

PONTIAC DISTRICT 429

Dukes sees district moving full STEAM ahead

By Luke Smucker
Staff Reporter

The Pontiac District 429 Board of Education met earlier than usual this month due to the board's planned attendance at the upcoming Illinois Association of School Boards annual conference, taking place Nov. 18-20, in Chicago. With the eighth grade junior high boys basketball team playing only a few feet away, in the gymnasium next door, Supt. Brian Dukes spent a portion of the meeting outlining his plan to bring education levels up through 2020.

"We have some catching up to when it comes to science, kindergarten through fifth grade," Dukes said to introduce the topic. "In the next couple of years, I want to not only get our kids to be equal to other stu-

dents across the state, I also want to very quickly jump ahead of everybody."

To begin his discussion on a plan called STEAM 2020, Dukes first began by explaining what STEAM stands for. STEAM is an acronym that stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math. Dukes would like the district to look at its enrichment throughout, being able to create one department that could work together to cover the different areas of STEAM.

"We've been talking to local businesses and they have told us STEAM encompasses a lot of the skills that our students are going to need to have in order to be better prepared for the job



Supt. Brian Dukes

world," Dukes said. "In some cases, we don't even know what all of those jobs are yet, but lately, there have been a number of jobs that are going unfulfilled in our county and the other areas around us because of the lack of skilled workers in these areas."

Dukes said the new program would not only give younger students a better idea of what kinds of jobs are in the area, but also nurture the skills that these businesses are looking for, before the students leave District 429 to go off to high school and eventually out in the real world or to college.

"We are hoping to truly take the lead for our county," Dukes said. "I feel like we are taking a very proactive approach. We could get in front of this and really take the lead, not only in our county, but really even in

our region. I see this as a way to bring our educational opportunity level to that of some of the bigger schools in our region."

Dukes talked about how this plan could be implemented. The good news, he said, is that Illinois State University has developed a curriculum and even has a free mentorship program available. Already, Dukes said, the district has started the process of bringing the program's building blocks into place. He referenced the makers club at the junior high and the new art and music programs at the grade school as example of steps the district has taken towards this plan.

The district has also begun to build a relationship with ISU's STEM department. STEM, according to the U.S. Department of Education, is "a curriculum based on the idea of educating

students in four specific disciplines — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — in an interdisciplinary and applied approach."

"I feel this program is going to continue to develop over the next several years," Dukes said. "Hopefully, we can approve to hire somebody at the K-5 level to be our STEM instructor and we will hire a new instructor at the junior high."

The superintendent explained that the current STEM instructor at the junior high is about to retire, which gives the district a unique opportunity to re-align itself, kindergarten through eighth grade. Dukes said this alignment of grade school and junior high education has been a big priority for him since he started.

"This would allow us to com-

See 'DIST. 429' Page A6

DIST. 429

Continued from Page A1

pletely align ourselves with the STEM curriculum,” Duker said. “At the K-5 level, these STEM instructors would be predominantly spending time with the content-area teacher in the district, building up the science curriculum to be aligned with the next generation of science standards, because we are very far off from that even being reality. The hope is, to have one person coming in and co-teaching with our teachers and building those lessons to align the curriculum.”

At the junior high-level, Duker said they want to give a new STEM instructor an opportunity to evaluate and develop the current program and figure out what is needed to go forward.

“The biggest cost that the board would be picking up would be that K-5 teacher,” Duker said. “As you notice, most of the other stuff would involve me going out and talking to our local businesses, organizations and trusts to build the funding to supply the equipment and the curriculum that would go along with these activities to build the program up.

“It’s going to be a big challenge, but based on my initial discussions with the business, community, I feel there is some collabo-

ration and work that can be done to incorporate the business community into our schools and it’s not something that has been done a whole lot over the past few years.”

The board approved to being the hiring process for a K-5 STEM teacher later on in the meeting.

Also approved at the meeting:

- Approved a tentative levy of a 0.7 percent increase. “Really since 2010-11 school year, our tax rate has gone up slightly, sometimes more than others,” Duker said. “This year our EAV going up like it is right now, we should see our tax rate be just about same as it was this last year. A lot of it had to do with EAV continuing to drop. But, when it’s all said and done, we’re hoping our tax rate for this year will be looking about the same for next year for everybody. Last year our cap for the levy was 5.888. This upcoming year, we’re looking at 6.029.”

- Approved a membership with the GLCEDC. “I was approached this fall about us joining membership with the GLCEDC. I feel like at this point, it would be an appropriate time for us to go ahead and join membership and be at the table with the business community and the other taxing bodies to talk about what’s coming up and have a voice in that discussion.”