

WHS striving to provide students more options

By Kathryn Reed

ZEPHYR COVE – Dreaming big, with an eye toward reality. That has been the focus of a committee tasked with coming up with ideas to make Whittell High School more than it is today.

There was a time when it looked like the two remaining Douglas County School District schools at Lake Tahoe would be merged into one K-12. This committee has determined that is not fiscally doable or responsible, nor would it be good for the students.

On top of that, the district is going through an enrollment upswing after years of decline. That is something committee members at their final meeting on Monday acknowledged and want to stress to the board – staffing concerns are going to need to be addressed to handle the student population boom that is going to start next school year. The current sixth-grade class at Zephyr Cove Elementary is 38 students.

The group wrapped up its work – for now – on Jan. 12. Facilitator Nancy McMillan will be putting the ideas into a working document in the next week. There will be a special workshop Feb. 19 at 4pm for the committee to present its ideas to the board. The location has yet to be determined, but it will be at the lake.

The committee came about because last spring the school board started taking programs away from the Zephyr Cove school. Parents filled meetings, expressed their concerns, sought equity compared to valley schools and desired a voice in the process.

The committee became that voice.



Whittell High School Principal Crespin Esquivel, from left, makes a point Jan. 12 while ZCES Principal Nancy Cauley, DCSD employee Rommy Cronin, and school board member Ross Chichester listen.

Working on a memorandum of understanding with Lake Tahoe Unified School District so students can cross the state line to go to school in each state is a suggestion. The desire is to make it feasible to pick and choose classes or to be a full time student in the other state. As it is now, Nevada students can go to the California school, but not the reverse.

Working on dual credits with area community colleges is a goal, but some of that will be up to state lawmakers in Nevada and California.

Committee members know not everything can happen at once, so some recommendations include more study of an idea or putting it on the back burner until money is not an obstacle. But having things on the public record will give the concerns validation and put it in the archives for future reference.

The committee wants Douglas County School District board members to offer online classes – aka e-learning. But the district needs to file an application with the state to allow this to happen. And depending on what is offered and when, it

could affect the district financially based on not being reimbursed by the state.

Then there was the discussion of using the word “empowerment” versus “autonomous”. The former is now more closely associated with underperforming schools, which WHS is not. (The middle school is considered a five star school – the top honor, while the high school last year was recognized by *U.S. News and World Report* as 80th best high school in the nation.)

Seeking a little more autonomy is desirable.

While Whittell is a 7-12 school, it is operated more like two schools within one building. This continues to present challenges the committee wants addressed.

A mentoring/intern program could provide youngsters with an opportunity to get hands-on experience that a traditional classroom cannot offer. Intensive intersessions would allow more in depth study of a topic.

Today the dean is also the athletic director. A dean and vice principal have different duties and limitations. Changing titles may get Whittell more of what it wants/needs.

Principal Crespin Esquivel and ZCES Principal Nancy Cauley agreed they could easily share an instructional coach.

The complete list of recommendations and priorities will be presented next month to the board. At that time it's expected the board will direct staff to work on what it sees as doable for the 2015-16 school year. The public will also have an opportunity to weigh in at the February meeting.