

Alternative School research detailed by local students

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Holyoke Alternative School students provided research information at the May 5 meeting of the Holyoke School Board. The project focused on “Bridging the Gap” between the alternative high school, HHS and the community.

Board member Jeff Tharp commended the students after their presentation, noting he saw a lot of confidence in them. “That’s a skill you’re gaining every day—finding a way to succeed on your own terms,” said Tharp, adding the students should be proud of themselves.

In a board work session following the regular meeting last week, board president Kendon Olofson reported the board is still happy with the alternative school after its first year. He said they’re pleased with what it’s doing for the school district.

Kicked off by a four-year grant that involves reduced level of funding each year, the alternative school status is significant to the board and community.

At this point, decisions are being considered on whether to spend money to upgrade restrooms and more in the building which currently houses the school or to look at other locations.

Supt. Stephen Bohrer pointed out timing is a factor, as well. He is working with the Colorado Dept. of Education on pursuing a construction grant, as well as the Colorado Dept. of Public Safety which issues occupancy permits.

Bohrer said the current site has been approved for one ADA restroom instead of two, but the cost of that would be \$5,000-\$10,000, and the school would still be in a building that doesn’t belong to the district.

If consideration is given for constructing a building or leasing a building that is constructed for them, it is doubtful it would be done by the start of the 2009-10 school year. As a result, exemptions would be needed for conducting classes out of the current building for a limited time.

Grants also require matching funds which the district doesn’t have at this time, and require a competitive bid process which takes further time. Matching fund percentages required by school districts are increasing in the capital construction grant process, said Bohrer.

Further discussion of alternatives will be scheduled by the local school board.

Alternative School director George Purnell noted students are looking for positive support for continuing school and working towards their high school diploma, as well as a bright career.

Student Efrain Garcia, 17, shared he has been in Holyoke five years. The main reason he dropped out of regular high school involved family issues.

He had missed quite a little school when his grandfather was ill, and it was too hard to try to integrate back into the school routine. He added he is grateful to Purnell and board member Laura Krogmeier who encouraged him to try the alternative school.

Student Kaziah Dagel shared she moved to the area a year ago. She said she’s moved 30 times and been in 16 schools, but found it especially hard to adjust to regular school here. She dropped out in January, which was hard. “I’ve had lots of obstacles in my life, but never thought going to school would be an obstacle,” she said.

Kathleen Kropp, with Centennial Mental Health, sponsored the student research project. She noted every student can learn and should have the opportunity to learn and achieve the quality of life they desire.

Some things offered by the alternative school are smaller classrooms, a chance to make up the rules and working at one’s own pace. Purnell noted it’s important for the students to understand the difference between the world and classes.

One student had a hard time leaving HHS because of a teacher he liked. On the other hand,

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students have looked for alternatives because of things people said, the way conflicts were handled (or ignored) and because they didn't feel a connection of being able to talk confidentially.

The alternative school has a very open concept, which attracts some looking for a niche.

Purnell reviewed the grant funding for the alternative school. The grant revenues will decrease by 25 percent each year. That money will eventually have to be replaced through Per Pupil Operating Revenue (PPOR) or funding received by the state for each student enrolled.

Purnell said they'll need to be good stewards of the money so the district doesn't take a big hit the fifth year, when grant funding runs out.

"If we do meet the challenges in education in the 21st century, I believe alternative education has to be part of that program," said Purnell.

Students mentioned the need to identify at-risk kids at a much earlier age than is currently being done. Purnell said if they see they'll be 20 years old at graduation, that scares them, and they probably won't do it.

Academically, the students use the Odyssey program on computers, without a teacher. Student Emily Daniel said she feels this is harder than regular school. While Odyssey allows a student to move faster, there isn't the hands-on assistance of a teacher.

Daniel said the alternative school has allowed her to catch up, so next year she'll have the choice of graduating with the class she started with—either through alternative school or regular school.

Purnell removed names from data which he shared in a visual presentation. It emphasized the individual approach for each student's learning needs.

Maury Kramer, who tutors math for alternative school students, noted the advantage in being able to work with a student who's a junior and take him back to freshman math, if necessary. There's not a social stigma of being behind like there is in regular school.

Math, in particular, is a hard subject to learn on one's own. It's not easy to read how to do math; students need to be shown.

Purnell said the students are learning interaction with adults. He added their relationship with each other as peers is very good.

He does have a concern of whether the students' attendance practice is teaching them about the real world. They need to know if they don't go to work, they could lose their job.

Next year, Purnell said they'll look at whether they should create different positive reinforcements or look at real world reinforcers.

For the coming year, Purnell said he'd like to improve on student attendance, parent involvement, additional help with student career building in the community, English as a Second Language services for those who need it and the school facility.

He added he would like to improve communication. Working with principal and counselor Susan Ortner and Summer Maloney has been great, but Purnell said he needs to communicate with high school staff in a better way.

Marshall Thompson said he and his wife are very thankful for this school and what it's done for their daughter Kracinda.

Adding details about how the alternative school handles conflict resolution between students, Kracinda noted the students are almost like a family.

Marshall Thompson serves as president of the alternative school parent council, while Tina Thompson is secretary and Heather Ganitz is vice president.