

# Kevin Suchinski Interview

Superintendent, Hillside School District 93, SHIELD Illinois External Stakeholder

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## SPEAKERS

Rebeca Escamilla, Kevin Suchinski

### **Rebeca Escamilla** 00:00

So I'll begin. My name is Rebecca Escamilla. I am a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives. I will let my interviewee introduce themselves and their title and position.

### **Kevin Suchinski** 00:17

Oh, sorry. Kevin Suchinski, Superintendent, Hillside School District 93.

### **Rebeca Escamilla** 00:24

So for today's interview, today's date is Friday, February 17 2023. We're here at the University of Illinois Archives. We will be discussing how the COVID 19 Pandemic impacted Hillside School District 93 and how the school district formed their working relationship with SHIELD Illinois. This interview will be used for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 documentation project. And I also wanted to make a note beforehand that for this interview when we discuss SHIELD, we most likely mean SHIELD Illinois just to differentiate from you UIUC SHIELD and SHIELD T-3. [KS: Right] Yes, so if you're ready, we can just start. Yes. Okay. So for the first question, can you tell us more about Hillside School District 93?

### **Kevin Suchinski** 01:13

Yes. Hillside School District 93. It's a one school district established in 1918. We service several communities-- a portion of Hillside, Berkley Westchester and a small portion of Bellwood and unincorporated Cook County. We have three cemeteries, one golf course, and in its entirety, we service about 450 students right now. In terms of that, it is a suburban district that is 20 minutes outside of the city of Chicago, surrounded by numerous suburbs, and with DuPage County being to the west of us.

### **Rebeca Escamilla** 01:57

Great, thanks. So we just kind of already know this beforehand, but we still want to hear it from our interviewees perspective or from their actual words. So thank you. So can you tell us also more about your role as superintendent and so what are your duties and responsibilities? What does your day to day look like?

### **Kevin Suchinski** 02:18

So in terms of being in a one school district, that role that superintendent plays many, many different hats. I play the role of superintendent with the governance of the Board of Education, I play a role of

human resource, I play a role in operations. I play a role in grants, transportation, overseeing the district in terms of that. When you look at public schools, there's only one employee of the Board of Education and that's the superintendent and then I employ everyone else. We have about a staff about 90. 60% of our students give or take are African American. I'm sorry, Latino, 40% are African American. And we service about 70% of our students are under the category of free or reduced lunch status. That's about it, but I can go on forever about duties and responsibilities.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 03:10

Sounds like a lot of duties and playing a lot of hats. So I just wanted to ask a clarifying question. What does it mean when you say one school district?

**Kevin Suchinski** 03:20

So that means that in many districts, you might have five schools. In this case, there's only one school-- Hillside School. So the district office is connected to the school. It has now five additions and it serves students from early childhood to eighth grade. So the students are all on one campus, one building. It started as a one room schoolhouse in 1918 and then as they started developing it, they never built another school. They've been as high as 1000 kids in the district, but over time, and has vacillate back and forth in terms of that. So when we say that some districts might have two elementary districts, a pre K, a middle school and then a high school, we are considered an elementary school district. So we only service early childhood to eighth grade.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 04:05

Thank you. So we will be going on into the COVID-19 questions, specifically. So do you remember the first time you heard about the emergence of COVID-19 so this would have been probably around... Some people heard about it as early as December 2019, and others--

**Kevin Suchinski** 04:24

So I think, since I'm a little bit of a news junkie, yes hearing about it in China, but most most importantly, probably in the middle of January when it was coming out of Washington State with travelers coming back from China as well as then a large population of I think it was a senior assisted living facility and I'm having it and someone passed away because of COVID in Washington State. So certainly was on the radar, you know, through the lens of probably saying, Oh, this might be just another virus that's spreading whether what we've had before in the past there and so that's the first time it came on our radar, but more in the sense of, okay, this is just one of those phases that we're going to be going through.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 05:10

Yeah, I think I also remember that news breaking out and yeah, just brought some memories.

**Kevin Suchinski** 05:18

And then started coming back where you were then hearing cases in San Francisco and in terms of the the west coast as people were traveling back and forth, large populations moving back and forth from China. And that's when, it's like, okay, it's an isolated case. It's something that's going on, you know,

we've had different types of flu come through, you're like, okay, it's just another virus that's now circulating.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 05:40

So, I guess a follow up question--for the school district, does it have established responses, for example, for the flu or is it just...

**Kevin Suchinski** 05:52

Correct. So in terms of, obviously, we take our direction from two different agencies within Illinois: you're taking your direction from Illinois Department of Public Health, but your local health department that oversees you and that would be Cook County for us. So for both of those agencies, there wasn't a high alert, but in the sense of if we have a norovirus or if we have hepatitis, so in many cases, there are protocols that we have to then report or a outbreaks of measles. There's always a reporting process and for school districts that you would have to report back to IDPH regarding outbreaks of certain illnesses, and then we have protocols related for flu or students who are facing other things. If you have a fever, you have to be out of school for 48 hours fever free in terms of that if you're in terms of any type of illness. And so there was set protocols that we established in the district that are guidance to IDPH as well as to your local governments. So there are for that, whether it's measles, or you know, Hep C in terms of what's going on norovirus, food poisoning, all those things that we now have to report because then there might be a mechanism that you need to seek state resources or Cook County.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 07:04

and for the reports, would it be individual students?

**Kevin Suchinski** 07:08

So you might be reporting a couple things you might be reporting raw numbers as well as then reporting student names. So if you ever had an outbreak, they would be giving guidance, this what you need to do. You might have to disinfect the building. You might have to do things--that was some typical protocols that you would have prior to COVID.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 07:27

Thank you. So do you remember going into lockdown, so this would have been around March 2020? And just how the general atmosphere?

**Kevin Suchinski** 07:36

Yes, so we had a board meeting on March 8, and we actually had students on March 8, come to our board meeting, and present to our Board of Education. At that Board of Education meeting, we end up finding out that one of our board members caught COVID. So we made that notification. We had kids presenting on Speech and Drama, we just did our speech and drama. It was kind of some conversation like okay, what are we going to do the unknown, and that was on March 8, subsequently after that. So then I made notification to parents saying, by the way, you know, that board member didn't sit near you. At that time there was no mask wearing there wasn't anything other than your treating it that way. And that was our first known case of that. And then we reported that to the families. Some people were worried because either they had significant health risks in their families. Had a couple emails saying

"but why would you have your Board of Education Meeting?" We dealt with that, but subsequently then after the next two weeks, as the number of cases were increasing, I actually have the email that went out, and so before the governor declared his we're going to close school, myself and there are a total of six school districts, we came together and said all right, we're gonna go back and actually go ahead and put ourselves in remote before the governor did it, and that for us was March 13. And our email was after careful consideration of information from the Centers for Disease Control and Illinois Department of Public Health regarding social distancing and supportive preventive measures to limit the spread of coronavirus. We're going to close schools beginning March 16, with a tentative date of April 6 when school will be in session all day. And then we talked about corrective school closures shown to be one of the most powerful interventions that curb the virus, further information coming in and we'll continue to work with that. And so we were in the phase of we did this before the governor and then all of a sudden, the governor came back on that Saturday and said, "Schools are closed up until April" and we already did it. We kind of were, I'll be on thin ice because as we were talking districts and myself and a couple others were really paying attention to the CDC guidelines that we just said, Talk to our boards and set this up, we're going to do it. Thinking, Alright, let's do it short term. Let's figure this out. And that short term turned into a long term. So we were on a limb and I found that initial email that I end up sending to my admin saying here it is English and Spanish. This is what we're sending out to her and then we went into warp speed because then we had to get kids ready for remote learning.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 10:21

So I guess I have a follow up question. So when you say board meeting, how, generally, how big were the meetings

**Kevin Suchinski** 10:28

Well with the Board of Education meeting there-- So I was giving guidance on my Board of Education prior to that time and working behind there. Our Board of Education means there's seven board members, and then that's open to the community and public and in our case, we have a community that we don't have as much participation in our Board of Education meetings. And so really, it's the governance of those seven board members that I'm going beforehand. They're doing the policies and the governance of the district with the recommendation of Superintendent so before we even had our board meeting, I was going to them and saying we're going to take a proactive measure. I made sure that I had the other districts on board with me because I didn't want to be the only one out there by myself closing and we decided to close ahead of time before any declaration of emergency closing schools, really no authority, but we you know, we had spring break coming up the week after so we're like, okay, it's only really going to be one week. So those board meetings happen once a month that we go by law and so the Board of Education meets once a month. That is a course of paying their bills doing their governance, all those things go there, and that's where the Board of Education sits with the superintendent. You have a board president, vice president, secretary, they run the meeting and then the superintendent is within guidance working with them.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 10:28

And you also mentioned students being present is that a regular occurrence?

