

Lansing schools set sights on 'academic success'

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Better methods of assessing achievement, stronger relationships with kids and making lessons relevant to kids' daily lives are part of a preliminary plan to improve academics in the Lansing School District.

Chief Academic Officer Terri Spencer presented the plan to the school board at a special meeting Monday.

Superintendent T.C. Wallace Jr. said he felt the meeting was productive.

"It sets the framework for moving ahead in academic success," he said.

The academic plan is the first

step in a process of restructuring the school district that the board and administrators plan to conduct through the fall with a goal of saving money and better serving district families. A final plan could include building closings and consolidations, and a reconfiguration of grades.

"As we look at this district and how we are organized, are we organized in the best way to educate children?" asked board President Shirley Rodgers. "As we restructure the district, it seems like this is the time these should be on the table."

According to the plan, the future could include:

» **A revamped curriculum.** That's necessary, as Michigan

joins a nearly nationwide coalition of states in teaching similar material in each grade, known as common core standards.

» **New ways of making curriculum relevant to kids instead of simply imparting facts.** For example, instead of teaching linear equations by rote, a teacher could give students a real-world problem to solve by using linear equations.

» **Thoughtfully collect and use meaningful data** to keep track of how kids are doing and quickly offer them help where they're struggling, as well as find better methods than the annual statewide tests taken by third-through-eighth-graders and 11th graders to assess achievement.

» **Make sure all students become comfortable to use information technology** as a part of their daily lives.

» **Building better relationships with students** to help keep students accountable for academics and their behavior.

» **Accountability for principals, teachers and students.**

The board asked Spencer to work with other administrators over the next month or so to create ways to implement the plan, and to consider recommendations as to the possibility of reconfiguring grades.

Spencer told the board she believes that in-classroom improvements are more important in the long run than reconfiguring.

EVALUATION COMPLETED

After months of delays, the Lansing school board on Monday completed its performance evaluation of Superintendent T.C. Wallace Jr.

Some board members initially wanted to conduct the evaluation in April, and it was delayed several times, most recently in late June. The issue was among several during a contentious spring for the school board, which also clashed on laying off top administrators and whether Wallace had violated his own contract by signing contracts with those administrators.

The evaluation was a last-minute addition to the agenda for Monday's special board meeting. At Wallace's request, the board discussed the evaluation in closed session.

Board President Shirley Rodgers and Wallace both declined to comment except to say that the board's public action on the evaluation will take place at the board's Aug. 4 meeting.

IN BRIEF

Stolen campaign signs to be replaced

At-large Lansing City Council candidate Rory Neuner said Monday she can replace more than 100 campaign signs believed to have been stolen Saturday night.

The incident came shortly after the public release of pre-election campaign finance reports last week. Neuner raised more than \$11,700, data show, a figure that tops that of any other council candidate by at least \$5,000.

Neuner said she heard from residents in multiple city wards that signs were missing. She said she noticed signs missing from yards on her own street after returning from Sunday brunch.

Neuner said she has distributed about 200 of the 500 signs she ordered. Neuner did not file a police report, saying police have more important crimes to handle.

Lansing police spokesman Lt. Noel Garcia said anyone prosecuted for stealing the signs could at the least be charged with larceny. Neuner's campaign finance report indicates she paid \$1,277.30 in two installments for yard signs.

Volunteers sought for school project

The Lewton Elementary PTA is looking for 100 to 150 volunteers Saturday morning to help with a landscaping project at the Lansing school.

As part of a persuasive writing assignment, students wrote letters asking local businesses to help the school.

Home improvement chain Lowe's Cos. Inc.'s Delta Township store came through with a \$1,200 grant for new garden materials.

Volunteers also may help install swings purchased with money raised by school kids and matched by the district. They also should bring their own rakes, shovels and garden tools.

To learn more or sign up, call the school at 755-1460 or email the Lewton Parent Teacher Association at lewtonpta@yahoo.com.

— From staff reports

HOME GROWN



Neighborhood resident Elisabeth Simmons shops Monday for fresh produce and is helped by Travis Nightengale of Nightengale Family Farms at the Westside Farmers' Market in Lansing.

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Market brings local fruits, veggies to Lansing's west side

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Locally grown fruits and vegetables have arrived on Lansing's west side, thanks to a farmers market started with help from Ingham County and the state.

Baked goods and crafts also are part of the new Westside Farmers Market launched this month at the corner of West Saginaw Street and North Butler Boulevard near the Genesee neighborhood.

Open from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Sept. 19, the market

was created to improve access to fresh foods in neighborhoods that are not close to grocery stores, said Joy Baldwin, food systems project coordinator with the NorthWest Initiative, a community development nonprofit.

