

Whittell test scores going down; 4-day week intact

By Kathryn Reed

ZEPHYR COVE – School board members in Douglas County on Tuesday received enough information to convince them the four-day school week is not the reason test scores at Whittell High School are going down.

After WHS Principal Crespín Esquivel gave a sobering account of how students are doing at his facility, the next part of the April 10 discussion centered on whether the 7-12 school should continue with the Monday-Thursday schedule that began in fall 2009.

The board on a 7-0 vote agreed for the next three years to keep Whittell on the four-day schedule.



Whittell
Principal
Crespín
Esquivel
listens to the
board talk
about his
school.

Photo/Kathryn
Reed

Board member Randy Green said five years of data is needed before true conclusions can be made.

“I don’t think we can tell if the results are the four-day week or site specific,” board member Tom Moore said of the test data. “I do firmly believe it is one of the two.”

Superintendent Lisa Noonan said she is convinced “we can’t blame it on the four-day week.”

Statistics presented by consultant Steve Mulvenon, who was tasked with compiling a report to the board about four-day school weeks and how other districts are coping as well as to assess specifics about Whittell, showed that reducing the days in the classroom does not negatively impact test scores, nor does it save districts money.

When proponents of the Whittell four-day school week first presented their idea, one of the overriding reasons was to decrease absences because so many extracurricular events are on Fridays, which was pulling students from the classroom. The number of class periods missed dropped from 27,972 in 2008-09 to 16,984 in 2009-10 and 17,589 in 2010-11.

While the perception of parents, teachers and students – who all had the opportunity to take similar surveys – was that academic performance is better with the four-day week, the principal’s report showed a different reality.

Part of the discrepancy could be that the survey questions were broad in nature and parents may have just thought about their child’s individual test scores or semester grade. Esquivel on Tuesday was talking standardized tests that affect several grade levels, as well as the ACT that college-bound students take.

“We do have a trend that is heading down. We are trying to implement good things, but we won’t see results for two to three years,” Esquivel told the board.

The data shows almost across the board in every grade level and subject tested (reading, math, science, language arts) students are doing worse than their predecessors.

Esquivel has no definitive reasons why. By incorporating the data Mulvenon presented the blame cannot be put on enrollment – it has been steady for at least three years, the ethnicity of the student body has not changed dramatically (28 Hispanics in 2006-07 compared to 42 in 2011-12), and reduced or free lunches have not spiked (37 students in 2006-07 and 48 in 2011-12).

“In 2008 Whittell had 25 percent of students take the ACT. In 2011 68 percent took it,” Mulvenon said. “The more students who take standardized tests the more likely the average (score) gravitates to the mean.”

It was stressed by several people that with Whittell having such a small student body it only takes a few students to change the percentage in test scores. For example Douglas High has a graduating class of about 400, which is nearly double Whittell’s entire population. So, to have a 10 percent drop in scores, it could mean five students doing poorly at Whittell, while it would take 40 from Whittell’s senior class.

A bright spot is 90 percent of Whittell’s class of 2011 graduated. And students in the class of 2012 have been accepted to a variety of universities including a full ride to Georgia Tech, an athletic scholarship to Oregon State, one to Baylor, another to Tulane, more than 15 to UNR to name a few.

The concern is if the test scores continue to decline that graduation rates will drop and post-secondary options won’t be there for tomorrow’s Warriors.

The board and staff are also worried that as new state mandates come into being the stakes will be higher and thresholds harder to meet.

Esquivel admitted the collaboration between Whittell seventh-grade teachers and Zephyr Cove's sixth-grade teachers needs a 180-degree improvement. Mentoring programs are also going to be implemented.

The board was also assured the superintendent and principal would be meeting to come up with a more definitive plan of action.