends. “We all looked forward to it,” Gwaltney said. Readers of his missives enjoyed the content once they deciphered the messages, his daughter said. “His letters were a challenge to read because of his handwriting,” she said.

Family members wrote in an obituary that Smith was born in Chicago and had a younger sister and a younger brother who preceded him in death. He enjoyed the outdoors as a child and graduated from Calumet High School. He delivered newspapers, worked on a dairy farm and in a Continental Can Company factory, among other jobs. “He boasted he never missed a day of work and never turned down an hour of overtime,” family members wrote. He earned a bachelor’s degree at Western State Teachers College, now Western Michigan University, and a master’s degree in education from the University of Michigan. He served 21 months in the U.S. Army during the Korean War and helped build airfields with the Army Corps of Engineers, his daughters said. He spent his entire professional career in District 126, as an eighth grade teacher at Lane School and as principal before his 31-year tenure as superintendent. While living in Chicago’s Morgan Park neighborhood, he began dating Rita Bialecke, a Chicago Public Schools teacher. “Nine of their first 10 dates were Blackhawks games and the other was a ballet, showing Bill’s wide range of interests,” family members wrote in the obituary. They married and settled in Oak Lawn. Lisa Smith said she and her two sisters, twins Kristine Freeman and Kathleen Sullivan, compiled the obituary with help from a nephew. “It was a group effort,” she said. Smith said her parents were married for 30 years, from 1960 until their mother’s death in 1990. In 1976, Bill Smith helped celebrate the nation’s bicentennial by organizing an all-ages spelling bee at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Oak Lawn. The family moved to Orland Park, where he launched the first event in 1978. Smith told reporters over the years that the “Little House on the Prairie” book series by Laura Ingalls Wilder inspired him to hold spelling bees. He enjoyed reading the books with his three daughters when the series was developed into a popular TV show during the 1970s. The village of Orland Park has co-sponsored the annual event and elected officials have been judges. “He was a fine man who contributed a lot to the community,” Orland Park Mayor Keith Pekau said. Pekau, an arborist, said he met Smith years ago when Smith was a customer of Pekau’s landscaping and tree care business. “He was as passionate about caring for his spruce trees as he was everything else,” Pekau said. “He was interested in everything and we had many good conversations over the years. “Bill lived in a perpetual state of hope,” said the Rev. Yvette Marie Eber, pastor of the Orland Park congregation. “He brought the community together. “When the Smith girls were young the family took vacations to nearly all 50 states and abroad. Smith taught them to read maps and made sure they knew all the state capitals. He could freehand draw an outline of the United States with all the state borders, his daughters said Tuesday during a conference call.

In retirement, he would incorporate geography, history and other lessons into “Map Man” presentations at schools, libraries, nursing homes and even prisons, his daughters said.

“He was a walking encyclopedia before Google,” Lisa Smith said.

He sang with choirs, enjoyed bowling and traveling in search of adventures, according to his obituary. Rest in peace, Dr. Smith. You will be missed.

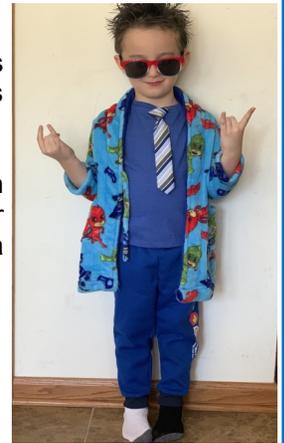
## District 126 EC Center

World Kindness Day is celebrated on November 13, 2020.



The Preschool Team decided to turn it into a whole week of activities focused on the importance of being kind to others. Each day, preschoolers had a theme for dressing up on our remote learning classes such as Superhero/Super Helper Day, Wear Red for Kindness and Crazy For Kindness. We also presented a "Kindness Challenge" to our students such as helping around the house, making a card for someone you care about or paying people a compliment. Teachers read books to the students with a focus on kindness and how to "fill up" others by our words and actions.

The preschoolers (and their families) loved Kindness Week!



## Lane Kindergarten Celebrates 50 Days of Learning!

The Lane Kindergarteners celebrated the 50th day of school with a virtual 50's themed day. Our wonderful Kindergarten Lions dressed in their best 50's gear, virtually drank root beer floats in our soda shop, sang oldies but goodies and practiced counting to 50.

The students also enjoyed viewing toys, cars, games, and apparel from the 1950's.

