

In this Issue...

Fighting & Chaos at Haven Middle School Sparks Protest Movement

After a surge of fighting led to a lockdown and sent two Haven staffers to the emergency room, parents and teachers demand increased safety measures.

D65 Teachers Describe "Toxic Climate"

Long before the recent turbulence at Haven, D65's Union president raised concerns about a "toxic climate" that was ignoring teacher concerns, driving away staff, and harming student performance.

D65 Test Scores Show Steep Declines

As math and reading scores fall, D65 lowers expectations for Black and Latinx students. School leaders pull back on pledge to ensure every Evanston public school graduate is a proficient reader.

Families are Leaving D65 for Private Schools

A troubling trend that started during the pandemic is continuing, according to enrollment data.

ETHS SAT Scores Have Fallen Sharply

The racial achievement gap is narrowing, but not in the desired way. ETHS students show far sharper declines in "college readiness" than a peer school, Oak Park-River Forest High School.

In Our Next Issue

- A Closer Look At D65's Plan to Build a 5th Ward School & Redraw School Boundaries
- Curricular Changes in Math & Reading in D65
- Why are Teachers and Parents So Scared of Criticizing D65 Leadership?

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Schools Update



Dear Neighbor:

Test scores are in steep decline, teacher morale is at an unprecedented low, parent concerns about safety and curricular changes are mounting.

We are a group of Evanstonians who share a deep concern about what's happening to Evanston's public schools.

We're writing today because it's become clear in conversations with our neighbors that many people in Evanston — including some parents of D65 and ETHS students — are unaware of the changes taking place in our public schools.

We know most Evanstonians don't track the constant stream of school news in local papers, or listen to the hours-long school board meetings, let alone fact-check the claims taking place on social media.

But at a time when the stakes are so high for our kids and teachers, and when our school leaders are making critical decisions that impact every Evanston tax-payer, we believe that it is imperative that more of our neighbors know what's happening in our schools.

That's why we have created the Schools Update to give our neighbors a snapshot of important school issues. Each issue will summarize important news from local papers, school board meetings, and spotlight opinions from Evanstonians on what's happening in our schools.

This is our first issue — and we'd love to hear from you. Please take a moment to finish our quick survey online — we want to hear the issues that concern you most.

To receive the next Evanston Schools Update — or help us distribute to more neighbors — please visit us at: www.evanston-schools.update.org

Haven Violence Injures Two Staffers — Sparks Teacher Protests

On April 18th, a standing-room-only crowd of dozens of Haven parents and teachers told the District 65 Board that they are sick of fights and other behavior problems and want something done about it immediately.

The calls for action come after fights at the school led to a lockdown, sent two Haven staffers to the emergency room, and a [viral video](#) of the fight was broadcast on Chicagoland news stations.

Since the incidents, dozens of Haven teachers & parents have gathered each morning in the school's parking lot on Green Bay Road to enter the school together, in solidarity, and walk around the building as a group in protest.

Parents and teachers are furious because they say they have reported problems about fighting and out of control behavior all year, but the D65 Administration has

...continued from page 1

failed to respond, allowing the problems to escalate into what many describe as an unprecedented crisis. Amy Odwarka, a longtime librarian at Haven, told the RoundTable, **“I’ve never seen this level of disrespect and this level of violence and abuse toward staff members in 26 years.”**

What happened at Haven?

- On March 30th, a Haven hall monitor suffered a head injury while trying to break up a fight in the school’s lunchroom. A week later, on April 8th, a Haven music teacher, **Amber Evey-Schmidt**, who was trying to break up another fight, was carried out by paramedics on a stretcher. Hours later, Evanston police **arrested a student** who was interfering with paramedics as they treated another Haven student, according to the RoundTable.
- During the chaos, the school was put on a soft lockdown — no one was allowed in or out of the building. Many parents reported receiving text messages from frightened children asking them to take them home.
- One parent told the RoundTable her son has never felt unsafe at Haven until now: “I don’t care if my kids don’t learn math the rest of the year. I do care if my kid doesn’t feel safe going to his school the rest of the year.”

I don’t care if my kids don’t learn math the rest of the year. I do care if my kid doesn’t feel safe going to his school the rest of the year.

At a packed school board meeting on April 11th, two Haven students presented a petition with 459 signatures — that’s more than half of the school’s population— calling on the District 65 leadership to reduce fighting, and pay more attention to student safety concerns.

- **“Students are struggling, and the staff are struggling,”** 7th grader Maislin Kelly, one of the organizers of the petition drive, told ABC7. “The students who are fighting will be slamming against doors and really scaring the students and teachers.”
- **The music teacher who was brought to the hospital, Amber Evey-Schmidt, told the Board** that she did not believe the student meant to hit her, but **“I was not surprised this happened, only surprised that it didn’t happen sooner.”**

Teachers: Administration Not Listening to Safety Concerns

“We just feel entirely gaslit, entirely, by the Board of Education.”

