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District 219 announces budget cuts

w Zoe Ljubic
Editor in Chief

At their monthly faculty meeting in March, Niles West teachers and support staff listened as Superintendent Nanciann Gatta delivered some sobering news. Due to the poor economy, Niles Township District 219 plans to close three resource centers and to reduce the support staff workforce by 14 employees.

According to Gatta, the district is maintaining stable finances by proposing an initiative to close the Math and Science Resource Center (MSRC) at both Niles North and West and the English and Social Studies Resource Center at North. In addition, seven employees at each school will be laid off.

At the budget meeting, which Gatta promises will be an annual event, she said, "It is important for the [school] community to understand the situation."

As Gatta explained the district's predicament, District 219 funding comes primarily from property taxes.

"Less than 20 percent of the total money we need for the district comes from the state and federal government," Gatta said. "We rely on the taxpayers to give us the money we need."

By law, increased tax revenues from year to year are determined by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), Gatta said. According to Gatta, in 2008-09, the CPI was the highest it had been in 15 years (4.1 percent). Because of the plummeting economy, next year's CPI will be the lowest it has ever been (0.1 percent).

"[The lower] CPI means we can get only 0.1 percent of additional money over [what was apportioned in 2008-09]. It takes approximately 120 million dollars to run [the district]," Gatta said. "If our budget is \$120 million, and the CPI is 0.1 percent, we can only receive an additional \$120,000."

Expressed in dollars, District 219 received an additional \$4.8 million in the 2008-09 school year. For the 2009-10 academic calendar, the district is only expecting \$120,000.

Because of increases in salary and benefits negotiated in the 2004 collective bargaining agreement and in the 2008 extension, the district will need to dip into its reserves to meet expenses, Gatta said.

"From year to year, teachers get raises because they are part of the union, because the union collectively bargains. The Board [of Education] has already agreed to give the teachers five percent raises for the next three years. Even though the economy is bad, the teachers are going to be just fine," Gatta said. "In addition, every year the price of everything goes up—the bus company wants more money to take the kids; the security company wants more money to pay the staff." Gatta added. "Health insurance goes up [every year] as well."

Out of the \$120 million, 71 percent of the budget is spent on staff salaries, and the remaining 29 percent is spent on buildings and grounds, maintenance and supplies. Gatta said that cost increases have induced the district to reconsider the resources available to students in each school and the personnel to provide such resources.

"We are not going to get as much money as were are used to due to the economy. Luckily, the district is in a good financial position because the Board of Education has been very wise and has saved for a rainy day," Gatta said. "We have a savings account, and we are really lucky."

Beginning this year, District 219's expenses will exceed its incoming revenue. This is going to cause the district to "dig into [its] savings accounts," Gatta said.

"Many districts do not plan for the future, but we are going to be just fine. However, as the leader of the district, I need to be proactive and keep us just fine. I do not know how long this economy will stay this way. We have the savings account to rely on for the money we are not getting. Could I rely totally on the savings accounts? Yes. Would that be a good idea? The answer to that is no," Gatta said.

Gatta realizes that not everyone agrees with the district's

decisions.

"The argument could be made, and teachers will make it. [The teachers] will say that you do not need to cut back on anything because you have money in the bank, but I do not think anyone would run his/her life like that. While you are using the money in the bank, you also need to cut back a little bit to offset some of that money," Gatta said. "We are doing that by looking at the programs and looking at the places in the building that maybe are not needed as much anymore because times have changed. Technology has changed dramatically in the last ten years, and these are the things I look at when the cuts are made."

Gatta said that she would make her final decisions in the best interest of the students.



Students utilize the math and science resource center to complete homework and meet with their teachers. Photo by Zoe Ljubic

"I have to make judgments on what the students need and what we need to run this operation," the Superintendent added. "Nothing has changed with regard to personnel, but so much has happened with technology. We have created new places and opportunities that make us think about what makes those places still operational. I love the resource centers, but they existed when there was no Literacy Center. Not only do we have a new bright cheery place, we have technology right in the center hub of the school with certified teachers and student tutors."

The new science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) center will replace the MSRC next fall. According to Gatta, there will also be a place for students to meet their teachers.

