

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SESSION ON COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

MMSD looking to polish its image

BY ANGELA SIMMONS

Rows of benches lined the cafeteria floor of O'Keefe Middle School on Feb. 22 for the Madison Metropolitan School District's (MMSD) Community Engagement Session.

Hosted by the Board of Education, people gathered to share communication strategies. After a few earnest remarks from Superintendent Dan Nerad, community members, parents, and teachers made their way to four designated sections of the venue. Each segment, facilitated by an MMSD employee, asked for input regarding how to improve the District's communication with the community about its schools and programs.

Reaching out to the community in unconventional ways dominated the discussions. Suggestions ranged from engaging local businesses to encouraging former students and graduates to speak out about the benefits of attending MMSD.

Participants shed light on certain demographics MMSD may be unintentionally omitting when

promoting the District. One man informed the group that a large portion of Madison residents do not have children, yet they are required to monetarily support the public school system. A nonprofit business owner encouraged others to look around the room, and questioned the minuscule representation of other cultural groups. She eagerly proposed that MMSD make a conscious effort to improve cross-cultural communication in hope that all feel welcomed to take part in these types of events.

MMSD recognized that a number of families are disengaged with their children's school due to communication barriers, such as language or accessibility to the information being provided by the District. Accessing resources regarding Madison public schools is sometimes difficult, one parent said. Many resources involve having the time and luxury to search the web, which hinders certain populations.

An MMSD tutor opened the floor to discussion about the realities of how the media presents Madison public schools to the public. A parent, whose children

attend school in the District, proposed that parents who have children in other school districts may find MMSD intimidating based on the images and stories produced by news outlets. She advised the District display honesty about occurrences in the schools and circulate information on how it deals with issues such as drugs and safety.

Attendees were challenged to visualize Madison public schools as an edifice that functions and thrives in the community opposed to simply existing within the community. Such an approach could cultivate service learning projects, in which students and residence work together, as well as learn from one another.

The session adjourned with an overall summary of recommend strategies voiced by those in attendance. To learn more about the Community Engagement Session's objectives, visit www.madison.k12.wi.us/.

Angela Simmons is a former UW-Madison collegiate intern and current writer for The Madison Times.