

get the city to commit to preserving the oldest building in Verona for at least several more months, but they came just in case.

About 30 people attended

and how the 160-plus-year-old Italianate home should be saved.

City staff followed several minutes later with recommendations and with a list of questions they

applause by unanimously following the staff's recommendation on spending up to \$5,000 on some basic maintenance and repairs to get the home through the winter.

past two months and what plan to do.

"For me, it seems like a easy decision," Dist. 2 Ald. Linder said. "It gives us t

Verona Area School District

Broader horizons

Proactive approach helps SC lead district in hiring diverse staff

SCOTT GIRARD
Unified Newspaper Group

When Justin Rippl and Jen Maier interviewed for their teaching jobs at Sugar Creek Elementary School last summer, they both noticed an emphasis on questions that tested their cultural experiences.

"They really were just trying to find the kind of person that you were and see if you'd be a good fit for the Sugar Creek community," Rippl said. "(Principal Todd) Brunner really looks for people that fit well."

That new process reflects an emphasis around the Verona Area School District to increase the diversity of its staff and a variety of efforts to make that happen. VASD gives its principals autonomy in their hiring

processes, and at Sugar Creek, Brunner has used that to find candidates who have an understanding of working with under-represented populations.

That doesn't mean just hiring minorities, he cautioned, as illustrated by the hirings of Rippl and Maier, who both are white. But he said it's a goal to make his school's teachers representative of his student population, which is more than 40 percent minority students.

"You've got to have a staff that culturally understands students," Brunner said. "They look like them, they talk like them, they understand where they're coming from. Teachers in schools are powerful role models in our society."

The numbers show there is still a long way to go to get to equal representation with students, but the school district nearly doubled its percentage of minority employees this past hiring cycle.

VASD human resources

Turn to **Hiring**/Page 8



Wildcat pri

Verona Area High School district crowded Main Street football team followed the Curtis Jones Stadium, and Above, Zoey Bystol, 2, of Left, Helen Milhans, 5, car begins down the street.

Inside

See more p

Sugar River UMC celebrates future community sp

Art event, auction fundraiser is Oct. 24

SAMANTHA CHRISTIAN
Unified Newspaper Group

Tools clang and country music echoes in the concrete cavity of the

former Wildcat Lanes bowling alley as Pastor Gary Holmes gives a tour of Sugar River United Methodist Church's future sanctuary, which was expected to be done by now.

Due to ongoing - and delayed - construction efforts, he said many people outside of the 200-plus congregation still don't realize the church has been holding worship

services in the upper level every Sunday since September 2014. Holmes hopes 2016 will be the year the church can fully utilize the building and occupy the space where pins used to be knocked down.

Church members have been anticipating the completion of the building's exterior on 415 W.

Verona Ave., as well as the opening of its new foyer, narthex entrance, first month. But ever since started, they've had unexpected issues, high-bumped timelines along.

In an effort to build

Turn to C



The Verona Press

Holistic Groomi

Hiring: Diverse staff includes bilingual social workers, secretaries at Sugar Creek

Continued from page 1

director Jason Olson said that improvement resulted from a renewed focus on staff diversity that began two years ago, when the district recognized the retirement benefits structure would create high turnover in the coming years.

"One of the most significant ways to impact organizational change is through the people that you hire," Olson said. "We're trying to restructure our thought process as to what we're looking for in a teacher."

The new focuses for candidates included flexibility and adaptability, commitment to student growth, addressing the impact of white privilege on educational equity and clear beliefs about educational best practices.

"We're not hiring for color or gender or socioeconomic standards," Olson said. "But we're hiring for that improved and increased cultural awareness."

Changing the process

At Sugar Creek, Brunner began to look at the importance of hiring practices in 2008, two years after he began the job and one year before the school again became a host of the district's bilingual program for English-language learners.

"We had two minorities," Brunner recalled. "One was a custodian. We're a diverse school, our staff was not."

Eventually, a year-and-a-half ago, he made the change to a permanent hiring committee in place of the rotating committee that had often included mostly volunteers.

Now, the new committee is a permanent group of four people, with half of them minority and half not, half female and half male, and it includes administrator, parent, teacher and non-certified staff demographics.

"In a school where they are already all white, female and middle-class, but your student body is

District staff diversity

School	Minority staff	Minority students
VAIS	30%	27.4%
SC	23.6%	44.6%
SOMS	15.4%	35.3%
GE	10.8%	25.1%
VAHS	10.4%	30.9%
CV	9.1%	40.2%
SP	7.5%	43.8%
BR	6.3%	33.6%
NCS	0%	14.4%
CKCS	0%	27.9%
Total	10.8%	33%

not, you're going to get a lot of biases that come into play," Brunner said. "All great people, but time after time, what I saw happen was it was the candidate that often looked like them, sounded like them, was from a small town like them ... they were the ones getting job offers."