The day ended with a Virtual Sock Hop and a visit from Elvis himself!

We are very proud of all the learning and growth that our students have demonstrated in the first fifty days of school!



## Hazelgreen Physical Education Live Cooking Demonstration

This fall our physical education teacher coordinated a live cooking demonstration with Chef James Martin. James has worked at several Michelin Star restaurants and is in the process of opening his own restaurant in Lincoln Park. Mr. Floyd was connected with Chef Martin through his work as a fellow with a nutritional education organization called Pilot Light.

To begin the event, each student and their families were provided ingredients to make pancakes with roasted apples. The event capped off a three part learning series where students learned about the importance of breakfast, the benefits of apples, the seasonality of food, and proper nutrition. Students were also provided insight into what it was like to work at a Michelin Star restaurant as well as the process of opening your own business.

Thank you to Ms. Humphrey-Mason, our families, students, and Pilot Light for your support!

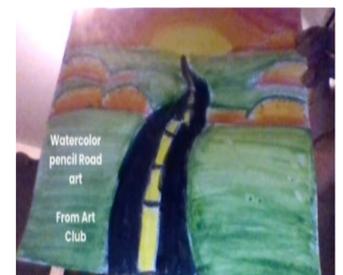


## Virtual Art Club at Stony Creek School

Intermediate students had the opportunity to sign up for Art Club as a way to learn new techniques and skills in Art outside of the school day. 19 students joined this new club with Mrs. Mueller, Stony Creek's Art Teacher. Students have been learning new techniques and skills while experimenting with shading, watercolors, origami, and clay.

Art Club meets twice a week after school with Mrs. Mueller. Mrs. Mueller provides live lessons to help enhance and sharpen some of our students' more artistic talents.

We are pleased to offer this engaging opportunity to so many of our student artists.



### Prairie Junior High—Red Ribbon Week

Students and staff at Prairie Junior High did not let Remote Learning get in the way of celebrating Red Ribbon Week!

The last week of October is traditionally set aside as a week for many schools and organizations to promote a healthy drug and alcohol free lifestyle. In addition, it is a time to celebrate student differences and build a bully-free environment. Although they did not meet in person, PJH Hawks participated in a 'Zoom' spirit week that included Pajama Day, Wear Red Day, and others. A lucky student even received a Zoom visit from our very own mascot, PJH Hawk!

There was also a video shared with students to encourage them to find their 'natural high' - a passion that can help them not only stay focused in school and in life, but also encourage them to make good drug and alcohol free choices.



### Preschool Learning Bags Support Remote Learning

We all know how challenging remote learning can be for our students and their families.



For preschool, it can be really challenging given their attention spans and making their learning meaningful at this age, over a computer. Our staff, the families and our students have really risen to the challenge and made the best of their experience. To support at home learning, the preschool team put together and sent home several learning bags with developmentally appropriate materials, visuals for the students, created videos for parents to understand how to use the materials and send out daily reminders with pictures of the supplies the students will need to be ready to learn. Preschool sessions over Zoom are still incorporating hands on learning, read alouds, movement and exposure to early academic skills.

We are so proud of our preschoolers and their families for all of their hard work during this time!



### Lane Lions are Roaring with GRATITUDE!

Although we can't be together in person, the Lane Lions are grateful for so many things.

We wanted to show our gratitude so every student and staff member created a Gratitude Paw. Each paw was printed on a poster and was decorated with drawings, photographs, and words to symbolize everything we are thankful for during these challenging times.



The Lane teachers and staff displayed their Gratitude Paws in the Media Center windows for all to see. Families were asked to display their paws on the windows of their homes.

When you drive around the Alsip neighborhood, look for all of the signs of "Pawsitivity" and gratitude.



### Honoring our Veterans at Stony Creek

Although virtual, we did not want to miss an opportunity to honor our local Veterans for Veteran's Day. Our Specials teachers coordinated with staff different opportunities for students to learn about the importance of Veteran's Day. Students completed military type workouts, sang songs about our country and drew pictures to honor and thank those who have served our country. Students highlighted family members who currently do or have served in the military. Students were so proud to talk about their families and showcase their accomplishments. It was great to learn more about our Stony Creek families through this virtual assembly!



We are grateful for all of our Veterans, but especially those who have shared their families with us.

[Virtual Veteran's Day Assembly Stony Creek 2020](#)

### Red Ribbon Week at Hazelgreen

Red Ribbon week at Hazelgreen was October 24-21, 2020. Like in years past, we celebrated Red Ribbon Week with activities that focus on living a drug free life.

