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Principal wants to keep program in elementary school, involve parents

The 4-year-old kindergarten program at Cedar Grove-Belgium Elementary School should remain in the elementary school and more effort is being made to involve parents, Principal Craig Gunderson told the School Board on March 14.

He also recommended the program remain half-days for four days a week based on an on-line parent survey that showed a preference for the status quo. Of the 82 surveys sent, 72 were returned.

Of the 60 parents who expressed a preference, 50 preferred a four-day program and 20 preferred five days, with 12 saying either program would be OK.

The review was prompted by a request from the School Board for Gunderson, who is new to the district, to take a fresh look at the program.

There have been requests to offer 4-K in preschools and child-care centers.

Gunderson gave a video presentation to reinforce his conviction that the four 4-K teachers are doing an excellent job of preparing the youngest students in the school for learning and that being in a school setting benefits the children.

Supporters of the program filled the Belgium Village Hall and Fire Department meeting room during the presentation and many spoke in favor of keeping the program in the school.

“They always come home with a smile on their faces and talk non-stop about what they

learned," parent Julie Teunissen said of her children who attended the program.

Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger said three of his four children have gone through the program.

"They definitely developed those kids to become 5-K students," he said.

Kris Sass, a first-grade teacher, said, "I think it's a wonderful addition to our school and it needs to be in our school."

She said students who go through the 4-K program, which is not required, are prepared to learn to read.

Board member Julie Reichle said she visited each 4-K classroom and was happy with what she saw.

"All are very different — different teaching styles, different children — and all are wonderful," Reichle said.

When 4-K parents were asked to rate the program on a variety of items, excellent was the overwhelming response, except when it came to parent involvement. That was rated below adequate.

In response to that, the 4-K teachers held a holiday party to which parents were invited to frost cookies with their children. Gunderson said he and other staff members "adopted" children whose parents couldn't attend.

Parents were also sent a list of volunteer opportunities, ranging from helping in the classroom to going on field trips.

When asked how many other teachers have to do that, several teachers in the room said they do it at the beginning of each school year and it helps to get parents involved.

Several parents said she they always felt welcome in the classroom.

But other parents cited lack of involvement as a weakness and Gunderson concurred.

A 4-K website has been set up to keep families aware of what's happening in the classrooms, Gunderson said.

During the intense review, the teachers developed a common curriculum, goals and a mission statement, putting them ahead of other grades which still must do that, he said.

Asked by a teacher's aid what will happen next, Lautenschlaeger said, "There is no action to take if there is no change."

Image Information: KINDERGARTEN TEACHER Nan Hokanson read a story to students in her afternoon 4-year-old kindergarten class at Cedar Grove-Belgium Elementary School. Photo by Sam Arendt