That's a problem, Olson said, that can regularly create a cycle of hiring people who look the same as the committee that's interviewing them.

Brunner said the new process has allowed the group to emphasize and focus on a certain set of goals when hiring any candidate, and it also allowed the school to ensure those on the interview team could recognize any personal biases being brought into the interview room.

The group took several preventative measures to ensure diverse hiring practices. It reviewed its beliefs, expertise and processes; reviewed its hiring domains; trained in effective hiring techniques — including hiring biases such as stereotyping, "similar to me" bias and first impression error; developed surveys and created a set of questions and an assessment matrix for candidates; and read about the importance of diversity in the teaching realm.

The second part of the interview puts the candidate in a classroom scenario,

with current teachers acting as students to bring up challenges and see how the teachers respond. Brunner said this allows the actors and the interview committee to compare notes and see if what a candidate preached in the interview was practiced in the classroom setting.

Once Sugar Creek started to hire more minorities, up to 23.6 percent of its staff now, it became a self-guiding process.

When spaces become open now, some of those people will let a friend who they think would be a good candidate know to apply, offering a broader reach than what the district would have on its own.

Looking like them

Brunner and Olson both said studies have shown it helps students to have someone who looks like them in front of them as a teacher or around their school.

For most of the district's schools, that's simply not a reality, and even Sugar Creek is still struggling to keep up with the increasingly diverse demographics of the district.

Other elementary schools, like Stoner Prairie, have also taken a look at their processes to ensure they are hiring the best people, minorities included.

Principal Mike Pisani's school has the largest gap between its



New teachers hired at Sugar Creek Elementary School this year include, from left, Francellin Veguilla (bilingual resource teacher/ESL teacher), Adriana Galvan (secretary/educational assistant), Jen Maier (fifth-grade teacher), Elisa Martinez-Arenas (library assistant/educational assistant), Asha Omar (first-grade teacher). Not pictured: Justin Rippl (fourth-grade teacher) and Melissa Ruder (educational technology coordinator).

Sugar Creek

Year	Minority staff	Percentage
2008-09	2	4
2009-10	8	10
2010-11	10	13
2011-12	8	10
2012-13	11	14
2013-14	12	16
2014-15	15	20
2015-16	17	23

minority student population (43.8 percent) and its minority teachers (7.5 percent), but it's something he said he hopes to work on in the coming years.

"I do believe that (having a diverse staff) helps kids feel more connected just seeing people that look like them or have similar experiences to them," he said. "(It's great) when you see kids' faces when they realize other people speak Spanish."

There, however, the hiring committee is not a constant like it is at Sugar Creek. Pisani knew of what Brunner had put in place at Sugar Creek and said it was

"possibly something we could look at," but that he also recognized drawbacks with set committees.

"When you do the rotating like mine ... you don't get the opportunity to refine those (hiring goals) as much," he said. "(When it's a set group), you don't get to penetrate the building as much."

At Sugar Creek, while diversity is an important goal, the real focus is on how a candidate would interact with a diverse group of people, regardless of race.

"They did ask a lot of questions that reflected how diverse Sugar Creek is and what you're going to do as

an educator to help with the culture here, and help with the variety of learners and the variety of backgrounds that you see in our classrooms," Rippl recalled of the interview.

Pisani said Stoner Prairie emphasizes "the growth mindset," which operates on the idea that "everything can be learned and we just have to help kids learn it."

Family connections

But diversity can still bring more to the table in the big picture, Pisani acknowledged.

"When you don't have perspectives present or represented, then you don't know what you're missing, either," he said. "(It's) another way to engage kids and another way to engage families is being more inclusive and feeling like one community."

Brunner emphasized that diversity is important beyond classroom teachers. Sugar Creek has two bilingual secretaries, and both of its social workers are fluent in Spanish.

"Both our counselors can call any family in this school without a translator," he said. "When families come in, they know that, they feel, 'OK, I don't have to be stressed at this interaction with a government agency.'"

For Rippl and Maier, that community is evident, and Brunner's work to close the gap between teacher and student diversity has helped the two non-fluent Spanish-speakers connect with students who are English-language learners.

"I have kids in my class that just moved to America last year ... and their English is, they don't have any," Rippl said. "I try every single day to have my kids in here teach me and stuff ... but everybody from the secretaries to the specialists in the building are very supportive."

It's a diverse staff that allows that to happen, Brunner said, citing at least three countries that some of Sugar Creek's employees are from.

"It didn't just magically happen," Brunner said. "What the district has allowed me to do has been really remarkable."

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