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Citizens' group defends travel costs

U-46 spending for parents' trips to conference questioned

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Leaders of a parents' group say the Elgin Area School District U-46 administration's decision to pay for parents to attend a conference in Nashville last September was worthwhile.

U-46 Citizens' Advisory Council Chairwoman Lisa Hopp and Vice Chairman Larry Bury spoke during Monday night's school board meeting addressing recent comments by school board members Jeanette Ward and Phil Costello questioning why taxpayer funds were used to pay for their trips.

The duo were part of a contingent of 18 people from the district attending the three-day conference, which included site visits to high schools to learn about the creation and implementation of career pathway programs. The conference registration cost was roughly \$1,400 per person, including airline, hotel accommodations and meals, according to Ward.

School board members have agreed to review the travel guidelines for conferences, which CEO Tony Sanders said might be the right time to evaluate in light of rising fuel and air travel costs.

Hopp said the Nashville trip followed two years of discussions with administrators about how the advisory council could help improve the district's academy and career and technical education programs.

"It was made clear that expenses beyond the conference fee and airline travel would be our own personal responsibility," Hopp said.

Hopp said the school board created the council 60 years ago to serve in an advisory role, working in committees "to provide reports, recommendations and community input."

Its officers are elected by the general membership. The group, comprising district parents, has helped with boundary changes, implementation of new programs such as Eureka math, kindergarten through eighth-grade science curriculum, and full-day kindergarten, and creation of the district's five high school academies, she said.

Citizens' Advisory Council members are helping the administration review and create new high school academies or career pathways, expected to be established in 2020-21 and to enroll 400 to 600 students each.

Bury said the conference reinforced the need for building community understanding and support for creating successful career pathways.

"If we don't understand as parents what the district is trying to do ... if we don't understand the terminology ... the goals ... if we don't see how this is going to benefit our

students, then it's going to be very difficult to build the community-level support that you are going to need to go forward," Bury said.

Among the challenges school districts face is getting parents and members of the public involved when implementing new programs, he said.

The district previously has paid for members of parent-teacher groups to travel for similar learning opportunities.

School board President Donna Smith and board member Sue Kerr went on district-sponsored trips as advisory council members before being elected to the board.

Ward stressed her concern remains that taxpayer funds are being used for travel expenses of parents who are neither elected school board members nor district employees.

"This (trip) should have been offered to the board. CAC members were invited, but not board members," Ward said. "Since board members are responsible for approving curriculum and are elected by the public ... it would seem more appropriate to invite them."

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U46 decision to pay \$3,400 for 2 parents to attend career pathway conference defended

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO



School District U46 board members and U46 administrators attend the Tuesday meeting at which the district paying for two parents to attend a Nashville conference on career pathway education was discussed. (Rafael Guerrero / The Courier-News)

School District U46 spent \$3,400 to have two parents accompany 16 employees to a career pathways conference in Nashville in September 2017.

U46 School Board member Jeanette Ward requested information about the district's travel policy after learning two members of the U46 Citizens Advisory Council went to the three-day event, which cost \$1,400 per person to attend and about \$300 each in airfare.

The Alignment Nashville conference focused on the career pathways concept of high school education, which U46 plans to implement as early as the 2019-20 school year.

Ward questioned why Advisory Council Chairwoman Lisa Hopp and Larry Bury, the group's vice chairman, were invited to join the U46 group and board members were not.

"I still maintain that this should have been offered to the board," she said.

The Citizens Advisory Council, made up of volunteers who hold monthly public meetings, formed 60 years ago. Most of 50-plus schools that make up U46 have representatives, and members have been influential in helping the district change school boundary lines, form the current high school academies, set up networking and community engagement events, and introduce new programs into the schools, officials said.

Hopp and Bury, speaking at Monday's meeting, said they believed attending the conference gave them great insight into how the career pathways style of high school worked and could be implemented in the Elgin-based school district, information they can impart to other parents. The Nashville school district has already made the switch to career paths, and conference participants were able to visit schools and speak with district administrators, business leaders and others about making the transition to a completely different way of approaching high school.

District officials envision U46 high schools housing multiple career academies in which high school students would pursue classes that will put them on a path to a particular career. Career clusters under consideration include business management and administration, health sciences, law and public safety, manufacturing, STEM and others. Plans have not been finalized by the district.

"If we don't understand as parents what the district is trying to do, if we don't understand the terminology, the goals, if we don't see how this is going to benefit our students, it will be very difficult to build community level support," Bury said.

The district paid for registration fees and airfare but Hopp and Bury were responsible for all other costs.

Hopp said they presented their findings to the Citizens Advisory Council in October and November and have continued updating members on the district's progress in starting the transition process.

"Larry and I were very committed to making sure there was value on sending us there," Hopp added. "We were eager to take what we learned, what we saw, our impressions, our concerns and keep them moving forward."

The two said they took offense when Ward questioned their participation in the trip, which took place almost a year ago, and felt they had to defend themselves.

Another board member, Phil Costello, recently wrote on his blog that U46 should suspend covering conference trips for non-district personnel that "do not have the expertise, qualifications, or capacity to deploy learning opportunities inside the classroom."

"We are your advisory council," Hopp told the board. The two said some school district officials they met in Nashville were envious that U46 sent parent leaders to the conference.

At last month's school board meeting, some members said traveling with U46 staff to conferences provides "invaluable" experience as a parent. Board President Donna Smith and board member Sue Kerr said they both attended events at the district's invitation when they were Advisory Council members.

Costello acknowledged and thanked Hopp and Bury for their commitment and hours of work, but said staff should still be given priority at future out-of-district trips.

The district's policies regarding travel expenses for non-district personnel is expected to be discussed at a later board meeting.