

FASD Transforming Education

Dear Editor;

There is much talk these days about the need for reform. Politics, health care and education are all in need of drastic change, according to pollsters and statisticians. In October, the movie *Waiting for Superman* will hit theatres with yet another urgent plea for educational reform, citing examples of woeful mismanagement across the country. In the Fort Atkinson School District, we believe the process must be one of transformation, working with the tools and resources we've been given to create opportunities for students to achieve their academic and personal potential. In contrast to many of the schools cited in the movie, our district can claim success in how hard we have worked to serve the needs of our learning community. We are not without our challenges, and we have much more to do, but we are optimistic about our future. What follows is a summary of our recent celebrations.

For the fourth straight year, our graduating seniors exceeded both the State and National averages on the American College Test (ACT), an exam required for students contemplating an undergraduate degree at most Midwestern colleges and universities. The individual ACT scores in each category (English, Math, Reading and Science) determine a student's likelihood of success in that same subject at college. Again, our students exceeded the State and National averages by subject, as well. We attribute this growing, positive trend to our district's long-range strategic plan, the alignment of curriculum K-12, and our commitment to increasing student achievement through rigorous programming.

Students are all unique, of course, and the emphasis on test scores, which only show achievement at one point in time, do not always demonstrate the growth those same students have experienced in our classrooms. The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) is a state-required test administered to students in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10, annually. As with the ACT results, our goal is to widen the gap between our scores and those of the State, but we are pleased to see results which demonstrate our students are indeed, improving over time. In 2009, Fort Atkinson School District students scored above the State average in 22 of 23 subtests, with an increase in students showing growth in the proficient and advanced categories and a decrease of students in the basic and minimal competencies. We use this data to discern what areas of our curriculum need strengthening and in guiding staff development.

We understand that education needs to evolve to meet the needs of today's learners and tomorrow's employers, so our district continues to explore innovative education opportunities. Currently, we are conducting a feasibility study on alternative calendar options. These might include programming through longer school days, more online classes, or possibly even an extended school year. We've utilized programs such as The Boys and Girls Club, which recently expanded to a third site, to provide additional educational support through on-site, certified teaching staff who assist members with homework help. And recently, our district was the recipient of the Immigrant Children and Youth Grant, which we'll use to address the unique instructional needs of our non-English speaking students, including literacy activities, mentoring and outreach to their families.

Student safety and wellness are also priorities for our district, and we enjoy meaningful partnerships with our local enforcement officers and health care providers. With their input and guidance, we have developed bully prevention training and attempted to instill a sense of personal accountability amongst our student population. We are also concerned for the physical health of our community, and we strive to maintain healthy, affordable school meals, knowing that the weak economy has impacted the budgets of many of our hard-working families.

Balancing the educational needs of our learners against the costs of maintaining our physical structures is always a challenge, but the Fort Atkinson School District has become a leader state-wide in energy conservation efforts. Both Purdy and Barrie Elementary schools were recognized with Green Energy EPA awards for reducing their energy output by 35% or more. This followed on the heels of the district's second year of geo-thermal heating and cooling, the installation of photo-voltaic panels on the roofs of some schools, and a feasibility study involving a wind turbine at our high school, which would save the district 5% in high school electricity costs annually. (A public hearing is being held October 7 at 6pm, at Luther Elementary, to engage citizen input on this topic). While there is some investment up front for green energy projects, the opportunity for grants and financial support is high, as is the eventual return from energy savings. These efforts are not only good for the environment, but they also relieve the district's operations budget and taxpayers' pocketbooks.

The Fort Atkinson School District Board of Education feels fortunate to be serving this district and a community that values high quality education. We are appreciative of the positive support from our PTOs, booster clubs and community volunteers, and thankful for the strong ties with the businesses that shape our local economy. The community's belief in our mission and trust in our staff is the cornerstone of this district's continuous improvement, in spite of major financial burdens and heavy state and federal mandates. We have much more to do if we hope to maintain this level of excellence, and the chips are not always in our favor, but as long as students are the core of our mission, we will strive to serve them to the best of our ability.

Sincerely,

Scott Johnson, President
Kent Koebke, Vice President
Bob Chady, Treasurer
Carrie Chisholm, Clerk
Rodger Thomann, Member