

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Looking for a way to enhance communication with the community, Holyoke School District Re-1J is considering focus groups.

Support for these groups was expressed at the March 4 school board meeting, and a program draft will be put together for review at the next meeting on Monday, March 17.

Board member Michelle Van Overbeke cited the success seen with focus groups among students. She said most of the issues that come to her from patrons involve a lack of communication, and perhaps group discussions can help with this.

The proposed focus groups will involve dialogue about strategic topics. Van Overbeke suggested that these not be complaint sessions but informational settings.

With a positive nod for such activity given by the board, Superintendent Bret Miles will put together a potential ad for the school website and newspaper to give community members a chance to get on board for focus groups or to make suggestions. This will be tweaked at the next board meeting.

It was emphasized that these are board-level issues. Teachers are still the first point of contact for parents.

Miles, Herman testify for Student Success Act

Miles and board member Dennis Herman, along with the superintendent and a board member from Cherry Creek School District, joined Colorado Association of School Board reps in testifying to the House Education Committee recently.

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Monday, March 3, they represented both small and large school districts as they introduced testimony on HB 14-1292 on the superintendents' proposal for the Student Success Act.

The superintendents' proposal highlights amendments to HB 1292 for K-12 state funding. The original bill proposes to add \$263 million to K-12 education, and Colorado superintendents are requesting \$275 million of ongoing funding to restore the negative factor and address the needs of at-risk students.

There's a formula in the state statutes and Constitution that stipulates a certain dollar figure for funding for each school district. The past four years, the Legislature has said it doesn't have the money to fund this.

The difference between the funding a school district was supposed to receive, by statute, and what it actually received is called its negative factor.

In HB 1292, Miles and Herman pointed out that the final impact on the Holyoke School District looks to be a negative \$14,876 since there is no more reserve to be used. The proposed one-time funds would represent \$29,340 for Holyoke.

With the superintendents' proposal, the final impact on Holyoke would be \$76,059, which is 10.2 percent of the negative factor. The one-time funds would be \$73,350.

The superintendents' priorities include eliminating under-funded and unfunded state mandates that take away from instruction.

Additionally, the superintendents' amendment would give each of Colorado's 178 locally elected school boards maximum flexibility in prioritizing programs and using funds.

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

The intent is to recognize each school district's unique five-year struggle to cope with being underfunded and to respond to new legislative expectations.

Survey to address food service program

After a midyear review of the school food service, Miles said the district will be deploying a survey this month to hear from students and parents. They hope to glean actionable data pertaining to the school food service program.

He pointed out that food service revenue and expenditures are monitored monthly. The midyear report shows the district is on pace to do slightly better than last year, where they operated at about a \$5,000 deficit.

There are some areas they would like to focus more attention. Miles said they would like to see K-6 lunch participation at 80 percent, up from the current 75.2 percent.

Also, they would like to set a short-term goal for K-6 breakfast participation at 25 percent, up from the current 12.2 percent. Miles said they will be using Chartwells' resources for a more aggressive breakfast advertising campaign.

Rural Agility Project update shared

Miles and board member Kim Killin reported on the Feb. 19 meeting for the Rural Agility Project. Seven school districts were represented in the meeting with Colorado Association of School

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Boards' executive director Ken Delay and CASB attorney Beth Friel.

At the end of the project meeting, Miles said they left saying they would be back at the next meeting on March 25. He said he believes two districts will not return, as they thought the project was a way to fight the Department of Education.

Delay made it clear they're not interested in fighting but want to communicate.

The Rural Agility Project recognizes that small school districts have different needs than larger ones. Recovering rural districts' freedom to govern locally is the project focus.

Reporting from the Feb. 19 meeting, Killin talked about the three targeted statutes involving waivers, innovative schools and charter schools.

It was pointed out that one of the key pieces with waivers is the threshold of proof.

The possibility of schools becoming charter schools is already on the books. Miles noted that charter schools are public schools and are under contract by the elected board of education.

Killin said CASB could be helpful in articulating to the public what this means. Miles added it's so important to make sure people understand what the district is trying to get away from and what they're doing.

Miles said the district has received pushback from the DOE staff to go the innovative schools route for approaching these rural issues.

Van Overbeke emphasized that mandates are making rural districts do things that don't work. Killin highlighted the proposed high school diploma, citing that equating a diploma to entering a

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

four-year college is not good. “There’s nothing wrong with trade schools,” she added.

Miles said Delay feels the power of the Rural Agility Project is for each individual school district to tell their story. Not everyone will have the same provisions, but CASB will provide the resources to go forward.

The next step at the March 25 planning meeting will be to list out options to change what they would like to do differently. This will begin by listing CDE rules and statutes that are in the way.

Citizen Jim Gribben attended last week’s board meeting and advised the board to research charter schools. “I don’t think it’s good for us,” he added.

Miles noted that his next meeting with Commissioner of Education Robert Hammond, along with several of his senior staff and CASB’s Delay and Friel, will be April 14. Miles is encouraged with Hammond’s pledge to work together in a problem-solving way.

Board advocacy role discussed

Miles shared several resolutions for consideration for the board to advocate its position.

Herman said he feels that submitting resolutions expressing the district’s concerns is a better way to approach challenges than to simply refuse to follow the rules.

Much frustration has been expressed across the state with regard to the negative factor, assessments, teacher effectiveness and more.

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Board member Kris Camblin said it's frustrating to just get testing figured out, then the requirements change. It's hard to relay to the public just why those changes are being made. "And it's stressful for the kids," added Van Overbeke.

"It seems like all these decisions are getting made in a vacuum," said Killin.

Herman suggested that a follow-up resolution on the negative factor discussion would be timely. He cited the point that districts weren't told where to cut funding, so why are they being told where to put it back in?

Board members agreed that a resolution on school finance would be a good start, followed perhaps by one dealing with assessments. Miles will draft some resolutions for board consideration at the next meeting.

King elected BOCES board president

Holyoke board member Jon King represents the district on the N.E. BOCES board and was elected president of that board Feb. 24.

All board members from the BOCES schools were invited to the annual meeting of the full group which followed the Feb. 24 BOCES board meeting.

Issues for rural districts were in the forefront as information was presented by the Colorado Association of School Boards.

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Reporting at the Re-1J board meeting last week, members identified that the hot topic of the Feb. 24 gathering was assessments. The feeling that students are being over-tested is becoming common.

Other business

In other business March 4, the Re-1J board:

—changed the next regular meeting to Monday, March 17 at 7 p.m. instead of Tuesday, March 18.

—held a 35-minute special meeting prior to the regular board meeting. The full meeting was taken to executive session to confer with an attorney for legal advice on specific legal questions.

—reviewed a proposed 2014-15 school calendar, with the goal being to make it as close to the 2013-14 calendar as possible. The calendar will return to the March 17 meeting for action.

—approved Susan Ortner as JR/SR high principal and Kyle Stumpf as elementary school principal for 2014-15 and 2015-16.

—hired Sandra Rahe as head HS girls/boys track coach, Scott Dille as assistant JH track coach and Shelby Beavers as volunteer JR/SR high track coach for the 2014 spring season.

—noted Emerald Award nominations have started to come in for the March 14 deadline. Selections will be made March 19 for the April 24 program.

Focus groups considered for school communication with community

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Holyoke Enterprise March 13, 2014