Verona Commences New Five-Year Plan

By Mira Braneck

Verona is looking ahead to the next five years.

The Verona Public Schools, at the end of the current five year plan, is in the process of writing a new Strategic Plan for the development and improvement of the district over the course of the next five years.

“This plan is reflective of our growth as a district,” said Ms. Elizabeth Jewett, Director of Instructional Studies, and the Strategic Plan Internal Coordinator.

Ms. Jewett, who arrived during the second year of the current Strategic Plan says that it “served as a guidepost” for the creation of the new plan, especially “for curriculum and instruction.”

The past five year plan was focused on “teacher outcomes,” which was necessary to lay the groundwork for the current plan, said Ms. Jewett, which “is explicitly focused on student outcomes.”

One of the few failings of the 2008-2013 Strategic Plan was the fact some goals were not met in respect to facilities, due to budgetary constraints.

The current planning process began with the formation of the Steering Committee. A group of 25 stakeholders met three days in December 2012 to create the framework for the plan.

Dr. Judith Ferguson of Centennium Consultants, who consulted in the writing of the current Strategic Plan, provided training and guidance to the Steering Committee.

Six Action Teams, comprised of 85 administrators, teachers, students, and dedicated community members, were formed. The action teams are responsible for developing result statements and action plans for each statement.

After the initial February 20 “kick-off” meeting at Verona High School, at which all action teams met for their first planning meeting, the teams met regularly and will continue to meet through May.

The six action teams include Finance, Curriculum, Professional Development, Global and Local Partnerships, School Culture, and Buildings, Grounds and Technology. The team leaders are administrators and teachers.

Many of the long and short term goals for the district have already been written by the action teams. The next step is to work on action plans and time frames to meet these goals. Prioritizing goals is one of the biggest challenges the teams are facing, as the goals are all important, according to Ms. Jewett.

All of the action teams are creating their goals around the Verona Public School’s core values: collaboration, diligence, initiative, integrity, respect, and responsibility. Their various courses of action will reflect the mission statement, which was written with an attempt to express a clear identity for the Verona Public Schools and its students.

Community involvement plays a huge role in the writing of the Strategic Plan. The action teams are comprised of half teachers and staff as well as half community members. The administration has hopes of increasing community involvement in the planning process for the next five years.

“It’s inspiring to see community members and students all sitting around a table and cooperating,” said Ms. Jewett. “It’s very inspiring to be a part of that.”

Students are part of four of the six action teams, as well as the Steering Committee. “I think it’s fantastic,” said Ms. Jewett of student involvement. “The end result is for the students,” and they can “speak from experience.”

“I think it’s good because they can see a student perspective,” said Brianna DaRin, Verona High School senior and member of the Global and Local Partnership Team. “It’s not just teachers.”

One of the Global and Local Partnership Team’s biggest concerns is creating a student with global awareness, according to Ms. Jewett. The Team is discussing expanding opportunities for seniors, such as creating internship opportunities or making community service a graduation requirement.

“How can we make senior year more meaningful?” is one question Ms. Jewett raised. “How do we really maximize [the students’] experience their senior year?”

The School Culture Action Team, led by Mr. David Galbierczyk, the Assistant Principal at Verona High School, is focused on “ensuring our programs support our core values,” stated Ms. Jewett. The teams will create or expand current programs that promote the core values and ideals of the district. They will also review programs that are lacking in substance, as well as programs that should be expanded to reach more students.

One of the biggest issues the School Culture Action Team is facing is the onslaught of social media that the current generation is facing, as well as its negative impacts.

“I know that things go on here,” said Mr. Galbierczyk, tapping his computer screen, “that cause some people to struggle while they are in school... We are going to face and try to meet the challenges that social media presents.”

“The bottom line,” said Mr. Galbierczyk, “is how we can foster a more healthy, respectful, and positive learning environment.”

The Curriculum Action Team, led by Dr. Nicole Santora, Supervisor of Mathematics and Science, is focused on integrating STEM, or science, technology, engineer, and math, education into the schools to prepare students for modern life, according to Ms. Jewett. They want to infuse literary standards through all subject areas and revise electives to “meet the needs of students in the 21st century,” said Ms. Jewett.

One of the overall hopes of the Strategic Plan is “fostering independence among students,” said Ms. Jewett.

“It’s a good process for a district to go through,” she said.

The next five years should bring plenty of change to the Verona Public Schools.