"There will be a place for students to meet with their teacher, but if students are going to do their homework, I want them down in the Lit Center. I would not say we are eliminating the resource centers, but relocating them to the Lit Center," Gatta said.

President of the North Suburban Teachers Union and English teacher at North Dan Montgomery disagreed.

"When we planned the Point (North's Literacy Center) no one ever said, 'And by the way this means we are closing the resource centers.' What happens in resource rooms is different than what happens in the Point or the Lit Center," Montgomery said. "The resource centers provide students with the opportunity to sit down with their own teachers. We have argued that the resource rooms should not be closed, but even if the district closes them, [that] does not entail all these big layoffs. The two do not go together, and I do not see the logic."

Despite Montgomery's concern, Gatta is sure that this is only the beginning of updating the district's resources to accommodate students.

"We know that kids want an environment where they can go to and collaborate with their classmates. We also want to create many hot spots around the school where students will be able to bring their laptops or mobile Internet devices and use them," Gatta said. "We are currently in the process of planning out places where we can put couches and tables and [places where] students can plug in—places where students can rethink things and adjust to what they need."

Montgomery cannot understand why the administration has felt it is necessary to lay off a number of support staff at District 219.

"I represent both the teachers and the support staff when I say that we understand that [the administration] has a plan to cut 14 support staff jobs and slash the hours and wages of about 10-15 support staff members. They also plan to rearrange a lot of other support staff. This will negatively affect 40 support staff members, which is 20 percent of all the support staff," Montgomery said. "We regard these as very huge cuts and reduction in wages and benefits. That is a big change, and we see this as a very important thing. Obviously, we have a very bad economy, however, Niles Township has wisely saved for a rainy day. It is not that rainy day yet."

Montgomery said that two years ago, the district ended its year with a budget surplus of \$10 million. Last year, that number rose to \$15 million. According to the union president, there is over \$38 million in the district's savings account.

"It would be one thing if they came to us and said we are broke, we are near broke or next year we will be struck. That is not the case. This district should tighten where they can, and we have said that for a while, but to cut services to students, which is what they are proposing, at a time when the district finances are good, I do not think that is defensible. I do not know how you can go to the taxpayers and say we are not cutting your taxes; we have an excess amount; we have a huge bank account and by the way, we are going to cut services to your kids. I do not think that is right, and I do not think they can justify it," Montgomery said.

According to Montgomery, when President Barack Obama issued the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) this past February, he

instructed Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to send a letter to each governor and school district nationwide, describing the four principles for using the stimulus money under the ARRA.

"The first principle is to spend the money quickly and use it to avert layoffs. The district is getting from a minimum of \$283,000 to as much as \$1.1 million, and they are to use that money to prevent layoffs. We are calling on them to follow what Congress and the Secretary of Education want and turn the economy around. It will be hard to accept that money and still lay off people," Montgomery said.

Community Relations Director Jim Szczepaniak provides a different perspective.

"It is a very good thing that we are now engaged in a long-term planning process, and we are sharing that information with all of our employees. One of [Gatta's] priorities is to make sure all of our teachers and all of our staff and faculty appreciate our financial situation and understand it for our own purposes—to be able to understand it so they can explain it to the community," Szczepaniak said. "In today's economy, everyone is concerned and taxpayers have questions about how their tax dollars are being spent. We are facing challenges too and we are trying to spend our money very wisely."

He applauded the budget plan, calling it the "first time we have had a formalized budget model. Now we are not only looking from the individual department but district wide so that we can make more informed decisions on how we spend our money," Szczepaniak said.

Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Paul O'Malley concurred.

"Obviously this is information that we researched; we extrapolated the data, and we took the teacher contract in consideration. It is our reorganization that outlines where the district projections are going with the future," O'Malley said. "You are forecasting the future; you are trying to do the best you can and maintain good fund balances."

For faculty and staff, however, the matter is more emotional and personal.

"I am saddened to what has had to happen. It not only affects the [staff who will be laid off], but their entire families," math teacher Evie Raffanti said.

