
Yoncalla business practice review findings addressed

BY DESIREE AFLLEJE,

Yoncalla, which serves about 350 students, volunteered to be one of five Oregon school districts to be evaluated. The reviews were funded by a grant from the Chalkboard Project, a nonprofit organization aimed at moving Oregon into the nation's top-10 ranked school systems.

"The goal is to identify best practices," said Colin Fogarty of the Chalkboard Project. "There are other school districts across (Oregon) that can learn from these findings at Yoncalla; the idea is to create a business practice tool kit."

The nearly 200-page review reported a need for a multi-year budget plan and more detailed financial reports for the school board.

Superintendent Marc Thielman, who recently replaced retiree Art Johns, said the district recently completed its first monthly budget report to create more transparency to the board, staff and the community.

The school district review found that maintenance usually occurred in response to facility problems and recommended that the district create goals to set priorities for future maintenance needs. The report emphasized the need to make building improvements, especially at the high school, to create a more pleasant learning environment for students.

Thielman said the district is working on improving the front of the high school with new sidewalks, pressure washing and the addition of student benches and a picnic table to the commons area in front of the office. He said the district is creating a five-year maintenance plan to budget for future maintenance needs.

The report highlighted the commitment of the district's staff to student success throughout the review and praised the effectiveness of its mentor program for first-year teachers.

"There's a high degree of caring and a desire to support each other," said Thielman. "And I believe that's our greatest strength as a district."

The recommendations called for more effective communication between the district and the public. The report said that school board, which dealt with controversy including former board member Gideon "Hop" Jackson's recall last school year, had not been functioning effectively in recent months and recommended that the district create a Community Relations Advisory Committee to help unify the district and build public support.

The district switched from a part-time superintendent to a full-time position when they hired Thielman for the 2008-09 school year. The report recommended that the board reconsider making the superintendent position full time because of the extra cost.

Thielman was extremely pleased with the review process that he thought effectively brought in outsiders' perspective to help the district validate its strengths and identify ways to improve problems. He said the district will continue to review and discuss the findings.

"It's incredibly healthy," he said. "As new superintendent, it gives me a road map."

You can reach reporting intern Desiree Afilleje at 957-4211 or by e-mail at dafilleje@nrtoday.com.

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