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National recognition for Rodgers

East Aurora School D131 magnet academy cited by U.S. News



Denise Crosby

The Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy has always been a source of pride for School

District 131, but its most recent accolade is a national feather in East Aurora's cap: U.S. News and World Report recently named it one of the top middle schools in the country.

Which is darn impressive, considering the well-respected media company uses data in math and reading pulled from state report cards — including graduation rates and how well students are prepared for high school — from over 79,000 public schools.

The focus is not just on

current scores, noted Principal Brian Valek, but on the growth students exhibit.

"If you look at the students themselves," he told me earlier this week, they are "hard working ... but also come from families who value their education.

"They don't just get here by accident. ... They want to be here," he said.

With good reason. According to district officials, the Fred Rodgers Magnet

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Principal Brian Valek, right of banner, stands with sixth grade teachers and students after learning East Aurora School District 131's Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy was named one of the top middle schools in the country by U.S. News and World Report. SCHOOLDISTRICT131



Bryce Reinhard, 22, of Aurora, was identified as one of the three victims who died in a car crash Sunday in Glenview. His father, Jeremy Reinhard, said he liked outdoor activities. JEREMY REINHARD PHOTOS

Two young lifelong friends from Aurora die in crash in Glenview

Two 22-year-old men and a 20-year-old woman were the victims in the fatal accident

By Richard Requena
Pioneer Press

Two victims of a Glenview car crash that killed three early Sunday morning have been identified as lifelong friends from Aurora who were both 22 years old. The third victim has been identified as a 20-year-old woman.

Wesley "Wes" Beitler and Bryce Reinhard, both recent college graduates, were identified by Jeremy Reinhard, Bryce Reinhard's father, as victims of the crash near West Lake Avenue and Pfingsten Road in Glenview. Obituaries for both have also been posted.

Jeremy Reinhard said his son and Wes Beitler had been close

friends since elementary school.

The Cook County Medical Examiner's office identified the woman as Khaliunaa Mungunkhuu.

Glenview police said police and firefighters responded to a single vehicle crash Jan. 19 at 4:30 a.m. and found a vehicle in flames with three people inside. After putting out the fire, officials located the victims and pronounced all three dead on the scene.

Jeremy Reinhard said Beitler and his son lived in Aurora, and were driving to the north suburbs from Chicago on Saturday night to drop off the young woman, whose name he knew only as "Luna."

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Waubonsie Valley's Wes Beitler, right, runs in the 3200-meter race during the DuPage Valley Conference Meet on May 10, 2019, at Naperville North.

Geneva bond referendum taken off April ballot

Question for \$68M for public safety facility had been approved by City Council on Jan. 13

By Molly Morrow
Beacon-News

Geneva residents will no longer vote this spring on a \$68 million bond referendum question to construct new public safety facilities in the city, after the measure was pulled off the April 1 ballot this week.

The referendum question had been unanimously approved by the Geneva City Council on Jan. 13, and was to be voted on in the April 1 election.

But, after a calculation error was discovered that would have doubled the projected property tax payment, the City Council decided to rescind the measure on Tuesday, officially notifying the Kane County clerk's office of the change on Wednesday, according to a news release from the city.

Before the City Council vote on Jan. 13 to get the measure on the ballot, the city sent out surveys and held community meetings about the potential referendum, according to the release.

During this process, the city used a formula to calculate the potential property tax impact if the measure was approved by voters, the release said.

The city discovered the error after the Jan. 13 meeting, officials said in the news release.

According to survey data, the release said, the actual estimate for the potential property tax payment surpassed what residents may have been willing to pay.

If the referendum question was approved, the bonds would have funded the construction of a new police station and Fire Station 2, along with renovations to existing buildings.

According to the news release, the city plans to continue speaking with residents and weighing options for the facilities projects in the future.

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Dolly Parton's Imagination Library coming to Kane and Kendall counties

By Molly Morrow
Beacon-News

A new literacy program for children 5 years old and younger is coming to Kane and Kendall counties.

Last Friday, the Fox Valley United Way opened sign-ups for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Families in Kane County and Kendall County who enroll in the program will be mailed a free book monthly for their child from birth until the age of 5.

A \$100,000 donation from the Follett Educational Foundation is partially funding the program in Kane County, according to a news release from the Fox Valley United Way. That money will pay for the

Fox Valley United Way to enroll children, process sign-ups and coordinate the mailing of books in the county.

There are roughly 20,000 children in the area who qualify for the program, according to Lisa Foydel, director of engagement for Fox Valley United Way. Since registration opened last Friday, the organization has seen nearly 1,000 sign-ups from Kane County and roughly 1,700 from Kendall County, Foydel said.

