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PARENTS CONCERNED JUNIOR HIGH CHALLENGE PROGRAM COULD BE LOST

26 Oct 2015 11:57 | Written by Tim Kukes |

Two years ago the Northshore School District Middle School Grade Reconfiguration Task Force, a group consisting of parents, teachers and NSD administrative staff, came into existence to plan the transition of the NSD junior high model to a middle school model — moving grades six, seven and eight to middle school and grade nine to high school. They have been quietly doing so until the last month when concerned parents got wind that the Challenge Program might be on the chopping block.

One of the benefits of the Challenge Program, said Angie Hinojos Yusuf of Save Our Challenge, is that any student with the drive and motivation can choose a Challenge course during course enrollment without having to test to gain access to the more rigorous curriculum. The district also has a Highly Capable program for students who qualify based on testing, and that program isn't in danger of being ended with the grade reconfiguration.

The Challenge Program was implemented four years ago as a self-select program for junior high students to choose specific accelerated courses at enrollment. There is no testing into Challenge courses. Students simply decide — with the guidance of their parents — to opt into a course that will challenge them beyond the normal curriculum.

In those four years the Challenge Program has been deemed a success by Save Our Challenge representatives Angie Yusuf and Angie Hancock. They note the popularity of the program with students and parents alike as one indicator of this success. Nancy Chamberlain, another Save Our Challenge member, said only the Challenge math courses adequately prepare students for making college acceptance levels.

According to Leanna Albrecht, NSD communications director, the NSD has not conducted a formal evaluation of the Challenge Program. Albrecht said that it has been the district's experience that there are students who excel in the Challenge Program and there are students taking Challenge courses that would benefit from being in non-challenge courses. In addition, some students struggle when there are no peers, or only a few peers, to push their thinking.

Albrecht emphasized that no decisions have been made yet, and the Task Force hasn't even made any recommendations yet, but hopes to do so during this school year.

Ken Smith, who is running for NSD School Board along with being a member of the NSD Transparency Group, has a child currently involved in the Challenge Program.

"I think Challenge is extremely well regarded by parents, students and teachers," Smith said. "And it looks like it is working well for many people."

Due to the presumed success of the Challenge Program, Save Our Challenge supporters are confused on why the program would be at risk, and considering that its creation was driven by parent mandate, why the task force would consider dismissing the program without first creating a dialogue with NSD community.

"Because we are moving from a junior high 'mini high school' model to a middle school all aspects of the junior high are being reviewed and considered," Albrecht said in an email. "The Challenge Program is a junior high model and the subcommittee is determining its fit and alignment to the four essential attributes of middle school."

The four essential attributes for a middle school come from the Association of Middle Level Education paper, "This We Believe," and are: Developmentally Responsive, Challenging, Empowering and Equitable. Currently the academic subcommittee, a portion of the Task Force charged with determining what a rigorous middle school curriculum would look like under the guidance of the four attributes, is reviewing a heterogeneous classroom model as one possibility, Albrecht said.

Though Albrecht said that the Task Force publishes its agendas, minutes of meetings, and had informational nights last May, the Save Our Challenge group said there isn't enough information coming forward. In addition, Smith tried to gain permission to tape Task Force meetings but was denied due to task force members being uncomfortable with being videotaped. The Task Force will be working on a community engagement plan which will provide opportunities for public feedback in January 2016, Albrecht said.

"The one thing I can say to that is if there has been significant change proposed you typically have a strong and vibrant case for change being made that lots of people participate in," Smith said. "And I think that's really the concern, that there is potential significant change and there is not a written case for change that we all can look at, understand, and have a dialogue — that's the concern."

In an attempt to give voice to that concern, Save Our Challenge has created an online petition to spread support and awareness for the Challenge Program. The petition states that the NSD Middle School Reconfiguration Task Force is deciding whether Challenge classes will be eliminated come 2017-2018 as part of the transition from junior high to middle school curriculum and urges readers to sign and distribute the petition, which is located at www.change.org/p/northshore-school-district-save-our-challenge. As of last Friday morning, the petition had 1,096 electronic signatures.

Save Our Challenge representatives — and concerned parents — have been attending NSD Board meetings to present their concerns to the Board and public. At the Sept. 22 Board meeting approximately 10 people stood before Board members. They voiced concerns over the Challenge Program and why change something that is so young and was born of community effort without community feedback. They also expressed concern over only one model being discussed in the academic subcommittee — the heterogeneous model. On Oct. 13 the group was back before the board once again advocating for transparency from the Task Force and retention of the Challenge Program.

Lastly, the Save Our Challenge group held an informative meeting at the Kenmore Public Library last Thursday night. Approximately 50 people attended to listen to the Save Our Challenge organizers discuss key concerns over the process of selecting middle school curriculum by the Task Force. They urged attendees to contact

School Board members and attend School Board meetings.

“We would like the district to be clear on what the problem is before they fix it,” Susan Cobb, a member of Save Our Challenge, said.

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