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Schools pitch selling points

U-46 officials use breakfast to demonstrate district benefits to real estate brokers

By: **Rafael Guerrero**



School District U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders, center, speaks to Realtors and other real estate professionals Tuesday about the good things going on at the district, which he said can be used to change the negative image some homebuyers have when considering schools for their children. (Rafael Guerrero/Courier-News)

Elgin-area real estate brokers are used to pitching School District U-46 communities and schools to potential home buyers and renters. On Tuesday morning, they found themselves on the receiving end of the pitch.

“I’m not going to sell you a product I wouldn’t buy,” U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders told the crowd of about three dozen in attendance at the fifth annual breakfast for real estate professionals, held at Kenyon Woods Middle School in South Elgin.

“My kids entered U-46 in second grade and fourth grade. They both have now graduated,” Sanders said.

A negative stigma still exists about the district — one district officials and real estate brokers both acknowledged at the event. The goal is to turn that image around by educating prospective home buyers and renters on the district’s advantages, upcoming program changes and improved finances.

“The big goal here is to be able to say we are a good place for (homebuyers’ and renters’) kids,” said Karla Jimenez, coordinator of family and community engagement for the district and one of the event’s main organizers.

The children of real estate broker Alfredo Ramirez graduated from U-46 more than a decade ago. Ramirez lives in Elgin and shows homes to potential buyers in U-46 communities as part of Universal Real Estate, in Carpentersville.

Getting clients to see U-46 schools as a great place to send your kids can be a challenge, he said.

“I think it’s just a matter of perception. My clients just say I don’t want U-46 ... it happens sometimes, not every time,” he said. Often they won’t elaborate as to why, he added.

Ramirez said he was encouraged Tuesday to hear the district’s financial situation was improving, with a balanced budget and more funding from the state. Only a decade earlier, U-46 budgets were in the red, resulting in deep staff cuts and program eliminations, he said.

“It’s refreshing to know there’s more stability,” he said.

Other audience members said social media and website school ratings play a big role in clients’ decisions to reject U-46 for other districts.

Rebecca Miller, a parent of three U-46 students, said she’s heard the negatives. “My daughter tells me every time there is a fight,” she said.

The district, though, provided her children options not readily available elsewhere, she said. Her oldest daughter is in one of the high school academies, which are being converted to more rigorous magnet academies, and her youngest daughter is in a two-way dual-language gifted program. One of the main reasons her family stayed in Elgin, Miller said, was the specialized services available to her oldest son, who is autistic. Those services will continue into early adulthood, she said.

“Our starter house became our school district house,” Miller said.

Among the things proposed as selling points for the district is its well-regarded music education, full-day preschool options, in-the-works high school pathways program and the district’s planetarium.

South Elgin High School student Mahima Dave spoke highly of her education in the district.

“The support I’ve had (in my schools), I’ve been able to develop even just a little bit of confidence to speak here,” said Dave, who graduates in the spring.

“We come to school sometimes being a little bit nervous about the things that we’re going to go into. But when we have that support system, we’re really able to show our strengths and foster them into something greater than ourselves.”