Over recent months, the District leadership has attributed the violence at Haven to a stressful COVID-19-impacted environment, a shortage of staff trained in crisis intervention techniques, and, according to Superintendent Devon Horton, Haven’s “long” history of disciplinary trouble.

But teachers say that the out-of-control classrooms at Haven have much to do with the Administration’s poorly implemented policy changes — and its unwillingness to listen to teacher concerns.

A shift in policy. In recent years, District 65 has **touted** its revised approach to student discipline called **“restorative justice practices.”** Instead of addressing student misconduct through traditional disciplinary approaches, restorative justice seeks to address fighting and classroom disruptions through conflict resolution techniques, such as sharing circles and **restorative conferences**, which, the Administration argues, will better address the root causes

and needs of all those involved and will limit suspensions, which **studies** have shown is linked to a higher rates of incarceration.

While many teachers support the goals of the effort, District 65 union president Maria Barroso told the Board of Education last fall that the revised student discipline practices are not properly spelled out to teachers and are contributing to out-of-control classrooms and some teachers are reporting being **“traumatized by students who are swearing or threatening them.”**

By discouraging teachers from using familiar disciplinary methods to manage classroom disruptions — and yet not providing enough support in the new methods — teachers say they are hamstrung in their ability to manage disruptive behavior.

...continued on page 3

Parents: Poor Communication, Lack of Transparency, and Lots of Talk

In the aftermath of the April violence, a group of parents created a group, Guardians for a Safe Haven, to advocate for safety improvements.

Parents say they've lost trust in the Administration because of months of poor communication, inaction, and a lack of transparency. In a March 30th email, Haven's principal Chris Latting wrote that a staffer was injured because he "intervened and fell." **Yet Haven students reported a very different picture. And days later, the Haven staffer, Jayson Lim, told the RoundTable, "I did not fall. The student punched me."**

- On social media, one parent wrote: "If we can't trust the administration to tell us the truth, how can we trust them to honestly partner with the community to get this crisis under control?"
- Parents say the stress is taking a toll on their children. "They are telling me that every day is very stressful," [parent Christina Mato told ABC7](#). "They see a lot of fights and they feel like they are not being listened to and problems aren't being addressed."

Parents have also directed their frustration at a School Board that they say cares more about performativeness — and using progressive language — rather than performance. One parent lambasted D65 Board member Biz Lindsay-Ryan on social media forum for attributing the fighting at Haven Middle to ["toxic masculinity."](#)

- **"Toxic masculinity? Please."** wrote Marlin Milner, a parent of two Haven children, who, he said, were terrified of the violence. He criticized the Board for using

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- Haven teacher, Elizabeth Stirling-Jackson, told the RoundTable that concerns have been raised with administrators throughout the year, but have been **"ignored, dismissed, minimized... We just feel entirely gaslit, entirely, by the Board of Education."**
- A survey of Haven teachers conducted by a parent, Lee Ann Silva, found that 91.7 percent of respondents had expressed concerns to administrators. Of those, 100 percent said that their concerns "were not acted on satisfactorily."
- Another Haven teacher, Simone Larsen Heffner, expressed support for efforts to address the school-to-prison pipeline by reducing suspensions, but worried, in a blog post that "we have gone too far," and created a school culture where children are not held accountable for their negative actions. **"Consequence has become a dirty word in today's climate,"** Heffner writes. **"If you fight in school, you must be held accountable. If you send your teacher to the hospital, you must be held accountable. How else will a child learn right from wrong?"**

progressive buzzwords, yet failing to deliver reform and actual transformation.

- **"This District is all TALK," Milner wrote. "Despite all the District's talk about helping Black children, when I reached out for school counselor support for my Black kids I got basically nothing."**

At the April 18th School Board meeting, Milner voiced his concerns directly to the Board. "My family is one of the ones you claim to be talking about when you talk about equity," said Milner, who added he was sick and tired of being lectured week after week. "Some have couched this issue in racialization, gender expression and sexual orientation," he said. "What about safety? Stop the lecturing and lead with concrete actions. Your final exam is right here, right now."

If we can't trust the administration to tell us the truth how can we trust them to honestly partner with the community to get this crisis under control?

—D65 Parent

D65 Test Scores Are Declining

Test scores show extent of pandemic learning loss

Many parents are expressing concern about learning loss in Evanston's elementary schools — test results reinforce this concern. D65 students show steep declines in attaining proficiency in math and English language arts, according to data from the Illinois Assessment of Readiness.

