

A Strategic Plan for the Herman-Norcross School District

June 1999

The process of strategic planning in a school district presents many challenges as well as opportunities for a community. When strategic planning is conducted well, the community can reap substantial gains. Members of the community will feel empowered as they are invited to come together to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the system, and then to offer their visions for the future of the school district. When planning is done poorly, the results can be divisive and detrimental to the larger community. Enduring tensions in the community can be exposed and even increased if the structure of the planning process is not itself carefully planned.

The effects of a positive planning process can also have positive effects on the community as well. When the school has broad public support and its leadership does a good job responding to citizen concerns, the benefits are enormous to the community. The presence of a strong school in especially a small community many times serves as a centerpiece for stability within the community. Good schools are undeniably a strong factor in convincing people to both come to and remain in a community.

This document outlines the context for decision-making for the Herman-Norcross school district. The people of Herman-Norcross met together during a recent community visioning process that occurred from December 1998 through April 1999. During this process, it became evident that the community, while obviously united in support of their existing *good* school, shared a vision of excellence that would capitalize on the strengths of the school and community. Together the community members articulated a vision for a student-centered, community-based school that would ensure an excellent education for each of its students. This report describes this visioning process and summarizes the recommendations made by various community members during these meetings. Suggestions for the implementation of these recommendations complete the plan.

Background and Regional Context

Good planning occurs with a solid recognition of the environment in which decisions are made. For the Herman-Norcross school district, the larger regional economic trends have clearly affected local decision-making within the district. The Herman-Norcross school district is located in Grant County, a sparsely populated rural county in western Minnesota. With 474 residents, Herman is the third largest city in the county. Norcross, Herman's neighbor to the northwest, had 93 residents in 1990.

Like most counties in the region, Grant County's economy is largely agricultural. The 1997 Census of Agriculture indicates that there are approximately 317 farms in Grant county, down 18% since 1992. Yet during this same period, the total land used in farming actually increased 3%. This trend of fewer, larger farms has been a trend at least since the 1980s.

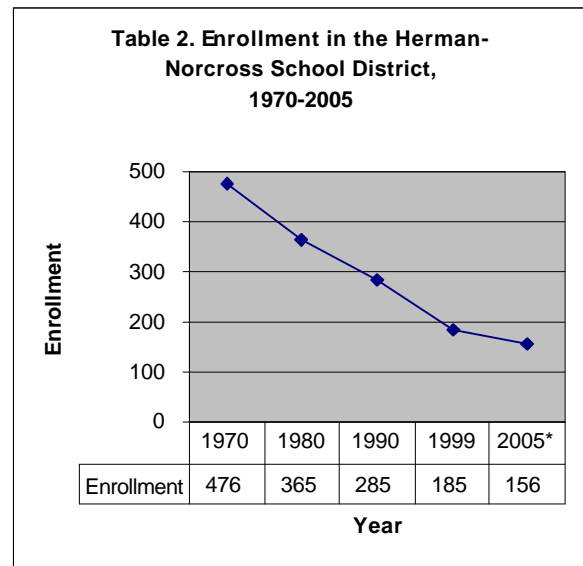
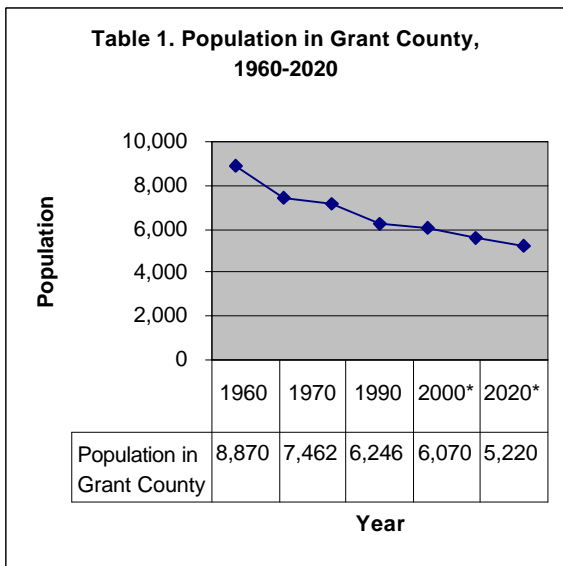
The top three commodities based on acreage are soybeans, wheat, and corn. The largest number of livestock based on number sold are hogs and pigs, and then followed by

sheep and lambs, and cattle. The late 1990s have witnessed a severe decline in hog prices. Unquestionably, this has hurt the Grant County economy.

Yet Grant County is not alone in feeling the pain of declining agriculture markets. The entire western third of Minnesota has been affected by these trends. Despite a very strong national economy, the farm sector has struggled. Prices in many commodities have dropped to levels that make all but the largest farms unsustainable. As a result, there has been a significant amount of consolidation in agriculture.

