

School board ponders next year's calendar

By Charlie Kanzig
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Next year's school calendar has school ending June 24. That's too late for some, and the school board took on the topic at its March 4 meeting.

Board Chair Jay Wilkins was absent, leaving Don Hedrick to direct the meeting.

Fifth-grade teacher Tiffany Tisdel was the lone participant in the community comment section of the meeting and brought up the topic that would be roundly discussed later in the meeting. She expressed concerns about the school calendar as proposed to the board which included a start after Labor Day (September 9) and a finish date of June 24, suggesting that the board consider a pre-Labor Day start (September 1) in order to end the school year a bit earlier.

The thrust of her position is that the combination of starting so late and keeping a two-week spring break pushes the school year very late into June, which has proven to be a challenge educationally.

You get a lot more bang for your buck in the classroom in September than in late June, she said.

Tisdel described herself as speaking as a teacher, parent, and coach.

Alison Haney, middle school principal, later reported on the initial recommendations of the school calendar committee. She explained the process of the group and work, including surveying school staff and school families, in order to arrive at the recommendation. The plan keeps the long-standing two-week spring break (which Sisters is the only public district in Oregon to do) and included three days (rather than all five) the week of Thanksgiving.

It was noted that Labor Day is as late as it can be in

2020, which has had ramifications in the discussion. One of the data points Haney shared included that 52 percent of families voted to do away with the two-week spring break. It was noted that the extra week is a child-care burden for some families. Additionally, questions arose about whether the survey clearly spelled out the full picture of starting and ending dates.

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Referring back to Tisdel's testimony, the board engaged in 20 minutes of discussion. Hedrick ultimately asked for a motion to approve the calendar as presented. Board member David Thorsett asked for an amendment to the motion to approve it with the change of starting September 1. Neither passed, leaving the board agreeing to spend some more time on the issue and have a final vote at the April meeting.

Reports from administrators included elementary Principal Joan Warburg sharing information about a grant she is submitting on behalf of the District that could increase funding for pre-school in Sisters, which is neither state-mandated nor funded. However, Student Success Act money is available through grants that would support what is known as the Pre-School Promise.

Warburg related that when she asked a group of Latino families from the Sisters

School District what would support them the most, she was surprised the response was access to pre-school.

While the grant wouldn't include funding to serve every single pre-schooler in the Sisters District, it would provide support for those who might otherwise not be able to afford or access pre-school.

Research is clear that early childhood education such as pre-school improves readiness for kindergarten and first grade, she said. Warburg said that her kindergarten teachers see a noticeable benefit for students who had the opportunity to attend pre-school.

Currently pre-school is provided in Sisters on a limited basis through Sisters Park & Recreation District in cooperation with the Sisters School District. If Sisters is awarded the grant, it would cover staffing and other needs to allow up to 18 student slots for qualified families for pre-school beginning in the fall of 2020.

Joe Hosang, high school principal, introduced the board to the Sources of Strength program which is being implemented at both the middle school and high school with a goal of building resilience and bolstering support for students. About 60 students were trained earlier in the school year to learn more about peer-to-peer support that can help students recognize and enhance their support systems. Motivation for investing in the Sources of Strength (SOS) program stemmed from a community group that formed in response to suicides by graduates of Sisters High School in their early twenties.

It's not a suicide prevention program per se, said Hosang, but anything we can do to increase our students' and graduates' access to

people who are supportive is a plus.

Students and staff, and ultimately parents, will become familiar with the Sources of Strength wheel, which helps people identify what support they have, including access to medical care, mental health, family support, peer support (positive friends), mentors, healthy activities, spiritual support, and generosity of others.

Superintendent Curt Scholl reported that enrollment has held largely steady at 1,190, down just seven students since January and likely to swing up again before next year. Overall the enrollment is up by 19 students over last year.

Scholl gave a brief overview of how the Student

Investment Account (SIA) monies will be prioritized for the future. (The SIA refers to the funding provided by the Student Success Act (SSA), which was approved last year by the Oregon Legislature to give school districts extra funding to better support students, including by increasing the graduation rates in Oregon.) More focused information about the priorities will be known in the upcoming weeks, but generally include added support for special education, English language learners, social and emotional learning and intervention, staff training, and increased staffing.

The next school board meeting is set for after spring break on Wednesday, April 8.