This year, we had a poster contest for our primary and intermediate students. The winners received a drug prevention goody bag and a gift card.

Congratulations to P. Cahill, the primary winner and J. Atko the intermediate winner. All students that submitted a poster received a special drug prevention gift. Also, thank you to our PFO for the fancy, Red Ribbon Week fence cups.



## Life Science at Prairie Junior High

The Science department at Prairie Junior High is already off to an exciting school year!

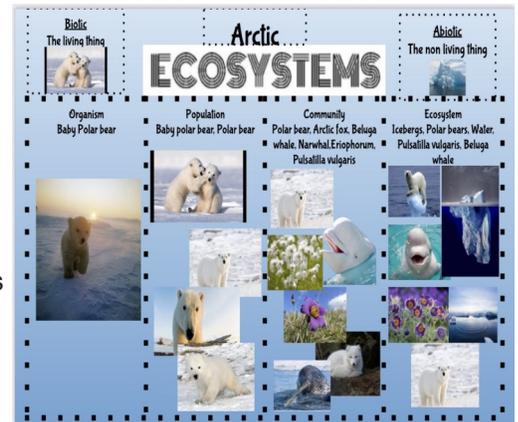
Both 7th and 8th grade students began the year learning where they get their good looks!

During the genetics unit students learned how offspring inherit their traits from their parents and grandparents. The students used their creativity to create fictional scenarios and to invent parent traits and genotypes. The students displayed their completed Punnett Square and probable offspring using Google Drawing.

Continuing our life science unit, the students have been exploring the science of ecology and the relationships between living and non-living things. Through a series of Google Slides, Google Drawings, videos, live and virtual labs and other activities, the students have learned the key vocabulary and concepts about the levels of organization and relationships between living things.

Currently, students are studying the effects that non-living (abiotic) factors can have on living (biotic) factors in an ecosystem. Coming up, we will continue to dive deeper into ecology as we look at the flow of energy through an ecosystem and invasive species using a series of stations, interactive lessons, and virtual labs.

We are very proud of how far the students have come in this unit. Their use of vocabulary and application to real-life situations impress us on a daily basis!



## District 126 School

### District 126 Schools

Lane School  
4600 West 123rd Street  
Alsip, IL 60803  
(708) 371-0720  
Patti Egan, Principal

Hazeltree School  
11751 South Lawler  
Alsip, IL 60803  
(708) 371-5351  
Leah Humphrey-Mason  
Principal

Stony Creek School  
11700 South Kolin  
Alsip, IL 60803  
(708) 371-0220  
Nicole Leggett Principal  
Jennifer Saturnus,  
Asst. Principal

Prairie Junior High  
11910 South Kostner  
Alsip, IL 60803  
(708) 371-3080  
Maureen Paulmeyer,  
Principal  
Brian Nievera, Asst. Principal

Dist.126 Early Childhood Center  
12250 S. Orchard Ave  
Alsip, IL 60803  
(708) 631-0490  
Gina Fiske,  
Student Support Coordinator

## District 126 Administration

Craig Gwaltney, Superintendent  
Steve Gress, Assistant Superintendent  
Lori Connolly, Director of Teacher and Learning  
Robert Condon, Director of Special Education  
Gina Fiske, Student Support Coordinator  
Claudia Peralta, Bilingual Coordinator

## District 126 School Board

Marigrace Sinnott-Snooks, President  
Joe LaChica, Vice President  
Lori Pierce, Secretary  
Kim Powers, Member  
Harry Tannehill, Member  
Donna Waldrom, Member  
Therese Zaker, Member

## Don't Forget to Check the Virtual Backpack!



Check out our website and you will see a link to the District 126 Virtual Backpack! Here we will be posting all approved flyers from District 218 high schools, as well as other informational items from local sports teams and local governmental/educational entities.

## We've got an App for that!



District 126 has an app that you can download to your smartphone. This app will enable you to access current school and district news, school calendars, breakfast and lunch menus, the staff directory, school sports information and other useful information. Search for District 126 on either the Apple App Store or Google Play to download our app!

## Dates to Remember

December 23 through January 5th—Winter Break  
January 6—Remote Learning continues  
January 14th—School Board Meeting.  
January 18th—No School—Martin Luther King Jr. Day  
February 15th—No School President's Day