

Whittell parents want their concerns addressed

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – A committee consisting of parents and Douglas County School District staff may be formed this fall to investigate and suggest solutions to some of the long-term issues facing Whittell High School.

Superintendent Lisa Noonan, in an update at the May 21 board meeting regarding the school's staffing, said she needed the summer to plan for what she called a study group, which then could be launched at the start of the new school year.

The goal of the group would be to look at how other small schools have dealt with such issues as declining enrollment, budget cuts and reduced curriculum, and find answers for Whittell's ongoing problems.



More than 50 people fill the room May 21 at the Douglas County School District meeting. Photo/Anne Knowles

Enrollment at Lake Tahoe schools has dropped from a high of 942 students during the 1997-98 school year to 385 students this year.

The task force was one of the requests made by the public during a May 9 meeting of the board, where about two dozen teachers, parents and others spoke mostly about a threat to Whittell's music program.

"The launching pad is the conversation next week," Noonan said at this week's board meeting. "We need more listening and conversation. We don't have the answers tonight."

Noonan has scheduled a meeting with parents at 4:30pm May 27 at the high school, prior to a 6pm awards ceremony there, to talk further about their concerns.

About 10 parents and teachers spoke at the May 21 meeting, most reiterating the same worries voiced at the previous meeting.

Kelly Gardner, for example, said parents were very excited about meeting with Noonan next week. But she said parents had been blindsided before by unexpected changes and needed to first build trust with the school district.

"I am hopeful you have empathy for our lack of trust and that we need commitment to run our schools from decisions of what is best for our kids and not from an accounts' perspective," said Gardner during public comment. "I look forward to building a truly trusting environment to work toward a plan that works for all the students at the lake."

In a May 6 email to the board and district office staff, Noonan said, "The number of students requesting music for next year was enough to fill one class – which is a 0.20 allocation. Rather than post a job for a 20 percent contract, we added a drama class and will use the music stipends for hiring someone to offer a music club.

"We also increased the fine arts teacher from a 60 percent contract to an 80 percent contract.

“The overall reduction at WHS for next year is a 0.40 allocation.”

During her presentation, Noonan also emphasized that the district budget, which the board approved at the meeting, does not end the discussion.

“The first concern I want to alleviate is when the board sets the budget they report to the state, that is different than my role helping with allocations,” said Noonan. “The board is never asked to approve at a granular level.”

Noonan said deciding how to spend the money allotted is an ongoing process and a school’s master schedule of classes is a “living, breathing document.”

The passed budget freezes most spending categories, except for an additional \$25,000 for testing of 11th-graders, \$4,450 for software, \$50,000 for special education and \$577,125 for salaries and benefits.

There are eight employee groups and the district has negotiated contracts with all of them except for the largest group, teachers.

Several teachers spoke during public comment and two held up homemade protest signs saying, among other things, “Negotiate Don’t Arbitrate,” and “Transparency, Honesty, Question the Budget.”

Noonan, during her update, asked that a task force of parents and staff not overlap with or negate the work of school performance plans, which are required by law and address some of the same issues in the short-term.

Board President Tom Moore said that the board could not yet approve the proposed committee because it was not an item on the board’s May 21 agenda.