

Are NJ high schools changing with the times?

Redesign steering committee to host public forum on March 5 in UC

The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee will be hosting its next public forum on Tuesday, March 6, at the Jose Marti Middle School in Union City from 7 to 9 p.m.

The meeting will include a discussion by Lucille Davy, commissioner for the New Jersey Department of Education and Stanley Sanger, superintendent of Union City, who will discuss topics relating to the future of New Jersey's high schools.

"We are looking forward to the meeting in Union City," said Edwina Lee, executive director of the committee and the New Jersey School Board Association. "What we have tried to do is acknowledge the diversity of the state. It just made sense for us to hit the most densely populated areas of the north. Union City has done significant things in addressing the needs of their students, but more importantly Union City was a welcoming city."

The Union City meeting is the only one scheduled in Hudson County.

The committee has held meetings in East Brunswick, Washington Township, and Long Branch.

Enhancing high school education

Last January, the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, which is composed of leaders in New Jersey's education, business, and higher education, started hosting statewide public forums on high school reform.

The meetings include discussions on globalization and technological advances, required skills for students entering the work force or going on to further education, how New Jersey students measure up (nationally), and action steps to improve the quality of the high school experience for state students.

The ultimate goal of these meetings is to gather information and feedback from the public, and implement it with the feedback from educators in the hopes of making recommendations to education and policy makers.

"Back in 2005, a summit on high schools was convened by then acting Gov. Richard Codey," said Lee. "About 100 state educators throughout the state were brought together to talk about the focus on high school graduate students."

According to Lee, among the topics in discussion were the changing trends that were causing a successful effect on education throughout the nation.

"We were the first state to be aware of a need," said Lee. "Now 29 states are posing the question and struggling with the possible resolutions. Coming up with a benchmark and academic standards, and setting common goals and expectations for all."

It also raised several questions such as what will colleges expect from these 21st century graduates?

What will the world of work expect?

"It was both interesting and provocative, and mind boggling to discuss [the steps needed] to enter the realm of the workforce or pursue advanced degrees," said Lee.

The next step

The summit members decided they needed to meet with educators, parents and the general public all over the state, which has been occurring in the 2006 to 2007 time period, to get feedback on what's going on in the individual districts, their models for education, and any suggestions they may have.

Since then, they have been working on coming up with these benchmarks, and establishing a more rigorous set of standards for the type of courses that students in high school will be taking.

"Thus began the work of the steering committee, which has been around for many months chewing on the data and [making sense of it] for students in New Jersey," said Lee.

According to Lee, as it is, New Jersey is ranked among the top five states in the nation in terms of high school performance. The state has among the highest number of students taking and passing the SATs, and lower numbers of high school dropouts.

"We have significant benchmark skills, but it's still not good enough," said Lee.

The last few meetings have been spent speaking to parents and educators, and improving the rigor of education such as in professional development, staffing realignment, and courses in the earlier grades, as well as transition components.

"Those are the things we heard [from educators]," said Lee. "Thus we began the public forums to help us talk to parents, citizens, tax payers and people concerned about the future of New Jersey, and what residents can expect from the next generation."

The committee is anticipating a good response, and although Union City will be its final stop in the current statewide forums, it will certainly not be the last.

Lee said that although this is the last scheduled meeting, it will not be the last chance for public discussion. The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee is co-chaired by New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine, Prudential Financial Chairman and CEO Arthur Ryan, and Montclair State University President Susan Cole, and is composed of the leadership of New Jersey's major education, business, and higher education organizations including the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) and the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence (BCEE) at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

The committee supports the work begun at the National Education Summit on High Schools held in Washington, DC in February of 2005.

Jose Marti Middle School is located at 1800 Summit Ave., Union City. For more information on how to engage students visit www.learnandearn.org, for more information on the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee visit www.njhighschoolsummit.org.



PANEL – New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee members Edwina Lee and Jay Doolan participated in a panel discussion at Washington Township High School in Gloucester County on Feb. 8. The committee was created to discuss high school reform. Photo courtesy of the steering committee.