

Lewis-Palmer D38 Parent and Community Advisory Committee, Oct. 8

Grace Best Elementary School, Career-Innovation Center plans discussed

By Harriet Halbig

The Lewis-Palmer D38 Parent and Community Advisory Committee met at Lewis-Palmer Elementary School (LPES) on Oct. 8. Among the subjects discussed were activities at the school, potential treatments of the Grace Best Elementary School building, and ongoing development of the new Career and Innovation Center.

LPES report

LPES Principal Davonne Johnson conducted a tour of the building before the meeting began. She explained that each school day begins with a greeting and opportunities to introduce oneself to others and mingle. She then involved the committee members in a left-right story reading where members passed balls back and forth when the words left or right were read.

The school was built in 1974 and just celebrated its 50th anniversary. It now has 409 students. Its vision is that all students matter and belong.

LPES offers several programs for those with disabilities including those for students with significant support needs and Affective Needs.

The theme for this school year is LPES is staying on track, all aboard, using the motif of a train throughout the building.

Board of Education report

Board liaison Tiffney Upchurch reported on recent discussion of the Grace Best Elementary School building during the board's work session on Oct. 1.

The facility was assessed in 2020 regarding the suitability of its use for students and other community members. Among current uses are the Silver Key Senior Center, Palmer Ridge Robotics, the Transitions program, and the Home School Enrichment Academy.

At the board's Oct. 1 work session, it was told that during a recent fire walk Monument Fire Chief Andy Kovacs had been unaware that there were students in the building over the past few years. As a result, when he conducted his walk this year he created a list of issues which would need to be addressed for the building to be used for students.

Among these was the storage of combustible materials such as boxes and wood and damaged or missing fire resistant ceiling tiles.

Upchurch said that the chief did not submit a documented report to the Colorado Department of Education but said that he required the district to develop a plan to address the list of problems by the time he visited next year.

The board had passed a resolution in June 2021 to demolish the portion of the building built in 1959 and the gymnasium and retain the two-story portion built in 1988. No action was taken.

To hear the discussion, please see the livestream of the Oct. 1 work session on lewispalmer.org, Board of Education, livestreams of board meetings.

Board Secretary Dr. Patti Shank reported on subjects to be addressed at the Oct. 21 board meeting.

Career and Innovation Center

Director of Innovative Programs Jessica McAllister reported on progress in developing programs and determining use of space in the new Career and Innovation building on Synthes Drive. To view her PowerPoint, please see Family Resources, Community, Committees, meeting contents, and the date Oct. 8.

Planning for the center began in 2022 with a series of meetings and surveys including community members, industry representatives, students, and families. Then the building became

available and with the passage of Senate Bill 24-017, \$8 million became available for one-time use by the district. This enabled the district to plan the center without using reserve funds.

In the past year, meetings have focused on curriculum, technology needs, prioritization of occupations within categories, and continued solicitation of feedback from industry partners and post-secondary institutions. Potential funding sources are being identified and plans for water, storage, and electrical needs are being examined.

Plans include a course proposal to the Board of Education in November, vertical alignment for the program of study in March, and staffing plans in April.

Courses of study will concentrate on information technology, engineering, manufacturing, and health sciences. Students in grades 9 through 12 will be involved in two double blocks of classes each day. Courses will vary from beginner to advanced levels in content.

Following her presentation, McAllister involved committee members in viewing various options for the use of

color and spaces within the building.

Superintendent Forum

District Superintendent Stacie Datterri said she is using feedback from last month's meeting to determine her priorities in her new position. She said she is determined to get things right with regard to the strategic plan. She has met with staff and departments and asked for suggestions about values for the district.

She said she views what is best for the kids as her primary consideration. She stresses that students and staff must be respectful with each other and all have an equal chance for success.

The Parent and Community Advisory Committee meets six times per year. Locations vary. The next meeting will be at 6 p.m. Nov. 12 at the Monument Academy East Campus, 4303 Pinehurst Circle, Colorado Springs. For information, please contact tmckee@lewispalmer.org.

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Monument Academy School Board, Oct. 17 and 24

Board hears financial audit, improvement plan, internal review

By Jackie Burhans

The Monument Academy (MA) board held two meetings in October. In its first meeting on the 17th, the board heard its financial audit, unified improvement plan, and October enrollment count report. It passed several policies.

At its second meeting on the 24th, the board heard an internal school review audit from a consulting firm and entered an executive session to discuss possible actions.