Thirteen vendors agreed to participate, said Carolyn Drake, the market's manager.

"People are actually meeting the farmer instead of just going to the grocery store and seeing what

IF YOU GO

» **The market** is open on 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays in Shanora's parking lot at 829 W. Saginaw St., Lansing.

there is," Drake said.

About \$8,000 in startup costs was received from the Ingham County Health Department and the Michigan Department of Community Health, Baldwin said.

The market is in the parking lot of Shanora's Wigs & General Merchandise, 829 W. Saginaw St. Parking is available off Butler Boulevard.

Mason woman gets prison in theft from union

Former assistant ordered to pay more than \$400K

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GRAND RAPIDS—A former administrative assistant for a Lansing-area union was sentenced Monday to 3½ years in prison and ordered to pay back the more than \$400,000 she embezzled.

April Franklin, 35, of Mason, admitted stealing a total of about \$371,000 between 2003 and 2009 from an apprenticeship and training fund held by Lansing's Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 333, officials said.

Dues pocketed

She also admitted pocketing about \$40,000 in cash dues that were paid to the union.

Officials said Franklin issued checks to herself to pay for personal expenses and her monthly credit card bill. She falsified the union's accounting records to hide the thefts from co-workers and the union's auditor, officials said.

According to a news release, U.S. District Judge Paul Maloney noted in handing down the sentence the thefts hurt the union financially and it was not able to pay certain death benefits to members' families.

Union officials were not available for comment late Monday. A telephone number for Franklin has been disconnected.

Expressing regret

In a letter to Maloney submitted before her sentence hearing, Franklin said she is working two jobs and intends to pay the money back.

"The damage I have caused the (union) and the disappointment in myself are the first thoughts when I wake in the morning," she wrote. "I will, no doubt, spend the rest of my life regretting these actions."

MDOT worker with 'shy bladder' wins battle

MDOT officials say they won't appeal an arbitrator's decision that gives fired employee Ron Koontter his job back, plus eight months' back pay.

"We're going to put him back to work and we're processing the back pay now," Jeff Cranson, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Transportation, said Monday.

Koontter, who lives in Grand Ledge, is grateful for the vindication. He said he'll accept both the belated payday, and his job — "the sooner, the better."

Koontter, 44, worked for MDOT for 16 years before getting fired in November for failing to produce urine for a drug test Oct. 25. He attributed his inability to urinate on demand to a medical condition — "shy bladder syndrome," which was con-



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firmed by Koontter's doctor, Mark W. Schaar, who operates a family practice in DeWitt.

In a letter he wrote to MDOT on behalf of Koontter, Dr. Schaar wrote:

"This matter of his shy bladder causing him to lose his job is just plain wrong ... in my professional medical opinion ...

"I fail to understand (why) ... in the face of Mr. Koontter's previously diagnosed and documented medical condition ... you are continuing to follow through with his termination of employment ..."

Schaar, in a separate letter, wrote that Koontter also was unable to produce urine during a routine physical exam Schaar conducted in November 2006.

Drug free

Koontter is a building maintenance electrician. He is subject to drug tests because he is occasionally required to drive, and holds a commercial license.

Koontter estimated he's undergone eight random drug tests in the past — prior to his shy bladder syndrome — and passed them all. He has insisted all along that he doesn't use drugs, and never has.

Arbitrator Bruce Lillie ruled in favor of the reinstatement and back pay late last week, saying there was no evidence Koontter was trying to dodge the drug test. Among those who testified

LSJ BLOGS

The calm after the storm

I wrote Sunday about Lake Huron's churlish streak. In all fairness, I must say the big lake is capable of stunning tranquility as well.

Check out my blog www.lsj.com/johnschneiderblog.

in Koontter's case was Steven Soifer, associate professor of social work at the University of Maryland and the chief executive officer of the International Paruresis Association. The word "paruresis" refers to the inability to urinate in the presence of others.

'Barbaric actions'

Soifer wrote: "Under the new Americans with Disabilities Acts As Amended (ADAAA), such bar-

baric actions on the part of employers hopefully will be considered a refusal to provide reasonable accommodations to a person with a bona fide disability."

Meanwhile, state Sen. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, who took up Koontter's cause, reacted to the arbitration ruling in an email to me:

"Finally! We have been pressuring bureaucrats to make this miscarriage of justice end and restore this man. I can only imagine the mental anguish he and his family have gone through. Finally!"

Koontter said he's eager to go back to work, and put the episode behind him, adding, "It's been one heck of a ride."

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