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WESTWIRE



RIP Math Science Resource Center

Hillary Lindwall
News/Wire Editor

For many students the Math and Science Resource Center (MSRC) serves as an escape. For others, it serves as a mostly quiet place with a good atmosphere where students can easily get help from their math and science teachers. However, beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, the MSRC will no longer exist.

Although it will be sad to see our beloved resource center go, the change has been a long time coming. The MSRC and some of its surrounding rooms are being converted into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) research labs that will be used in specialized science courses beginning next year. Even though this new lab will serve as a great asset, students need a place such as the MSRC to help both their stress level and their mind expansion.

A resource room for science and math teachers to meet with their students will be attached to Literacy Center, but making teachers walk essentially across the entire building rather than across a hall is very inconvenient for the teacher and may be detrimental to the student. A student may miss out on an

Even though this new lab will serve as a great asset, students need a place such as the MSRC to help both their stress level and their mind expansion

opportunity to learn something because of this hike.

This problem compounds that of this year's prohibition that limits access of the computer lab to full classes, with individual students redirected to the Information Resource Center (IRC). If the IRC is filled or is hosting one of several programs it sponsors during the year, a student in need of a computer for all but the most basic applications limited options, among them the MSRC. With no computer lab, only four computers in the Literacy Center, limited, first-come-first-served access in the IRC and no MSRC next year, students will have nowhere else to turn. Even though mini-computers are available for students in the IRC and Oakton Lobby, these do not have a full range of applications.

Furthermore, with the conversion of the Oakton Lobby into a study hall, students already have lost an important sanctuary. The elimination of the MSRC, with its low-key atmosphere and the congenial supervision of Andrew Erickson, has become a replacement of sorts, and its closing will limit further the havens available to students who don't really fit into a specific place in high school. Although the student commons and Drop-In Center are designed to attract such students, the proximity of the commons to the cafeteria and its fishbowl-like glass walls make it a much less intimate spot, and many would rather keep to themselves rather than enter a group discussion in the Drop-In Center.

Obviously, it is very beneficial to have STEM labs for students—being technologically advanced should be one of the district's major goals. So, why can't the resource centers merely be relocated? According to District 219 administrators, part of the rationale behind the MSRC cuts at both North and West and the elimination of the English/Social Studies Resource Center at North is an effort to reduce the district's budget (see editor in chief Zoe Ljubic's front page article in this issue), reductions which seem unnecessary to some, including the unions that provide protection for school staff. The unions have proposed that the District 219 School Board use the money that was received from the recent economic stimulus package to prevent job cuts. Dave Dorl, President of the Niles Township Support Staff Union, Steve Grossman, President of the Niles Township Federation of Teachers, and Dan Montgomery, President of the North Suburban Teachers Union believe that job cuts "are not educationally sound" and that "they will negatively impact student learning." They also believe that "they are ill-timed and will cause severe economic hardship for the staff members involved." Obviously, eliminating the MSRC is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of budget.

The complete elimination of the MSRC seems unnecessary, cruel and unusual punishment for students and staff alike. A relocation of the entire MSRC system would be a better solution than the elimination of this vital educational resource.

National festival to be held at West

Helen Salamanca
Staff Writer

Niles West will host the annual Heritage Festival in the Robert L. Johnson auditorium on April 3-4.

The Heritage Festival is an annual music competition involving band, orchestra, choir, drumline and color guard students from all over the United States. The event will be sponsored by travel agencies that primarily arrange travel and accommodations for music competitions.

Band director William Koch is a major proponent of the event.

"I am looking forward to this year's Heritage Festival. It is more like an education to me, because I get to hear groups from all over the country. Each school has [its] own system and warm ups. Some of these bands and orchestras give me ideas of how I would like to help my band as well," Koch said.

The number of schools attending will determine whether the competition will last one day or two. During the practices,

judges will critique students. As the rest of the band and orchestra students perform in the auditorium, the marching bands will compete out on the fields. Once the competition is finished, the award ceremony will take place at Medieval Times theme restaurant in Hoffman Estates. "When we go out to Medieval Times for the ceremony, hundreds if not thousands of people attend," Koch said.

Bands from as far way as Barrow, AK, are scheduled to compete. "The festival is a great way of getting people to travel," Koch said.

