

Town, FHUSD pledge to keep working together

By Bob Burns
Times Reporter

Expanding opportunities for on-line education for students in Fountain Hills schools as well as adults was a topic discussed at a joint meeting between the School Board and Town Council on March 11.

Superintendent Dr. Bill Myhr outlined steps taken by the district to offer on-line courses for students.

Myhr said the district is working with other Valley high schools and getting laptop computers on the desks in some classrooms. He said they are also encouraging students to use academic networking.

The district itself is not yet offering any classes on-line, but students do have that option through the district.

Myhr said they are also working on options to bring online courses to the community using the new learning center. They are already offering foreign language, Spanish and French, and are looking into other options.

Myhr said the kids love

the technology and are very good at it, making this a great platform for education.

Board member Helen Howard said the on-line classroom skills are important for students going into college.

Online education is becoming more important to some families where students are involved in outside pursuits such as athletic or cultural, according to Myhr.

It allows the students to get their education and still concentrate on the outside activity.

It is also becoming an important option for home schooling.

With the cost of facilities, on-line education is going to become more important in the future, Myhr said.

A citizen attending the meeting spoke regarding his experiences with on-line courses.

Gary Kida said in a class he took attrition was high and success was low. He added he believes the involvement of parents is very important for online learning at the high school

and middle school levels.

Maricopa County Sheriff's Sgt. Jerry Funk noted that on-line students pose a bit of a challenge for deputies charged with enforcing truancy laws.

Funk said there are five or six kids in town who claim to be taking online courses but are getting into significant trouble during the daytime hours.

"There needs to be more checks and balances," Funk said.

Myhr said there is an annual assessment and students must show they are making progress.

"The district has the ability to check and decide what (coursework) it should accept or not accept," Myhr said.

Board member Dana Saar said if the student lives in the district they are the responsibility of the district.

He said there are advantages to allowing students to see an entire lecture over again if they need to.

"This is another resource for students," Saar said. "The future of education is going to require a lot of Internet use."

*More discussion

Funk also reported on how Midnight Madness is being accepted by students. He said they have changed the format from locking the kids in a gym for a few hours to offering focused activities.

The new programs have included taking the kids bowling, skating, hayrides and Diamondbacks baseball games, according to Funk.

Truancy is also a big issue being addressed by the school resource officer assigned by the Sheriff's Office. Funk said the SRO has been monitoring "sweep" as it appears some students are intentionally using the system to get out of class.

Myhr explained that "sweep" is the term used because after class starts anyone left in the halls is late for class and "swept" up into a separate classroom.

Myhr agreed that some students take advantage of that process.

Myhr said the district's relationship with MCSO is a good one and they are regularly talking and working on ways to improve.

"The ongoing partnership is working smoothly," Myhr said.

In response to a question from Councilman Dennis Contino about drug usage among teens, Funk said recent busts at the middle school and FHHS indicate they are present among students.

He said law enforcement and FHUSD are part of the Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition and are working together to

curb abuse.

Myhr added that often he is confronted with "parent issues" as it relates to teen drinking and that many parents see it as a rite of passage.

Communication

Myhr said one of his goals is better communication with the public and parents.

It was suggested by Councilman Dennis Contino that the district televise meetings like the council does.

Saar said the district simply does not have the resources right now to make that work.

It was pointed out that the town's equipment for recording meetings is not mobile and the only way for the board to take advantage of that is to meet in council chambers.

Communication is improving in ways that allow parents to go on-line to check their child's progress. There also is a system in place that notifies parents of unusual events at school such as a lockdown.

Assistant Superintendent Tim Leedy explained that the revenue picture for the district is not good, much as the town's situation.

Leedy emphasized that failure of a ballot proposal for a temporary sales tax increase would have significant impact on the district. That question will be on the ballot in May.

Town Magistrate Ted Armbruster reported on the cooperation that has made a success of the Teen Court program in Fountain Hills. The program is in its seventh year and continues

to expand and improve, according to Armbruster.

Public Works Director Tom Ward reported on progress in sidewalk construction to allow safer pedestrian movement to and from the schools.

One project along Del Cambre Avenue near Four Peaks School is to be constructed this fiscal year. Design work for a large sidewalk project along Fountain Hills Boulevard also continues.

Ward said he has been asked to consider participation in a larger "Safe Routes to Schools" program and is looking into that. He said he would like to talk more with district officials on how to find the time and resources to implement the program.

Saar noted that the safest way to get kids to school is on the bus, and he suggested the town and district work together to encourage greater use of the busses.

Funk noted that parents dropping off students can create serious traffic problems around the schools.

Parks and Recreation Director Mark Mayer reported that he is asking for a budget allocation to complete the design for two parks on school sites.

These sites are at McDowell Mountain School and at the high school.

Mayer said both the district and the town will find the additional outdoor space useful for activities and programs.

Mayer also noted that the cooperation between FHUSD and the town is better than anywhere else he has worked in his parks administration career.