

Principal opposes community 4-K

Written by CAROL POMEDAY

Wednesday, 16 November 2011 18:25

CG-B District was one of first to offer classes for early kindergarten, but private partnership still debated

The Cedar Grove-Belgium School District was one of the first districts to offer 4-year-old kindergarten, and some people believe it should now be expanded to allow parents to choose a community-based program in a private facility.

Such programs are currently offered, but parents pay for them. If the school district partnered with private facilities, state funds would be used to subsidize the educational program.

Currently, the district provides half-day 4-K Mondays through Thursdays. There are 90 students enrolled in five sections with two full-time teachers, one part-time teacher and two full-time aides.

After evaluating the current program and looking at the pros and cons of partnering with private centers, Elementary Principal Craig Gunderson, who joined the district this summer, last week recommended that 4K remain in the elementary school.

Being new to the district, Gunderson noted, he could look at the program without preconceived opinions.

“It’s no secret this has been a topic in the school for years,” he told the School Board Nov. 9. “Most stakeholders have a strong philosophy one way or the other because their children have gone through the program here. There are many adult viewpoints that might or might not be best for kids.”

Gunderson told the board he believes the negative aspects outweigh the positive ones in contracting with private centers.

“It is my recommendation not to move 4-K students off campus for their education,” Gunderson said in his report. “Moving our 4-K children to an off-campus environment may affect and impede their overall literacy for the years that follow.”

Those are strong words, but Gunderson said 4-K students now have access to guidance counselors, special education, music, art and computer specialists and are involved in school activities, something that would be difficult for them off campus.

“It’s the starting point for our students who will eventually graduate prepared for higher education or the job market,” Gunderson said.

“It’s a thriving program. I want to continue to bring that forward to align its program with the rest

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of the school.”

Board member Gina Sotelo of Belgium noted Stepping Stones Children’s Center has a 4-K program for people who don’t want their children to be bused.

Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger said the 4-K program should be flexible.

“The way I look at 4-K is to be flexible and allow parents to choose the program they want,” he said. “I wasn’t in favor of a full time 4-K because I wanted my kids home half a day and I liked them having Friday off. I think it’s OK for parents to say, ‘I don’t want my kids to take the school bus,’ and let them take a program in the private sector.”

He suggested a survey be sent to parents of preschoolers to determine what programs they would like.

Gunderson said he prefers improving the current program instead by exploring the following options:

Change to a five-day, half-day program. That may be more convenient and economical for parents and could result in more state aid, Gunderson said. However, legislators are also talking about discontinuing aid for 4-K, which is not required. More than 90 school districts in the state have five-day programs.

Have art, music and physical education teachers provide those programs. That would allow 4-K teachers to have prep and collaboration time throughout the week rather than only Fridays.

Increase and improve parent outreach programs, encouraging them to volunteer their time, donate materials and help in any way possible.

Increase the availability and use of technology in 4-K classrooms. Teachers said they have an old computer in their classrooms for their and student use.

Address educational programs at all grade levels, including 4-K, so all students are taught in ways they can learn.