This trend has had a significant influence on the populations up and down the western “corridor” of Minnesota. Throughout the region, populations have been steadily declining over the last several decades. Table 1 displays the population statistics for Grant County. The population has declined from 8,870 in 1960 to 6,246 in 1990, a decline of nearly 30%. Yet the hemorrhage is not over. The Minnesota State Demographic Center projects the population of Grant County to further decline by almost 19% to 5,060 by the year 2025.

Not surprisingly, this declining population trend has also strongly affected school enrollments in Herman-Norcross. Enrollments have dropped in the school district from 476 in 1970 to 185 in 1999, a decline of over 61%. The Superintendent of the Herman-Norcross School District has projected that enrollments will further decline to 158 students by the year 2005, an additional decline of nearly 15%. Because state funding for schools is based predominantly a per-pupil formula, this significant decline in enrollment has had a significant effect on school district finances.



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Minnesota State Demographic Center, and Office of the Superintendent, Herman-Norcross School District

* - Indicates Projected Values

Political Context

Besides the regional economic crisis resulting largely from troubles in the agriculture industry, the Herman-Norcross school district also had a recent history in the area of school reform. In 1992 the community, acknowledging the financial problems that

are inherent in schools with rapidly declining enrollment, openly debated the merits and problems of consolidating with another school district. The debate culminated in April 1992 with an interesting form of “survey”. Community members were asked to state their preferences for the future of the school district. Should the school consolidate with another surrounding community? The answer was a resounding, “NO”. The survey had many answer options, including consolidating with several surrounding school districts, or even simply not naming the school district with which to consolidate. Out of 508 “surveys” taken, 370, nearly 64%, indicated that they wanted the full K-12 program to remain in Herman-Norcross. The next highest alternative received just 69 votes, or just over 13% of the total “surveys” cast. That option provided for consolidating with the nearby school district in Wheaton.

Simultaneous to this debate, the school district also began a rather thorough review of its programs. The strategic planning effort continued throughout the summer months of 1992. The group had significant community participation, and evaluated the curriculum in many areas. The work of the strategic planning effort was interrupted, however, when in November of 1992 a five-year levy referendum for the Herman-Norcross school district failed by a vote of 386-345. The levy would have raised an additional \$120,000 per year. Without the levy’s passage, it would be impossible to operate with a balanced budget. One likely cause of the referendum’s defeat may have been that the levy disproportionately put the additional tax burden on farmers. The school board had already increased taxes via certification that year on bare farmland from \$4.16 to \$4.84 an acre, an increase of over 16 percent. The levy would have raised that tax level per acre to \$5.70, making the total increase in school levies on farmland exceed 37%. While the town residents of Herman narrowly approved the levy, the vote outside the city limits was decisive. The school district was in crisis.

As one reads back issues of the local paper, the Herman Review, one can easily get a sense of the importance of the issue. The school issue was dominating the city’s business. Much of the debate had become acrimonious. In the November 12, 1992, Herman Review, the chair of the school board argued that “enough was enough”. He argued that the school issues were fracturing the community, and that it was time for the school board to more seriously examine the issue of consolidation. The November 19, 1992, issue of the Herman Review also gives indications of the seriousness of the issue to residents. On the editorial page, the editor pleaded with readers for reconciliation. He wrote, “The issue has altered friendships and relationship within families.”

Important discussions about consolidation dominated the school board through the winter. On November 24, 1992, the school board voted to go another year and offer another referendum in 1993. The decision clearly was going to result in large amounts of deficit spending. Meanwhile, the strategic planning committee completed its work and presented its plan on December 10, 1992. The recommendations were comprehensive and very reform-minded. Some of the recommendations included using more block time to create more flexible scheduling, establishing entrepreneurial opportunities within the district, and strengthening the bond between the school district and the community by developing resource lists and hiring a community-school coordinator as a half-time position. Unfortunately, many of these reforms were overshadowed by the larger public debate about the future of the school district.

The decisive moment came during the board's meeting on February 25, 1993. The board was going to vote on whether or not to bus students outside the district. Community participation was high and evenly distributed. The motion failed on a 3-3 vote. The district would get to vote on a levy again in November 1993.

The November 1993 levy referendum obviously also generated a lot of interest in the community. The 1993 referendum increased funding by about \$260,000 for each of the next three years. By this time, the school had an operating deficit greater than \$120,000. An overwhelming 81% of eligible voters turned out to vote and approved the levy by a 419-320 vote. Just over 56% of voters supported the levy. The school district had three years worth of funding to rebuild public support. The 1996 levy referendum called for a renewal of the 1993 referendum for an additional three years. It won easily by a margin of 467-223 (67%-33%).

One interesting observation is that no board members who supported busing students out to other districts in 1993 still sits on the school board in 1999. The key member who voted against the busing arrangement now serves as the chair of the school board in 1999, and a key community member who coordinated the strategic planning effort in 1992 and openly spoke out against busing to a nearby district also serves on today's school board.

