

December 17, 2008

## NCSD has rare opportunity to change future

The Natrona County School District is building a new high school.

Though you won't see concrete poured for a couple of years, the foundation is being laid for this new school in a very real way.

On Nov. 24, 2008, the NCSD Board of Trustees approved an \$885,300 allocation of funds to allow visioning work for transforming our secondary system and building a new high school of the future. About half of this money had already been set aside by the board for secondary systems work; they needed to act to allocate it. The other half came from one-time dollars within the board priority fund, an account that allows the board to fund special or innovative projects.

It's a large amount of money – for a large project.

The district has known for about five years that it would need to build a fifth high school. Part of the reason is the district's and community's decision to move to a new space-grade configuration, in which elementary schools will serve students in preschool through fifth grade, middle schools will serve grades six to eight, and high schools will serve grades nine to 12.

We also have known for some time that we, as a community, face a rare opportunity to have a blank canvas on which to create a new future for the education of our children. Our schools are facing serious challenges, including student engagement that is too low and dropout rates that are too high. The secondary schools of the past 100 years were designed to assimilate immigrants into being productive citizens in an industrial society; the model simply doesn't fit all of the realities of our time, much less the future.

As we move forward with the visioning, design and construction of a new high school, we have a wonderful opportunity to look ahead and to transform our entire secondary education system. My sincere intention is that we can all look back 10 years from now and be proud of the foresight, energy, responsible risk-taking, and action it took to do something truly significant for education in Natrona County, Wyoming and the United States of America.

Yes, we will build one great high school. More importantly, though, we have the opportunity to transform an already good secondary system into a great secondary system that will give every student over the next 50 years the best chance to be a champion.

To fulfill this opportunity, we will need help from our community and others. Let's face a truth: If we, in Natrona County School District No. 1 or in American public education as a whole, had the ability to transform our secondary schools by ourselves, we would have done so already. I am proud to say that many of our schools are engaging in the good work of developing home-grown new initiatives, testing them in small settings and expanding those that get good results. These initiatives are steps in the right direction and are positive. However, the challenge of transforming 20th Century schooling into learning for the 21st Century is still before us.

Like any good organization, we need to invest in research and development to cultivate better products and to keep ahead of the trends of the future. The \$885,000 allocated by the board of trustees shows a commitment to change and improvement.



We will use this money to engage our community; to seek out best practices in education currently in existence throughout the country; and to learn from others who train people outside of education. The allocation also will allow us to begin working with the leading futurists and innovators in this country to begin developing the best practices of tomorrow, right here at home.

The district will be working with a technical assistance partner and a thought partner to help us in this work. The technical assistance partner will provide support with proven tools and processes for communication, project management and fiscal accountability as we develop a vision for the secondary system and the new high school. The thought partner will help us connect with the very best minds in the country to begin looking to what the future will hold and what our students will need to thrive in it.

Both partners will have very clear expectations and deliverables to produce. We also have a definite timeline in which to complete this work. Our vision and programming for the new high school is expected to be completed in April 2009, at which point we will hire an architect to begin designing the new building. Design of a high school typically takes about one year, and construction takes another two years.

The design and construction process will take the same amount of time no matter how long we plan for the programming and vision of the school. By spending these next few months engaged in thoughtful, significant work, we have the chance to open a new high school – and put in place the cornerstone of a new secondary system – that will truly serve our children and our community for decades to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Dvorak". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dr. Joel Dvorak, Ed.D  
NCSD Superintendent