

'Room to improve' at Valley View School, principal says, but much to build on as well

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MARY NUNN

WATCHUNG – Valley View Middle School does have some work to do, Principal Mary Nunn told a crowd of about 40 parents on Wednesday, July 11, but the school is embracing the challenge.

Nunn highlighted areas in which the school can improve and also a number of trends the school can be proud of at a Board of Education meeting that night at the middle school.

The presentation came in response to public scrutiny of the district's academic standing. A number of parents shared concerns about the district at a Monday, June 25, listening forum hosted by Watchung school parent Frank Bisignano at Watchung Valley Golf Club.

Bisignano, a multi-millionaire and Fortune 250 CEO who has experience working with school districts, presented data at the forum that showed Watchung falling behind. He has offered to aid the Watchung Borough School District by serving on an ad hoc committee with school board members, teachers and other parents.

Math Scores

Nunn stressed several times her presentation was not an attempt to view Valley View School through rose-colored glasses, nor was it a deep dive into standardized test scores. She did, however, seek to clarify a miscon-

ception about the eighth grade math program.

She said a statement had been made that 79 percent of eighth grad-

ers during the 2016-2017 school year failed to meet PARCC testing standards in mathematics.

She clarified that of the 85 members of Valley View School's Class of 2017, 33 students took "eighth grade math," the lowest of three math levels offered, 43 took Algebra I, which is considered a high school-level course, and nine students took geometry, which is a full two years ahead of the "eighth grade math" class.

It was in the 33-member eighth grade math class, in which students tend to have more difficulty with the subject – but not across the entire grade – that 79 percent of students failed to meet PARCC standards, she said.

"That's not a number that we are happy with," she said. "We would like to see that number improve, but the additional data is that the students that take math eight tend to be the students that have more difficulty in school."

She noted 81 percent of Algebra I students met or exceeded the Algebra I PARCC standard, and 100 percent of geometry students met or exceeded the PARCC geometry

standard.

She noted 26 percent of students in the Class of 2017 were classified as having a disability, higher than the 23 percent of students in the total school population.

"The majority of those students who have a little more difficulty in school are taking math eight in eighth grade," she said, though she noted being classified does not necessarily mean a student will struggle more in a particular subject.

She also said Valley View School, in the eyes of the state Department of Education's (DOE) 2017 School Performance Report on test scores, student growth and other factors, was "on track for success" in line with similar middle schools such as Warren Middle School and Bernardsville Middle School.

Of the roughly half-dozen comparable middle schools she exhibited, she noted Watchung has a higher percentage of students with special needs.

"I am not up here saying, 'OK, we have wonderful scores and there's no room for improvement,' because there is room for improvement. But I also think that we do have to – as we're thinking about those challenges and moving forward and embracing these challenges – we do have to understand the number of students that we have in the district that are students with disabilities is higher than other districts similar to ours, and

that needs to be addressed in a certain way."

She said a number of students are exceeding expectations in various subjects including in the two higher math classes, but more needs to be done to ensure all students are succeeding.

On a separate note, she said both Valley View and Bayberry School are looking to stem a rising trend of absenteeism among students.

High School Placements

The principal pointed to Valley View School graduates' success in attaining advanced class placements at Watchung Hills Regional High School.

Per the high school recommendations for Valley View's Class of 2018, 18 percent of this year's graduates would be placed in honors English, 54 percent in accelerated English, 16 percent in the college prep level, and 12 percent at replacement level, which Nunn said is tailored to suit students with disabilities.

In mathematics, seven percent would be placed in honors geometry, 30 percent in accelerated geometry and 20 percent in college prep. Twenty-seven percent would be placed in college prep and 7 percent in replacement. Two percent of students would be taking honors pre-calculus as freshmen.

In science, 19 percent would be placed in the honors program, 47 percent in

accelerated science, 28 percent in college prep and six percent in replacement.

Nunn noted, in particular, Watchung students' success in English Language Arts at the high school.

She said the high school's language arts supervisor told her Watchung graduates "were doing a better job in discussing books and having conversations and speaking freely in classrooms."

She also said students are excelling in social studies.

"I think that we have been sending students consistently to the high school well prepared, but again that doesn't mean that we can't do even better," she said.

New Initiatives Planned

The principal concluded by sharing plans for improvement.

She said the school will introduce a new curriculum next school year focused entirely on study skills. Once a week, she said, instead of students going to band or chorus or art enrichment, all students will return to their homerooms for an additional class on study skills.

Secondly, she said, the district will add more structure and more focused instruction to guided study periods. She said guided study periods are reserved for students who are struggling and who do not take a world language. The classes consist of three or four students and a teacher meeting four times a week.

She said the school hopes to make the sessions "even more focused on the specific skills that the (individual student) needs."

Another one of the goals is to improve student and parent commitment to school attendance.

The school will also look to add professional development on differentiated instruction, or instructing different students in different ways, and executive functioning skills.

In addition, she said the district has a data analysis committee working this summer to make recommendations to help teachers better collect data and how to use it in group instruction.

Finally, she said, the district will continue curriculum mapping to better meet state standards. The idea behind the goal, like the other goals, she said, is to improve instruction.

Nunn said the school board is also looking to make changes with the Child Study Team and by making additional hires. She said there is "not just one thing that we need to be doing," and the entire district is working to make changes.

"There are areas that definitely need improvement, but we also do have successes that we should be happy about," she concluded. "We want to keep that going and then make sure that we are giving everyone that opportunity with all the resources that we have."