

# OVUU board wrestles with complex issues

05-25-2022, The Reporter, by Mat Clouser

BRANDON — Issues surrounding diversity and equity, technological integration, and facility upgrades dominated the conversation on May 18, when members of the OVUU school board convened at the OVUHS library, and online via Zoom, to discuss several topics of wide-ranging impact, touching on prevalent themes of local and national importance.

Among those on hand to give a presentation was Susannah White, RNESU's Equity and Engagement coach, who for the past year has been helping lead an inquiry into systemic issues affecting educational inequity within the district that affect the lives of its students, faculty, and administrators.

"The issues raised are systemic in nature and are reflective of local, state, and national trends," she said in her presentation to the board. "As we unearth and reckon with the inequities that exist in our schools, we must assume shared responsibility, seek systemic solutions, and avoid the impulse to blame individual people and or schools. We must also remember to embrace the work of educational equity as ongoing, unfinished, and embedded in all we do."

White went on to discuss a brave group of students who participated in the inquiry by sharing some of their negative experiences with the board—including: dealing with racial, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist slurs amongst the student body; dealing with adult responses to those slurs; and incidences of inequity within the curriculum as well.

"Our students are telling us there are things we must do to make school more engaging, accessible, relevant, meaningful, and safe for all learners," White said. "For example, there are students who have shared that they experience hostile language and treatment based on one or more of their social identities and are asking for adults and students to work to shift the culture and respond in meaningful ways to incidents of harassment and bias. There are also many students who want to see themselves reflected in more meaningful and affirming ways in their curriculum, in addition to experiencing deeper learning about a broader and more diverse range of histories, perspectives, and issues. Our work is to partner with our students to create the school community that they dream of and deserve."

Moving forward, White said an equity committee with student and faculty members will meet monthly with goals that include: "Connecting about equity issues that arise and engaging in team problem-solving on those issues: developing our own capacity to support and or lead positive change work in our schools; designing and implementing district-wide initiatives for educational equity; and engaging in inquiry and listening to identify issues and opportunities to [create] equity in RNESU."

RNESU defines "educational equity" as "each child receiving what they need to develop and thrive academically and socially."

White mentioned the importance of centering student voices in this process, explaining that the work is ongoing and always more is to be done.

"Some ways RNESU is working towards elevating student voices include: Inviting student participation on our Equity Committee, empowering student participation at Board meetings, holding student focus groups, developing affinity spaces, and administering surveys—including a climate survey," she said.

"Next year, Otter Valley will renew its partnership with Up for Learning with the goal of creating a dedicated and representative group of student leaders who will collaborate to transform their school for the better. The Curriculum and Instruction team also plans to design professional learning opportunities for educators to strengthen their capacity to empower student voice and agency within their instructional practice."

# SHOP UPGRADES

White's presentation was met with a united round of applause from the board who had earlier been engaged in a somewhat contentious debate over whether an additional \$200,000 should be added to the \$440,300 budget for facility repairs and upgrades over the summer, with the bulk of the new money designated for a welding program.

Points were raised about the long-overdue upgrades to the shop. Much of its equipment is older than the instructors and, in the case of the shop's lathe, even the building. Of particular importance was the harsh reality that training on this equipment puts OVUHS students at a disadvantage when it comes to acquiring real-world experience.

Of additional concern was the hasty nature of the decision, without the presence or input of the teachers who will implement the new program. Eventually, a vote passed to approve the money only for the board to then realize that the leg work involved in hammering out the details of the new project could mean a delay for the other repairs and upgrades.

A motion was then passed to strike the new budget of \$640,300, which was voted on and approved, at which point the original budget of \$440,300 was reintroduced, voted on, and approved and it was noted that within the approved budget there had already been money allotted for upgrades to the shop and they would take place over the next year and a half.

# DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Rounding out the evening's events was a presentation from Max Burman and Susan Hennessey, RNESU's technology integration coaches, about their ongoing efforts within the district. The pair mentioned that while participation in the program is done strictly on a volunteer basis, it has become much beloved by students and faculty alike. One area in particular that has been a success is the digital citizenship initiative where students are taught how to be safe, responsible users of technology.

"Our district made great strides given how quickly the pandemic hit and required our schools to pivot to remote learning out much time to prepare," said Burrow. "Our roles as coaches this year found us supporting educators who needed extra help using Google Classroom and Google Meet to ensure their teaching materials were accessible to all in case we needed to pivot once again."