The program is part of a statewide partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library launched by Gov. JB Pritzker in 2023, which allocated \$1.6 million in the state's 2024 budget for the program. Local partners provide

the rest of the funding, and the Dollywood Foundation orders the books and coordinates the program's logistics, Foydel said.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was founded in 1995 distributing books to children in Tennessee, according to its website. The program has since expanded across the United States and to Canada, the UK, Australia and the Republic of Ireland.

The Follett Educational Foundation was originally founded to provide college scholarships for children of employees of the Follett Corporation, according to the foundation's website. Follett, currently based in Westches-

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Dolly Parton performs on Aug. 27 during an event in Kansas City, Missouri, celebrating the expansion of her Imagination Library. On Friday, the Fox Valley United Way opened sign-ups for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library for residents in Kane and Kendall counties. CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP



Volunteers raising money to expand storage barn

Fox River Trolley Museum to add space

By Mike Danahey

Volunteers behind the Fox River Trolley Museum are in the midst of a good old-fashioned barnraising and are seeking the public's support in funding the effort.

"What we're doing here is preserving history," said Kathleen Jamieson, fundraising chair for the museum in South Elgin. "Many of the trains we have here sit on the line on which they ran so it's local history."

Its collection currently consists of 35 train or trolley cars, some of which date back as far as 1887, Jamieson said.

The barn space the museum now has holds nine of those cars and is used to do restoration and maintenance work.

With the money museum volunteers hope to raise through a GoFundMe.com campaign, they'll be able to build an addition to the 41-year-old barn so it can house three more cars.

Having more enclosed space is particularly important when storing and restoring older models, which are mostly made of wood, Jamieson said.

Volunteers have already started on the barn addition, securing permits in mid-November.

They have completed grading, earth and track moving, and other prep work needed before the building process can begin.

With track being so heavy, the project has given volunteers a real appreciation for what went into building railroads, Jamieson said.

The project gained traction following a change in the museum's board of directors last year, resulting in the fundraising committee becoming active again, Jamieson said.

That led to discussions with an unnamed donor, who has agreed to match up to \$53,000 raised for the addition. As of Tuesday afternoon, the group had collected more than \$11,250 of that \$53,000 goal.

The \$106,000 will cover the cost of the work already done by volunteers and the cost of hiring a construction company to put up the addition, Jamieson said.

If any additional money is raised, it will be put toward future



Fox Valley Trolley Museum volunteers have been using small flat cars to move rail so they can save as much money as possible in building an addition to their storage barn, officials said. **ERIC ZABELNY**

upgrades, such as tracks, a sprinkler system and overhead wiring in the car barn.

Building the new structure will take three to six weeks, Jamieson said. The hope is the work will be done by the time the museum hosts its Bunny Burrow Express event on April 5, 12 and 19 or in time for the season opening on Mother's Day, May 11.

In addition to a newly expanded barn, it also will be easier to get into and out of the museum's 365 S. La Fox St. location this year now that road construction on Route 31 is finished.

Last year, its visitor count was down about 50% because of that road work and they're eager to see the numbers return to where they were or higher than in 2023, volunteers said.

Last year the museum also completed a project in which each car in its collection, along with information about it, could be viewed online. The equipment also has been marked with QR codes so visitors can use their cell phones to access the information as they view the pieces in person.

Jamieson said the all-volunteer Fox River Trolley Museum



Almost all posts were in for the expanded Fox Valley Trolley Museum barn as of Saturday. A fundraising campaign is underway to bring in the money to complete the project. **KATHLEEN JAMIESON**

is ready to get the barnraising underway. "We are small but mighty, and I'm so immensely proud of the dedicated volunteers we have," she said. "Many hands

are at work here in the cold, but we can't do it alone. Donations will help keep this piece of history alive." The fundraising campaign can be found at www.gofundme.com/f/double-your-impact-help-preserve-historic-trolleys.

Mike Danahey is a freelance reporter for The Courier-News.

Allstate to raise Illinois homeowners insurance rates by 14.3%

By Robert Channick
Chicago Tribune

As California smolders in the wake of devastating wildfires that burned 12,000 homes and left billions of dollars in damage, insurance rates are set for another double-digit rise 2,000 miles away in Illinois.

Climate change-related weather events roiling insurance markets across the U.S. may well connect the dots between California and Illinois, according to industry analysts.

Allstate is increasing homeowners insurance rates in Illinois by 14.3% beginning Feb. 24, according to a filing with the state last month. The rate hike applies to a "portion" of Illinois customers, with some seeing lesser increases or no changes, an Allstate spokesperson said Monday.

