

New Faces to Take on Issues in Dist. 204

by Howard Crouse, Superintendent

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School starts in just less than two weeks. We will welcome almost 28,000 students into our classrooms. Indian Prairie also has a significant number of administrators who are either new to the district or new to their position, including me. As I begin my new role as superintendent, I want to help everyone understand the key issues in front of us.

The first is anonymity. Our large schools are financially prudent, but our students can easily be “lost” in the masses. The staff and I have to prevent that from happening. We must make a concerted effort to connect with each one of them. I firmly believe that student learning increases when there is a positive relationship between a student and one or more members of the staff. That adult may be the classroom teacher, the coach, the club sponsor, or the music director, but we have to proactively make that relationship happen. Our elementary buildings thrive because of the connection between the students and their classroom teachers. The middle school teaming approach is based on the same fundamental belief. Our high schools have added and improved an advisory period to give us a different opportunity to connect with kids. Ultimately, we must be sure no student can be anonymous.

Student learning is the second issue. We set high expectations for our students, and we must have high expectations of ourselves. Student learning is our goal; teaching is one means to that goal. Our staff has thrived in an atmosphere where change is a constant. We have an explorer’s attitude that permits us to try new routes, take new paths, and carve out new territory. We will need to call on that strength to build on our success and continue to improve. We also have a multitude of activities to keep students involved in an area of interest. Studies that show higher grades for participants in extracurricular activities often miss what I believe is the real point. If students want to be involved in something positive during or after school, they will motivate themselves.

Thirdly, we must not only connect with our minority students, particularly our African American and Hispanic students, but we must work with them to close the achievement gap that exists in every district. We must reach out to their parents to partner with us, we must keep our students involved in school and activities, and we must believe in both our high expectations and every student’s ability to learn.

The fourth major issue is the need for more space. Although we continue to grow, the end is within sight. The wave of student enrollment is moving through the elementary schools but will overwhelm our middle schools very soon. We also need additional space at Neuqua Valley. Over the next few months we will debate whether to have a referendum this spring or next, and determine what that referendum will include. Much will be written about it as the issue is put before the public, including future columns in this space.

So as parents are preparing to send their students to school, our message is simple. Students who enjoy what they do during or after school will find a way to excel, despite our size. Our staff will re-commit themselves to helping make that happen. Student learning will increase. We will be even more successful.