**Kevin Suchinski** 10:46

The reason why we'd have board meetings it's celebration of students. It might be for this was for our Speech and Drama club, we had kids that won first place. We have kids come to a board meeting for IAVA Illinois Music Education Association, they might have been in contests, maybe athletics coming here, student of the month so we would highlight students because in those meetings, there was a spot for public comments. Then there was presenting of business and then you take action, but we always, prior to COVID, were looking to celebrate students because that's what we're about--celebrating students.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 12:23

Yeah, I think that's interesting. I don't, I've heard of previous board meetings, but I've never heard of students taking an active part. So that's pretty interesting. So when the school district was changing to remote learning during the pandemic, what were the direct challenges when starting this initiative?

**Kevin Suchinski** 12:46

So when we made the decision of like, Hey, by the way, it's this Thursday. On Monday we will have no school. We were a district that had one--we had devices for every child. However, they were not a take home device. The devices stayed at school. For us that meant kindergarten students had iPads, first grade iPads, and then second grade iPads and then third through eighth grade all had Chromebooks students had those but they were kept in the classroom. Kids would come into the building, they would take out their iPads, or the books charge them back up and use them in the classroom. So we were a district that every single child had devices. What they didn't have was taking those devices home and then the idea of then if they were taking that home, how do you then have internet access? And so what it meant to be is that literally on that Friday before we're going to close school literally every one of the administrative teams are literally grabbing every single iPad, every single bag. We were putting them in bags, we actually were starting to buy bags for students to carry the books and literally assigning every single kid an actual Chromebook or iPad and getting ready to send that home with the students. We already built a platform on our website to say this is how you're going to access your teachers. We are Google school. And so those are the things so there was a lot of tech aspect of there. And then we ran into the point of do our parents have internet access. And so we were then working with T Mobile to be able to get Wi Fi hotspots for our students. And so we were in the midst of getting those Wi Fi hotspots through a grant. And so we had to navigate both the equitable aspect of this, the barrier, as well as economic barriers from there and really just thought, oh, it's only going to be short term. I would have to say if I reflect back on there, we were kind of like winging it like okay, let's figure this out. And you were figuring out you go you build a website off there that there were stores that kids can go into we are sending out notifications saying when you go on the website, you'll be able to access your teacher. We were ready to go. We started buying other things like cameras and having web cameras ready to go. And in that midst of the two weeks really trying to just power up everything to get ready to go. So our challenges were both technologically as well as economically and in the sense that our students and staff were not advanced knowledge of what remote learning looks like in the traditional sense. We're talking about kindergarteners, first graders who were in front of teachers used to direction versus a kid sitting behind a computer. So we figured oh it's only going to be short term. We're okay. That short term was governor declares it says you're going to come back on April 6 And then it just snowballed.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 15:46

I have a follow up question. So about how many students would you say needed assistance with obtaining the Wi Fi?

**Kevin Suchinski** 15:53

so for us, we found it to be more than probably 30% of our families needed access for Wi Fi. So then we started getting devices giving out those devices for free unlimited. Just really pushing that out as fast as we can to get those devices as we're working behind the scenes.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 16:12

And then when you were entering into sort of agreement with T Mobile when since at first everyone thought it was going to be a short notice. Were you given certain stipulations "Oh you have this until this time?"

**Kevin Suchinski** 16:25

So the T Mobile was the 1 Million Project where when you get the bank you would be able to have free- it was for low income districts. You would buy the devices on front you would have some limit and you know we bought some not thinking we needed a ton and then we started amping up our Wi Fi, said we even needed more. What we did is I had a district Berkeley School District I went to them and said hey, I need some Wi Fi hotspots. I heard you're on the same grant is that we do I said can I come over and borrow 40 of them literally they loaned me 40 Wi Fi hotspots so I can give them to my families until ours actually made it to the district. So that was a little bit of some partnerships we have with districts like hey, I don't have this like yet we have them on our shelf. We always have them. You can use them and to get yours and we literally issued those when we got ours we literally put them off and what they were was they were still working off our network. They were still filtering options and wasn't like kids could just surf anything they want. You still have the filtering options on there, as well as our Chromebooks have filtering options out there. So you still have some protection. But we were really exploring some new avenues of using technology at home because we weren't taken home. We were just one on one in school but not one on one at home.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 17:44

So I guess kind of following along. How did parents react to this because I remember when COVID started to emerge and then the possibility of going remote. A lot of parents raise questions like I have to work this certain amount of time who's gonna take care of the child when the child is has to stay at home on the computer doing remote learning, so how was that tackled?

**Kevin Suchinski** 18:08

So I think that was probably one of our major if you look at that. We're a pretty blue collar community. I've been there for about eight years in terms of the economic status of the district, we're in a really sound financial aspect because we take a group of towers and overlook towers that really keep down our tax rate, but overall, our communities kind of a blue collar community. And when you started looking at that, and they started going to the close down, most of the industries that remained in there were your service industries, your factory, your companies there, if you were in quote unquote, a white collar

job, you were able to go back to a remote. A lot of our families weren't able to do that. So they had older siblings because remember, the high school was closed at same time. So there was an older siblings there. There were kids going to Grandma's house and auntie's house, their older siblings in eighth grade watching their kindergarten and first grade in the same room, you know, with the cat and dog flying around the room. And so that was a constant conversation. That if you look at me, the class by the superintendent, my own kids are all going through remote learning. So I had my own children who I had one that was in college and one who was going into her senior year and then I had another one who was so we were going to defer family but my wife works in the Plainfield school district so she was able to stay at home because she was online out there. So we had this sense of seeing what it was like for our family, but then the idea that we had families who we were then peering into their household. This was the first time we saw what was going in the household, good and bad. And many instances it was extremely stressful. Because who's going to watch my child and again in the unknown and we went from, okay, it's going to be short term to being like, you're in remote for the rest of this year with the idea of yeah, we're going to come back in August. We'll be back in August. And so that's kind of where it went and that the stress was on our families very much. So for me, I continued going to the office, I have a personality that I'd rather be in the office. And so for some of my folks, we as administrative team started coming in all of our teachers stayed home. We kept employing all of our lunch staff all of our custodians because we started sending home lunches for a family. So then we had to feed our families. So then we had to put together a program where literally we were having parents come to the back parking lot and getting on one day then we went to five days of meals to get people's food and that means you know, custodians. Everyone working together, people delivering and for me, I continue to stay in the office because just in the sense of I needed to be there. And so we had to feed families on top of taking care of their SEL. In the beginning it wasn't as much but as time went on, then you saw the cracks in the mental health. You saw the stressors related to families of like I have to go to work and who's gonna take care of my babies, or in the worst case scenario, families had like family members that passed away and in our case, that is a factor that did impact here.

**Rebeca Escamilla 21:19**

So when students were doing remote learning, where was there ever an extreme situation where students just didn't know how to handle the technology couldn't show up?.

**Kevin Suchinski 21:32**

On an everyday basis. Just imagine kindergarten students trying to learn how uppercase and lowercase, learning how to read. Yes, and you're trying to have them navigate an iPad.

**Rebeca Escamilla 21:46**

yeah, I was a tutor during for four years in undergrad and I also had to do one year of tutoring while remote learning and we had students that just wouldn't come to class or wouldn't show up to class for like a week.

**Kevin Suchinski 22:00**

So we went back to Okay, do we require kids to put their cameras on do we not, we're peering into the household. So there might be domestic situations going on in the household, there might be things that like Ohh, don't really be looking at those things and seeing those things. And we went to the point of

being very easy to say, do we require kids to be on cameras because then it became a mental health issue, making sure we saw our kids and make sure their kids were okay. And so we went to the point of vacillating between do we require them to be on cameras or not on camera? And that was a little bit of back and forth because for the first time we're now peering in there. So we then had to put up notifications to our special education families giving them notification that you know, we're peering in, some of these lessons are recorded and we're now videotaping people. And now we're dealing with some confidentiality and letting people do that. So that was the stress part. We have kids not coming aboard and then we had to figure out like, Why aren't you coming out and calling parents and say, well, they couldn't get on because they would take their child from one house, bring them to another house, and then grandma's got five kids or has the kids can't help five kids because doesn't know how the technology works, doesn't know how to push the buttons for Google and go on to the cameras and turn it on and off or mute it in terms of that. So those were the struggles that certainly were everyday and were real in terms that lot of times our kids were navigating without a parent.

