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Lackawanna Trail School District offers blended schedule through NOLA digital program

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FACTORYVILLE — Although Lackawanna Trail Superintendent of Schools Matthew Rakauskas would like to see every student take part in the standard curriculum, he realizes the district must be flexible to meet each student's needs.

During a regular monthly meeting Oct. 11, Rakauskas discussed a new program the district has implemented to give children who are interested in cyber learning the opportunity to still attend the school through the Northeast Online Learning Academy (NOLA), the NEIU (Northeastern Educational Intermediate Unit) 19 online learning program.

The NEIU supplements and supports local schools in their efforts to educate all students through education, collaboration, and innovation.

"It's cheaper, it's a more rigorous curriculum and clearly a better education than what's offered by other cyber schools," Rakauskas said.

According to Rakauskas, the NEIU recommended the district begin a blended school system in an effort to retain more students.

"There has to be a blended model where students who want a cyber education can get it and still be part of our school," he said. "We already started it in the high school. Some students, who otherwise might not be with us, are coming to Lackawanna Trail and are taking their cyber education classes through NOLA, physically, in our classrooms for part of the day."

Lackawanna Trail High School Principal Mark Murphy believes the program has been a success in its early stages.

"We started it a hybrid experiment," Murphy said. "We currently have about 12 students who were already in the NOLA program, the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School or third-party charter schools. We opened up one of our classrooms and repurposed some IBM ThinkPads as Chromebooks. Those students come to school for the first four periods of the day and take their instruction online, the difference is we have a certified history, math, science and English teacher who acts as a study hall monitor, but also provides remedial help. We're finding our cyber students who were already engaged in NOLA are doing better. We're also finding some of our students are coming back from third-party charter schools for the face-to-face component.

"It's a platform that works for some students," he said.

Murphy added some students are starting a blended schedule where they participate in math and science in a regular classroom and take English and social studies in a cyber environment.

"The students can pick and choose the things they like about the cyber environment and Lackawanna Trail, and put them together in an individualized platform," he said. "These are students who could be leaving the district, so I'm glad they're sticking with us and getting a Lackawanna Trail degree."

Lackawanna Trail Business Manager Keith Glynn credits the passing of a state budget and a tax increase for putting the district in a good spot financially.

"This is the first month, since I started here in May 2015, I can say we're at a healthy cash flow position," Glynn said. "A lot of people have chosen to pay their taxes within the discount period which helps increase cash flow in the earlier part of the year so we can keep pace with our bills."

Rakauskas announced the district plans to solicit comments on its wellness program.

"We're seeking feedback from parents about how they feel we're doing in terms of the wellness of their children from kindergarten through their senior year," he said. "That includes the food and snacks they are being served, access to drinking water, health and physical education classes, opportunity for exercise, and social and emotional wellness.

"Over the next few weeks, we will be putting together a survey that will be available online for parents to answer questions if they agree or disagree on a variety of topics."

Rakauskas added parents will also have an opportunity to take part in the survey by utilizing computers at the high school and elementary center during parent teacher conference days.

"We're trying to get as much data as we can from a broad group of people," he said.

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