

DCSD board hears how to make WHS better

By Kathryn Reed

ZEPHYR COVE – A roadmap to Whittell High School's future has been laid out to the school district board and staff by a committee of concerned parents and staff.

"This work you've done is a living document," Douglas County School District Superintendent Lisa Noonan said at the end of the special board meeting Feb. 19.

The committee that came about nearly a year ago because of frustration with the district and the board by those at the lake culminated this week with a path to go forward. And while it's understood the recommendations by the committee may not all be implemented, it was an amiable meeting that showed both sides could talk and listen to one another. That in and of itself is progress from last spring.

Noonan said when the board meets at the lake in April she hopes to bring forward some ideas that could be implemented.

The committee proposed having the school calendar and bell schedule be more aligned with Lake Tahoe Unified School District than the valley schools. This would allow for students across the state line to have easier access to individual classes in the neighboring district.

That is another idea – to allow students to take specific classes rather than just attend the other district.

As it is now, DCSD students may pay to attend LTUSD, but the reverse is not true.



Douglas County School District board member Cindy Trigg, center, makes a point Feb. 19 as colleagues Ross Chichester and Karen Chessell listen. Board member Neil Freitas was absent. Photo/LTN

Committee members reached out to LTUSD administrators who are open to discussing a possible memorandum of understanding to bridge the education divide. They would like the district staff to continue the dialogue.

Working with the state Legislature to recognize Lake Tahoe Community College is really the two-year institution WHS students would attend rather than Western Nevada College in the valley is another goal. The problem is LTCC is in California.

Delving into distance education or online classes is another goal of the committee's. This could open up more elective options to Whittell kids. That is an area that is lacking because of the small student population.

As with most things in public education, laws and money govern what can happen. It's possible the district would lose some funding if this were to occur.

Board member Tom Moore was the most vocal about money being a constraint. He said it's necessary for spending to be equitable among all the schools.

Committee member Greg Felton said, "Part of it is how do you judge equity? Cost is one way. Opportunities for students is another. We need to find some way to judge what is equitable."

He pointed out how Douglas High students have so many more course offerings – questioning whether that is equitable.

Taking a formal survey of students and parents to gauge what electives they would like was presented to the board. That could then be the basis for future course offerings.

Offering incentives to teachers to obtain additional qualifications to be able to teach a broader spectrum of classes was brought up. This would help with curriculum choices as well as not be a financial burden to teachers.

The committee would like Whittell to have more autonomy. Exactly how that would look still needs to be ironed out.

All signs are pointing to enrollment increasing in the future. This has to do with the economy on the South Shore improving. It was pointed out that Lake Tahoe Hard Rock hired about 25 percent of its work force from out of the area. The presumption is some of those people are bound to have school-age kids. And other businesses are opening or expanding.

This led the committee to believe discussion of further consolidation of the lake schools is a moot point.

Committee members also foresee their work not being finished and that a group like this could always have a role.