

OVUU board divided on surplus funds

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BRANDON — The recent meeting of OVUU's school board began in earnest with cake and a celebration. It would be the last meeting with Superintendent Jeanné Collins at the district's helm, but she did not show any signs of resignation or coasting into the finish line.

Rather, at its June 19 meeting, the board and Collins faced the ongoing COVID-related problems of the past two years that have manifested in the district as in other school districts across the state and nation.

Compounding the district's ongoing staffing and work-related woes, in which para-educators and bus drivers are still at impasse over contract negotiations, there have been nagging questions about facility and program upgrades and budget appropriations. The board spent most of the meeting attending to several aspects of that struggle.

Two of OV's teachers, Josh Hardt and Devon Karpak, were on hand Wednesday night to give presentations about the Moosalamoo and Tech Education programs, including their successes and challenges.

Hardt began his presentation on the Moosalamoo education program by outlining the importance of outdoor education in his students' lives. The program, which addresses at-risk students, currently enrolls around 30 students per year and engages them in various outdoor activities, including Hawk Hill trail maintenance.

Of those students, Hardt said about half are dealing with some form of academic or behavioral issues. "The students I have today have very little trust in the school," he said.

And yet, Hardt said his students were thriving within the program. "They're often more excited by the program than they are [other aspects of] school."

Strengths of the program, Hardt said, included confidence-building, personal, reflective, and lifelong learning opportunities. Among issues raised were a lack of reliable transportation to and from activities, poor staffing, and a need for a functional classroom, as well as complaints about gear storage space in a "moldy basement."

Karpak's presentation on his Tech Ed program, which enrolls 137 students, mentioned similar successes as the Moosalamoo program in dealing with students who may not be on the traditional, college-bound academic path.

He said community and administrative support was significant, and highlighted some of the work students had done with heavy-equipment training among the things that were working well.

Consistent transportation issues were also on Karpak's list of concerns, as was the need for several facility upgrades. "The shop's in pretty bad shape," he said, "and we have outdated tech and tools that don't meet the industry standard."

Much of the shop's equipment is older than the building itself. One item of particular concern is the air-handling system which could date as far back as 1959 and was built by a company that's been out of business since 1961. The system needs several repairs, and there was some speculation by the board as to whether it was even up to OSHA standards.

The board has been aware of this problem and recently voted to approve \$30,000 worth of improvements to the air-handling system. However, there was additional speculation as to whether that money would be sufficient, as well as questions about the overall benefit the program could offer its students, given how far it is behind the times.

“I believe we’re in violation of our policy to give all students a quality education,” said board member Kevin Thornton. “This is decades of neglect. We’re limiting their future.”

Elaborating after the meeting, he said, “There’s a sociological component with the types of kids who wind up in the basement. These are working-class kids who are not going to attend college.”

“I think it’s an unacknowledged class divide,” he continued. “Only about a third of our graduates attend higher ed. We’re not preparing the others, particularly in the face of COVID. Our board does not want to face the nature of the crisis.”

Reached for comment after the meeting, Superintendent Collins said she believed Mr. Thornton was misinterpreting both the policy and the data about higher education.

“The policy is intended to see if students are excluded from opportunities, not to see if all materials and equipment are the latest and greatest,” she said. “In 2021, 11% of graduates attended a two-year education program, 37% went to four-year programs, 1% enrolled in some form of military, 39% went into full-time employment, and 12% were undecided.”

Data for 2022’s graduates are not yet available, according to Collins. The statewide rate of graduates attending some form of higher education is 55%.

As he did last month, Thornton made a motion during the meeting to direct an additional \$175,000 out of a budget surplus in the facilities fund and into Tech Ed to create a new welding program.

The motion ultimately proved unsuccessful amid questions of the legality of such a move and whether Mr. Karpak had a comprehensive plan to use the funds.

“When there is a surplus,” said Supt. Collins after the meeting, “the board may do nothing with it, which rolls it forward into next year and is used to lower the tax rate—referred to as giving back to the voters.”

“Or it can be put in a voter-approved reserve fund,” she continued. “OVUU has two voter-approved reserve funds: facilities/capital construction and afterschool programs. Those are the only options, and the board must decide each June when there is a surplus.”

The board ultimately voted to return up to \$200,000 to the voters, with additional funds getting earmarked for the facilities fund.

Additionally, the board discussed the following issues:

An impassioned group of speakers from the para-educators and bus driver associations, who are currently at an impasse with their contract negotiations, began the meeting by addressing the board. They listed safety concerns stemming from staff shortages and de-escalation protocols as their primary concerns. In addition, they raised issues about excessive workload and poor communication with the school.

Several board monitoring reports were approved despite concern about whether the policies the reports oversaw were appropriate. It was agreed that the discussion would be tabled as the actual policies would be reviewed in August at the board retreat.

The Superintendent’s report paid particular attention to the Neshobe school, where the recently refurbished school bell was put back into use to celebrate the recent 6th-grade graduates.

Collins announced to much relief that after two years of extensive efforts to remove PFAS from the school’s water system, Otter Creek Academy’s water was officially upgraded to potable.