**Rebeca Escamilla 22:51**

And for me when I was tutoring the biggest issue was also in immigration communities. Parents who are first generation in this country don't know English, don't know how to handle technology. So they had to rely on their kindergartner age child--

**Kevin Suchinski 23:50**

To be their translator. Yes. And so for us having you know, we started you know, for me my measure of assistance from Columbia. Well versed juris doctorate had a Latino Director of Technology who was probably second generation basic ailment I knew Spanish but not as much and going from there so everyone that could navigate that we could do that. relied upon lots of people calling there but it was a barrier, too, because then and for us I came in eight years ago they were not doing information both in English and Spanish. So after sending things home, it was so important to do things both in English and Spanish, for our audio, and our messages and well with everything else. And so every single plan we had to do had to be in English and Spanish, but there was the barrier of some of our new commers. Like there. Then there was also a fear of ICE. Like I'm not a citizen, and you know, if I go back and say I need help, and I mean, I'm not here legally in the country or I'm transitioning through the green card process. So lots of hesitation, then the whole issue of both in the African American community and the Latino community, the medical malpractice and the fear and untrustworthiness of the medical and the federal government regarding how to take care of their needs. So we're navigating that at the same time of is this really what's true. Who are we navigating? That's probably more of your questions, but we are going through it at the same time of Hey, what is this all about? So lots of factors going from there. And then, you know, we went from short term like, yeah, we're going to come back in August. Didn't come back in August, like we're going to phase kids in and so our first group came in because research was saying, we need to get K-3 kids in the building. So we literally were able to get those K3-- kindergarten to third graders-- back in in about the middle of September. Had them in for about four weeks, we're ready to do our next phase of fourth and fifth graders. And then the next phase is six up to eighth graders and guess what happened? Again, the COVID was running rampid and we literally then could not bring home we couldn't bring anymore in and then we went right back to remote for everyone. With the idea okay, when can we come back in? Then we got through the winter months, came back in



March and then started phasing kids in and then we went into a phase-in territory from there. And when you look at some of our students, when you look at it, this the first year they've been in school full time

**Rebeca Escamilla** 26:29

Thank you for explaining that. So for the next question, while the pandemic was going on, did your priorities as superintendent change in any way?

**Kevin Suchinski** 26:38

One hundred percent. Our priorities were about wellness, health, safety and then keeping kids who are seeing their engagement in mental health. It went away from teaching and learning and more in survival mode.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 26:59

So during this time, did you directly interact with the students? What were the issues that they were dealing with?

**Kevin Suchinski** 27:05

So then we started going into a check in every morning for students to say how are you feeling? What are you doing? So they started doing check ins with students in the morning before we even started learning what's going on? We are then having to go to houses a drop off food. Or check on kids because they weren't coming on board. So then we were doing--and then social workers or principals were coming out to the house and being you know, knocking on the door running down to the bottom steps. That was a phase when you know, were you wearing masks or not there we are with you know, like handkerchiefs, the colored hankerchiefs like making makeshift masks that we're wearing around our face. I have pictures of that where you know we were all making masks that you were taking like how do you make a mask out of a handkerchief and it was a bandana and you got it on your face and you know the bottom parts there so we're knocking on doors, dropping off food, trying to figure out like why doesn't so and so come on, what's going on with them? You know, they're searching things like "how to hurt myself" or what's going on. So the mode became a little bit of like, how do we then support kids were then in many instances, academics became secondary to survival mode.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 28:21

So we kind of did touch upon this, but I just wanted to get a clear answer during the pandemic did the school district see a change in enrollment?

**Kevin Suchinski** 28:33

Yes. So we probably when I looked at the stats, because we obviously requested that ahead of time. We probably had a 20% drop in our enrollment in that 2021 school year, and which then this year, we finally got back and we recouped those losses of enrollment coming back in. We do believe that some of our families just moved out of the state of Illinois. Some of our families went to private schools because then as the pandemic went on private schools were navigating the pandemic in a different way. We were under the guidance of IDPH and ISVE, and you know, those rules were a little bit different. And then private schools were there. So we lost some students that way. And we did see that

I mean it was like, Okay, what happened to our students and where did they go? When are they going to come back? So we saw about a 20% drop.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 28:34

So I'm kind of curious because I mean, when I was in school, my teachers always told me you have to be in class because the state is wasting so and so much money per student. Was that impacted when the enrollment dropped?

**Kevin Suchinski** 29:44

So for us, we are a district that is a tier four district, so we get minimal state funding. Our monies are coming from both commercial property and industrial property. Like I said, most of our bulk of our monies come from a group of business towers and so our tax rates pretty low is about \$2.35 for a district, which is the lowest in the area. So in terms of that, that was when the state was doing additional funding. It was called EBF, Evidence Based Funding, but for us, we got an extra \$1,000 that wasn't there, but most of our funding was really from our tax base in terms of that, at that time, they weren't making adjustments in the taxes related to houses. They weren't reassessing property. So we're still recouping that. So for us, our costs came in different ways. So because we started building additional staff to support kids, but what then came was all of your disaster funds from the federal government to help you offset that and like every district we got so one funds s or two funds and now extra three ARP, which is more for academic loss, so we were able to navigate that, so we weren't losing funds. The state was still paying their bills, they were still going ahead and giving their money. In our case now. You'll see the impacts now where you have inflation. They're delaying property tax bills, and so some districts this year weren't getting all their money from the property tax. We have significant fund balances within our accounts. And so we have neighbors around us that had to get what they were calling short term loans to cover their payroll for us. We weren't that because we had enough money in our fund balances. Again, because you know, tier ones, the lowest tier, four is the highest. We're at tier four different even though we're 70% of people are low income but you're tier four, well because we have these commercial properties and the industry within the area, that's that's how we get our money. So those went away and we would get all of our money from the state, we would flip flop this process.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 31:52

So just in case researchers are listening what does tier one, tier four?

**Kevin Suchinski** 31:59

So what it is, is it's they want they look at your funding formula they built the funding formula regarding adequacy up to 100%. So tier one is could be zero to 30%, up to 100%, then Tier Twos Up to a level. Tier four is any district that's 85% to over 100% of the formula regarding adequacy. So there's this adequacy formula that they created. This is what you should have in your district. Do you have enough funds to have that and they built the district and then the state them gave more money for someone who's in tier one and tier two, and people who are in tier three and four had limited extra money from the state. They are trying to close the economic burden of relying upon districts that were low income that could not have enough generated a property tax to trying to close that economic gap. And like right now the the state has over the last few years have been putting in additional \$350 million into educational funding and bulk of that would go to tier one schools and tier two schools to help bridge the

gap to get them closer to the 100% adequacy hillside. Were about 106% adequacy. So we have enough money. Remember, we're a small district, but we have a pretty high economic value because of some of those industries and those commercial properties. [RE: Thank you.] So we're really, you know, Hillside is very diverse low income, but then in essence has enough funds to provide services for students very much so when you look at our test scores, our achievement and scores are not as high as other districts on state average. Were right there for ELA, for reading, but for math, we're below the state average. Some of that is economic. Some of that is individual family economic barriers. Some of that is equitable opportunities. Some of those are language barriers and some of that is on us, that we're not doing a good enough job to make a difference in students lives.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 32:10

So I guess touching upon on the test scores did test scores get affected during the pandemic?

**Kevin Suchinski** 34:10

Yes, across the state. So they were still--in the last year, they tested and the year before they tested and so if you were in session, you would test and so you know, rather than have 100% of our students testing anyone that was in because you have an option to either stay in remote, or you have an option to come back and and person and so you're still testing and so realistically, those scores of math proficiency went from 31% down to 10%. For our math proficiency went from about 17% to 3%. We now have rebounded back up to 15% and we have almost rebounded up to about 30% for ELA prior to the pandemic. But the learning loss is extremely significant. Some students have lost two years of education in the foundational level. Stats are coming back out that every kid is at least a year behind. And that might take two to three to four to five years to recoup that loss as well as college students.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 34:11

So is there currently a plan of how this is going to be tackled catching up these students?