The purpose of this section of the strategic plan is to identify key contextual variables and historical events that shaped the attitudes of Herman-Norcross residents. The community clearly is challenged by the economic strain of a changing agricultural market and its corresponding effect on regional population. In addition, the community is still healing from very divisive events that occurred in 1992-1993. With this in mind, we began to strategize as to how best to engage the community in strategic planning in 1999.

Moving Forward with the Planning Process

In the spring of 1998, the school superintendent at Herman-Norcross, contacted the Center for Small Towns, an outreach program located at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM). One goal of the Center is to provide access for area community leaders to the resources of the University in order to help "in their struggle for survival and vitality."

Initial conversations included discussion of difficulties at the Herman-Norcross school district and common themes throughout all public schools in the West Central region of Minnesota. Recognizing that there is increasing mutual concern about the continued erosion of population and community, and the resulting decline in school enrollment as a threat to sustainability, a decision was made to hold a "conversation" in Herman inviting the area's school superintendents. This coincided with a process of planning a strategy for leaders from state, federal and higher education organizations to gain new insights into the concerns and future goals of citizen's in rural Minnesota and gather views on where dollars and technical assistance are needed. Minnesota Rural Partners, USDA's Rural Development Office and the University of Minnesota's Rural Development Council and others attended a "rural community conversations" in Herman hosted by area school superintendents.

Outcomes of the meeting included continuing planning when the superintendents got together again in early July. That planning is the key to sharing resources without necessarily consolidating. Another idea was shaped around the idea of the Herman-Norcross school district, the Center for Small Towns and the West Central Initiative Fund

to partner in developing a model process of school/community planning starting with Herman-Norcross. Key features were to include a broad-based approach to the planning process and that the “community” is perceived as a region in relationship to other communities.

As a follow-up meeting to the “Rural Conversation” in Herman on May 15, area school superintendents met at the UMM campus in July to discuss planning, needs, resources and technical assistance issues. A common purpose was expressed: develop a broader cross-section of people knowing the issues including school board members, to collect current demographic information, identify various methods of adapting to changes that impact the ability to provide quality education, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these methods as they apply to the operating environment in West Central Minnesota. The developing collaborative Higher Education/K-12/Community approach to the Herman-Norcross planning project was supported as a model approach to planning.

The West Central Initiative Fund provided partial funding of the school/community planning process for Herman-Norcross Schools by contributing \$2,500 of the projected \$6,500 budget through a “Community-based Planning” grant. The Center for Small Towns and the Herman-Norcross Schools also contributed towards expenses.

The Herman-Norcross school board became more involved with the school/community planning process during their September meeting. After reviewing current ideas on the planning process and offering input on procedure for the project, members of the school board, school administrators and staff from the Center for Small Towns developed and joined a steering committee to recruit community members, students, parents, teachers and additional University resources. The timeframe for the school/community planning process to occur is late November to mid-March when labor demands for farmers are lowest.

By mid-October a UMM Political Science faculty with community planning experience was hired to work with participation in small group discussions, provide consultation, as well as provide some coordination of UMM student involvement. Also joining the steering committee was a University of Minnesota Extension Educator from Grant County with a Community Resources Specialization, to be the primary facilitator of upcoming towns meetings. The role of the Center for Small Towns staff was to identify and recruit resources and to provide coordination and logistics between groups.

The steering committee met to provide additional perspectives on the operational environment for the school. The group shared a view of the school being for the most part sound programmatically, and consensus emerged that the school district enjoys good teachers, a balanced school budget, voters strongly support the needed levy referendum, and that open enrollment is not the challenge it was in the early 1990s. There was consensus among this group that the biggest challenge in the past five to ten years has been how to afford quality education when class sizes have dropped precipitously. Other factors impacting operations included negative economic change in the agriculture production industry has increased stress in the community and asking voters to approve a levy referendum on a frequent basis has a negative impact on perceived stability in the community. There was an expressed desire to create a shared vision among community members and to develop a method for taking action in an environment of uncertainty. As all but one member of the steering committee had E-mail, it was decided as a primary method

to communicate within this group. The atmosphere among members was encouraged to be one of cooperation with feedback throughout the process highly valued.

The involvement of both high school students and UMM students from the Herman-Norcross area was highly desired in supporting cooperation among all age categories. With two current UMM students having graduated from Herman-Norcross school, both joined as members of the Work Group (original Steering Committee) to attend Community meetings and assist with research activities. A third UMM student from a small area town and having high interests in policy-making and rural education in small towns, also joined. Involvement of current high school students at Herman-Norcross was encouraged, the members of one social studies class participated in the Community meetings. A second UMM faculty member from Education joined the Work Group in late December.

Recruitment of Community members was accomplished with notices in the local newspaper, announcements on the radio, and personal invites to key stakeholders. The editor of the local newspaper signed on as a participant in the Community meetings. Monday meetings were scheduled to allow publishing meeting summaries.

