

VSD Assessment

Superintendent Presents 'District Snapshot' Of The Vermillion School District At Oct. 5 Rotary Luncheon

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Vermillion Superintendent Damon Alvey is pictured in this image captured from a video stream of the Oct. 5 Vermillion Rotary Club luncheon meeting in the Al Neuharth Media Center on the University of South Dakota campus. He presented club members with his "district snapshot" report.

Courtesy of Vermillion Rotary Club

Superintendent Damon Alvey praised the performance of staff, teachers and students of the Vermillion School District last Wednesday, while also pointing out some of the challenges the district is working to overcome this school year.

He gave his "district snapshot" report in a talk before the Oct. 5 luncheon meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club, held in the Al Neuharth Media Center on the University of South Dakota campus.

The district, which has an area of 179 square miles that covers Clay and a portion of Union counties, has an enrollment of 1,395 students in grades kindergarten through 12, which is up 50 students from last year.

Class Size

"We're up 87 from the year before and we're up about 200 in the last six years, so that's bucking the trend of most schools in South Dakota except for the urban areas around Sioux Falls, but it's a great place to be in the fact that we're growing," Alvey said.

There's not one factor in particular that can be credited for that growth, he said.

"USD brings us some folks, there's industry in town that has had some expansion or some people who have come back and forth, but what we're seeing some of is that some Vermillionites are just coming home," Alvey said. "People who have grown children or children who are school age have gone off and done other things and are now coming back to their home community for whatever reason.

"We have seen, also, people from other states who are coming to South Dakota for some many great reasons," he said. "Over the last couple of years, we've seen a lot of out-of-state infusion into our state, which is great."

The Vermillion School Board works hard to keep the class sizes of grade junior kindergarten through second below 20 and at an average of 17.

"We feel like that personal connection with kids is really important," Alvey said, "and so we really work

hard to try to keep those class sizes small and more intimate for the kids and for the teachers.”

Class sizes begin to expand in grades three through five, with an average of close to 25 students. Grades six through 12 vary.

“We’ve got an gigantic 132 in our freshman class moving up from the middle school, which has really flooded our high school, which is good,” the superintendent said, “however, that does force us to sometime curtail some of our curriculum offerings or we can only offer one section of something, so kids have to make choices some times to take something next year that they would have like to have taken this year.”

“Typically, most of our classes are still around 25 (students) in a typical classroom in the high school,” he said.

Financial Concerns

Alvey said 32 percent of the district’s students qualify for free and reduced programs and that number is expected to grow.

“What we find is one-third of the students who attend our school have some sort of financial concern that they have to deal with and we still have those free and reduced programs from the federal government for breakfast and lunch,” he said. “What gave us a little bit of heartburn this year is the fact that the last two years, the federal government had funded all breakfast and lunch programs across the nation for all schools for every student regardless of your income level.”

The financial hardships that many families experienced during the height of the COVID pandemic was alleviated, in part, through the free and reduced lunch program, Alvey said.

“Everybody qualified. Last spring, they decided not to do that on the federal level and return to the pre-COVID free and reduced lunch program,” Alvey said, meaning that students must qualify for free and reduced school meals based on their families’ incomes.

“A family has to apply for that benefit from the school district,” he said. “If you’re already a part of other benefit programs from the state – if you’re a part of the food stamp program or some other programs – you automatically qualify for reduced school breakfast or lunch.

“I do think there’s a number of folks across this city, state and country that just barely don’t make the qualifications for a free and reduced program and they’re struggling, right now, with all of the high inflation and costs of things, to provide those lunch programs for their kids,” Alvey said.

He expressed gratitude for programs such as the Vermillion Public School Foundation which offers funding through Angel Funds to make sure kids don’t go hungry or can be offered seconds if they fall into this (financial) category.

“That’s the beauty of our school district,” he said.

Attendance

Students’ attendance rate during the last school year was at 94% “which was great,” the superintendent said, “however, the 6% (of students not attending) is a little misleading. It doesn’t seem like a big number, but of that 6%, some of those kids would miss up to 40 days of school individually ... but overall, our attendance rate as a district is pretty solid.”

The district usually sees about 90% of its senior class graduate. Last year’s senior class was made up of 67 students and the class had a graduation rate of 81%.

