

Whittell parents furious with class reductions

By Anne Knowles

GARDNERVILLE – Twenty-six parents, grandparents, students and teachers spoke out against the possible elimination of the music program at Whittell High School on May 9 during a special meeting of the Douglas County School District board.

Almost twice that many attendees filled the audience in the Carson Valley Middle School library where the seven-member board met Friday afternoon to discuss revisions to its strategic plan.

The possibility of curriculum cuts was not on the agenda, but some Zephyr Cove parents organized via email and Facebook to encourage people to attend the meeting and give a show of support to the music program during the period for public comment.



Whittell High parents crowd the May 9 board meeting.
Photo/Anne Knowles

The speakers each talked about the importance of the music classes, choir and band to the students overall education and for college admissions, and many told personal stories of the

value of the program.

"I've been in the music program since sixth grade," said Gabe Rusk, a sophomore at Whittell who is a band member. "It's something I need for my future. It's probably the way I'm going to get into college."

Elaine Welch talked about her two children, graduates of Whittell, who sang in the school's Black and White Choir.

"They sang at the Sacramento Kings basketball game. They sang at the Reno Aces games," said Welch. "It would be a shame if the choir program went away."

Maxwell Glasson, a 2002 Whittell graduate, said his participation in the music program helped him get into college and, indirectly, into law school.

"I moved back to raise my family and to put my kids through school there," said Glasson. "You're putting these kids' futures in jeopardy."

Glasson and several other speakers struggled to speak after choking up with tears during their three-minute allotted time, and every speaker was met with a round of applause when they finished.

Many implored the board to form a committee of parents, educators and administrators to come up with ways to save the program.

"We're asking to collaborate and for a seat at the table," said parent Carol Chaplin. "We can think outside of the box together."

Greg Felton, a parent of two children who graduated from Whittell and a third child attending it, suggested such a group could come up with a long-term plan.

"Put together a task force or committee with the people here

and put in place a 10-year plan so this is not hitting us every year," Felton said. "And in the meantime, freeze the cuts."

Several parents said this is just the latest in a list of sacrifices the school has already made, especially after Kingsbury Middle School closed and its students were moved into Whittell, putting two schools into one building. It is now a 7-12 school.

"There were 92 periods offered when Whittell and Kingsbury merged," said Kelly Krolicki, a parent, whose daughter Kate, a Whittell student, spoke after her. "Now there are 74 periods and we're talking about cutting that to 72 periods. We've lost 20 periods in six years."

Some parents talked about reductions in information technology classes and the unfulfilled promise to hire a vice principal for the school, but most were focused on the threat to the music program.

Nancy Gardner, a member of the DCSD board 40 years ago and a mother and grandmother to Whittell graduates, said she understood the fiscal constraints the current board was working under.

"I understand the issues. There are so many of the same issues we faced," said Gardner. "One lesson we learned as a board was to carefully pick our fights. This is a battle you should not be fighting."

Cindy Trigg, Lake Tahoe's representative on the board also made public comment as a parent. She opened the meeting explaining that the board could not bring or comment on future agenda items during the meeting.

"We are not going to have a conversation back and forth," she said.

Tom Moore, the board president, closed the public comment, thanking everyone for their respectful and thoughtful suggestions, and making a promise of sorts. The issue was not on an agenda item at the special board meeting. The meeting was called to tie up loose issues regarding the strategic plan.

“This is a conversation that is going to be taking place at the board level very soon,” Moore said.