Community Group and Work Group Tasks/Activities

The desired approach to the school/community planning process was viewed as solution oriented, an "opportunity" to develop a community consensus surrounding a shared vision. The intended result being a process more than a plan with clear identification of viable options as a means to adapting to the impacts of changing demographics. The tenor of the meetings was to be enjoyable, productive, respectful of all members and supportive of creative participation.

The Community Group was invited to attend a series of town meetings beginning in early December. The members of this group included all interested community members and included all members of the Work Group. The tasks established for this larger diverse group of community members was to:

- ✧ Envision - "what quality rural education in our changing environment looks like",
- ✧ Clearly identify and document viable options as a means of adapting to the impacts of changing demographics, and to
- ✧ Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each policy option.

Members of the Work Group included a smaller set of Herman-Norcross school administrators, school board members, UMM students and U of MN resources. All members of the Community Group were invited to participate, although no one stepped forward. The tasks of this group was to:

- ✧ First and foremost, take the preferences of the Herman-Norcross Community Group and translate them into workable policies that can be implemented by both the community and the school district,
- ✧ Establish project procedure, acquire necessary finances, and identify and recruit community members to participate,
- ✧ Establish contacts and provide copy to the media, and to
- ✧ Evaluate strengths and weaknesses of each policy option.

The Case of Herman: An account of the Town Meetings

Preceding a series of seven town meetings was an article on the front page of the Herman Review. The town meetings were characterized as a way to “turn adversity into opportunity” and touted Herman and Norcross as communities “full of talented, community-minded people having a great deal of positive leadership to offer...change isn’t easy, but it must come from the inside out”.

The future of our towns, townships and school district: An opportunity to adapt to change

The first of the town meetings was held on December 14, 1998. With over 30 participants attending, the group was complimented for its “great vision and attitude” in initiating the project. Starting with a discussion of the relationship that exists between the school and the community, acting Superintendent Larry Foley (Don Andersen was engaged on a temporary sabbatical in Egypt) presented a “state of the school district”. In describing the current student enrollment dilemma experienced across the region, he explained income sources for the school. With the high percentage of total income for the school coming from state aid via a formula using student enrollment, he added that the number of students has declined from 528 in 1973 to a current 185. The net loss translates to about \$150,000 and projections are for additional declines. Similar changes are being experienced across the region with negative impacts on businesses and households. Another challenge for the school is that with relatively few teachers required to teach the different subjects desired, it is difficult for the district to find teachers with the necessary multiple licenses.

Several community members shared their perspectives on the school and its relationship with the community. The school board chair assured the group that the school is “producing a good product, well-educated students, and complimented the superintendents for their administrative expertise”. Her daughter, a UMM student and Work Group member agreed saying that the education she received at Herman-Norcross prepared her well for college. Another community member with economic development ties commented on the benefits he perceived from the planning process done in 1992 and glad for this process being undertaken. He observed that the school is not necessarily essential to the communities’ economy. It is very important, as is a “positive and winning attitude” and the inclusion of our children in this planning process.

The director of the Center for Small Towns was on hand and commented on benefits of both the University and area communities with being involved with common projects. While UMM students benefit from work in the “real world”, communities also benefit from the resources and expertise of the University.

The UMM Political Science faculty and Work Group member described a message of “the best school is what is best for Herman-Norcross”. While suggesting that there are a number of options and opportunities and advised the audience “not to think of themselves as victims of declining enrollment, but to think of the situation as an opportunity to change. The better we adapt, the more kids will want to stay. This can benefit the school and the community”.

Building a dream: The values of Herman Norcross

The January 11, 1999 town meeting was the linchpin of the process in Herman-Norcross. This meeting consisted of community members brainstorming ideal images of the Herman-Norcross School; in other words, the community, working in small groups, was asked to consider the strengths of their school and to imagine what they wanted the school to

be in the future. By the end of this meeting, it was apparent that there was more consensus than disagreement as members of the community emphasized the need for ‘critical thinking’, ‘process’, ‘inquiry’, ‘problem solving’, literacy (including technological literacy), and the ‘basics’ (reading, writing, arithmetic).

Reframing the issue of school size in a positive light resulted in a discussion of many benefits for student learning. The community recognized that the students at Herman-Norcross were given more individual attention and they had more opportunities to actively engage in their own learning than they would at many other, particularly urban, schools. Community members recognized that there were numerous opportunities for students to be educated in the community and to interact with individuals of all ages as education takes place outside the school walls. They identified three key parts of education: that which occurs in the school, that which occurs inside and outside the school walls, and that which occurs in the home. It was also noted that the cohesiveness of Herman-Norcross and the fact that “everyone knows everyone” results in students being “clucked over”, as one community member put it, and fewer students falling through the cracks. This statement could be supported by the success of Herman students on Minnesota’s basic skills tests. Not one of the eleventh graders failed to pass the tests, as reported by the Minnesota Star Tribune in the 1998-1999 school year.

