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Principal also seeks to keep class that integrates special education pupils

Students in 4-year-old kindergarten in the Cedar Grove-Belgium School District will attend classes Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays in the 2012-13 school year.

Currently, 4-K students attend morning or afternoon sessions Mondays through Thursdays.

The change was made because next year all students will be released early on the third Wednesday of each month to allow time for teachers to work together on curriculum. Afternoon kindergarten classes would not be held those days.

To keep morning and afternoon classes on the same schedule, the 4-K staff recommended the change, Principal Craig Gunderson told the School Board last week.

Parents who have enrolled students in 4-K will be notified of the change in a letter to allow plenty of time for them to arrange child care or change work schedules if necessary, he said.

“It’s in alignment with our staff development and with other school districts,” Gunderson said. “Some people feel the students benefit from the break and stay more focused when they’re in school. Others fell it interrupts the learning process. For us, it will be more consistent for our families rather than switching one day every month.”

Gunderson also recommended that the district keep five sections of 4-K next year.

In addition to teachers Nan Hokanson and Paula Risseeuw who have their own classrooms, teacher Jody Jones and early-childhood educator Mary Suhorepetz team teach a class that integrates students who qualify for special-education services with regular education students. The class was added because of the large number of students.

“If we play the numbers game, we’re down this year,” Gunderson said. “Jody and Mary have solid team skills and are among the best teachers in the school. They have made a huge impact in the short time they’ve been here on our team.”

Special Education Director Tamra O’Keefe said special education students and regular students learn from each other, and both benefit at such a young age.

“We’re able to have therapists in the classroom and children who don’t qualify for services can get it through osmosis,” she said.

An occupational therapist spends time with every child in the classroom, Suhorepetz said.

“Many of the (special education) deficits are more skill-based and we can help them,” she said. “It provides some transition from early children education to 4-K.”

A classroom that has an equal number of special education and regular students is the ideal mix, she said.

The problem is affordability, Supt. Steve Shaw said, who noted it will cost $160,000 to continue the program next year.

“Federal jobs money paid for Jody’s position this year,” he said. “Next year, you can’t count on that.”

Board member Chad Hoopman said the board is looking at a 2-cent increase in the tax rate without any changes in the budget.

“There is a value to it (the combined classroom), but if we continue with the current structure we have in place, we have to recognize there will be ramifications in other places,” Hoopman said.