**Kevin Suchinski** 34:23

Very much. So for us we went in to try to employ additional staff, ranging from additional math teachers to additional tutoring, to free summer school programs to a what we call is a jumpstart program in August where kids were able to come back to school two weeks early and just get a transition back into school just to get into the routines. So now you know some of that money from the state were able to hire additional math teachers, instructional coaches, we're able to make sure we took care and keep on addressing COVID. Whether it was masks, whether it was purifiers, whether it's updating our HVAC system to keep our school up and running. That's where it's at. So now it's a long term plan on how to support kids and how we change our practices with the students and a lot of this is research based so we have to go back and see how we change it. We have to change our practices. We are still using technology more and I think that's probably our saving grace. Kids now are more adaptive to technology, but there's more of resemblance so... we had lots we thought we had quite a bit of kids with lots of perseverance we're seeing this year. Kids are like yeah, so yeah, so what. Yeah, don't worry about it. So going back to that positive mindset using some of that Carol Dweck research about how we get back to kids engaging with the learning environment. And we know the number one statistic regarding student success is belongingness to school. So we're running data to see how can our middle school kids maybe percent say they feel they belong but the next 20%, they don't. So looking at

some of our data, surveying our parents, really taking a look at our instructional practices, taking a look at our resources and increasing our interventionist in both math and ELA that's our because our students are at risk and we have lower test scores we go at it and have hired more interventionist, both remedial reading and math to support students. Right now we offer free tutoring any student who wants to be tutored at the school, it's free, and teachers get paid to do that. But right now teachers are facing what I would call is a little bit of stress and burnout. So how do you run those programs if you don't have teachers wanting to do it for that, and then there's a teacher shortage on top of it.

**Rebeca Escamilla 37:39**

So yes, we can jump the the page. And then you kind of did touch upon this but for the staff what was their turnover, a high turnover rate.

**Kevin Suchinski 37:53**

During the last few years, we did not see a higher turnover rate. What we have seen in probably just last year, probably people going to other districts for maybe more money and going back we're still running at about 90 to 94% retention rate behind there. We have lost a couple of teachers, but we also have increased hiring with different positions. So we have seen a little bit of that. A little bit of that is what I call as teacher shortage that we're in Hunger Games 2.0. We're eating each other up because we're having people and then people know they can go to another district and all their years of service or a district saying hey, I'll give you \$10,000 more. You know, we're all fighting for our diverse candidates there and there's just not enough in the pipeline. So again, we're doing Hunger Games 2.0. We're stealing from each other. We know that the statistics and in the university are showing less and less students are going into education, the amount of heat going to education that they're the economy was burned was running really hot. Some people are like well I can go into engineering I can go into tech I can go to someone else. There was no reason so we see a cyclical when the economy goes bad, we see an influx of people wanting to go into teaching. But teachers will say that they were always acting as teachers, social workers and nurses. They're acting more like social workers, nurses and teachers because kids are suffering dramatically.

**Rebeca Escamilla 39:20**

Yes. And just getting that perspective is also important than the human aspect. So when did the school district return to in person is there or was it just kind of fluctuating?

**Kevin Suchinski 39:34**

So what we end up doing here that is we went into in that 2021 when we went back and said okay, here we are, it's March 13, 2021 came back the next year tried to go into that 2021 year in person. Went back for a short period of time, shut it back down, and then came back into 21 into March, rolled it back into last year of coming back and then we offered in person. But then we were following the CDC guidelines where if a kid had COVID they stayed out for 10 days and last January and February, we had close to 40% of our students get COVID in the month of January and February. SHIELD testing was there, so we tested a kid before they came back to school. And literally we're getting 25 to 30% of our kids positive after they came back from winter break. So even though we were we stayed in person, we never shut down. We literally had sometimes 120 kids at home. I mean you had I mean hundreds of kids at home of not being at school because they caught COVID and we follow the guidelines of 10

days out and we require kids to continue to wear masks. In terms of that, so you know for that we never left after we went back into it that '21-'22 we stayed in we never close back down. Probably when you get to your SHIELD testing questions, that's probably why we were able to sustain it because we knew what was going on. And we knew where our spread was. And so for all of our guidance, we follow the CDC guidelines to the tee. What the Board of Education did is that we did a declaration of emergency. They wrote a resolution to our attorney that they gave the ability for the superintendent to make decisions regarding that rather than going back to the board every time of our being session, what are you going to do about an outbreak? And so when they wrote that resolution, it said that I would then be able to make those decisions whenever we had a declaration-- an emergency declaration. And right now the state will not end that until May that resolution is still signed. So then I can act with providing guidance to my board of education and keeping them in the loop regarding what we're going to do so didn't have to go back and schedule the board meeting like, Oh, we're doing this or we're doing that I was given the authority to a resolution. So for us we I mean we created a whole entire reopening plan. Here's our we follow CDC guidelines and IDPH came out with guidelines called ISVE and we follow those guidelines to the tee regarding social distancing six feet away, we will move to all of our classroom furniture, I put them in pods, you know those metal containers in the parking lot and then teachers just had bare bones, a desk chairs, everything else was gone. And literally that seat and pods for two years in the back parking lot because we just took out all the extraneous furniture and then every kid you know there was the beta because we have pretty low class sizes. Under 20 in K through five and six to eight we probably run 22 to 24. We have a little bit higher, but we were able to do 6 feet of social distancing. So literally dots on the floor that's put on the dots kids stayed away from each other. Everyone wearing masks, if you come into the building had to wear masks. So we were following CDC guidelines to the tee and we never changed from that. Kids who were identified as being positive or teachers they stayed out for 10 days until the guidance went from 10 then it went to five. And right now, we still follow all the CDC guidelines now which means they fail for five days. And then you come back for the next five days, you have to wear a mask. You don't wear a mask, you can't be in school and that's for students and staff. So we have follow that CDC guidelines to probably I was a firm believer that we're going to support the CDC and based on science rather than extraneous information. Yes. And probably the questions coming up.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 43:43

Yes. Um, so throughout the COVID 19 pandemic, there was a huge portion of the population who didn't believe in COVID-19 or actively spread disinformation or just people didn't understand what it was. Um, did you encounter this aspect in your work?

**Kevin Suchinski** 44:07

What we were lucky about is that as COVID and COVID-19 the pandemic continued you saw that COVID-19 and the pandemic had huge adverse impacts on both your African American/Latino community as well as your minority communities. Higher level of deaths, higher level of significant illness, hospitalization. So our community being predominantly Latino, and being African American, understood the significance of that there was still hesitation of vaccine when we talk when we get into that one. There was still a hesitation of vaccines. But the idea there that they knew that it was hitting their families and they took it serious. We were not having board meetings where people were coming in saying when we said we're sticking with masks and we're doing 10 days out, we did not have people

protesting in front of our district, where districts to my West that were a little bit higher SES, social economic status, or maybe more predominantly Caucasian, where people were inflaming basis politics and maybe a Republican slant versus a democratic slant. Or maybe some religious views on it. We were not having those debates at our board meetings. So for us, we did not face the pushback on that. And in terms of misinformation, what we faced and misinformation was was about the vaccine. Our parents were pretty willing to.. and I use the word and "comply" is probably the wrong word. But when we said this is what we're going to do, they're very much complying with that in the first two years, and I think as we went into the third year of saying, Okay, we record like for me I'm on record saying on alert high. We recommend masks. Every time there was a COVID case, we send out notification, not many districts do that now. When we have a notification--when we have a COVID case, we sent out a letter that says, At this time there was a positive case within your child's classroom. We're recommending that your child wear a mask for 10 days and then you get tested on the sixth day, that same letter still go on probably one of the only districts that do it. And we continue to do it. Whether someone gives us some tests on an over the counter or whether it's SHIELD, we continue to send out that notification. And as I indicated, they're probably up until just now there's I mean, maybe 2% were masks now where I think up last year, we probably had one mass optional, we still had about 80% of everyone wearing masks and and this year, that probably went down to 20 or 30 and it's probably down to maybe 20% of our kids wearing it and probably less than 5% of the staff. But our misinformation was more vaccine related and concern with the medical field and about the data coming out of there because if you look at studies with syphilis and African American populations, how they were being studies being done, there was being studies being done in the military, on African American troops as well as Latino troops of going there. And so there was a lot of misinformation. So we dealt a little bit of that with our own staff regarding that couple in terms of the number of people who pushed back and said I won't wear a mask because of religious reasons. For us that was less than one hand that we had to tell a staff member that you cannot you'll be on administrative leave until the governor takes away the mask mandate or the vaccine mandate. And that was less than, you know, [inaudible] and other districts had or putting people on leave or terminating people based on the rules, because one of the rules is that you had to be vaccinated or you had to undergo testing. We couldn't pass.