There was much apparent consensus among the group that building community would result in the strengthening of the school as the two are inextricably bound. These sentiments are echoed among other rural education groups, particularly the Annenberg Rural Challenge, which emphasizes the interrelationships of communities and schools.

Based on the discussion of January 11th, the workgroup arranged for several speakers to facilitate the community’s consideration of options for sustaining the Herman-Norcross School. What follows is a summary of the speakers who were brought in to the subsequent town meetings in Herman. Each speaker was invited based on the potential of their ideas and practice to provide alternatives for the Herman area.

Magnet Schools (January 25, 1999)

Judy Burkey, the new principal and superintendent of the Cyrus Math, Science, and Technology School (CMSTS) in Cyrus, MN discussed the decision in the Cyrus community to move to a magnet school for the elementary grades, and to tuition out high school age students to the Morris Area School District. Cyrus has a population of under 500 residents, and Burkey reported that 60% of the elementary students come from the Cyrus area, while 40% are bussed in from the neighboring communities of Hancock, Starbuck, and Morris.

Magnet schools are public schools that have a special emphasis or focus, such as technology, agriculture, language, or the arts. In 1990, Minnesota had four magnet schools in operation. By 1999, there were over 100 magnet schools. Magnet schools market themselves in particular ways, focusing on “specialties” the schools offer, in order to draw in more students.

The Cyrus community emphasized math, science and technology in their school as they moved to multi-age grouping and theme teaching to accommodate student learning in small classrooms. They departmentalized the curriculum, which means that teachers have particular subjects they are responsible for teaching (much like the traditional high school model). This helped to cut down on the preparation time needed for the teachers, as well as the materials needed for instruction. Burkey reported that there is “looping”, which means

that teachers move with students to the next grade level, as well as “team teaching”, or teachers sharing the planning and implementation of lessons. They utilize ITV and computers in each classroom.

The CMSTS also faces challenging issues that are directly a result of the declining population in rural Minnesota, particularly financial restrictions. Yet, Burkey noted the strong community commitment for the school in light of these financial challenges. As an example, community events are opportunities for community members to show their support. One such event, a Bike-A-Thon, raised \$3,000 last year, while another, a cookie bake, raised \$1,000 last year.

Other issues facing the magnet school at CMSTS include the challenges of teacher turnover, and the difficulty of retraining new teachers to the system that is in place in CMSTS. There is also a limited professional staff, which presents challenges for offering music and physical education courses to the students at the magnet school. The school nurse is part of a “co-op” and is present on site in Cyrus just two days each week.

There are some issues in bussing students to and from the CMSTS. Students from neighboring communities are often commuting to and from the school on a bus for significant periods of time each day, and sometimes these students need to transfer busses in order to get to their destinations. Further, there are interruptions to the school day as “early bus outs” require some students to leave schools before regular dismissal times in order to get them to the transfer site or some other destination.

In order to attract more students to CMSTS, Burkey noted that advertisements are placed in local newspapers and on local radio stations. Further, Burkey discussed the incorporation of an on-site, after school daycare. Students are charged \$1.00 each day they attend the daycare. The school does not make money from this endeavor, but it is a way to draw families to the school by attracting them to a service that is often much needed by working parents.

Charter Schools (January 25, 1999)

Doug Thomas of the Center for School Change spoke to the group about the potential for charter schools in Herman. Charter schools are public schools of choice that operate independently and innovatively under contract from an authorized public body. They are governed by local groups, and are free from the regulations and mandates that are imposed on regular public schools (with the exception of human rights and safety issues). They provide unique opportunities for innovation because most of the state mandates for education are waived with the charter. The charter needs to first be approved by the local school board before approval is granted from the state, and annual reports must be provided and reviewed in order for schools to retain their charter. Thomas noted that many local boards don't approve charter proposals because they fear losing their students to a charter. Minnesota was the first state to establish charter schools. Currently there are 45 charter schools in the state of Minnesota and nearly 2,000 schools nationwide.

Thomas suggested to the Herman-Norcross community group that a charter school would not be a viable option for Herman-Norcross due to the costs to the district. Instead, Thomas suggested that Herman needs to “act like a charter”; in other words, the Herman-Norcross school can think like “educational entrepreneurs”, can raise their standards and market through their ascendancy toward those standards, and can capitalize on the technology and small class size that already exists in the school. Thomas also suggested

applying to the state for waivers when issues such as the Profiles of Learning are unrealistic due to the size of the school. He also proposed that grants, such as the Small Schools Viability Grant, could help to offset the costs of education in small communities such as Herman.