"While more frequent, severe weather and higher repair prices have increased insurance claim costs, customers continue to get competitive prices with Allstate and can save money by bundling home and auto," Allstate said in a statement.

In its filing, Northbrook-based Allstate said nearly 248,000 customers in Illinois will be affected by the 14.3% homeowners rate increase next month.

Last year, Allstate raised homeowners insurance rates in Illinois by 12.7%, while State Farm implemented a 12.3% increase in May.

"We do not currently have a homeowners rate increase filed in Illinois for 2025," a spokesperson for Bloomington-based State Farm



People search through the remains of their burned home on Sunday in Altadena, California. They said they plan to rebuild. **MARIO TAMA/GETTY**

wrote in an email Monday.

While not directly related to the California wildfires, which have left thousands homeless and generated rebuilding cost estimates ranging from \$30 billion to more than \$250 billion, insurance rate hikes in Illinois and other states are being driven by the increasing prevalence of extreme weather events.

In December, the Senate Budget Committee released a report about the impact of climate change weather events on insurance markets, which has precipitated a

homeowners "insurance crisis" as providers raise rates or pull out of states across a wide swath of the U.S.

"Climate change is no longer just an environmental problem," the report concludes. "It is a looming economic threat."

Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina and California top the list of states where it is getting harder to insure homes because of everything from wildfires to hurricanes. But the issue has destabilized markets from New England to Hawaii as insurance providers decline to renew

homeowners policies, according to the report.

Illinois fared better than most states on the homeowner's insurance nonrenewal list, ranking 43rd, according to the Senate report.

In California, about 22% of the buildings in the Pacific Palisades fire and 12% in the Eaton fire are covered by the state's FAIR plan, insurance of last resort for homeowners unable to obtain coverage from traditional providers. The FAIR plan — a syndicated pool of property insurers — has nearly \$5

billion of potential exposure in the Pacific Palisades and Eaton fires, and has already received more than 3,600 claims, according to an update Friday on its website.

Shannon Martin, an insurance industry analyst for Bankrate, said the California wildfires will create a massive insurance liability that may raise rates down the road for neighboring states, and perhaps even Illinois.

"There's going to be a huge depletion of resources in terms of labor, in terms of lumber, all the building materials that someone needs to rebuild their home," Martin said. "And so if you live in Nevada and you have a fire at your home, it might cost your insurance company way more than what they calculated to rebuild your home."

Beyond the increase of weather-related events — from coastal states getting slammed by hurricanes to extreme storms across the nation — the insurance cost of the California wildfires may also spread to other states.

If the losses are big enough, Martin said insurance companies may have to pay more for reinsurance — the insurance company for the insurance companies — resulting in increased rates for policyholders far from the California wildfires.

"No one really foresaw the LA wildfires happening the way that they're happening," Martin said. "So we know there is going to be a domino effect from that. It's just going to take a while to see what that is."

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Crosby

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Academy focuses on STEM education, where students engage in coursework with a strong emphasis on technology integration across subjects.

They are offered electives like robotics, design modeling and computer science, with the goal of solving real-world problems through project-based learning.

But the school is also known for its commitment to character development, while also recognized for high academic achievement and

student engagement.

And it doesn't hurt, Valek told me, that the small population — under 300 kids — contributes to a "great dynamic" that makes it easier for staff and students to connect.

The principal, now in his fourth year with School District 131, says he sees that connection daily as he walks through the halls, noting how staff not only know all the kids by name but also their strengths and weaknesses.

And Valek sees it when he pops into a classroom and realizes life lessons are being taught along with book lessons.

Every fall, for example, the eighth graders do a project on "nostalgia" that requires a deep dive — from walking tours to personal reflections — on how their community is tied to them.

Many of the teachers, Valek added, have moved away from the lecture format into more of a "discovery" structure, where the emphasis is on how their lives connect to the outside world.

Valek, who has been a middle school teacher for more than a dozen years, says he really enjoys this stage of development because "they wear their hearts on their sleeves" which

can translate into a "real passion for learning," especially when they are met by a staff which is equally enthusiastic about coming to school each day.

"They value those kids as individuals but also the energy they bring into the building," Valek insisted.

The U.S. News and World Report honor was recognized at a recent East Aurora School District board meeting, and the school itself is in the process of planning a celebration with staff and students.

Valek described the award as personally "gratifying" and "exciting," but insists the

school's success is the result of a partnership with all parts — staff, students and families.

The award means "our hard work is paying off," he said, then quickly noted that, while staff is appreciative of where these kids are, "they continue to work on that vision of where they will go."

"We are on the right track," said Valek, also noting the support from district leaders and the Board of Education.

"But we are constantly looking at how else we can help these kids."

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