

## Superintendent Shawn Dilly's column – Alternative School

Recent headlines have unfortunately placed a number of questions in community members' minds surrounding the fate of Mineral County Alternative School.

Despite, what was being rumored last year there has never been any attempt to close the alternative program. The proposals provided last year were an effort to bring the Alternative School Expenditures more in line with other schools in the county while also understanding the special needs of these students.

We are faced with the continuing dilemma of budget cuts and decreasing revenue and we must find ways to be more efficient in serving our students. That is not to say that we will not continue to provide for all of our students in an appropriate manner and in an appropriate setting.

The Alternative School program in the 2013-14 school year cost the county about \$31,192.92 per student. The average of all the other schools was \$7,949.78 per student. As you can clearly see there is a tremendous disparity in the cost of operating the program.

It is anticipated that a program with very diverse needs will cost marginally higher than regular educational programs. However, this discrepancy well exceeded the appropriate margin.

By relocating the program to the Transition Center, we could save about \$100,000 per year. Change is difficult. It is especially difficult when students have special needs.

In addition to the previously mentioned costs, there is a disparity in the overall ratio of employees to students in 2013-14. That, too, was a component of the proposal provided to the Board of Education last year.

Professional staff for the county's schools averages about one professional employee for every 14 students. Service personnel ratios for the schools is one employee for every 31 students. Principal ratios for the county is one principal for every 263 students. Counselor ratios for the schools is around one for 457 students.

It could be argued that there is a need for additional counselors. The roles of these professionals has changed over the years and we probably should look at them a little more closely.

The alternative program's ratio was one professional employee for every four students. The alternative program serves between 50 to 80 students annually with one counselor for every 50 to 80 students. The original proposal called for the Alternative School principal position to be redesigned. However, depending on various factors the position could remain or change.

It was this disparity and excessive cost to operate the program that prompted the need to consider modifying the current approach to a more cost effective and equitable approach.

Until there is a viable plan, accepted by the Mineral County Board of Education, there can be no speculation on personnel changes and it would be unwise do so at this time. For one reason, there are number of other needs in the county to be addressed that could also affect personnel.

We understand that once the Keyser Primary School opened in its own building, staff at the Middle School had more space for middle school programs that they felt had been limited when the primary students were also located in the building. There was a definite need for the Primary School to be in a separate building.

But, I believe we need to reconfigure the Keyser Middle School building to optimize the space available not only for the Middle School students but for staff and programs. I would like for the School Improvement Council to look at possibilities for configuration in cooperation with administrative and building personnel, both professional and service. I would be happy to receive suggestions.

The Board did make some changes for the 2015-16 school year and improved the ratios for staffing. However, the Alternative program still needs further consideration. We can go back to the drawing board and try to work out a plan that would be more acceptable. But, that work needs to be completed along with other considerations to ensure a fiscally viable future for Mineral County Schools and students with special needs.

Regardless of where the program is located, these students' needs will be met.

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