# Three veteran educators with over a century of service retire from Hester Junior High



The recent retirement of educators Cathy Bernath, Greg Helton, and Kathy Zei has marked a significant moment for District 84’s Hester Junior High School in Franklin Park, Illinois. Together, they boast over a century of combined teaching experience, embodying a legacy of dedication and passion that has profoundly impacted countless students over their distinguished careers.

Giffen Trotter, principal of Hester Junior High, remarked on their unwavering commitment: “I’ve been here 19 years and they were all here when I got here. They’re just solid, reliable educators who see the big picture. Junior high can be a tough time for adolescents, and they should be commended for spending their whole career with the toughest ages.” Such sentiments reflect a broader appreciation for educators who remain dedicated to their students, especially during formative years marked by significant changes and challenges.

Cathy Bernath's career as a language arts teacher spanned 35 years, during which she not only imparted literary skills but also inspired students to pursue various interests through extracurriculars such as cheerleading and the school newspaper. “Teaching in the Franklin Park community has been a fantastic experience,” Bernath shared, highlighting her connection with her students, including those from families that have a legacy with Hester.

Greg Helton’s journey into teaching was unexpected; initially aspiring to be a professional musician, he was encouraged by his parents to pursue an education degree as a safety net. His decision proved fortuitous as he became a celebrated music educator at Hester, influencing generations of young musicians. Helton has been a key figure in fostering a love for music in his students, noting, “The students have been what kept me coming back every August.” Upon retirement, he expressed enthusiasm for mentoring his successor, indicating a smooth transition for the music program at Hester.

Kathy Zei, who taught special education for 34 years, has cherished the opportunity to work with students facing a variety of challenges. Reflecting on her journey, she stated, “Teaching reading to kids who struggle has been one of my favourite subjects.” Zei's methods evolved over the years, adapting to changing educational paradigms which have seen increased inclusivity for students with special needs. She expressed pride in the supportive environment fostered by District 84, attributing much of her success to the community’s commitment to education.

These retirements come at a time when turnover in the teaching profession is increasingly common. While many educators switch schools or leave the field altogether, the dedication exemplified by Bernath, Helton, and Zei is noteworthy. Their extended tenures at Hester Junior High underscore the capacity for long-term commitment in an era where job mobility is often the norm.

The retirement of these three educators not only signifies the culmination of their impactful careers but also prompts reflection on the future of educational consistency and mentorship within the district. As Trotter noted, Bernath nurtured “countless writers,” while Helton influenced “hundreds, maybe more like thousands of young musicians.” Zei’s legacy is similarly profound, with her unwavering support significantly aiding students in overcoming their personal hurdles.

As Hester Junior High continues to cultivate a nurturing environment for its students, the absence of these stalwarts will be felt. Yet, they leave behind a robust legacy, one that has firmly established the benchmarks for compassion and excellence in teaching within the Franklin Park community. As the district moves forward, the stories and teachings of Bernath, Helton, and Zei will undoubtedly inspire both current educators and future generations.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/), [[2]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/), [[2]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/)
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* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/), [[2]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/), [[2]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/), [[2]](https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/10/franklin-park-teachers-retire/> - An article from the Chicago Tribune dated June 10, 2025, detailing the retirement of educators Cathy Bernath, Greg Helton, and Kathy Zei from Hester Junior High School in Franklin Park, Illinois. The piece highlights their combined 104 years of service, their contributions to the school community, and the impact they've had on students over the decades. The article also features insights from Principal Giffen Trotter and personal reflections from the retirees themselves.
3. <https://www.fppld.org/local-history/historical-buildings/elementary-middle-school-district-84/> - A historical overview of Franklin Park School District 84, provided by the Franklin Park Public Library. The article traces the district's origins from the first school building in 1888 to the establishment of Hester Junior High School in 1971, named in honour of Superintendent Vance Hester. It also details the evolution of other schools within the district and their significance in the community.
4. <https://westcooknews.com/stories/669493862-franklin-park-school-district-84-welcomes-1-239-students-in-2023-24-school-year> - A report from West Cook News dated March 14, 2025, announcing that Franklin Park School District 84 welcomed 1,239 students in the 2023-24 school year, marking a 2.4% decrease from the previous year. Hester Junior High School had the largest enrollment in the district with 446 students. The article also provides context on statewide student enrollment trends in Illinois.
5. <https://westcooknews.com/stories/603230794-hester-junior-high-school-reports-0-truancy-rate> - An article from West Cook News dated August 16, 2021, reporting that Hester Junior High School maintained a 0% truancy rate during the 2018-19 school year. The school's average daily attendance rate was 95%. The piece also compares these figures to district and state averages, highlighting the school's commitment to student engagement and attendance.
6. <https://hester.d84.org/apps/spotlightmessages/8347> - A message from Hester Junior High School's website welcoming students and parents to the Franklin Park School District 84 community. The message emphasises the school's core values of Responsibility, Organization, positive Attitude, and Respect, and highlights the supportive environment provided by the faculty, staff, and parents.
7. <https://www.niche.com/k12/hester-junior-high-school-franklin-park-il/> - A profile of Hester Junior High School from Niche, an educational data platform. The profile provides an overview of the school's academic performance, diversity, and teacher quality. It includes data on student proficiency in reading and math, student-teacher ratio, and demographic breakdowns, offering insights into the school's environment and performance.