Not only does West provide the facilities and equipment for the Heritage Festival, but a handful of West band members have volunteered to help direct other schools into the auditorium. They will also provide assistance in setting up stands and other equipment for the competition.

The festival carries an added benefit for West. "Hosting the Heritage Festival is also a fundraiser for us. It is a great endeavor because when we host these festivals we earn money from them. The fine arts department can then use that money to provide partial scholarships for our traveling expenses," Koch said. "This festival is another great way of helping out Niles West."



Spring choir concert to inspire audience

Morgan Quilici
Staff Writer

The Niles West Choir Department will hold its annual Spring Concert on April 16 at 7:30 p.m. in the Robert L. Johnson Auditorium.

The concert will include performances by the Master Singers, the Chamber Choir, the Women's Choir and the Men's Choir.

The Master Singers will perform "Domine, Ad Adjuvandum me Festina," by Il Padre G. B. Martini. The Chamber Choir will be performing "Psalm 23," by Z. Randall Stroope. The Women's Choir will perform "Weep No More," by David N. Childs and the Men's Choir will sing "The Noble Son," arranged by Audrey Snyder.

"The music this year is probably the most difficult we have done all year. All the music is very challenging and difficult but also very beautiful. All the music has very unique characteristics," choir teacher Amy Branahl said.

Junior Master Singer Sajni Ganger expressed enthusiasm with this year's music selection.

"The music this year is great. It gives us a good chance to invest in the songs and that makes it a lot of fun to sing them," Ganger said.

In addition to the West choirs, choral groups from Park View, Lincoln, Fairview, Lincoln Hall and Culver junior high schools will perform two songs each. For the grand finale, the West choirs and the junior high choirs will collaborate.

"This is the first time in a very long time that we have had all the [feeder] schools here for a performance with the high school," Branahl said.

The diversity of choral styles will be a plus, Branahl said.

"[The concert] has a nice variety so you are not going to be hear all of the same style of music. It also really charts the growth of all the ensembles from the beginning groups to the advanced groups," she said.

Branahl assured that concert goers will enjoy the



Master singers practice for their upcoming concert. Photo by Rexly Penafloida

program.

"I do not think this is a concert [at which] you can easily be bored," Branahl added. "I think the audience will appreciate the variety and also the fact that they will be entertained."

T-bay helps Dance Marathon raise money

Nikki George
Staff Writer

Niles West's Dance Marathon (DM) is currently amid its annual auction, which began Monday and will continue through today.

The auction, which is designed to raise money for Camp One Step at a Time, a facility for children with cancer, is being conducted differently than in years past.

Borrowing an idea from Niles North's DM organizers, for the past three years West sponsored Teacher Trax, an auction involving faculty members who compiled mix CDs of favorite music, often including bonus gifts, what student activities director Peter Geddeis termed "SWAG [sealed with a gift]." According to Geddeis, Teacher Trax had limitations, so the DM executive board decided on a new format, "T-bay, because students are more interested in it and can contribute more to charity," Geddeis stated.

Like its namesake, Ebay™, T-bay involves bidding on a variety of items offered by school staff.

"Teachers donate items for students to bid on [and the item goes] to the highest bidder," Geddeis said.

DM sponsor Jessica Fliman provided a list of items offered, including:

- Chicago Bears game tickets (math teacher Kate Buttiitta)
- the ultimate Evanston package, including dinner and a movie (English/reading director Sanlida Cheng)
- homemade lunches for a week (Literacy Center clerk Patricia Ference)
- an invitation to the summer wedding of English teacher Lia Gerambia
- a ride on the motorized "Spirit Scooter" (Principal Kaine Osburn)
- instruction on how to drive a stick shift (English teacher Sharon Swanson)

Students were able to bid on items all week at the table outside the student cafeteria and will continue to do so today.

The deadline for placing a bid is the end of the school day today.

Dodge ball contest run by student government

w. Hira Malik
Staff Writer

The annual student government sponsored dodge ball tournament will be held Friday, April 17, after school in the field house.

According to student government sponsors, science teacher Jessica Fliman, history teacher Matthew Wiemer and special education teacher P.J. Conklin, all the proceeds from the event will support this year's Dance Marathon charity, Camp One Step at a Time.

