2020-2021 Review

**Administrative Transition:**

Serving as the Executive Director, the previous school year (2020-2021) was a challenge on many levels. Our administrative team and structure underwent a significant change. In July, Dr. Gwen Anderson was hired as the principal and Nathan Schwieters as Assistant Principal. Both Dr. Anderson and Mr. Schwieters embarked on each of their respective first years as building administrators. In addition to what would normally be a momentous first year, the global pandemic dramatically changed how all school administrators approached teaching and learning. This was a stressful adjustment for any administrator regardless of how seasoned or “unseasoned” they might be. With that said, to be in one’s first year on the job and to be tasked with working through a global health emergency (on multiple levels) proved to be even more challenging for the STRIDE’s new team.

**Planning and Implementing Academic Programming during a Pandemic:**

Being new, and being new within the context of a global emergency, the principal and the administrative team were tasked to develop academic programs for three possible scenarios. One would be for a regular school year, with certain health modifications in place (masks, social distance, feeding students, transitioning, transportation etc…), the other would be to conduct an academic program remotely. This was particularly cumbersome because of the multiple anticipated and unanticipated variables that presented themselves throughout the course of the year. The third scenario would include elements of both in person and distance learning (hybrid model). With recommendations and input from various health agencies (County, State and Federal levels) and with guidance from the Minnesota Department of Education, the school elected to begin the year in full Distance Learning. This continued through early spring. Prior to the year the administrative team trained teachers and paras in a unique form of professional development in order to deliver remote instruction in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Recognizing the need for increased tech support for these new and unique challenges Distance Learning would present, the school hired two additional technology support paraprofessionals to provide support for students, families and staff. The task for this newly formed “tech team” was to not only deploy devices to each student, but to help provide hardware, software and connectivity assistance to students and families. For families without an internet connection at home, the school directed some of its emergency funds to provide families with “internet hotspots” so all students could stay connected.

In anticipation of emotional and social trauma the students and staff would experience during the Distance Learning time, the school invested in additional Personalized Learning and Social Emotional time to the school’s existing SEL and PL staff. These coordinators worked with teachers and paraprofessional staff to implement strategies to help students experience better connections with the school and fellow classmates. The coordinators also provided staff with wellness activities and strategies to help cope with this difficult time.

Activity and club advisors also needed to adjust how they would conduct meetings, projects, performances and competitions remotely. Unfortunately, some activity and club offerings were not possible during the distance learning period.

Delivering instruction was done remotely for nearly seven months. It wasn’t until late March 2021 when all students were welcomed back into the building (with restrictions). During the last three months of the year, there were still a number of students who continued to “attend school” remotely. This required teachers to plan and deliver instruction both remotely and in-person simultaneously (our hybrid model).

One of the biggest challenges and frustrations teachers reported during Distance Learning time was motivating and engaging students through a computer screen. With very few exceptions, most everyone agreed that distance learning was a substandard replacement for regular in-person learning and it was time to get students back into the building.

**Hiring and Training New Staff remotely**

The team also interviewed and hired new teachers and paraprofessionals during the pandemic. Training and mentoring these new professionals and paraprofessionals in a virtual space also proved to be unique. The administrative team created space and time for new staff to connect and be mentored by some of the school’s most experienced teaching staff.

**Grade Expansion**

Another task that the team was given was to staff and program for two additional 8th grade sections. This was particularly challenging in a remote learning scenario. Finding licensed staff proved to be one of the biggest challenges. The team was able to staff the 7th and 8th grade sections with existing teaching staff who agreed to teach out of their licensure area for the year. Planning time and professional development were offered prior to the start of the school year.

**Facilities**

Adjustments also needed to be made when the staff and students transitioned back into the building. Cleaning schedules, which also included sanitation infrastructure, needed to be updated to meet the demands of minimizing the risk brought on by the virus. Some of these adjustments included: Touchless; paper towel, soap, water dispensers, thermometers, as well as sanitation and hydration stations. The school also had a supply of masks, gloves, cleaners and signage throughout the school. The school’s heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system required significant modifications and upgrades to reduce the risk of airborne virus spread.

**Authorizer Evaluation and Contract Renewal**

During the year the team underwent the required Quality School Review process and contract goal writing with its Authorizer, Pillsbury United Communities. This process and subsequent outcome were encouraging as STRIDE was informed that the Authorizer’s evaluation results were very positive and recommended the school be given a four-year contract renewal. This was particularly encouraging as STRIDE was the only school within the Pillsbury’s portfolio of charters schools that was offered a four-year contract.

**Finances**

Another highlight of the year was the improved financial status. Earlier in the spring STRIDE applied for, and received a loan (forgivable) through the Federal Payroll Protection Program. This loan was valuable for STRIDE as it enabled the staff to keep all of its valuable staff employed during the pandemic.

The school was also allowed to use a portion of the proceeds to pay off it deferred principal balance and complete its multi-year effort to emerge from financial default with its bondholders. The school is once again in good financial standing with the bondholders.

**Next Year**

In the coming year STRIDE will begin a strategic planning process to help guide it in meeting the communities’ needs in the both the near and long-term future. One of the outcomes of this planning process will hopefully provide the school with a clear vision of potential expansion of additional grade levels beyond its current K-8 offering. With any potential expansions, there will come the need for more physical space. The school is currently working with the landowner to the north of the school and is exploring options to secure the land for STRIDE’s future, whatever possibilities that may bring. This will involve ongoing collaboration with the school’s bondholders, the landowner, the city, the schools’ attorney, the schools’ Authorizer and the parents, as it examines the different opportunities and challenges that lie before it.

Respectfully Submitted,

Eric Williams

Executive Director