

Finding new facility for Collins suggested

By **BRENDA SEXTON**
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Finding a more appropriate facility is among the many changes being suggested by a task force charged with examining the Collins Alternative Programs.

Collins Alternative Programs are a cooperative that includes the White River, Enumclaw, Orting and Sumner school districts. The programs include the flagship Collins High School, an alternative to a comprehensive high school serving approximately 160 students; Collins Junior High, an alternative junior high which serves approximately 35 students; Choice, a parent partnership program for students in grades 4-12; the Collins Extension Center, an alternative learning environment that offers individual pacing and is often a transition placement for students awaiting admittance to Collins High; and an online learning component, a Web-based computer program which combines technology with traditional learning activities.

According to Janice Watson, deputy superintendent for the Puget Sound Educational Service District who facilitated the group, district leaders wanted an opportunity to evaluate and perhaps revamp the programs to better serve students. The program

was started in 1990.

With three relatively new superintendents - White River's Tom Lockyer, Sumner's Gil Mendoza and Enumclaw's Mike Nelson - and an interim Collins High principal, Mark Westerfield, it was a good opportunity to bring in some "fresh eyes," she said. In addition, the state was preparing its own summary report on alternative programs. The 18-member task force included those four along with Orting Superintendent Jeff Davis and a number of other leaders from each district.

After more than a year's research and analysis, the Collins Alternative Programs task force report was released Feb. 25. Originally slated for discussion at the White River School Board's regular meeting that night, the presentation was postponed until April 11 when more task force members and Watson can be present to answer questions.

It was an opportunity, Watson said, to look at who they are and who they serve.

"These folks have been wonderful," Watson said. "The task force members undertook their charge with enthusiasm, high hopes and an unswerving commitment to quality programs for all students.

"I don't think there's anything like

the Collins cooperative with the four different districts," she said.

The proximity of the districts is likely to provide the key to opportunity for kids in the future as the recommendations were laid out.

The task force grew from the districts' shared commitment to implement research and best practice to provide appropriate learning opportunities to all students. Although it looked at all Collins programs, the emphasis was on Collins High.

Collins High students chose the alternative setting for a variety of reasons. While there, they follow an individual student learning plan, take a variety of vocational and required courses to meet graduation requirements. They are also encouraged to participate in postgraduate guidance and planning.

The report notes, in recent years, Collins High, like other alternative high schools across the state and nationally, has struggled to meet the requirements for adequate yearly progress required by No Child Left Behind legislation. In 2006-07, Collins' on-time graduation rate was 10.7 percent, compared with rates ranging from 81.8 to 89.9 percent for the comprehensive high schools in the

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four districts. Tenth-grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning scores in reading and math are significantly below district and state scores. Writing scores are improving, but lower than district and state averages. While many factors contribute to the low graduation rate and the discrepancy in WASL scores, the report concluded, Collins High cannot achieve its mission or serve its students well if these gaps in student achievement continue to characterize it.

Task force members looked at facilities, graduation rates, curriculum, state standards and national standards for alternative education programs. Some members of the task force visited two of the top 10 alternative programs in the state, the Bethel School District's Challenger program and Avanti in Olympia.

On the list of recommendations, the task force believes a student profile should be established with an admission policy. Students who enroll in Collins High should meet the qualifications outlined in this profile.

The task force also suggests students who are admitted to Collins remain on probationary status for a specific period of time deter-

mined by the advisory committee in collaboration with Collins staff.

It also recommends Collins High broaden and deepen its course offerings and instructional approaches.

To help facilitate this, there should be a more structured process for enrolling students in Collins from the four comprehensive high schools and the frequent monitoring of the process to ensure that the same standards apply across the four districts.

In addition to the establishment of an admissions process, a boost in its curricular offering and expectations for student performance, there was also a recommendation for a continued focus on personalization and flexibility.

"Collins' programs has two of the three components of the success framework in place," the task force presented. "The alternative structure provides the flexibility many students need to remain in school and is connected to a learning plan. Collins staff excels at creating a personalized learning environment based on the staff knowing, understanding, and respecting the needs of the individual student."

In fact, if there was one thing the task force thought Collins "got right" it was the attention to the indi-

vidualized student. That is a point, the report noted, other comprehensive high schools could learn. It was noted that the third area, academic focus, will be the most challenging. Choice and online learning provide avenues for students to enjoy a high degree of rigor and engagement in their work. The other programs stumbled.

To go with the "new Collins" a new facility was also suggested.

The current facility is in a Buckley neighborhood on the outskirts of town. The home's interior has been converted to classrooms. The facility is crowded, confining and has "old house" problems, the report states. It does not provide access to dependable, functioning technology and a high quality lab, both very important to an alternative program. The facility, which also includes buildings at Rainier School and in downtown Buckley, do not provide the opportunity for professional learning communities for teachers to develop and also keep students separated.

Also on the list, the task force recommends the districts revive and reinvigorate the Collins Advisory Committee that existed in the first years of the program, but has since waned, to continually evaluate and revise the programs to meet student needs.