**Rebeca Escamilla 47:58**

So thank you for that information. [KS: Probably too much.] No, no, it's always better to have more than than less. Yeah, thank you. So going on to for the SHIELD and testing questions. For the first one SHIELD Illinois was an opt-in program that provided free testing to K through 12 schools. So how did this relationship started? Did SHIELD come into the district or--because I remember seeing that Hillside Elementary was one of the first districts that were testing.

**Kevin Suchinski 48:33**

We were the third district in the state of Illinois to join. We were I think the first elementary school. We received the email from through the IDPH saying SHIELD Illinois would like to do the testing. I literally got on the phone with Beth Heller three years ago and started talking to Beth Heller and saying hey, let's go and have talked to her ever since and so that was a point of me being very active and following the guidance of CDC. You know, if you saw Kevin in the early years, you saw Kevin walking around in a Dr. Fauci mask. My wife made those would sit there at the sewing machine and make the mask and I so for me I was a proponent of the CDC, any NIH in terms of the National Institutes of Health in terms

of that. And so for me, I was a big believer in the science. Also having a cousin that's an epidemiologist in Boston, having a sister that's a nurse practitioner. I mean, it was great to talk to people in the field because we were just talking, reading all the articles like hey, what came up so we were one of the first who literally went to my board and said, Let's go. We were adopted as one of the pilot schools. So what's great about that is as we came in, Rockefeller Institute in that first year, we were awarded a grant [by] Rockefeller, that because in that first year, you had to pay for testing. And then so we then I was interviewed by the Rockefeller Institute, and once they then granted us the free testing in which they paid for the testing within that first year, because that was nothing personal about it. It was you had to pay to fund it. But for us, we were granted to the Rockefeller Institute of getting \$100,000 grant in which that was going to pay for our testing. And we were accepted. A little bit of the dynamics of the district being low income, as well as high diversity and that we fit their profiles what they were looking to do in the support districts because again, the statistics show that more diverse communities low SES have a more difficult time accessing medical care whether accessing the information, maybe lack thereof, testing ranging from everything else there and then obviously proportionately high number of deaths and sickness so then as we came into that we were granted into that program and then it just kind of just took hold and just blossomed into a pretty amazing partnership in my opinion.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 48:34

Yeah it sounds pretty interesting just hearing how it all started. And it's also one of the things that we're interested in preserving just how I guess how, how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled throughout.

**Kevin Suchinski** 51:17

For the record, you'll see that in all of your initial your videos that started for SHIELD Illinois, how to test [videos], those are Hillside students. The first video that was created, how to go back and do SHIELD testing. That was our students. Most of the promotional pitches that you see on your website are Hillside students in our gym. We were involved in every single pilot and every single avenue of SHEILD Illinois we found I told our district that we're going to be involved in everything and so when you see those initial part of SHIELD to me with that and the team, meeting everyone from you know, Anna Maria, and IDPH. Everyone involved the SHIELD Illinois epidemiologist, and there I've talked to him all the time. And so we were on the forefront of just literally following everything we had and we're gonna do the protocol. We did it and so when you look at all the things that's we'll be there for eternity, because you'll see our videos being there. And shows how you can test in a minute and a half. They follow kids on the video--I'm on that video, it is pretty amazing. It's just very when you reflect back on that, it's very--Wow.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 52:27

Yeah, it's pretty interesting. I have seen those but I didn't know it came from Hillside

**Kevin Suchinski** 52:32

That first video of how to test and how best you can test is us that I think that the one email that goes on the front page of a girl sitting there doing this spit test, that's our student comes up very often.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 52:45

Yeah, I guess maybe if in the documentation, we don't have this noted then we can go back and make note of it. And for the next question, so some of this information we got it because we interviewed the Contracts Specialist Team and they mentioned that for SHIELD that they offered incentives to schools that signed up for testing, such as having vaccine priority over other schools that were not in contract with SHIELD. But you kind of mentioned that you were one of the first schools--

**Kevin Suchinski** 53:20

Yeah, I would tell you I don't remember reading that in the contract about the vaccine incentive. We went strictly to is how do we get free testing for everyone. We knew that PCR testing was the gold standard. We knew that we needed to get it back return fast testing right away, and how to make it easily accessible and immediate for our families. There was a little bit of this superintendent saying I believe in the science and I need to know how many COVID cases are going through the school so I can then put together a plan, update that plan, change that plan. So I don't remember that. That's when I read that question, I'm like, I don't remember everyone saying that because when we talked about that I developed a whole totally different relationship for vaccines, unrelated to SHIELD Illinois.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 54:08

That's pretty interesting. So I guess maybe it was [inaudible].

**Kevin Suchinski** 54:11

But I think because we had the Rockefeller Grant that for us, our incentive was that first year that we were granted we jumped into that program that was all being paid by the Rockefeller Institute ranging from collection in that first you know, we started that I think that was in March, April, May that was all paid for, went through the summer. Samples were collected, they came in, but we were doing it and many instances they were being picked up by third-part carrier. I, the superintendant, literally drove samples to the clinics ranging from from North Chicago to oh, I can't remember. What was right up 55 CASS Road in Cass I would drive samples and drop them off in my car. I knew everyone at the facilities, knew all the people that were working, Sue Peikle who does the drop off Center that's off of Cass road that didn't know her because it was two years of dropping off samples because we were doing sample and testing on different days that maybe weren't covered by the grants or this new transition. So for us, you know, it was it was a very easy decision for us to partner with SHIELD.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 55:24

Thank you. So something that was mentioned is that for the contract, the SHIELD contract, one of the things is that the contract--it was sort of a take it or leave it type situation.

**Kevin Suchinski** 55:39

When we got the first contract back from SHIELD Illinois, when I first looked at the contract, and we're very much concerned with some of the take it or leave it aspects of it they try to go back and offer additional language that contract with SHIELD Illinois through our attorney, that language was rejected by SHIELD after our attorneys tell me "Okay, here's your pros, here's your cons." We decided-- I then signed the contract because again, I had the resolution to sign the contract. I'm the one who initiated the contract. So even though there was some take it or leave it you couldn't you know, you had to do it that way. We said okay, the funding was taken care of. We're not worried about that. We built a good



partnership, and by that time, we built a great relationship with you know, that [inaudible] executive, one of the main executives there and then Ron Watkins and started talking to all the people there. And so there was some assurances out there that you know, this was going to be a program that was going to stay. Some of the concerns were with the confidentiality of how that was being done, who was able to access that. Our attorneys were worried about the permission slip forms, because in the first year it was all about when we take this testing, it's technically a medical test and who had access to it so they changed some of the opt in language and they were very clear with us and that we had to do an opt in, we could not do an opt out. And so we talked a lot of time with SHIELD in the beginning you had to do opt in and SHIELD kind of wavered a little bit and said Oh, you can do an opt out if you want to. Our attorneys still at the point that this is medical testing. You're getting information we had access to it. So we wanted to continue to do opt in and we were made as an opt in that I was not going to test a family unless I got permission. It could have been verbal, I could have put into the database or you literally did the electronic online signature form. But we were going to do opt in because of some of the hesitation with where the data was going. Who was reading the data, some uncertainty and fear of the federal government, state government.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 57:50

Yeah, and these concerns are still going on, I've still heard some people that are challenging SHIELD and in regards to--I guess some people consider it to be a violation of HIPAA. So that's pretty interesting. Yeah, seeing that perspective to thank you for that. And then for SHIELD when you made the decision...

**Kevin Suchinski** 58:15

So when I went back to my board and said, and the best thing about this is I have a board member who happens to be a school nurse, so I'm talking to her about it, she gets it so I would make my presentations to the board and say this is what SHIELD's about. It's free. This is what PCR testing is this is what it does. We're able to detect it earlier. We definitely need to do that. We will not force anyone to do it. We will then you know do an opt in. And then that case at that 85% of the students were participating in the program in two weeks, which is unbelievable.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 58:56

And then for the following question you already answered it--It was you who signed it. So when did--I mean, I assume that SHIELD came in pretty quickly. So--

**Kevin Suchinski** 59:09

Yeah so we signed the contract. I think it took us less than two weeks to get the program up and running. We had all the materials in there, we went through all the training. We started building how the testing procedures would go and so then we started building our protocols you know started pretty quick. We had all the vials, we had all the kits, we had--and that time, that was all in-school testing.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 59:39

So you already touched upon this was there any backlash for testing on school grounds with minors?

