

Community Education Connects Schools and Taxpayers

River Falls School District's successful community education program has more than 3,000 participants

SESSION: *Community Education: The Path to Community Support and Engagement*

Presenters: Jamie Benson, district administrator; Monique Squire, community education coordinator; Alan Tuchtenhagen, school board member, River Falls School District

While schools are perceived by many as the focal point in the community, it is sometimes difficult to connect with citizens who do not have children enrolled in the school district. To meet that challenge, five years ago, the River Falls School District explored the possibilities of a community education program. The program's evolution has paid huge dividends — including the passage of a \$19 million referendum.

“Community education allows the district to engage a population that is much broader than those families with children enrolled in K-12,” River Falls School Board member Alan Tuchtenhagen said. “All residents of the district are invited to participate. This is one of the things we should be doing to serve the people of this school district.”

Course offerings run the gamut from welding and quilting to foreign language and computers. The program has blossomed from 582 registrations to nearly 3,300 — a 550 percent increase — and is now an integral part of the River Falls community. Over 500 senior citizens availed themselves to course offerings in the current session, a key group the

district wanted to connect with. The district offers three sessions annually.

“The environment is ripe for community education,” said program coordinator Monique Squire. “People are really looking for life-long learning opportunities.” While Squire directs the program, she takes her marching orders from the community — more pointedly a 10-member advisory council. “They are my ‘eyes and ears’ of the community,” she said. “The key is to ask the community what *they* want.”

The advisory council meets monthly and decides which classes are added or dropped (potential instructors make their “pitch” to the council). The program is designed to break even. A general rule is the instructor receives 70 percent of the registration with 30 percent returning to the program. Several instructors volunteer and ask for no payment.

Squire said it is important to have a consistent brand for the community, noting the course catalogue has a similar look each publication.

“A big part of our success is using pictures of local people — people comment about that.”

She termed the catalogue “the



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bread and butter of community education.”

“Make it professional; it's how people judge your program,” Squire said. The district uses a local professional photographer.

A critical component to pay for the program is Fund 80 (\$150,000), which allows a school board to approve tax expenditures over the revenue limit. Superintendent Jamie Benson said, “There are some real opportunities to use Fund 80 for Community,” but cautioned, “understanding Fund 80 is critical.”

Benson noted the community education program “offers a structured, effective way to expand the school's traditional role and create a mutually interdependent relationship among home, school and community.” ■