

Mount Greylock School Committee Considers Health Program

By Stephen Dravis

iBerkshires Staff

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WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass. — This winter, the Mount Greylock School Committee likely will be asked to support a budget that adds a full-time position to the school's wellness department.

On Tuesday, the committee heard why it would be well to do so.

School nurse Nicole Russell and teacher Larry Bell told the committee about the

current state of the wellness curriculum and explained there is a significant gap in the program that prevents it from serving the students properly.

Bell explained that Mount Greylock students currently get one quarter of a year of health classes in seventh and eighth grade and another quarter in sophomore year.

"You could have a two-year gap between the fall of eighth grade and the spring of sophomore year," Bell said.

And that gap could make a big difference for some students.

"I've learned a lot from the [Northern Berkshire Community Coalition's] Needs Assessment survey," Bell said. "According to our surveys year after year, it's middle school through sophomore year when most students are making their important decisions with substances and sexuality."

In other words, some students are not getting help making important life decisions at the time they may need that help the most.

"If there's a way to make sure we get health as often as we can — particularly in middle school through sophomore year — we should do so," Bell said. "It teaches kids how to make these decisions on a daily basis because they're making them every day."

Bell, who taught biology and anatomy at Mount Greylock for 24 years, said his science background helped him see the efficacy of Botvin LifeSkills curriculum, which has a track record of helping teens to cut down on drug and alcohol use and risky sexual behavior, among other questionable lifestyle choices.

Mount Greylock currently staffs its wellness department with 4.2 full-time equivalent positions (FTEs), which includes three full-time teachers and four, like Bell, who spend a portion of their day teaching wellness classes, which include physical education and health.

Principal Mary MacDonald told the School Committee she wants to restructure the department by adding a fourth full-timer and moving out three of the part-timers,



Mount Greylock director of academic technology Eileen Belastock gives a presentation to the School Committee.

freeing up that period of their day to teach in other departments. The newly structured wellness department would have 4.6 FTEs and allow the school to offer a quarter-year health class in the ninth grade.

The restructuring also would improve the quality of instruction in the school's adapted physical education program, which serves the special education population, she said.

The health instruction and life skills training in proper decision making are more important than ever in a world where teens are exposed to new temptations like sexting that their parents did not confront when they were in school.

"Being intelligent doesn't mean you don't deal with this stuff," Bell said. "It's just part of growing up. It's part of being human.

"We need to be there when our kids get there."

A busy School Committee agenda Tuesday included updates from Mount Greylock's newly installed academic technology director and about the progress in the school building project, and the night began in a joint meeting with the committee members' counterparts at Lanesborough and Williamstown Elementary Schools. Together, the Mount Greylock and Superintendency Union 71 committees decided to elevate Assistant Superintendent Kim Grady to the post of interim superintendent.

On the technology front, Eileen Belastock told the committee about her efforts to support the faculty in using computers in the classroom. Part of her strategy included a half-day of professional development for teachers throughout the Lanesborough-Williamstown Tri-District; part of it it includes Mount Greylock's first "faculty tech camp" on Wednesday, when faculty members were scheduled to participate in 20 minute sessions focused on specific skills like using Google quizzes or how to use scanning to reduce paper in the classroom.

"Teachers created this," Belastock said when she gave a similar presentation to the School Council earlier on Tuesday. "I'm just facilitating. I'm hoping to do more of these throughout the year."

Belastock said one challenge for her is making sure that Mount Greylock's' computer instruction keeps up with the demands of its incoming students.

"We did an Hour of Code with eighth-grade students last week where they got to use Scratch, a Minecraft game," she told the School Council. "What I have found is how advanced these eighth-graders are. We need to tap into their experience. They don't have anything in seventh or eighth grade, so we want to fill that gap with a directed study option maybe."

Later this year, Belastock said, the school plans to roll out a pilot loaner program to send laptops home with students who do not have access to technology at home in order to help them keep up with their studies.

"We're hoping this will be the start of a bring-your-own device program and 1-to-1 computing," she said.

School Building Committee Chairman Mark Schiek told the School Committee that the district's renovation and addition project is running slightly ahead of schedule thanks to some foundation work on the academic wing that was completed this fall.

"The rammed aggregate piers for the academic wing have been installed, so the soil is stabilized," Schiek said. "Basically, the foundation is in place. We're ahead of schedule on that. It wasn't supposed to be done until spring."

Schiek said the SBC expects to execute a contract for structural steel next month and it should start going up in the new three-story academic wing in April — about a year

before the projected opening of the new wing.

School Committee member Wendy Penner asked Schiek about the project's financial picture, and he indicated there are no major concerns at the moment.

"Some things are coming in higher than we expected, and some things are a little lower," Schiek said. "Doing the foundation a little early saved us some money because we don't have to dig in frozen soil and things like that.

"As with any renovation, we ran into higher costs with demo and abatement. ... As we go further along, the surprises tend to get smaller and smaller."

In order to keep the \$64 million project on track, the School Building Committee continues to look for areas where it can save money, by, for example, choosing less costly finish materials, in the process known as value engineering.

"We will be on budget," Schiek said. "It's a question of what choices we have to make to stay on budget."