

District working to 'redesign' middle schools

By Ruth Campbell rcampbell@oaoa.com | Posted: Tuesday, April 23, 2019 3:48 pm

Ector County Independent School District officials are discussing steps to revamp middle schools and all ideas are on the table from block scheduling to student support.

Every campus except Nimitz is in improvement required status under state accountability standards. Robert Cedillo, an executive director of secondary education, said the first meeting on redesigning the campuses had about 22 people including ECISD employees, community members and consultants.



ECISD logo wide

Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Lilia Nájñez said they will put initiatives in place for six weeks and come back to see if they're working.

“It's just progress monitoring. We're going to process monitor, not just that one time but every six weeks,” she said.

Cedillo said something he's learned as a campus principal is if it's not working you can't wait a full year to fix it.

Looking at test color-coded test results, Nájñez said you can see the middle schools are performing at some of the lowest levels.

“... Then you compare that to the high schools where you see high achievement happening. We're severely underperforming at our middle school level and the data shows it. It's a no-brainer really when you look at the data. You know you have to do something to change because what we're doing obviously has not been working,” Nájñez said.

“This just doesn't happen overnight. It's been the same processes that have been in place for a long time, thus this is the result that we have. That's why the redesign idea just screamed at us when we looked at this color chart,” she added.

Nájñez said the high school teachers “work magic with the students because they end up reaching these levels of achievement which tells us that our kids are so capable. So in middle schools, it's difficult to find teachers. You have to have that certain breed to work with that age group and it shows because our most dire needs for staffing are in the middle schools. We have lots and lots of holes.”

Cedillo said the first meeting included coming to an understanding of where the middle schools are — they're strengths and weaknesses.

All ideas on what to do to improve the campuses are on the table, Cedillo added.

There is a common denominator among sixth-graders that their performance dips, so the committee wants to see what can be done structurally and systematically to better support them and students in the other middle school grades.

Capacity can also play into behavior issues, Cedillo acknowledged.

“ Sometimes middle school students in general have trouble keeping their hands to themselves. When you have more around you, it’s going to be more of a challenge to keep your hands to yourself. They’re middle school students. It’s a unique age. They’re learning and growing and trying to figure out what their pathway is,” Cedillo said.

Middle school students also are trying to figure out why school is important and asking why they need to learn certain subjects, he said. That’s where programs like PICK Education and ACCESS come in.

PICK Education is an initiative of the ECISD Innovation Department that uses hands-on professional development for teachers and brings real-world science and research projects to students.

ACCESS is a program that hopes to engage students in career possibilities beyond the oilfield to fields such as healthcare, manufacturing service and nonprofit sectors.

Asked if freshman centers like they have in Midland were discussed, Cedillo said they had not come up yet.

The second discussion point was on planning — identifying the right tools to improve student learning. The group talked about having four periods a day instead of eight, consistent professional learning communities for teachers; and professional learning opportunities within the master schedule, Cedillo said.

“ So basically less transitions for the kids, longer instructional time and also time built in to support teachers,” he added.

Alignment between curriculum and instruction and possibly rebooting Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support, which has been used before, was also talked about, Cedillo said.

“ Response to Intervention is ... a process to intervene at every level of need,” he said. “... It’s basically support, like the first piece would have to be clear expectations, clear structures, clear processes. If they struggle with following those, what supports can we put in? What social or emotional support can we provide to get the student to understand how school works, how school functions?”

If one level of intervention doesn’t work, that student would move up to the next tier.

“ Some of the schools I’ve seen will put a committee together that will be a team of teachers. They will call the student in with the parents and tell them we need you to step up and tell the student they have teachers that care about them,” Cedillo said.

“ Tier 3 support could be maybe a biweekly meeting with the counselor. Basically, it’s a support system,” he added.

Campus culture was another discussion item.

At Bonham, there was a leadership mentoring program this year where community members came in twice a month and met with sixth graders.

“ That was a big deal. That’s been working,” Cedillo said.

He added that he would like to see that same program implemented at other middle schools. That was something the Education Partnership of the Permian Basin discussed proceeding with April 16.

Expanding the AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination program, is being worked on, as well.

“ We are looking at training more sixth-grade teachers with AVID strategies because AVID is a good program,” Cedillo said.

AVID is a college preparation program that teaches students organizational, note taking and time management skills, among other things.

The next middle school redesign meeting, scheduled for April 26, is to continue the conversation on mission, shared understanding and prioritizing first-year objectives and goals.

There is a common denominator that six grade students their performance dips but I guess just seeing what we can do structurally and systemically to better support those kids.

Cedillo and Nájnez and other officials visited Ysleta ISD earlier this month and got some ideas and examples of master schedules and other initiatives they have undertaken.

“ The minute we showed up, the climate and culture was so welcoming and that is one of the super levers in turnaround plans,” Nájnez said. “... There are seven levers in school turnaround. Climate and culture are one of the two super levers.”

“... That is the first thing we felt when we first drove in. We felt that the culture of the schools—all three of the campuses— was positive, was warm, was welcoming. When we went into the classrooms, kids were willing to take risks. They were highly engaged in active learning. All of that is part of that culture of that school district and it was consistent within all the schools that we visited,” Nájnez said.

Nájnez said the group will probably report to the board in July on changes being implemented.