Thomas proceeded to discuss ten strategies that he has developed for small schools (and those that want to be small). The ten strategies are as follows:

1. You can't love what you don't know. For this reason, all professionals, particularly teachers, need to be involved in budget talks.
2. Engage the community. Students need to be in the community. Small, well run businesses need to be in the school.
3. Market the school, especially the size of the school.
4. Let technology work for you. On-line curriculums, flexible scheduling of courses via the Internet, and Nova Net are just a few options available for schools seeking to use technology.
5. Be entrepreneurial now! The school can be a mechanism to help the community become entrepreneurial.
6. Eliminate courses. Teachers need to begin to think as generalists rather than specialists.
7. Combine elementary grades.
8. Waive everything, including the graduation rule if it is too expensive.
9. Purchase services whenever possible. Outsourcing (such as the ADM group, buying rather than employing, and "private practitioner teachers" (those who sell tutoring services) are all avenues for the purchasing of services.
10. Look for new models. Innovative models become a good way to market your school.

Thomas concluded his talk by discussing the case of the New Country School. The school schedule, set up in "blocks" (such as a science block, an English block, etc.), incorporates time for teachers to take project proposals. Students begin their day in a 15-minute advisory group meeting, followed by project and library time. At 10 a.m., the entire school has math time, followed by lunch and Sustained Silent Reading from 12 p.m. to 1 p.m. At 1 p.m., students move to "post secondary options", which include internships and group work. The day closes with an advisory meeting from 2:45 p.m. until dismissal. Each student has a personal workstation in the school, and a faculty member who serves as an advisor.

Standards based education (February 8, 1999)

Sandy Fabian, of Minnesota's Department of Children, Families, and Learning and also a resident of Herman, engaged the community group in discussion and activities to demonstrate what the Minnesota Graduation Standards and their accompanying Performance Packages have to do with community. She began by explaining that there are rapid changes in education as our society moves from an industrial age (with industrial models for school) to a technological or information age. She called on the group to be proactive about where they want to go, not unlike the early pioneers who settled in this area.

Fabian suggested that student centered, community based, standards driven education are central to these new reconceptualizations of education. In particular, Fabian proposed that relevance, transferable skills, and workforce preparation should be key

priorities. Fabian detailed the prospects of the ten core areas of learning that are part of the Minnesota Graduation Standards. These ten areas include Read, View, and Listen; Write and Speak; Arts and Literature; Math Applications; Inquiry; Scientific Applications; People and Cultures; Decision-Making; Resource Management; and World Languages. She then engaged the group in consideration of the application of performance packages in the Herman-Norcross school.

Fabian encouraged the group to stop thinking in terms of course work, and instead to think in terms of student learning. This would require any restructuring of the school day to consider aspects of education that Doug Thomas also suggested: individualized learning, faculty mentors, and block schedules.

Technology (March 5, 1999)

Kristin Anderson, superintendent of the Fertile-Beltramy School District, spoke of the potential that technology has afforded the consolidated school of 650 students where she works. This school is surviving largely as a result of its open enrollment and tuition students (which add 165 children to the student population). It is a low-income district, with 48% of all students receiving free or reduced lunches. Anderson believes that the school has developed a reputation for personal attention and student involvement. They are noted for including special needs students in regular classrooms. Further, the school believes that all students need to have equal access to technology, and this central tenet has driven much of the funding for the school.

The Fertile Beltramy school has acquired and extended their technology resources by securing one loan and several grants for this purpose. At the present time, all the juniors and seniors have personal laptops to use throughout the school year. Additionally, all the faculty members have personal laptop computers. There is a full time technician on staff to support the use of technology by the teachers and students.

The technology students at Fertile-Beltramy have developed a “Webmaster” business in the school with a \$35,000 grant from the Center for School Change. The students develop and maintain web pages for every business in the town for a \$50 annual fee.

Anderson proposed that the Herman Norcross School could benefit from applying for free or refurbished computers through the “Computers for Schools” program at the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning. Further, she proposed that “Technology Literacy Challenge Grants” would be a viable venue for more funding in Herman. Anderson suggested that Theresa Mish from the Minnesota Department of Children Families, and Learning, would provide any needed support in the grant writing process.

Overall, Anderson seemed to suggest that technology could attract more students to the Herman-Norcross school. Courses could be offered, for a fee, over the Internet, and open enrollment could be increased through distance learning. Anderson also suggested that NovaNET would be more accessible than ITV, and that it accommodates EBD (Emotionally Behaviorally disturbed students) and other special needs students in more effective ways.

Initial Community Summary Meeting

The town members’ last two meetings consisted of Superintendent Don Andersen’s summarization of the various issues facing the Herman-Norcross School, and University of

Minnesota, Morris professor Greg Thorson facilitating decision-making about the possibilities for this particular community. The group reconsidered the information presented by each speaker, and weighed the implications the speakers' suggestions held for the Herman-Norcross school.

