

Superintendent's Corner

Here in Amity Regional School District # 5 there is much focus and attention on the middle schools and high school construction/renovation projects. This is appropriate given the magnitude of the investment and the value to current and future generations of children and taxpayers. It is important to recognize, however, that our fine staff of administrators and teachers is continuing their primary focus on providing outstanding educational services for the children of Bethany, Orange and Woodbridge.

Many parents commented to me after the recent parent conferences that they are extremely pleased with their children's teachers and the educational programming being provided. Recently, over 125 parents attended a presentation about our Advanced Placement Initiative. This effort is geared to expand the number of Advanced Placement (college level) courses taught at Amity. High schools in our comparison group offer significantly more Advanced Placement courses for their students. We want Amity students who seek academic challenge at the highest levels to be able to fulfill their potential. Along with more AP courses that will be offered in English, Psychology, Music and Art, we want as many students as possible to take the Advanced Placement exam at the end of the course. Achieving success on these exams can lead to many benefits when students are applying to college as well as after they matriculate. Most colleges, for example, will give credit to students who are successful on AP exams. A group of teachers and administrators have worked for over a year on this initiative and they recently received unanimous support from the Board of Education.

At the middle schools, we are moving forward with enhancing the design of our teaming approach to education. This is the model upon which the renovation project is based. When the schools are complete, we will have stronger teams with classrooms organized to promote teachers' ability to interact, plan and communicate about their lessons and the learning needs of their students. We are in the process of establishing a middle school design committee which will bring teachers and administrators from both schools together to ensure the best possible plan and consistency across schools.

As readers are most likely aware, we are projecting an increase in the money needed for the school construction/renovation project. Because of favorable borrowing rates and increased state reimbursements, it appears likely that these increases will not translate into an increased tax burden. The project is currently being estimated once again for cost now that the design has been more refined and detailed. The School Building Committee made up of Board of Education Members and community volunteers with extensive experience in the field of construction are working hard and smart in overseeing this project. The S/L/A/M Collaborative architectural firm has performed exceedingly well thus far in the project. The Downes and Fusco construction management firms have begun their work in helping to define costs and construction schedules. All this work is being overseen by the Program Management services of the Gilbane Construction Company working closely with myself and my administrative staff. I am convinced that the Board has assembled an outstanding team, cognizant of the past and committed to delivering the finest possible product for our school children.

Recently, my staff and I, along with Board of Education Members, have presented information at forums and meetings in Bethany, Orange and Woodbridge. We have been able to respond to some misinformation about the building projects. One misconception that was dispelled has to do with the size of the high school project.

When this project was envisioned, it was conceived as a 90,000 sq. ft. addition. As we worked with the architects to design the most efficient space, the high school portion of the construction is now slightly over 80,000 sq. ft. Part of the reduction is related to the Board of Education offices remaining at the high school, and not being renovated for high school purposes, and part of the reduction is due simply to more efficient utilization of classroom space. This is a positive development which has helped to keep the high school project very close to original budget estimates.

Another misconception had to do with the auditorium. The current plan calls for the demolition of the existing auditorium and construction of a new, larger auditorium that will allow us to assemble as many as two grade levels at one time in the space, for assemblies, presentations and performances. This would be a huge advantage to our school program. The fact that we have been able to design this space and create an addition to meet the academic needs of our students is something we are proud of. We have not sacrificed academic space for the arts. Even if we were not dealing with the need for an auditorium, we would have been compelled to design academic spaces that were as efficient and cost effective as possible. This school desperately needs an auditorium, sufficiently sized for our enrollment, and we are extremely pleased that this project now includes such a space.