

HERALD-NEWS

Fairmont community, parents play active role in student progress

District 89 officials use tailored assessments, initiatives

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This is the second story in a three-day series exploring the revitalization of Fairmont School District 89 through financial reform, academic growth and community engagement.

LOCKPORT TOWNSHIP – Twice a year at Fairmont School District 89, families are brought together to share a meal and learn about how to help their children succeed in the classroom.

Kathy Robinson was among dozens of parents sitting with their children at the school cafeteria Dec. 10 for Parent Literacy Nights, where attendees learned how to prepare their children for a future in science, technology, mathematics or engineering from [Blue 1647](#), an entrepreneurship and technology innovation organization.

“You get different ideas on how to help children be better for the future,” Robinson said.

Parent Literacy Nights is one of several initiatives started under Superintendent Sonya Whitaker’s leadership to improve student achievement.

When she came in 2010 to the district – located in an economically distressed community – she decided to not only implement several programs but also to use a different method of assessing student progress.

“We’re implementing nontraditional approaches to involving and educating the community and our students,” she said.

Measuring achievement

Whitaker saw a need for a districtwide assessment to measure student progress because the state kept changing its assessment measures. District 89’s student population also differs from many others because of its high poverty and mobility rate, she said.

Under the Illinois Standards Achievement Test – now replaced with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers exam – the percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards always has been low.

In 2002, the ISAT composite percentage of District 89 students meeting and exceeding standards was 25 percent, compared with 63 percent statewide. The scores fluctuated over the years – along with statewide scores – until they reached their highest in 2012 at 60 percent.

However, Whitaker took issue with how the scores were calculated in 2013, when Illinois raised scores for passing the ISAT in reading and math, causing the percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards statewide – including in District 89 – to decrease.

In 2013, the composite percentage of students meeting or exceeding ISAT standards in District 89 was 31 percent.

“I saw a need for districtwide assessment because I see the state keeps yo-yoing back and forth on what assessment measure most accurately gives them information,” Whitaker said.

District officials partnered with research firm ECRA Group to use an assessment called Measures of Academic Progress – or MAP – and “local norms” statistical methods to compare District 89 to others with similar demographics.

Whitaker said she wanted more detailed information on the students’ academic progress than what the state was providing.

“We really needed that accurate read so that we can make necessary adjustments to instruction and to do whatever we needed to do regarding staffing. We didn’t make excuses regarding the [state] results; we just took them for what they were worth, which was not much to us,” Whitaker said.

Under MAP assessments, she said, district officials have seen students generally reach expected growth in the areas of language, math and reading.

Parent involvement

Increased parent involvement has been key for academic achievement at District 89.

Whitaker launched a district initiative called Parents Count Pick 2 to fuel more involvement. The goal of the initiative is to have at least 80 percent of students have a parent attend a district-hosted event at least twice a year.

“The research suggests the more people are involved in their children’s academic career, the more likely the child will succeed academically,” she said.

Parents can pick two of six events offered by the district to attend, such as Parent Literacy Nights, board meetings or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports assemblies.

Teachers also try to involve parents more.

Sabrina Jackson, an eighth-grade teacher, sits on a parent and community committee at the district and is involved with Parent Literacy Nights. She also makes calls to parents of her students to let them know about their progress.

“We just want them to know, so they’re not left out of the education. We want to them to be part of the education experience their child has been getting,” Jackson said.

‘More help, not less’

Besides classroom achievement and parent involvement, positive role models also were needed for students. District 89 has run conferences for boys and girls – similar to conferences teachers and administrators attend for their own work – so they could meet role models.

Students who attended the conferences said they came away from the experience changed, Whitaker said.

“They said they saw images of people who look like them – because I purposefully selected people that were diverse in nature, diverse backgrounds – doing things ... that my boys thought they never could do,” she said.

Whitaker said she is beginning to examine the need for reading and math specialists for District 89. One of the lessons she said she has learned is that people may assume because district enrollment is low, it doesn’t need expertise.

“When you have high levels of poverty, when you have high levels of mobility and beautiful students who deserve a fair chance at life, systems like ours, we need more help, not less help,” she said.

The Herald-News’ three-part series on Fairmont School District 89 will explore in its final installment Wednesday the district’s relationship with the area’s broader community.

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