"Camp One Step at a Time is a summer camp for children with cancer and cancer survivors. Not only is Camp One Step at a Time run by volunteer summer camp counselors, but there are also many doctors and nurses on site that are also volunteers," Fliman said. "Each of the weeks at the summer camp costs about \$700 for one child, because all of the medicines and camp materials are really expensive. The really good thing about this camp is that if a family cannot afford [this camp], the camp does not turn the children away. [The camp] will pay for those children who cannot afford to attend."

The fact that this camp does not turn away children who cannot afford it really stands out to senior government member Janine Wilkin.

"The two-week camp experience is a way for the kids to feel like normal kids at a normal summer camp," Wilkin said.

The tournament will include teams from all facets of the school community.

"Last year, there were faculty teams, one administrative team and a bunch of student teams that played in the tournament," Wiemer said.

Wiemer believes that helping out Dance Marathon and the School Chest is something student government should always try to do.

"One of student government's big expenses is the senior send off, so as long as we have enough funds to cover our senior send off, we would like to give back as much as we can. I think [student government] would rather give money that we make

Senior student government vice president Lynn Choi agreed. "Student government hosts the dodge ball tournament almost every year. It is a fun and exciting way for students to get involved and support a great cause," Choi said. "The tournament helps Dance Marathon raise money. The total cost is \$50 for a 10-person team, which calculates as \$5 per person."

Senior student government president Nimra Elahi expressed her commitment to the project.

"It feels really amazing to be so connected to Dance Marathon. [Student government] represents the school. If our school is uniting to raise money for Camp One Step at a Time, it would only make sense to join in and make sure that [student government] is also raising money for a cause that our school wants [to support]," Elahi said.

The tournament is designed to give everyone a chance to succeed, according to Fliman.

"There are a bunch of teams that enter, and it is double elimination. So, even if you play one game and you lose, you are [placed in] the losing bracket. The winner is [placed in] the winning bracket. The [teams in both] brackets keep playing until there is a winner in each bracket. The winner will then compete against one another [for the championship]," Fliman said.

Student government remains active during the planning process and during the actual event.

"I will help with putting together the event, because not only [does student government] set up the field house, but referees the game," junior student government member Megumi Hoshi said. Student government looks forward to the event, according to Hoshi.

"This month, student government is asking students to create teams to play against each other," Hoshi added.



Faculty members prepare for last year's dodge ball tournament. Photo by Hillary Lindwall

in fundraisers away than to spend it on whatever we have for minimal costs," Wiemer said.

Students' works displayed in art showcases

w. Hira Malik
Staff Writer

The Skokie Public Library art show, the Lisa (Life Is Simply Art) show, Central Suburban League (CSL) art show and the Advanced Placement (AP) art show will all host their showcases through the month of April.

The Skokie Library art showcase began March 15 and will continue through April 19.

The Lisa showcase, sponsored by The Great Frame Up at the chain's Evanston location, began its exhibit March 31 and will continue April 14.

The CSL showcase began its art showcase April 2 and will continue until April 14 at the Highland Park Art Center.

The AP art showcase will be held at West, in the art gallery on April 23, at 6:30 p.m.

Submissions for each art showcase have been chosen by students and art teachers Barbara Wismer and John Zilewicz.

"[The Skokie Library show] is a group of 50 pieces of nice artwork from West and 50 pieces of nice work from North. [The

artwork is] chosen a team of students and teachers," Wismer said.

Sophomore Rocio Ruiz expressed her appreciation for being chosen for the Skokie Library show.

"I am really excited for my work to be displayed. My artwork took me about a month or so to complete, and I put a lot of effort into it," Ruiz said.

According to Wismer, the Lisa show is one of the most exciting exhibitions.

"The Lisa show is a really cool show, because we pick five different works of art from five different categories: photo, drawing, painting, graphic communication, two-dimensional and three-dimensional," Wismer said. "The show is juried by art teachers from different schools, and five are chosen to compete in the Best of the Best show in May."

Senior Lynn Choi was among those chosen for the Lisa show.