The group came to a general consensus that they were very pleased with their school. Overall, they felt the students at Herman-Norcross received a quality education. This is evidenced in 100% of the high school juniors passing the Minnesota Comprehensive Exams, a graduation requirement, and in the 100% graduation rate for more than 20 years. Former students who attended the town meetings also noted that they were well-prepared for college when they graduated from Herman-Norcross. Reducing class size, an issue gaining much attention in the media and legislature, is not a problem for Herman-Norcross, which already has low teacher-student ratios.

Another strength of the school noted in the concluding meetings was the up-graded technology available to students. While some town members were concerned that technology would be the "project" rather than a tool to facilitate learning and research, there was overall consensus that the school was well equipped to prepare students for using technology.

There was some discussion regarding the overall practicality and use of ITV in Herman-Norcross. Some of the high school students attending the meeting noted that students who hoped to pursue a pre-med degree at a university are required to take an anatomy course. Presently, Herman-Norcross is unable to offer such a course. However, ITV could make that a possibility. The challenges of this approach involve scheduling the course at a time students could attend, and having adequate enrollment in the course to make it cost-effective. Principal Tim Roggenbuck also noted that ITV could potentially lower the enrollment for already under-enrolled elective courses in the high school.

Other discussion involved introducing block scheduling and project-based learning. Principal Tim Roggenbuck suggested that afternoon class time could be changed to accommodate a block schedule. His concern about pursuing this related to how students would still meet the Graduation Standards and what would happen to the already limited number of electives students could take. Sandy Fabian noted that one project could meet several graduation requirements, and that communication among teachers would be essential if such an approach would be viable. Other concerns that were expressed regarding project-based learning included questions about how student learning would be extended into broader areas (such as those included in liberal arts education), and how assurance could be given that students would be learning the "basics" (such as punctuation, etc.). Time was also noted as an important issue – would teachers have enough time to help students with projects, and would students have enough time to take all the classes they needed. It was suggested that a focus on the outcomes of education would help with prioritizing and reaching conclusions to these questions.

The final concern was the need to increase enrollment. The community members all seemed to agree that it would be important to market the Herman-Norcross school, to advertise and attempt to bring in new students through open enrollment. Incorporating an all day, every day kindergarten was also discussed as a possible way to increase and retain enrollment.

This process resulted in many benefits for the Herman-Norcross community. Most important of these benefits was the consensus that was attained about the values and ideals

that reflect the goals of the community for this particular school. There seems to be a broad vision for the school that is essentially agreed upon by those who attended the meetings. This vision includes a desire to continue to provide a quality education that will prepare students for their adult life in both work and citizenship responsibilities. In order to attain this ideal, the community expressed interest in emphasizing learning through a focus on the “basics”, technology, and community life. Part of this ideal also reflects an emphasis on “individualized learning”, or working with each student as a learner to help them realize their goals. In a small school such as Herman, it is very possible for each child to have an individual learning plan that is developed in conjunction with the student’s faculty advisor and parents. With this broad vision articulated, it becomes easier for subsequent decisions to be made that will move the school toward this goal.

A further benefit to this process was that community members recognized that the issues they were facing were not unique to Herman. It was important to see how other communities were addressing these issues in proactive and creative ways. They came in contact with other leaders of small communities who can be resources to them in the future, and who have much to offer in terms of “collaborative” work in schools.

It was beneficial for the community to recognize the strengths of the school as it currently exists. As a group, there was important consensus that much in the Herman school was going well. In addition to this, there was a “menu of ideas” presented to the community, offering many options that could be taken up in the future (as needed) and adapted in ways that would still reflect the values of Herman-Norcross at large.

Summary of Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

The suggestions derived from the community meetings fall into three broad categories: curriculum innovations, marketing the school, and utilizing technology effectively.

Area 1: Curriculum innovations

It is critical to the success of any initiative that adequate staff training is provided. In particular, this means providing realistic amounts of time for staff to be trained during the regular workday. It is also critical that staff have a disproportionate amount of influence in the development of each of these areas. Ideally, it would be desirable for a staff member to be responsible for considering and implementing curricular innovations in exchange for additional compensation or release time. This individual would work with the high school teachers to develop and plan changes in the curriculum that would optimally use the resources of the school in more efficient and effective ways. This individual could be hired immediately upon acceptance of the plan, with the expectation that some implementation could occur early in the upcoming school year. The individual assigned to curriculum innovations might address the following points that were considered during the town meetings:

(1). *Individualized learning plans*: What options are available for meeting with each student, discussing their needs and goals, and developing a long range plan for that student? Would this be incorporated into parent-teacher conferences, or would there be groups meeting on a regular scheduled basis with students (such as those described by Doug Thomas) that would allow them to conference with a “study group” consisting of other students and a mentor?