- **Reading scores declined by 9 percent.** Only 35% of D65's students met or exceeded standards on the English language arts part of the test — which tests reading comprehension — compared with 44% on the 2019 IAR.
- **Math scores declined by 12 percent.** Only 38% met or exceeded standards on the Math part of the 2021 IAR that's compared with 46% on the 2019 test.

- **Scores for Black and Latinx students declined the most.** 50 percent of D65' Black and Hispanic third graders scored in the lowest performance level in ELA on the 2021 IAR.
- **More students are at risk.** Between half and three-quarters of Black and Latinx students in grades 3-11 are now reading below grade level, according to data reported at a joint meeting of D202 and D65 boards.

Why we're concerned: The pandemic has impacted student performance across the country, but these declining scores show a particularly steep decline in Evanston schools, and underscore the urgency in helping our children recover from learning loss suffered during school closures and remote learning.

D65's Response to Declining Test Scores: Lower Expectations

The Evanston Roundtable reported that District 65 is significantly reducing expectations for Black and Latinx students.

According to the Roundtable's analysis of Board's newly approved 5-year contract with Superintendent Devon Horton, the District's new plan no longer seeks to accelerate achievement for Black and Latinx students to reduce the racial achievement gap related to college and career readiness.

The Superintendent's new contract calls for "at least a 3% increase in the number of Black and Latinx students making "expected gains" in Reading and Math on the Measures of Academic Progress state test. But according to the RoundTable making "expected gains" — which means making the average growth of one's academic peers — is not enough.

"To move the needle, the district needs to accelerate the growth of Black and Latinx students, not tread water with average growth," writes Gavin. This continues a pattern of lowering expectations in our public schools.

- **Lowering Literacy targets.** Our school leaders agreed eight years ago on the "Joint Literacy Goal" that "all students are proficient readers and college and career ready by the time they reach the 12th grade." But at this February's meeting, leader of both Districts acknowledged falling far short of their goals, and discussed revising their goals.

Why we're concerned: The past years have been challenging, and the trend is going in the wrong direction, but that is no reason to lower our literacy goals for Evanston's kids.

To move the needle, the district needs to accelerate the growth of Black and Latinx students, not tread water with average growth.

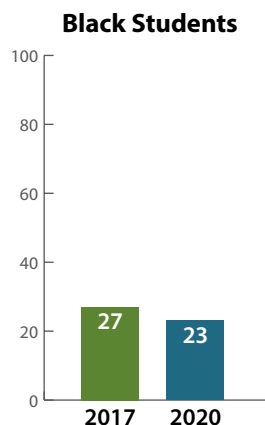
—Larry Gavin, RoundTable reporter

ETHS: SAT Scores Are Declining

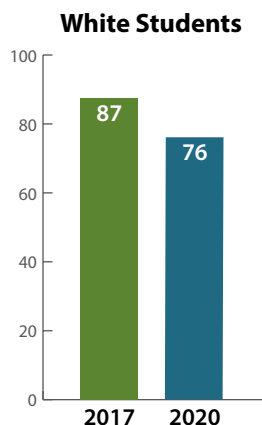
The racial achievement gap has narrowed, but not in the desired way.

For years, ETHS has sought to narrow one of the nation's widest racial achievement gaps. Data from the SAT shows the school has narrowed the gap by seven points. But the school has achieved this by lowering achievement for all students.

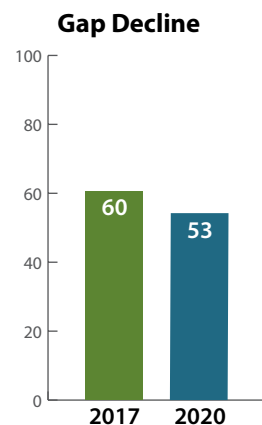
SAT Performance from 2017–2022



Data on SAT proficiency, an indicator of college readiness, shows that percentage of ETHS's Black students achieving SAT proficiency or better has fallen.



During the same time frame, the percentage of ETHS's white students achieving "proficiency" on the SAT has declined as well.



Therefore, the gap has declined, but it is not because of improving outcomes for Black students, but because the white student performance has declined dramatically.

How Does ETHS Compare Against Oak Park?

For some perspective on ETHS's declining scores, we looked at the performance of students from Oak Park-River Forest High School (OPRF), a school that ETHS is often compared to because of its similarities (size, demographics, and values).

Both ETHS and OPRF saw similar declines in proficiency among Black students, but the performance of ETHS's white students fell far more sharply (11 percent) than OPRF (2 percent).

This is significant because three years ago, ETHS had a significantly higher percentage of white students achieving proficiency. Now OPRF's white students outperform ETHS's white students.

