

Gifted students at Lawn Avenue School could benefit from new Virtual High School program

By Donna K. Drago

A new program to stimulate the minds of gifted students will be introduced at the Lawn Avenue School next year.

Assistant principal Mike Franco gave a report to the school panel on the program called "Virtual High School," which will be offered to students who can demonstrate a semester-long commitment to the extra work involved.

The program is geared to "high-achieving, critical thinkers," Franco said.

Initially, Franco hoped to attract "six or seven" of the high achievers to the elective class that will be offered one period per day. Franco said there would be an additional hour of homework each night associated with the class.

"It's a lot of responsibility, with daily and weekly assignments," Franco said.

Students will be selected for the program based on teacher recommendations, report cards and standardized test scores. Plus there will be an application essay,

Franco added.

The program is a virtual learning experience, where a teacher, who can be located anywhere in the country, teaches one subject to a "classroom" of about 20 to 25 geographically-diverse students who have on-line chats with the teacher and each other.

Franco said there is group work involved and students who work as a group can be located all over the place.

Once the students are selected for the program, they will get together and choose the class from offerings of about 100 different options.

"I'd like to see biology or physics," Franco said, but added it will be up to the kids to decide.

School Committee member Julia Held asked Franco if there are really kids "eager to do another hour of homework each night?"

"Yes," Franco said about some of the high achievers he's met at the school.

Dr. Robert Power, Jamestown's superintendent, said he has been asked, "What are we doing for the high end kids," on many occasions since taking over the helm last year.

"This is absolutely going to target those kids," Power said about the virtual classroom program.

David Dolce, a member of the school panel, said that the program should not be limited to the smartest students. "This might be a good thing for average students," Dolce said, adding, "Let's

not rule out someone who might be inspired by this," type of learning experience.

Franco said the program will cost the district \$425 per student and Dr. Power said that it would be paid for through grants.

In other business, the School Committee:

- Received three proclamations, from the Jamestown Town Council, the Rhode Island Senate and the state's House of Representatives on Teacher Appreciation Week, which ends tomorrow, May 11.

- Heard from Dr. Power that the two bidders for the food-service contract have been asked to make clarifications to their bids before the school panel will make a final decision. Once clarified, the bids will be reviewed by the sub-committee, business manager Maria Alfred, and Dorothy Brayley of Kids First.

A vote on the food provider is expected at the May 17 meeting.

Halley accepts buyout offer

By Donna K. Drago

Dr. James Halley, the embattled head of the North Kingstown school district will take a buyout of his remaining contract rather than pursue a lawsuit against the North Kingstown School Committee.

The NK school panel, at their May 3 executive session, voted 4 to 3 to pay Halley the remainder of his contract, which is up Dec. 31 of this year. Additionally, Halley will receive healthcare benefits through June 30, 2008, as well as accumulated vacation and sick time.

Jamestown's liaison to the North Kingstown School Committee, William "Bucky" Brennan, said he was not at the closed session meeting where the vote took place because the Jamestown school board was meeting at the same time.

Brennan, who has often expressed frustration with members of what he calls a "dysfunctional" school panel across the bay, said, "They should have never gotten to where they were with the whole thing." He added, "They had to buy him out because the lawsuit he (Halley) filed would have cost them a bunch more on top of what they (the school panel) have directly cost North Kingstown and indirectly Jamestown."

Jamestown school panel chairwoman Cathy Kaiser said, "I have had the opportunity to work with Jim Halley on numerous South County initiatives as well as in his role as district leader. I respect Jim, wish him well and thank him for contributing to the strong foundation from which North Kingstown can move forward."

Kaiser said, "Obviously, whenever there is top-level change, one has to be concerned about a shift in district priorities or mission. Jamestown is a stakeholder and as such we will closely monitor developments as the NK school district regroups."

MURPHY'S LAW

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Despite the controversy, Kaiser added, "We have unwavering faith in the commitment of the high school administration and teachers to continue to deliver high quality instruction to all NKHS students," including those from Jamestown.

Currently, Jamestown sends 213 teens to North Kingstown High School at a cost of just over \$2 million per year.

Halley had announced some time ago that he would retire at the end of his contract. Prior to his resignation, he had been on paid leave since the NK school committee learned from the Rhode Island Department of Education that he had allegedly misspent some \$245,000 in special education funds on non-special education items.

Just last year, Dr. Halley was named Rhode Island Superintendent of the Year.

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