"I feel really excited to be chosen for the Lisa show because it gives me a chance to showcase my artwork to different schools. It is a really nice way to promote myself. The piece I chose for the Lisa show is my favorite and also part of my college portfolio."

This year will be the first year the CSL show will be held at

the Highland Park Art Center.

"CSL is held at the Highland Park Art Center this year. There are 15-20 surrounding high schools who submit about 40 two-dimensional works and 10 3-dimensional pieces of artwork. It is the best work that our students have created this school year," Wismer added.

Entertainment will liven up the mood at the CSL show, Wismer said.

"There will be some kind of music performance [at the CSL show]. Usually there is a band or school group which performs at the show," Wismer said.

The AP art show will have students from Zilewicz's art class in the art gallery displaying their best work.

"The AP art showcase is an evening for these students to discuss their work in AP Studio Art. They will either have a showcase throughout the hall where they can explain their work, or wall space in the art gallery. Because most of these students are seniors, it is a nice little senior send off," Zilewicz said.

The Skokie Library art showcase is located at 5215 Oakton St., the Lisa showcase is located at 2814 Central St. in Evanston and the CSL showcase is located at 1957 Sheridan Rd in Highland Park.

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The foreign language secretary Barbara Drachenberg agreed and said that "it is very difficult to find another job."

Executive secretary to the Assistant Principal of Operations Judy Wheatman also concurred and said that while she understands "both sides, but doing this during these rough economic times... you hate to see someone lose [his/her] job."

Although not privy to the machinations of the budget cuts, students lament the closing MSRC.

"You need a place where you can come to call your teachers other than the Lit Center, because sometimes your teacher cannot make it all the way down there," freshman Armon Saeedvafa said. "[The MSRC] is a nice place to be, and [MSRC clerk Andrew Erickson] is just great."

Freshman Patrick Melnick agreed.

"I always come here when I have study hall. I see my math and science teacher, and I love to talk to [Erickson]. The Lit Center is great, but it is not the same as when you see your own teacher in the MSRC," Melnick said. "You learn the best way by having your own teacher teach the material to you."

Junior Josh Einbinder also believes that the MSRC closing is not a good idea.

"[Many] people go [to the MSRC]. When I go there during

second period, it is so packed that [Erickson] actually has to turn people down," Einbinder said. "It doesn't make sense for the administration to say that the Lit Center is the same place. In the MSRC, you can call your teacher to come in, and (s)he know what you are learning because (s)he is your teacher. Unlike the Lit Center, there is no paperwork to go through in the MSRC. You just call your teacher, (s)he helps you and you are done."

Principal Kaine Osburn sympathizes but believes that the District 219 has done what is in its best interest for students and will continue to do so in the future.

"Although the financial situation is very stressful for everyone, including people in the district and community, I am confident that the decisions that will be made short term and in the long term will be better for the kids in the district," Osburn said. "I think that in the end, the way we use the resource center and deliver those kinds of services to kids will end up being delivered just as well or better than they are now. We are going to create a space for teachers to meet with their students in math and science, and we are going to create a opportunities in other areas for students who want to collaborate on course work. Kids will get the services they need."

Science teacher Martha Lietz believes that the closing of the MSRC will negatively impact math and science students and

teachers.

"I do not like the fact that [the MSRC] is closing because my students have always worked well in there. It is more difficult for them to work in groups in the Lit Center because that can be more disruptive to students in the Lit Center," Lietz said. "When my students are working together in the MSRC and I have a free period, I work in my office and [Erickson] will call me down when they need help. It is easy for me to walk on over to the MSRC and help them then go back to work in my office. It is not as easy for me to go down to the Lit Center."

Math teacher Robert Nortillo believes that the district should not take away the convenience of the MSRC; however, he added that as long as the new space to which Osburn referred accommodates all students and teachers, "I think that we have a workable solution," Nortillo said.

As for the particulars of the staffing cuts, Gatta declined to divulge which support staff would be released.

Gatta summed up the district's position on the cuts: "[The district] needs to change to adjust to what kids need. You can't keep things that are out of date. That is like putting an old bathroom sink next to a new sink because, hey, I like them both. Technology has changed dramatically in the last 10 years...some of the jobs aren't the same anymore."