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RIDE reports poor progress at N.K. high school

By Eileen M. Daly

North Kingstown Schools Superintendent Phil Thornton presented the preliminary R.I. Dept. of Education report on the high school's progress toward meeting mandated regulations during Tuesday night's North Kingstown School Committee meeting.

The news wasn't good.

According to a Jan. 10 letter from RIDE to Thornton, the high school has made no progress in the areas communicated in a Jan. 8 correspondence addressed to suspended high school principal Gerald F. Foley.

The letter stated: "These results indicate no progress in the areas communicated in the Jan. 8 correspondence from this office...The review process indicates that North Kingstown has a significant amount of work to do in order to meet these expectations and achieve 2012 R.I. Diploma System full approval."

If the high school does not meet these requirements, diplomas issued by the high school in 2012 will not be approved by the state Board of Regents, Thornton said.

What that will mean for students graduating in 2012 has yet to be determined, according to Thornton. The mandates and the penalties for non-compliance are all new, he said.

"High schools essentially have been redefined in terms of how we have to work with students as far as teaching and learning. This all came around with No Child Left Behind in 2001," he said. "We've had different checkpoints with RIDE as far as what they are implementing in Rhode Island."

For example, in 2003, Thornton said, RIDE implemented personal literacy plan regulations.

"In 2007, we had our first check in with RIDE and they visited every high school and gave us a status report as to where we were. Our status report came out in a letter in 2008 in January," he said. "RIDE, in that letter, commended what we did well and told us what we needed to work on. We then had two years to work and then we had another visit this past fall...we're now getting feedback on our second visit."

This second RIDE report has indicated no progress during the past two years in the major areas mandated by RIDE, according to Thornton.

The areas in need of immediate and intensive attention, according to RIDE, are:

- A full alignment of the R.I. grade span expectations in all courses and assessments must be completed. This includes consistent use of common assessments and rubrics.

Proficiency descriptions must be determined in each of the six core disciplines. This process must include decisions relating to the number and types of assessments in which students must demonstrate meeting the standard in order to ultimately demonstrate proficiency.

mately demonstrate proficiency.

- An analysis of course-taking patterns of each of the pathways through high school must be completed to ensure that all students have sufficient opportunities to achieve proficiency.

- Evidence of planned personalization strategies.

- Middle level engagement of all aspects of the secondary regulations.

Thornton summarized three major points to explain the high school's present status and what needs to be done to correct it:

- The high school has not made good progress in the past two years.

- There is a tremendous amount of work to be done for the high school to be in a position to receive proficiency-based graduation requirements approval in 2012.

- There is a plan that is already being implemented at the administrative and building level.

Thornton and his team have put together a plan and are optimistic regarding their ability to sufficiently address the problems, he said.

"While N.K.H.S. is behind, we are encouraged by the capacity we have to move forward quickly," he said. One of the problems Thornton identified is that there is no definitive time period within which these mandates must be completed.

"We are anticipating that we have somewhere around 12 months to make this happen," he said.

The entire PGBR report includes 15 categories, with more than 30 responses from RIDE. Within these categories are eight mandated areas in which no progress has been made. "Where you see no evidence of progress – that is just not acceptable," Thornton said.

The major areas of concern, according to Thornton, involve grade span expectations, gap analysis and data analysis.

"If you do this first box, you will then have the homework done to do the next pieces for RIDE," Thornton said. "Not having done the preliminary pieces, we are not in a position to do the next pieces."

Thornton emphasized that the high school staff is now working double time to catch up and he is optimistic that significant change will occur.

The regulations are designed to ensure that education is uniform across classes, schools and districts; that possible bias – gender, race, socio-economic, etc. – is addressed; that rigorous and uniform standards of learning are in place; that every student in the country is proficient in all subjects by 2012 and that there is evidence-based data to support all of this, Thornton said.

"All of the stuff in this report represents 'best practice.' The Regents made it regulation to make sure schools do change," he said. "This work is transforming what high schools look like and, as you know, change is not easy."

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