

OUR neighborhood

Winter 2025

NEWS

Leading School Reform in the Fifth Ward

A pioneering team of Northwestern researchers is embarking on a transformative study to advance racial equity, school reform, and STEM education in Evanston, with a specific focus on the new elementary school in the Fifth Ward.

“This research, if successful, can be a model for how a city and school district can truly listen to a marginalized community.”

Supported by a five-year, \$4.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation, the researchers will work with the city, Evanston/Skokie School District 65, community groups, and local Black families to ensure students attending the new school receive rigorous and culturally relevant STEM education.

The research project is led by assistant professor of Black studies kihana miraya ross, associate professor of learning sciences Sepehr Vakil, and professor of learning sciences Nichole Pinkard. They will partner with community members and organizations—including Shorefront



Residents participate in the groundbreaking for a new school in the Fifth Ward. Shreya Srinivasan/The Daily Northwestern

Legacy Center, Fleetwood-Jourdain Center, and Family Focus—to better understand Black families' desires and needs pertaining to education. The investigators will also collaborate with an advisory council of members of Evanston's Black community.

“We have ongoing meetings with the council to discuss what's happening in Evanston, how we want to spend the resources, what

we want to study, and what we want to change,” Vakil says. “And then we're making sure the district has a clear sense of what the community wants.”

The 1967 closure of Foster School—the Fifth Ward's de facto segregated K–8 school—forced hundreds of Black families to bus their children to majority-white schools across Evanston. Since then, Black

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Boosting Small Businesses

In 2022 two Evanston small business owners founded e-Local Marketplace with a bold mission. Bryant Wallace and Clarence Weaver wanted to transform the way large organizations connect with local businesses to facilitate noncontract spending.

“Small business sellers often lack the financial resources, the technical expertise, or the time” to do e-commerce on their own, Weaver says. ELM offers a solution, with a platform aiming to increase earnings for such businesses, including those owned by women, minorities, and veterans, in Evanston and the surrounding area.

The inspiration for ELM was born when Wallace participated in the Leadership Evanston group. During an assignment to speak with community businesses and institutions,

“When you have successful local businesses and institutions working together, there’s an opportunity to spark and build new things.”

he discovered that many larger institutions wanted an easier way to find and buy from local companies. After talking over the problem together, he and Weaver began to build what became ELM. Both brought years of IT experience to the project.

ELM’s first client was Northwestern. Wallace and Weaver connected with Jim Konrad, the University’s assistant vice president for procurement and payment services, who served

on a local advisory committee. Working with Northwestern was a big step for ELM, not only to lend credibility to the platform but also as an opportunity to build and foster community relationships.

“I believe in a holistic approach,” Wallace says. “When you have successful local businesses and institutions working together, there’s an opportunity to spark and build new things.”

Northwestern will host a forum with ELM on December 10, bringing together potential buyers and sellers to further invigorate the local economy and expand the platform’s reach.

TO LEARN MORE about the event, visit forumelm.com.

Move-Out Program Encourages Reuse

Each year at the end of spring quarter, sustainNU's Take It or Leave It program invites students living on campus to place unwanted clothes, shoes, and linens in collection boxes in their residence halls—thereby reducing waste during move-out. Embracing the philosophy that one person's trash is another person's treasure, students are free to take items from the boxes, with remaining items

a lot of transition and a lot of moving, I hope it then carries with them as they move into the world beyond college.”

SustainNU celebrated 30 years of the program in 2024; Cahillane says it's a team effort among various University stakeholders. Reebie Storage and Moving, Northwestern's internal moving services vendor, donates the collection boxes, while

the University's grounds crew assists with donation pickups and Residential Services promotes the program as part of the move-out process.

Students are eager to take part. “We'll go to some residence halls, and the collection box is overflowing every single day,” Cahillane says.

While Take It or Leave It is primarily aimed at students, Cahillane hopes others in the University community take advantage of sustainNU's Green Office and Green Lab certifications, which help faculty and staff members implement practices to conserve water and energy and reduce waste in their workspaces. “There are always opportunities to contribute to a more sustainable Northwestern,” she says.



donated to a local charity. In 2024 alone, more than 8,000 pounds of clothes and linens were donated to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Chicago, which works to combat hunger and poverty in Cook and Lake Counties.

Julie Cahillane, Northwestern's associate director of sustainability, hopes the program helps demonstrate the importance of keeping reusable goods circulating in the community. “Whether that community is your next-door neighbor or someone in broader Chicagoland, reuse is a good option,” she says. “If we can help instill that concept in students while they're at an age when there's

TO LEARN MORE about sustainability on campus, visit northwestern.edu/sustainability/take-action.



Leading School Reform

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community members have fought to reopen the school, and in 2022 the District 65 board voted to open a public school in the historically Black ward.

Vakil says the team wants to ensure that the visions of Evanston's African American and African and Black immigrant communities are "respected and can meaningfully inform how this new school is going to take shape."

The NSF-supported work builds on Ross's prior research, which includes oral histories, surveys, and focus groups with Black community members in Evanston. Research findings emphasized that the Black community wanted the new school to have a STEM emphasis, Vakil says, "and they were really keen on having the school honor Black culture and Black values," similar to the African-centered curriculum at the city's Oakton Elementary School.

Given these findings, the team is working with stakeholders across Evanston to incorporate them into the planning of the new school. Once the school opens, the team plans to evaluate outcomes—exploring, for instance, whether students and families feel a sense of belonging in the school and in STEM classes.

"This research, if successful, can be a model for how a city and school district can truly listen to a marginalized community and incorporate their voices and their values into educational programming, both in and out of school," Vakil says. "I hope the research makes a practical difference in the educational experiences of Black families in Evanston."

TO LEARN MORE about the project, email sepehr.vakil@northwestern.edu.



CONNECT WITH US

Our monthly email newsletter includes important community updates. Email Shayla Butler at shayla.butler@northwestern.edu to sign up.

Do you have a business or non-profit in Evanston? We can help increase your visibility, facilitate connections to the Northwestern community, and find student volunteers.

For details, visit northwestern.edu/communityrelations or contact Dave Davis, senior executive director of the Office of Neighborhood and Community Relations, at dave.davis@northwestern.edu.

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Staff profile: Jason McKean



Jason McKean is assistant dean and director of strategy and operations for the office of the dean of students. Having worked at Northwestern

since 2015, he began his current role in 2022. He directs the office for off-campus life, manages the Administrator on Call program, and oversees the department's database use.

With 25 years of experience in student affairs, McKean values helping students solve problems through advising and education. His Northwestern career began in the community standards office; his new role allows him to connect with the community and also to continue his database and strategic development work. A former middle school teacher, McKean has a bachelor's degree in social studies education and a master's in higher education.

As "Skevanston" residents, McKean and his family enjoy frequenting such local attractions as Lighthouse Beach and Evanston SPACE.