**Kevin Suchinski 59:51**

Initially, since the testing was only first grade through eighth grade, remember they were only had to be initially it was--initially you couldn't do early childhood, you couldn't do kindergarten. And so our main concern was some of the, when we started working with first graders there it was about Could someone produce enough saliva to do that? There was some concerns about that that was too hard, and we spent hours and we spent training kids learning them how to dribble into--literally all the kids were tested there. So I think a little bit of was there was some concern like where's this going? But what we ended up doing was trying to then when we first did the SHIELD we actually did a forum for parents to come in both English and Spanish. We did videos, we did communication, we sent home flyers, and we answered a lot of questions. I had a great school nurse who's now retired, talked a lot of parents and saying "it's okay, it's not a big thing. Don't worry about it." And so we've got a lot of buy in up front. Pretty good.

**Rebeca Escamilla 1:00:59**

And then for when you were testing the school district, when the school district was testing, was it only students who were getting tests or were community members also involved?

**Kevin Suchinski 1:01:09**

So what we were able to do in that first year we did both school testing and we had a portal for community. So then we tested our students, all of our staff tested and then if our parents something happen with their parents or parents can come to the back door of the school and submit their samples. We tried not--we were really worried about overwhelming ourselves, and so we didn't do a true community testing portal, even though we were one of the first districts that did a community portal. We were initially trying... it was a daunting challenge to run the testing program and exhausting at the same time from us because we were doing it that way. So we had where if a parent came in said, Hey, can I drop off a test all of our parents could go ahead and do that they just had to create their portal, but we did not expand ourselves out to the whole community. And so even though we had the community part of that one, we had it we had our parents with me because they can drop off samples where they can test in their car in the back parking lot. And that's what they had a lot of times tested in the car.

**Rebeca Escamilla 1:02:17**

So once the test is state protocol, was introduced by the Illinois Department of Public Health, how did the district logistically tests twice a week for all its students or is that something that--

**Kevin Suchinski 1:02:33**

So what we were doing is when our kids came in, when we realized that we were going to lose a little bit of some instructional time in the morning so as soon as our kids coming in and we started doing ways so we were testing inside the gym, probably 120 kids at one time, it was like a like a factory. When kids came in, they stopped, we had a mask on where they grabbed their things, they gave their own saliva, they found a spot to go to. They collected our samples. We ran the stations, we ran into stations and so realistically, we had waves of kids going through there. So when we were doing that process there we were testing twice a week. So not only was I testing on Tuesdays, I was always testing on Thursdays. So I started going into a two day week testing protocol, one because I required all of our extracurricular activity students to test twice a week because that was part of the CDC

guidelines. So if you weren't part of our, any of our Chorus, Band, when we started sports backup, you had to test a second time, you were required and if you don't, then you aren't going to be able to play and go from there. So when we went test to stay and everyone was there, we had a we had a lesson we built databases like these are the kids who were to the right, we did close contact tracing who was to the right who was to the left, who was on the bus. And so who was the two students in front, two students in back, we get all of the close contact those kids were on [inaudible] and those kids in order to come back, they were on the list and they got called down on that second day to test. We told our parents, if you don't test, they have to stay home, there was an incentive to stay in school. So the incentive of staying in school and not being at home incentivizes that to go from there. At the same time, it reduced the number of kids out of the district who were at home because you know, there's this oxymoron going on here. We have always said that, what is the biggest indicator of success in school-- kids coming to school. Now we're telling parents "don't send your kids to school. Don't come to school" and now we're telling them there so for us the test state protocol was an easy one for us to go to because we're sending less kids home. The bus, you know, was the biggest thing of the kid two kids in front, we have assigned seats, we knew who was sitting where, kids knew where they were going to go, we were checking cameras, and then we would then know to schedule tests to say and so they knew when they came back then they were on the list. And literally we had administrators calling kids down these, you know, these 25 kids have to come and they had to test and they did it and then they went home. So there was a sense we had some high number and then kids who were then close contacts, their parents agreed to do it because they wanted to keep in school and so we just had them a second time.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:05:07

Pretty interesting. Just hearing the logistics of how a student would go in to school and get tested. And just hearing about the database seems pretty...

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:05:17

We were able to get through, you know, we were running, for a district which worked with the kids I mean against 340 tests and you know, we would go and do that within a given day. And we would start probably getting them down at 8:30am and by 9:15 we were done with every one that we'd tested. So we went pretty quick. We were down to the point where kids were in and out really quick in a minute. But then our younger kids were just they were struggling. So we would sometimes go to the classrooms and you know when they opened up to early childhood, we would test early childhood students outside their classrooms. Sometimes we'd bring them to the boardroom. We would practice saliva drool testing with our early childhood kids. And then we run the pilot for the takeoff testing. And so for us that was where the stressors of that really revealed themself because of the take home but we did our testing in the morning. And then literally, we started you know, we went from the Rockefeller grant expired, and then they offered the ability that you could do their own testing or you can bring in a third party. We brought in a third party, or that third party, the first third party was not as successful. They could not manage it, they didn't have enough workers. Lots of time we were taking over for us. All of the testing was done by an administrative team. That means all my principals, six principals, Director of Technology, administrative assistants, Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent literally we were there twice a week testing the kids, twice a week waiting for every single result to come in was exhausting. [RE: Yes.] In fact, we were testing Monday, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Monday was when you get

tested, Tuesday if you were absent, and again on Thursday for your second testing. So three days a week myself or the principal, mostly myself and the principal we literally would wait up and wait for the results, sit there and hit refresh, refresh, refresh. And then we would get six positives, or ten, or two. And then we would start calling parents at 9 o'clock at night to tell him "guess what, your kids positive" and then a letter would have to go out and then you notify the teachers to fill out the close contact form. I mean, just an exhausting [inaudible] there and even though we went from one third-party and then our current third-party right now is now taking over. We had a system in place that this is how we're doing it and you're gonna follow the same rules we have. Here's our two lines and our two stations kids come here they come through. So as a third party came in there, but then I still had administrators because you had to have people observe kids testing and was still observed testing. That means we had to stand there and watch kids test and encourage them to do that. We had an administrative team, we never used parents and we never paid anyone. That was just all of the administrative team literally doing that for now you know, going on our third year of testing. Process is a lot easier with take home testing. But I still have administrators, we all get assigned so many days to do take home testing because then we assist right now to collect those samples as kids walk into the building. And now we're at the point now where they drop off their samples in the morning and they go right into class and so we have zero loss of instructional time. And we had minimal because we had a pretty... everyone that came in knew that Kevin was a little anal retentive and it had to be done this way and this is how we were doing it. And this is the process we're going to do it and we're going to be really serious and we're going to follow all the protocols. So but it was an exhausting two years.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:08:50

Yes, I can imagine. So I guess moving on to the next questions. So for the for the volunteers, you already talked about this, but it was just mostly administrative...

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:09:04

It was just people that was there. We used school nurses, we used ourselves, I tried to limit who was doing it. So that's why I took it upon myself to check all the results and then the principal and I looked at herself and just said I think we're going to mentally break if we're the only ones checking results. And so then we went into a rotation, saying "we need other people to check these results." But unfortunately, we were still sitting there every Monday, Tuesday, Thursdays checking the clock at night, hitting the refresh button to see if we were positive or not.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:09:37

So for the rotation, was it... did staff volunteer for this or was it just sort of...?

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:09:42

Umm... I'm on the team of 'volun-told?' Okay. You're an administrator. So guess what, this is what we're doing and this is how we're doing it and I got your back and if you're going to do it, I'm going to do it.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:09:54

Okay. Great. So for the next question, how did... you kind of touched upon this with the Rockefeller grant, but um, since for public schools, the State gave money, so how was that handled? Did you do this [inaudible]?

**Kevin Suchinski 1:10:13**

So in that second year we went to testing. We had a... since we had a third party, but we, they were only going to test one day a week. Since we are testing the other two days, testing on Tuesdays and testing on Thursdays, we then use a hybrid testing model. And for the record, in order for Hillside School District to be reimbursed from that, it took over six months to finally get it approved because initially, hybrid testing meaning you either pick a third party or you do it yourself and you do it on your own, like I have a district that they decided to do on their own. It did have a party behind their vote since we tested three days and we can remember for the initial contract with their party is only one day a week. So what I wanted to do was the kids who are absent on Tuesdays and I need to do my sports because that was CDC guidelines. That company was not coming to do it. So we as a team did it on our own. We were approved to be a vendor from U of I. But we finally after numerous emails and numerous conversations we were approved as a third party vendor, and those results or those tests that we did we were paid for for the dollars but there after said there is no such thing as hybrid testing. You either do it by yourself, or you do it with your vendor. And if your vendors not doing it and do it by yourself, you will not be reimbursed for that. And that was all of last year. So any extra testing we did was on our own. For us, we had a PM kindergarten and PM early childhood program that since our vendor left already and our kids came in midstream, our AC kids would come into the board room they would test them and I would get in my car and drive the samples every every Tuesday in the afternoon back so they can get their results. So there was some uniqueness on their understanding that that was a protocol and there was you couldn't you had to be careful in terms of where the funding was going. We did get that check for that. But then afterwards it says you can no longer do hybrid testing you have to pick one or the other and it was very clear that you were not being reimbursed. And so all the extra testing we did was just us. That was Kevin's car driving back and forth as the as the courier for extra testing.

