

Berne-Knox-Westerlo Central School District Jan. 25 community forum

Topic: Climate and Culture

Facilitator: Bill DeVoe Administrator: Sarah Blood

Table 5

One community member said there is a sense among high school students of “What do you expect, I’m from Berne?” He said we need to do a better job of instilling a sense of pride in the students, but that the school can’t do it alone – it’s a community-wide issue. “That being said, I don’t believe the school is as big a part of the community as it once was.”

Another community member said that the turnover on administration over the past few years has had a negative effect on the morale and direction of the staff and students. “This lack of direction affects everyone, from the top down.”

Another community member said that the BKW area has a lot to offer as a community, but a disconnect has developed between the school and community. “non-parents are disconnected.” He said that students should volunteer more in the community, to show the “senior senior-citizens” how valuable they are to the community.

Another community member asserted that the students are already doing those types of things, with the history dinner, Kiwanis, maple sap run, and volunteering throughout the holidays. “I think those types of things need to be better communicated and covered by the newspaper.”

Communication was a big topic at this table. “The school needs to know what the community’s needs are, but we also need to know what the students’ needs are.”

Many people at the table lamented the lack of broadband access on the mountain. Is there anything the school can do to help the community get that much-needed infrastructure? Beyond that, the school needs to use every available communications channel at its disposal, and look at more avenues of communication, like public access and traveling town-hall-style informational sessions.

“How do we connect with the people who don’t have kids in school and maybe don’t know how their school taxes benefit them?”

There was also a big push for community use of the facilities by the participants at this table. The feeling is that would go a long way toward bridging any gap with the community.

Table 1

Elementary School parent appreciates how “close-knit” the school is. “I walk in the elementary school and I know everyone here. My kids do not get lost in the shuffle here.” She says the younger students have a sense of pride in the school. However, she worries that we have such a small, close-knit school at the price of some opportunities that larger schools may be able to afford.

Another parent agreed. “I know my kids won’t fall through the cracks in the elementary school. We haven’t really experienced any negativity so far.”

Noting that there is lower morale among students in the secondary school, a parent asked, “How do we shield the kids from the negativity?”

A community member responded that the problem is complex: “When the kids transition to the secondary school, the gap between the performers and non-performers widens. Maybe we need more challenging opportunities for both groups of students? More things to do out in the community, so that kids don’t define themselves by how well or how poorly they’re doing in school?”

Another parent said she wants the best of both worlds – the atmosphere of a small school, but the opportunities offered by a larger school. She added that “people are optimistic with the new leadership in place that we can somehow strike that balance.”

Another community member said that BKW once had a great balance of program offerings, athletics, extra-curricular activities – all while retaining its identity as a small, rural school. She noted that there were more sports offerings in the past and the district did a great job of working with students to see what would suit their interests.

Many people at the table agreed that more opportunity would lead to a better culture and climate within the school. “We need to look at the population we have and meet their needs.”

A couple of community members said that the school climate ebbs and flows more so here than in a larger district.

A community member said that we need to promote volunteerism in the school to create in the students a sense of ownership of the community. He suggested that students could repair homes in the area, clean up areas of the community, etc. “This would give kids a sense of pride in themselves and the community.”

Table 2

A handful of parents said that community members who don’t have children in the district mostly hear negative things about the district, but that seems to be “turning around with the new administration.”

One parent said “Staff can be a big factor in motivating students, and administrators are a big factor in motivating staff – so climate comes from the top down. If the administration is happy, then everyone else is happy.... We’ve turned 180 degrees in the past year.”

A couple of people at this table said that we need more sports and more students involved in sports. “Sports get entire families involved.”

One person pointed to the homecoming soccer game: “There were a lot of younger families that may not be regularly involved in the district at that game. That’s a gateway to getting them involved in other things.”

A community member said that while morale may be up among the families whose children attend school, there are people in the community who are disenfranchised about the amount of money the district spends. “People want to get a quality product for the investment,” he said.

How can we better show our value? Become a hub for the community, bring activities back that were once cut.

A parent asked in the district suffers from an identity crisis. “Is it possible that because we cover three separate towns – three separate communities – that we have three separate identities?” She said that some of the apathy that some of the students feel may be societal.

Even if the apathy is societal, the district has to be a leader of positive change in the community.

“It has to be us.”

Table 3

Some parents and community members took exception to what was said at previous tables: “To hear that some of the students aren’t proud to be here, that pisses me off. When I went to school here, we were very proud to be at BKW.”

A parent wondered how we could sustain the excitement that students have in elementary school, so that it carries over to the secondary school. How do we do it? Maybe more student recognition? Moving up ceremony?

One community member suggested that as the district develops its vision that it share it with the students. “Younger kids may not fully understand, but older kids are smart enough to ask ‘why?’”

A parent added: “And if the kids hear about it, the parents hear about it.”

The majority of the group voiced support for letting students have more say in the process of developing a vision for the school, and more control/ownership of the culture and climate.

On Volunteerism: One community member said he was “well aware of talented students in the district that can volunteer in the community.”

He also suggested a field trip to Hannay Reels, possibly a work-based learning course with them.

A community member said that the culture and climate extends beyond the school, and some things are out of the school’s control. That doesn’t however, make it an issue that the school can’t address. “Things like broadband access and people’s lack of transportation may be out of the school’s control, but the school needs to lead on these things.”

“There’s not a lot in town, so the school has to offer more.”

The school needs better, more varied avenues of communication. “Not everyone has internet.” We may be missing many senior citizens who want more information about the school.

Table 4

“Most people don’t think they’re getting anything for their money,” said one community member. She said people feel disappointed in the district, that parents aren’t supportive. “Are people just disconnected?”

Members of this table also discussed if the disconnect was societal. One asked if it was because of the poverty level in town, and if – for whatever reasons – people with more resources felt better connected to the school than people with fewer resources.

One community member said she thought PTA participation was down and suggested they send personal letters home to the parents of every child. "Parents have a bad taste in their mouths, so you have to reach out to them directly."

A parent said the district needs to communicate more. "I have to believe that more communication will lead to more community involvement."

Another parent said that, globally in education, the focus recently has been on testing and Common Core, things that make the school uninviting to students and parents.

A number of people at this table also suggested opening up the facilities to the community, letting adults use the building, and offering continuing education programs. Using the school as a community hub would ease the feeling of volatility in the school's leadership.

The district needs better communication when it comes to athletics cancellations or schedule changes. People rally around sports, let's get them the right info in a better way.