“When you have 67 seniors coming through, and one, two, three or four of them might need to come to summer school to finish up their high school credits, we’ll let them walk in the ceremony if they’re within two credits of graduating because they can make that up in the summer,” Alvey said, “and some do, and sometimes they have three or four credits they need to make up and some of those students never return.

“They’ve turned 18, and they’ve decided to go on,” he said. “That number is something that we take very seriously and we want to see improve.”

The Vermillion School District’s staff includes 119 certified instructors.

“That’s up about 15 from the last couple of years,” he said. “Most of that is in relation to the federal dollars that we got through ESSER funds, and we have grown in our district by nearly 200 students in six years, so we have had to do some catch-up to make sure we stay in the ratios we prefer as well as the priorities of the school board.”

The average teacher salary in the district is approximately \$49,000 based on the average years of experience of the teaching staff.

“Our starting salary is at \$44,000,” Alvey said. “About half of the teachers in our district have an advanced degree of some kind which is really outstanding. We believe that those extra degrees give you extra skills and extra experiences which will be good for our kids in the classroom, so we continually encourage our staff to go back and get more education when they can.

“Obviously, to stay certified they’re required to have that, but they’re not required to have it in a certain field that eventually leads to another advanced degree,” he said.

The state tracks the number of the district's qualified teachers.

"Right now, we're at 100% highly qualified, which basically means the people who are in the classrooms are in the positions they had gone and gotten their education for," the superintendent said. "There are times and places where a school will take an agronomist from an ag profession into the school district to be a science teacher, for example. They can go back and get an alternative education certificate because they already have a bachelor's degree in agronomy. They can take specific education-related courses and become a science teacher in the school based on their agronomy background, but we don't have anybody in that position this year."

The district employs 28 para educators. "Those are the people that work with some of our most needy students," Alvey said.

Nine administrators are employed in the school district and five members of the community serve on the Vermillion School Board.

Student Information

"We have a very robust curriculum in our district. This community has been blessed having a university and other promotions in our community that people value," he said. "Thirty-seven students are involved in our advanced placement course work. Some of that's through dual credit activities and some of it's through Mount Marty (University in Yankton), where we have congruent credit.

"We teach it in our building, but that teacher is also an instructor for Mount Marty, so the kids are getting credit from us and Mount Marty – basically the same as dual credit," Alvey said.

During a typical school year, the Vermillion School District offers between three to seven dual credit courses.

"It can be anything from government to calculus, algebra – pre-calc is a popular one, speech is probably our most popular one," he said. "Some of our students take our dual credit online, on a computer. They go into study hall, they watch the modules and they learn from there. Others will be actively on Zoom with a teacher at a location. Others, with the benefit of having USD in our back yard – the USD professor comes to our classroom and we actually teach the USD curriculum in our building."

The dual credit classes, taught via Zoom are great, Alvey said, but they're not for everyone.

"It is a different level of rigor and it's a different level if you're taking it over Zoom or some type of electronic form," he said. "Not all students learn best in that way.

"The fact that we can take USD speech to our campus is quite amazing," he said.

Fifty-one members of Vermillion High School's junior and senior classes are taking dual-credit courses.

"Those kids are earning college credit and high school credit and they will earn it at a much-reduced price than they would if they walked in as a freshman taking that class," Alvey said.

Of last year's VHS graduating seniors, 84% went on to pursue some type of post-secondary training.

"They had over a \$1 million in scholarship offers from different places," he said. "They may not have taken the scholarship from SDSU; they took the USD scholarship, but the offers were over \$1 million for those students which is a true testament to those students and their families and really, quite honestly, our teaching staff that those students are achieving at that level."

The Vermillion School District is proud of not only its robust curricular activities, but also its wide range of extra-curricular activities.

"If you're a student in our district and you want to find something to be a part of, you've got over 40 different things you can be a part of," the superintendent said. "It might be an art club, for example, it might be football or basketball or track or part of the golf team. You might be out for show choir, or you could be in the school play.

"Maybe you're involved with SADD – Students Against Destructive Decisions ... National Honor Society – the list is huge," Alvey said, "and most of those positions are filled with staff in our district who might serve as a coach or advisor, but because of the sheer numbers, we value and need good folks from the community to step up and coach some of our activities or be an advisor for one of these many clubs that we have. We want to thank all of the people that contribute to that.

Coverage of Superintendent Alvey's talk will continue next week. It will include information about the school budget, the use of ESSER funds and the construction of the new elementary school.