**Rebeca Escamilla 1:12:34**

Yes, yeah, we do hear stories of how for example, the university lost hundreds of millions during COVID-19. So for, just just for clarification, for the Hillside District when it had to pay for the testing, did that money come out from others?

**Kevin Suchinski 1:12:56**

So that was that was a reimbursement. So every testing you did you got \$8. Yeah, so realistically, we had this so what our costs were is that we had to buy our testing supplies, that was our pens, our bags, our bins, our scanners, all that we had to pay for ourselves and we had to continue using district monies. For us, we were able to use the federal funding dollars to do that. And so we use those monies so we didn't have to use existing monies but we were just being reimbursed for that additional testing. Then we went into our second year we had a third party vendor that kind of was released from their contract and then Zebra Health came in and that's been our current partner for the last almost a year and a half, almost two years now give or take. And Zebra Health is now our partner now that they come now. Mondays and then they come on Thursdays for take home testing. But in that way, if I look at the number of hours that people were working, none of our administrative staff, nurses or administrators who were there never received an extra dollar because there was no avenue to get them extra money to get paid. So you had testing companies where I would do 300 tests, they would get paid \$10. That

would be \$3,000 a week. They'd have two people come in at \$24 or \$25 an hour that would be 100 bucks for one day, 100 bucks for two days. They would spend \$250 on labor and they would make \$3,000 a week so they might be taking \$2,000. So where that money went to I understand that there's lots of issues, but some of these third party vendors, certainly in my mind, the amount of people they staff, that's where it became exhausting for districts why some districts gave up on the program, because it became exhausting. So even though you have a third party vendor doing it, you only had two people they were looking for the bottom dollar. How much money can I make by doing this testing? I don't want to have the it started with four people being there and they scale it down to two and so then you had to keep in your administrators and one of the agreements in the contract was you had to have- they would not observe kids. They would not supervise kids. And so I would talk to all third party vendors. They said Kevin, your school is the best. I'm not bragging for the record. But you had your people there, they monitored students, they kept them under control. We would go to other schools kids are eating food doing these things. But that's the exhausting part of this process there, is that there is that after the testing is done, check your results, to then giving up your time or every day and that is awesome. And then you would spend another two hours notifying parents regarding positive tests. That's the true reality of this as well as trying to then keep your staff going and principals are trying to keep your staff going. You're trying to keep the kids in school. That's the reality of COVID on top of everything else that happened with just loss of life, serious illnesses in terms of that.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:15:57

Yeah, thank you for...

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:15:59

my feature box. They've all heard it a million times. I'm so sorry for the record.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:16:09

So I guess another aspect that I wanted to follow up so for when SHIELD was paying for some of these resources, was that money that was meant for each school? Or was it just kind of a general...

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:16:26

So when SHIELD Illinois did the Rockefeller grant, obviously they took care of all those expenses. When you went and phased into then hiring outside contractors, they were paid directly. We received no money at all. They were paid directly. So all of our costs regarding additional travel, additional testing time people there. If we wanted to hire someone to be a supervisor, we'd have to pay him we decided to do that on our own. Because we wanted all of our monies to go towards kids. Versus some districts hired parents, volunteers get separate budgets. They gave people overtime for me probably that's one of my things as how did I-- and then so what I did for my administrative staff is they got COVID bonuses by the Board of Education to try to offset their hours which is probably just a token of appreciation it nowhere took care of their time. And so what the Board did is I said to him as that you know, as well as teachers got a COVID, you know what I would call as a thank you, by no means did those administrators who worked ever get paid for the amount of hours that they did, and it was exhausting to the point where people were facing positive mental health because it was a daunting challenge and exhausting.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:17:42

Yes. We've heard stories of staff members who after going through the initial phases of COVID-19, they they're just burnout and they decide to leave their role.

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:17:55

I would in for us. I had a Director of Curriculum Instruction, because of what we had to do for everything, she end up retiring early. She could have stayed longer, but I think the challenge is relating to being still in COVID the unfinished learning was there. She decided like okay, I have my time to make the leap. All my other people did stay. I didn't have a loss of that. Didn't have--I see more of the issues now where teachers are stressed, burnt out, say they're overworked this year, or that is coming up but as I talked to all my superintendent groups, those groups, every single teacher is saying that they're concerned with student behaviors, student mental health issues, familia issues going on, lots of issues going on, and that's what we're facing now.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:18:41

Thank you. I guess going on to the last page. So you did talk about this, but aside from SHIELD, did Hillside School District partner with any other organizations?

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:18:56

Yes, which is just exciting news. So when it first came out that both Moderna or Pfizer was developing a COVID-19 vaccine--Thank you, SHIELD--they were so willing to share the resources. This young man that sits in front of you has been interviewed from NPR to be 74 to going into webinars with State Health Department officials and being asked to talk about the importance of SHIELD. SHIELD Illinois put my name out there, I was on the front page of the [Chicago] Tribune I ever forever be grateful for the appreciation that they did for me, but has been an active and so I've been interviewed for many, so many journals about the [inaudible] of SHIELD that I really lifted going from there. But at the same time, when Pfizer came out, out of a whim, ran into someone from [inaudible] said yeah, we'd like to start with doing COVID-19 clinics. This person took it to heart that said that we're going to save lives. We have to save lives. And I was eating drinking COVID and started combing vaccine community clinics, started 'em first in a point of going to my village, my village officials and saying hey, I want to do this for the community. Started with very small ones at the school. We were one of the first districts to do for our staff. Our staff was the first ones to get the COVID-19 initial there. And we moved into a phase of developing a partnership with Jewel (?) and ASCO (?) where we were running vaccine clinics for 2000 people at a time. That would--we would partner with the village, they went to the Sheet Metal Workers Union Hall in Hillside and said "can we use this hall to do it?" I had the village there with the police department, the fire department and we were running 2000 people at a time vaccine clinics from eight o'clock until four o'clock in the afternoon. I was there every day that we would do that would be the first dose we'd run a second dose. But I think we counted up that we continue that partnership with there we've done over 8,000 to 10,000 vaccines for the community. We were the first out there doing it. We tried to cover our community visits important and that's where the hesitation came in. When we were trying to push out the initial COVID vaccine, we have lots of hesitation about what was it about lots of people being there. So we had to get out there doing it both in English and Spanish, having our nurses and my administrative assistant build those relationships tongue parents like this is not--You're not going to go horns. There is some research to it. Well, you know, all the resources are telling us they

were doing whether how much they did on the efficacy of that we're not sure but we still think it has saved many lives. And so dealt with Jewel and ASCO where we were just wanting them non stop one of the first ones school districts are running for community where then we were able to do it for students and then it was 12 and older. So we did that first one and that was old park. We had people coming from Elmhurst we were the first one out there and literally just continuing to run clinics non stop to then running booster clinics. From the second boosters, then to running clinics for kids who are five and six to get their initial boosters. And that was a partnership we developed with Jewel and ASCO who--Kevin met so many pharmacists who were getting their pharmacy license. They would be sitting there I would be talking and they'd be studying in between. We would have 20 stations there with people just going around and just literally getting shot after shot there. Grateful to Jewel and ASCO, they made a lot of money off of it. We make no money at all, but every vaccine clinic we did we brought in a food truck or we had food and then we just gave out food to our pharmacists, to our police, the police and fire department. We had the pharmacists they were become we ran a club a clinic and they're all we ran clinics at the school. We always had the fire department there. So if something happened with someone, we ran our first ones for little kids and you know, these are the heartbreaking stories you get. You get a mother say to a five-year-old child "You know why you're getting this vaccine? It's because your grandfather died." Yes, the human aspect of it all. Just beyond heartbreaking.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:23:33

Yes, it is.

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:23:35

Beyond heartbreaking. But the idea there are times so then I get you know, praise for doing things that at the end it was a village effort, a community effort. I just happened to be the big mouth who said "let's do this."

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:23:49

Yes. And I appreciate these stories because we typically do--we've done interviews for researchers and epidemiologists and sometimes the human aspect of it almost missing in those interviews. So it's something that we're grateful to be getting.