(2). *Block scheduling and Project Based Learning*: This was a point much deliberated in the final meeting. The high school principal suggested that there might be time for block scheduling late in the afternoon for the high school students. The individual responsible for implementing curriculum innovations might consider introducing a small block one-day each week to provide time for students to develop projects that would address multiple graduation standard requirements. An outside expert may be instrumental in working with this individual and helping the school to realize the possibilities for this innovation. It would be desirable to initiate a limited amount of block scheduling for the 1999-2000 academic year. Again, it should be emphasized that ideally this program should be developed and implemented by staff. The program should be evaluated for effectiveness and correction after the completion of the academic year.

(3). *All day, every day kindergarten*: Because of the difficulty of scheduling every other day kindergarten, particularly for working parents, the notion of all day, every day kindergarten is very appealing to many families. There is also some evidence that such a program has academic benefits. For Herman-Norcross, all day, every day kindergarten could be a way to bring in new, young students, and once the students begin at the school in kindergarten, it could be a way to maintain an increasing population through open enrollment. Some of the costs of such a program could be offset through state money that is available for decreasing class sizes or other programs.

Yet developing a program such as this may produce conflict within the school district. Some parents have expressed concern about all day, every day kindergarten, and due to the limited enrollment of this age group, it seems unlikely that the school district can offer both all day, every day sections and traditional every other day sections. This will need to be approached carefully and deliberately, ensuring that the families of Herman-Norcross' needs are met.

(4). *Before/After school child care*: This is another option that is appealing for working parents, particularly those who may work out of the immediate vicinity of Herman-Norcross. As with all day, every day kindergarten, before and after school child care may be an option that is appealing to young families, and subsequently a way to draw in families to the Herman-Norcross system. The district should look at the desirability and feasibility of offering before-school child care with an active breakfast program.

Area 2: Marketing the school

The school district should either assign an individual or create a task force whose goal it is to maintain or increase open enrollment in the school district. The highest priority will be to encourage families who live in the Herman-Norcross area to educate their children in the Herman-Norcross school system. Central to this strategy will be to publicly acknowledge the accomplishment of Herman-Norcross faculty and students. This group should work closely with the town and local businesses to develop creative marketing techniques to increase the visibility of the school.

Ideally, this individual or task force should be in place as soon as possible, with a pilot advertising plan in place before the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year. An attractive brochure should be developed that is readily available throughout the community and distributed to prospective and new residents. In addition, the district should increase its coverage on the local access channel with its many activities and celebrations acknowledging student and faculty accomplishments.

Area 3: Utilizing Technology Effectively

The Superintendent and School Board should examine the structures that are coordinating technology use within the school. In particular, the school district should analyze why they have technology in the first place. What can technology offer to Herman-Norcross? What is in demand that can be accessed through technology (i.e. an anatomy course for interested students)? There needs to be adequate feedback to decision-makers through frequent conversations with teachers, administrators, and town members who are interested in utilizing and improving the technology in Herman-Norcross. As indicated by the school district's media specialist, the school has many current resources available at the present time, and teachers have been working on grant writing activities to continue to maintain and increase these resources. Specific questions that could be addressed such as:

- (1). What would be the most effective use of ITV? What courses should be offered? How many students need to be enrolled? How do we coordinate these efforts with neighboring schools (such as West Central)?
- (2). What grants are available to increase the resources and training in technology for the Herman-Norcross school?
- (3). What technical support can we secure as we proceed through the grant writing process? (who is available to find grants that will suit our needs, who will help us in the writing of grants, etc.)
- (4). What professional support can be secured to assist the teachers in Herman-Norcross with the integration of technology into the curriculum?
- (5). How can the technology be made available to the community (through continuing education, etc.)?

These issues should be addressed immediately, and there should be a specific plan for the ITV usage in place before the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year.

Assessment and Evaluation

During the implementation of each of these three issue areas (curriculum, marketing, and technology), it is critical that assessment and evaluation are conducted periodically. The superintendent of the Herman-Norcross district has indicated that historically implementation of initiatives in the school district has been most successful when specific duties were assigned to individuals by the superintendent rather than by forming a committee. With this in mind, it is suggested that the key individuals who lead these issue areas will also establish the most appropriate measures for assessment and evaluation. Assessment should be an on-going process, with periodic reporting to the school board. The means and frequency of the school board reports should additionally be determined by the leaders of the issue areas, in conjunction with the superintendent and board members.

Conclusion

The community meetings seem to indicate a strong sense of satisfaction with the school system. However, satisfaction is not enough for this community. They are clearly striving for excellence. Although students are learning and accomplishing their goals, this is no time to rest on these accomplishments. More can be done with very little or no effect

upon the financial resources of the district. Specifically, improvements in the school's curriculum, marketing, and use of technology can be made.

The Herman-Norcross school district is clearly succeeding at educating young people. The community has taken time to get together and evaluate how far they have come. They should be proud of their school, teachers, and students. Together, they will continue to work towards making the Herman-Norcross school district a place where students can receive individualized attention and instruction, and accomplish whatever their dreams may be.