

Scoop'n the News — School is doing its homework

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Unforeseen scenarios crop up in any policy or procedure change, regardless of its magnitude. As a result, decisions involving significant change take some tweaking and certainly evaluation.

Holyoke schools—from staff to administration to the board of education—are taking good hard looks at procedures and evaluating them for the good of our community's youth. They're doing their homework.

One of many evaluations at the forefront is the 2008 decision to move the sixth grade to the JR/SR high building from the elementary facility.

Much controversy surrounded the move two years ago, and the school is doing its homework in studying that decision to determine if it needs tweaked, changed or left alone.

No decision for 2010-11 has been made and will not be made until three sets of criteria have been assessed. These three include teachers' perspective, parents' perspective and data. The district focus is right smack dab in the middle of the three.

Meeting with parents of current fifth grade students and then with parents of current sixth graders, administrators sought the parent perspective last Tuesday evening.

Supt. Bret Miles emphasized the study areas to both sets of parents. He pointed out this is not a financial decision as it was when it was made two years ago.

"This is about determining the best place to educate our sixth graders," said Miles.

In the information-gathering process at last Tuesday's meetings, parents visited in small groups, targeting six topics.

They discussed and documented their input on:

—positives of sixth graders being at the JR/SR High.

—positives of sixth graders staying at the elementary school.

—concerns for sixth graders at the JR/SR High.

—concerns for sixth graders at the elementary school.

—ideas on transition. When is the right time to move kids? What helps prepare them?

—thoughts or suggestions as the 2008 decision to move the sixth grade is evaluated.

Through the study process, it may be determined the current JR/SR High building may be the best place for sixth graders, with some tweaking of procedures. On the other hand, a thorough review may reveal the sixth grade setting would be more beneficial to students if it returns to the elementary building.

It could be done either place without a financial impact, Miles pointed out. It could turn to a financial decision, but at this point it is not.

Principals at both buildings have faith in each other that whichever setting is chosen for the sixth grade, effort will be made to provide the best education possible.

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“Where our sixth grade kids learn best. That’s what it’s all about,” said Elementary Principal Kyle Stumpf.

At Tuesday’s fifth grade meeting, parents asked about teacher perspectives and wanted copies of data from CSAP and NWEA (MAPS) testing to compare trends.

They extended their one-hour meeting, sharing their input and ideas. Another study focus suggested by parents is discipline issues for sixth graders at the two buildings.

Administrators reiterated this decision for location of sixth grade classes clearly does involve the three perspective areas: parents, teachers and data.

Unfortunately, results from the recently-taken CSAP tests will not be available until August, which is too late for decision-making for the 2010-11 school year. But NWEA (MAPS) results will be assessed, as well as grades and the Colorado Growth Model which measures individual student growth.

It is not all about numbers, Supt. Miles emphasized, as he highlighted the value of teacher and parent input.

Revisiting major decisions after they’ve been implemented is key to continued success. Holyoke School Board members are giving a strong message about listening to the voice of the community as they revisit procedures in place.

JR/SR High Principal Susan Ortner and Elem. Principal Stumpf both encourage those with input on the sixth grade move and other subjects to contact them with their ideas.

Earning an A grade takes commitment to good study habits and quality listening skills along the way.

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I commend Holyoke School District for not only taking a good hard look at policies and procedures, but for the transparency in which it's approaching sensitive subjects such as the sixth grade move.

Thanks for doing your homework.