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:24:05

It was just so you know, and then we partnered with the County Department of Public Health. You know, this is a guy who was on every webinar every week with Cook County Department of Public Health, deciding what is the staffer saying what's the research on there? How do we continue to fight it, being on every single webinar, working with Cook County Department of Public Health to do additional clinics, sending out research with them partnered with them in terms of getting families out there, partnering with SHIELD Illinois to do surveys regarding parents about why do they do testing, why they--and then they got gift cards to staff coming in and kind of giving them feedback to all the pilots and then you know how we pivoted was from, you know, in person to now take home testing. Now we volunteer to do the in demand on demand COVID testing I'm just waiting for Maria--Maria, wherever you're at, get our kids over to us so we could become a drop off spot and then we can go to on demand, knowing that lots of the community there so that was a partnership from the village of Hillside to Mayor Camerino, to [inaudible], to the fire chief, Jeff, to Ken Carlin who just came together and you



know, knew everyone going in there. So that was huge endeavor, just to get that in people's arms. The governor came and said, you know, teachers are going to stay in school. They need to be vaccinated, not going to do weekly testing. So then our teachers went to SHIELD testing. This is the guy that had tell people like you didn't do your SHIELD testing this week. And if you don't have your SHIELD testing, and you don't have a negative result, then you can't be in work. So but that the ease of the SHIELD testing allowed us to really make it as less stressful as you can, even though people had both religious and political differences to the vaccine and testing that still only made it so easy that people just came down, took her pass when there was said they got back the results and life goes on. And so that was the ease of the testing for us. Was that you know, in the early phases, you know, was taken two days to get back results. Then everyone stopped testing we get we were in the first month we were getting back our testing at seven, eight o'clock at night. Versus people were going to Walgreens, CVS and taking four days to get them back or going to Oak Street Health and then finding out that they really didn't test them and these results were there. People were waiting hours in line and they were going past the clinic by my house that pop up clinic and there'd be hundreds of people in line waiting to get their COVID tests. And you know, SHIELD Illinois was doing community testing we were doing testing there everyone can test and so the ease in which you are getting that back because when someone say to me is like can't get my kid at school I said Well, you could get tested right now. There's no wait. So don't go to CVS. Don't go to pharmacy, come here and do this for free. And I would you know meet kids in the parking lot or in the thing. We would start just literally testing them in the parking lot on off days just to get them back to school but the ease of SHIELD was just was just an opportunity to keep kids in school to help promote and save my eyes and my opinions because people knew what was going on. They had symptoms, they would get a test. They can then take the correct the chances. I think that's the difference that SHIELD made. Everyone knows that in West 40, in my region of Illinois Association of Superintendents, that is I was the SHIELD guy. Everything that they have. They all knew that I was drinking the Kool Aid. Some of them believe in it. They didn't want to hear about it, but I was always preaching and someone wants to know about it, they would call me I would tell him that you're stupid if you don't do it. And I'm not calling you stupid, I'm just saying that you're not listening to facts. You can do this for free. You don't have to do it by yourself. You can protect your community, let them deal with it and tests and to me I think SHIELD was was just a difference maker and really was at the forefront of really saving lives. And I appreciate for being part of that.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:28:04

It's good to hear. I mean as a student I've also heard stories of students who they're just too busy to go to testing so they kind of had to make time out of it and just going to the SHIELD testing unit here on campus, the speed of how quickly everything went was a big change. So I guess kind of winding down, is Hillside school district 23 still in contract?

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:28:33

Absolutely we're still in contract and we're going to the On Demand testing. As we know we went from 85% of our kids testing that we're down to about 20%. We are also part of the pilot school on wastewater. So again, we're part of the IDPH and SHIELD two and three where we collect wastewater for both RSB and COVID. And we're one of the 30 schools that are part of that pilot, so thanks to Bob Lucky I think that's his last name there. So we're part of that one. So we'll have a meeting next week. And then we're able to do the correlation, the number of kids out versus what's in our wastewater. And

they did that pilot. In a sense, they want to take them for the water treatment plants. They want to take them right from school. So what did what did Hillside do? Kevin volunteered, we probably volunteer for everything. And again, to everyone like I text Beth Heller and she's like "I'm in Hawaii" and I said "I'm going in for the interview." She said "So am I, it's so exciting." And whoever put my name up for it is pretty amazing. I think everyone in SHIELD knows who Kevin is, bad and good and I feel sorry for you. But we're feeling great contact and I will continue doing it. We think that the fact that the governor is sending the declaration in May 11. I think then we'll figure out what happens after that. And I know that's where this on demand testing, it'll probably be the next phase. And that just gives them, now when you go to CVS or Walgreens or immediate care, you're now starting to pay for your testing. So imagine that the impacts on our families, so we want to take away the barriers of this is free still so come and take it do not go from there. Just like for the vaccines for Jewel and ASCO, you know, if you didn't have insurance, we're gonna get it free for them. Now they're starting to charge for the vaccine. So you know, that's kind of where we're at with the change over time. You know, we're hoping to every every, every day gets better. Yes.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:30:30

Thank you for that. So kind of more of a personal questions. So I guess for the first one, what have you learned from COVID-19 pandemic just with the people you surround yourself professionally?

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:30:45

So some for me professionally, I what I have found is that politics has ventured into the professional categories of education and we as an education system was meant to deal with kids who have been ingrained in politics. It has been either for it or against it. You're either red or blue. That is the negativity of the pandemic. On the professional side, I have seen people come together and build partnerships to really go above and beyond to save their families. I just got lucky and became the "poster child." Because you can see by this interview that I like talk or share. But the idea there was lots of people were doing just as much work they just you know, they weren't out there because they just didn't have to get interviewed. So I think we came together, that we found out how to navigate science, how to navigate politics and navigate the ongoing pandemic and that's where I've learned professionally, that there's so much science behind this good and bad, but that we had we have to take the science is important for us as we engage because there will be another pandemic that's going to impact students and will impact them further. So that's where I've learned from that part of that one. Personally, what I've learned about it is probably more knowledge than I ever needed to know about COVID in my life and wastewater and all the things that I really didn't want to know my life actual testing and PCR levels in terms of that, false tests. But I'm pretty grateful because I think I was able to hopefully keep my friends and educate my family and my friends and really, you know, have my family and my friends who believe in it really advocate for it, which is pretty good in personal level, I was able to, you know, do some things that were further good and you know that to me out of everything. You know, it was it as I said to the Union, for me professionally and personally COVID almost broke me. Very much so.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:32:43

Yeah. I relate to that. So we did talk about the community vaccine clinics, but is there anything else?

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:32:52

Nope. You've gone above and beyond. You'll see me on the Tribune and the vaccine clinics were just a whole effort. It just you know, we had great hotdogs and hamburgers and good food but I think that was a role that if people wanted to get them, you build it they will come and we create that. You know, if you do it they will come if you do build upon people you do it so I think it was just thanks everyone for building vaccine clinics because it was so rewarding.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:33:21

It's just having that resource available. So since we only have 3 minutes left, is there anything you want to say before we end the recording?

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:33:33

No--differently, different from that you know, for me, as I said it broke me my mom didn't die of COVID but she died because of COVID. But due to COVID, she ended up losing her life during this time and gave up on her because of her illnesses, lack of not seeing her children. Would I do something differently? Me, personally, I'd probably spend more time on myself and my family versus devoting myself to everyone else, which is probably you know, not being able to see your mom and yes, COPD and one's got lung deficiencies and my sister is a nurse and is in a hospital setting. You can see me and go with mass. So what I do definitely probably want to go back and get that time to go from there. Yeah, and that's the biggest time because I think everyone has learned to just hug your family, hug your kids. Say thank you. And just not be so divisive.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:34:23

Yes. That's something that always comes up in all of our interviews, just epidemiologists having to work 24/7 during the pandemic and just wanting to spend more time with family.

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:34:32

Thanks, for the record thanks to SHIELD, thanks for adopting Hillside School District 93. We can't thank you enough. Thank you for all you do.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 1:34:41

Yeah, I mean, I'm not part of SHIELD, but I guess technically I am the person who documents, so, thank you. But Kinsey, is there anything else you want to add?

**Kinsey Brown** 1:34:56

No, I just want to say what a fantastic interview this has been. This is such a great perspective and seriously it, this has given us so much perspective into how SHIELD has operated in the community. So thank you so much, sir.

**Kevin Suchinski** 1:35:11

You're very welcome. Thank you