

# TO EXCELLENCE

**PLEASANTDALE MIDDLE SCHOOL** | Focus on national achievement test, rather than state, helps make a big leap among highest-scoring middle-grade schools

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At Pleasantdale Middle School in Burr Ridge, Principal Meg Pokorny has presided over rising Illinois Standards Achievement Test scores by, basically, not paying much attention to them.

The ISATs have changed so many times that Pokorny and other Pleasantdale District 107 officials don't have much faith in them, Pokorny says.

Instead, the district relies on a test that's been around for decades — the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, which stacks up students against a national sample rather than a state passing standard.

"It's a dependable, reliable measure," Pokorny said. "It's how we take our temperature."

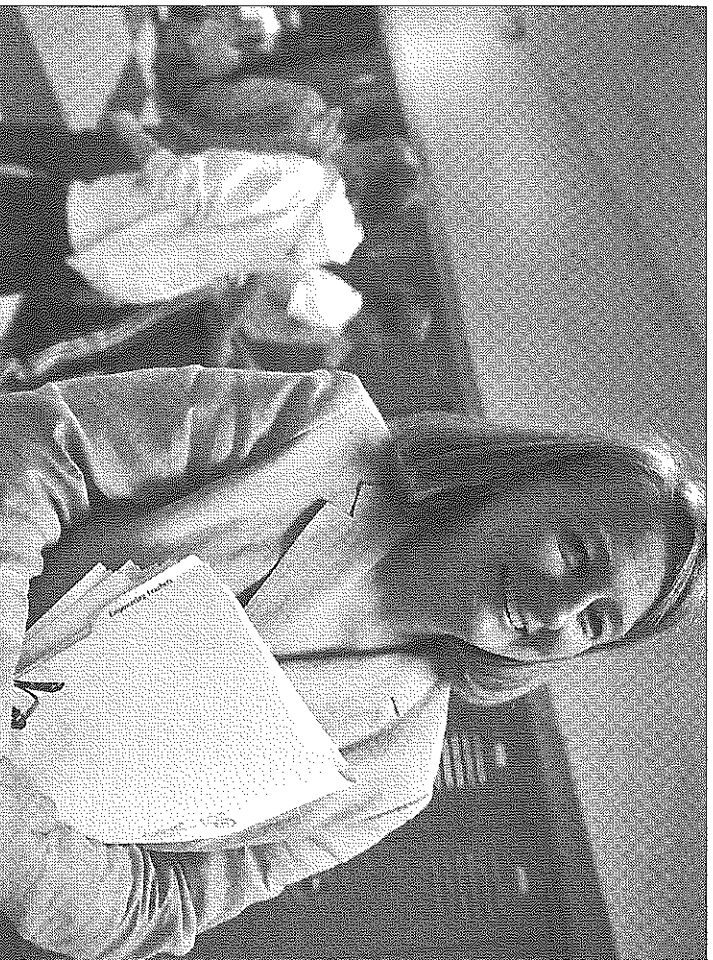
Even so, Pleasantdale Middle has seen steady ISAT gains. This year, 94.5 percent of students there passed their ISATs, up from 78 percent when Pokorny became principal in 2002.

In 2008, the school leapt past 45 others to land at No. 43 on the Chicago Sun-Times' annual list of the highest-scoring public middle-grade schools in the state, based on math and reading scores in grades six through eight. Its jump was the biggest among the top 50.

Seasoned teachers — more than 80 percent have at least five years experience — are one key.

But some changes last year also may have helped. A new vocabulary book, tied to Latin and Greek roots, was so popular with accelerated eighth-graders that it's been expanded this year to seventh-graders. A new math lab offered struggling kids an extra 22 minutes of math tutoring during lunch.

And an extra 44 minutes a day of reading, offered for four years to struggling readers, seemed to be bearing



Meg Pokorny, principal at Pleasantdale Middle School in Burr Ridge, says the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills is "how we take our temperature." | JEAN LACHAT-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



Alexia Petrovic, 12, discusses word roots with classmates during seventh-grade composition and vocabulary class.

Kids spend most of that time in "reading workshop" just reading a good book.

But sixth-grade teacher Nikki Giancola also quickly checks in with each of her

seven students. The first question she asks 11-year-old Paulina Sribnovski: "How many pages did you read last night?" Then: "Tell me what you read yesterday." And then: "Go through your Post-Its."

Kids use Post-Its to record at least three "connections" between events in their books and things that have happened to them or occurred in other books, or took place in the real world.

Giancola also wants to know how "hard" Paulina found her book. On a scale of 1-to-5, with 5 "being really hard," Paulina says "3."

Without the reading workshop, Paulina says, she would only have 10 minutes of "free reading" at the beginning of her regular reading class. She likes the extra practice. "I'm not that good at reading," she says. "This class helps me be a better reader and to read faster."

At the other end of the spectrum, at least one classroom per grade in this largely

white school, where only about 7 percent of the kids come from low-income families, is devoted to an accelerated curriculum. A gifted specialist team-teaches some classes, helping ensure kids are challenged and instruction is one grade above level.

In one accelerated composition class, teacher Kristin Thompson hands out numbered popsicle sticks to divide seventh-graders into groups to practice word dissection skills, based on Latin and Greek roots from the book *The Word Within the Word*.

#### Vocabulary builder

Alexia Petrovic and Rachel Walsh attack their vocabulary question together: "Is a viable fetus able to survive?" Since "able" means "able to be" and "vita" means "life," the answer is "yes," they decide.

"I think I'm understanding things a lot better now when I read," Alexia says. "You can actually figure out what a

**TOP 10 SUBURBAN\* MIDDLE SCHOOLS**

'08 state ranking	'08 percentile	School	City
7	85.84	Kennedy Junior H.S.	Lisle
9	83.89	Daniel Wright Jr. H.S.	Lincolnshire
10	83.44	Joseph Sears	Kenilworth
12	83.31	Hinsdale Middle	Hinsdale
15	82.68	Roosevelt	River Forest
18	81.95	Marie Murphy	Wilmette
19	81.86	Carleton W. Washburne	Winnetka
20	81.19	Maple	Northbrook
21	80.83	Bannockburn	Bannockburn
23	80.72	Wilmette Junior H.S.	Wilmette

\* 6-county metro area

#### TOP 10 CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD\* MIDDLE SCHOOLS

'08 state ranking	'08 percentile	School
11	83.36	Edgebrook
13	83.15	Lincoln**
15	82.68	Oriole Park
32	78.86	Bell**
38	76.73	Norwood Park
53	74.32	Ogden**
73	72.30	Blaine
83	71.85	Wildwood
92	71.23	Beaubien**
100	70.43	Burley

\* Schools where neighborhood children are guaranteed seats.

\*\* Test scores include gifted classrooms

#### For all four top 10 charts:

- See how we ranked the schools at [suntimes.com/news](http://suntimes.com/news).
- Percentile indicates the percentage of students statewide who scored the same as or worse than the average student at the schools listed.
- Elementary chart based on reading and math scores at schools that tested at least two grades out of third, fourth and fifth grades.
- Middle school chart based on reading and math scores at schools that tested at least two grades out of sixth, seventh and eighth grades.
- Some Chicago schools appear on both elementary and middle school charts. SOURCE: Sun-Times analysis of individual student ISAT scores

word means." Don't look for any ISAT test prep books in this school. With such high scores, the academic sanctions that low ISAT scores can bring are not a worry. "We give the ISAT and

we're very pleased when our scores are high," Pokorny said. "But to know where we need to improve as a district, we use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills."

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