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Dunlap schools launch strategic plan

36 people will work to access where district's schools are, where to go

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By Scott Hilyard (shilyard@pjstar.com)
Journal Star

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DUNLAP — A long-term strategy initiative that launches this week aims to improve the Dunlap School District, already considered one of the higher-performing public school districts in the region.

"The district has grown so quickly that its success has mainly been in its ability to commit random acts of excellence," said J. Jay Marino, the first-year superintendent of Dunlap Community Unit School District 323. "This strategic plan process allows the district to be proactive instead of reactive - to have a vision and implement it."

The foundation of the strategic plan process will be a group of 36 people gathered by design from the various corners of the Dunlap school community and not hand-picked by the superintendent's office. The group will include a School Board member, a representative from the teachers association, one teacher and one parent from each of the district's seven schools, four from the superintendent's office, four principals, four support staffers and three students. It also will include five community members not directly affiliated with the school district. The process will last the school year and be implemented in four phases.

Beginning Thursday with a kickoff meeting at Dunlap Valley Middle School, the group will take the rest of 2009 to document the current state of the district and analyze its strengths and needs.

"The idea is for each of the stakeholders to take what they learn throughout the process back to their groups and get the whole community involved to determine what kind of school district we want to be," Marino said. "The power of the group is shared equally among the students, the parents, the teachers, the community and the others, and the process will go wherever they take it. This is not about stacking the group with people who are going to do what the administration wants to do anyway."

School Board President Christine Finley, the board's representative on the strategy group, said the first part of the process will focus on developing a district philosophy.

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"My hope is this sets out a road map of where the district is now and where it can be," Finley said. "I believe the first part will be developing a mission statement - as big as we are, it's sort of surprising that we don't have all that rolled up in a single document right now. The last part would be documenting measurable, deliverable means to reach those goals."

The district has hired the Consortium for Educational Change, an Illinois not-for-profit educational consulting group, to help steer the process as it has done in towns and cities across the state, Marino said. The School Board is expected to approve a \$15,000 contract with the consultants at its September meeting.

The district grew another 4 percent this school year - it's 13th consecutive school enrollment increase - and building new classroom space remains a constant issue, Marino said. But, he said, it's unlikely the district would move quickly forward with new building proposals in the same year its future is being mapped.

"The show goes on and the building issues won't be put aside, but I think the board would be cautious about making a large investment. Down the road, any building plan would need to be aligned with what the district is trying to accomplish," he said. "What this process is designed to do is help us find the way to go from good to great."

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