Financial audit

Tom Sistare of Hoelting & Co. Inc., MA's audit firm, dialed in to remotely present a summary of the financial audit presentation, giving MA an unmodified or clean opinion. Sistare said his team had been on-site in July testing internal controls and believes MA's financial statements are presented fairly.

He said the audit covers both fund statements, which are how the school keeps its books on a day-to-day basis, as well as government-wide statements that roll all funds together and add capital assets, debt, and other liabilities.

In the government-wide statement, the statement of net position is the balance sheet for the entire school, Sistare said, indicating that cash and investments were up, capital assets decreased due to depreciation, and grants receivables were down due to fewer grants being available. The long-term liability is \$55.5 million with a \$39.1 million loan balance. MA paid \$922,000 in debt service through the building corporation fund which manages the bonds for the West Campus and has \$16.2 million in liability due to the Public Employees' Retirement Association (PERA) unfunded liabilities. MA's net position decreased by \$798,000 primarily due to PERA.

For the fund statements, Sistare said the ratio of ending general fund balance to total expenditures for the year was similar to last year, maintaining a balance equal to 80 days of expenditures. For the current year's activities, he said local revenues increased due to increases in donations and state per pupil revenue. Federal revenue fell as COVID grants wound down. Revenue was up about 4% with expenditures up 5% with a resulting \$243,000 increase in fund balance. This compares favorably with a budgeted \$790,000 decrease in fund balance. Sistare concluded by saying there were no findings of deficiencies on internal controls or other areas.

Interim Chief Financial Officer Glenn Gustafson added a three-year high-level comparison. He noted that for government agencies MA uses full accrual, while for day-to-day purposes it uses a modified accrual. Over three years, Gustafson said, the general fund revenues increased from \$10.8 to \$13.8 million due to School Finance Act revenue or per pupil revenue (PPR) while enrollment has been flat. Expenditures have grown due to hiring and raises, but the difference has gone from a \$131,000 loss to a \$243,000 profit. MA is trying to come into full compliance with its bond covenants, he said, and ending fund balance, which is the reserve, has increased by \$653,000, which is a good position for a bond refinance.

The preschool fund had a small loss, but MA has made changes to bring it back to financial stability. It drew down the balance from \$99,000 to

\$66,000. The building corporation and the foundation funds handle the bonds for the West and East Campus respectively and function with a fairly straight flow through from the state's intercept program. Bank balances are invested aggressively and have seen good interest returns. Finally, the Student Activity Fund totals \$125,000, has had a lot of cleanup, and is used only for Student Council expenses. He said he was very pleased with Hoelting, a local firm that has done a lot of work with charter schools.

Non-financial audit summarized

At a special meeting on Oct. 24, Lis Richard of Helping Schools Thrive LLC (HST) delivered a summary of her internal review audit which she emphasized was focused on academic, operational, and governance review rather than a financial audit. A more detailed presentation will be presented at the Nov. 21 meeting.

Richard, who served as MA's principal until 2017, said her objective was to compare current practices and policies with the original intent of the school charter and philosophy documents and offer the board and leadership some tangible reflection and resources. For her summary, she focused on academics, philosophy, and student achievement.

For philosophy, she said PK-12 staff has only a basic understanding of the philosophy of MA and that no one could give an elevator speech explaining it. The foundational principles, practices, and virtues are not trained annually nor understood by leadership, which she found concerning. Understanding philosophy could aid in ensuring that it is a pillar of practice, she said.

Her greatest area of concern was that PK-5 did not have a solid curriculum direction and had too many supplemental materials that do not follow Core Knowledge (CK) practices. There is a strong implementation of core subjects in secondary school, which was a stellar start, she said while noting that the arts curriculum could better follow the CK sequence and work to support interdisciplinary practices. CK is spiraling and vertically aligned, Richard said. Training on curriculum is lacking for staff and leaders, she said.

Regarding student achievement, she said there are no current methods for new student assessment, which would be a good practice to provide to teachers. The assessment data has fallen to lead teachers or administration and is not used as a method of accountability for instruction and utilization with students and parents. The purpose of assessment is not clear in PK, Richard said, and MA's elementary schools are no longer competitive with other district schools. There is a spirit of "That may be OK," she added. Middle school achievement is in the upper quadrant but has room to improve, she said, and it was encouraging that the high school has performed well in its few years of existence.

In respect to operations, Richard said there is adequate room for PK-5, but that obviously the secondary school needs more room. Documentation of

MA (Cont. on 14)

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