87% of OPRF's white students achieved proficiency compared to

76% at ETHS

OPRF's white students outperform ETHS's white students

2% Drop at OPRF

11% Drop at ETHS

Why we're concerned: ETHS has made sweeping changes in recent years to narrow the racial achievement gap — such as detracking math classes — while these changes have yet to take place at OPRF. This SAT data suggests that ETHS's efforts could not only not be helping Black students, but lowering the performance of all demographics of ETHS students.

D65 Teacher's Union: District Leaders have 'destroyed morale'

Months before the violence erupted at Haven, Evanston elementary and middle school teachers held several protests outside of D65 Board meetings and orchestrated a "sick out" that abruptly shut down schools for two days before Thanksgiving, angering thousands of parents.

Why are D65 teachers protesting? According to Maria Barosso, leader of the District 65 teacher's union, the District leadership is allowing a "toxic climate to continue unchecked."

She charged the District leadership with "disrespect" for teacher input, "micromanaging" the curriculum, and making "overwhelming demands" on staff that have led to a crisis in mental health among educators.

Barosso also said that the District's disrespect for teacher concerns is hurting D65 students by lowering the quality of instruction, and that the working conditions are driving some of the District's most experienced and valued educators to resign or retire early.

Former Dewey Principal: Teachers are Burning Out, District is not 'putting children first'

One of the educators to resign is Donna Sokolowski, the former principal of Dewey Elementary. While most teachers had been unwilling to criticize the District leadership on the record, Sokolowski [wrote a long essay in the RoundTable](#) detailing her reasons for leaving D65 after twenty years.

Sokolowski, a 4th grade teacher and reading specialist before becoming Dewey's principal, echoed many of the Union's concerns, charging leadership with devaluing the expertise of veteran teachers and using "blame and shame" tactics to discourage dissenting views.

Sokolowski also questioned the District for not "putting children first" by hiring more highly-paid consultants and funding central administrative positions while cutting critical instructional positions, such as reading specialists, that have direct contact with the District's most vulnerable students. Sokolowski criticized the District for cutting four reading specialist positions at a time when reading scores are in steep decline, and while the need for literacy support for special needs students is at an all-time high.

Families Are Leaving District 65

As District's numbers decline, private school enrollment is soaring

When enrollment declined last year, D65 officials said it was likely an aberration due to COVID-19. But according to data from the District this fall, parents are continuing to pull their kids out of D65. Evanston Now reported that K-8 enrollment in D65 was 6,546 at the start of the 2021 school year, that's an XX percentage drop (*200 students left*) from 2020-21.

Infographic: sourced from Evanston Now shows rising enrollment at Catholic schools

At the same time, enrollment is soaring at local Catholic and private schools. According to Evanston Now, Pope John, a K-8 school in Evanston, has grown from 168 students when the pandemic hit in March 2020, to 259 in fall of 2021. Other Evanston Catholic schools, St. Athanasius and St. Joan of Arc, also reported nearly 20 percent increases, as did private schools, such as Roycemore & Chiaravalle.

One parent interviewed by Evanston Now said that he moved to Evanston because of its high quality public education, and his older son went to Evanston public schools from K through graduation, but he decided to pull his young child out of D65 because "I see the school system in Evanston progressively getting worse, not better."

On social media, we have also seen reports of parents warning prospective families about the deteriorating conditions of D65 schools.

Why we're concerned? Declining enrollment is always a concern because it takes away crucial resources and engaged parents from public schools. But this data is more concerning because it suggests that parents, who moved to Evanston for its great public schools, are leaving for private schools.

In the Next Issue of Evanston Schools Update...

A Closer Look at the D65's Plan to Build a New School & Redraw School Boundaries.

In March, the District 65 Board approved a sweeping plan to build a new \$40 million school in the 5th ward. But the plan comes at a time when D65 is facing a budget crisis and projections of [sharply declining enrollment](#) that are expected to require the District to close schools within the next five years. We'll take a look at the details of the plan and how it will impact neighborhood schools.

D65's Curricular Changes in Math & Reading. D65 has made significant changes to the curriculum and staffing in recent years. We'll take a look two changes that have sparked the fiercest debate among parents: the decision to eliminate an

accelerated middle school math program and the District's decision to lower reading targets and cut literacy specialists.

Why Teachers and Parents are So Scared of Criticizing D65?

In the wake of the turbulence at Haven, Michael Klotz, a former special education teacher at Haven, harshly criticized D65 leadership for failing to listen to teacher concerns, and announced a run for School Board, saying **"It's time for a teacher on the School Board."** But as soon as Klotz made the announcement, he received a chilling preview of the price he will pay for daring to criticize District 65 on social media. We'll take a look at a group that some teachers and parents call the "D65 Social Media Mafia," and how they have used Trump-style intimidation to successfully silence teachers, parents, and scare away candidates from challenging Board members.

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About Us

We are public school parents, teachers, and Evanston residents who are concerned about Evanston's schools and our children's future.