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NIU, DeKalb could team up in old Malta school

By John Kelleher -- Managing Editor

DeKALB -- A partnership between the DeKalb School



District and Northern Illinois University would offer a variety of innovative programs at the old Malta High School under a plan unveiled Monday.

The district intends to spend about \$1 million to renovate the school and reopen it in the fall of 2004 for students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Under the proposal announced by Schools Superintendent Brian Ali and NIU President John Peters Monday night, district teachers would staff the school, but NIU students and staff would help offer a wide variety of programming, including:

- All-day kindergarten
- An extended-day program that would enable parents to drop their children off as early as 6 a.m. and keep them at the school until as late as 6 p.m.
- Student access to Northern programs ranging from speech and hearing services, on-site teaching experts and health offerings
- Expanded programs in fine arts and technology.

While details have to be worked out, Ali and Peters said they expected great things from the partnership if it is approved by the DeKalb School Board.

"If you can't feel my excitement, at least you can see it," said an enthusiastic Ali at Monday's school board meeting.

Northern partners with eight other school districts, including Chicago, Rockford and Kaneland, said Christine Sorensen, dean of NIU's College of Education. But the DeKalb program would be the most extensive, she said.

Ali said the program will cost no more than if the district offered traditional classes at the school.

Peters said the university will pay for its share of the program by "refocusing existing revenues"

and seeking grants.

"Getting grant money is something we are good at," Peters said.

The guiding principle of the school will be to teach all students as if they are gifted, Peters said.

But it will not be an elite school that focuses on brighter students, he said.

Every attempt will be made to have the school "mirror the demographics" of the district student body, Peters said.

School officials said they hoped that by offering the innovative programs, students from throughout the district would voluntarily come to the school and no students would be involuntarily assigned there.

That, combined with redistricting at other schools, would alleviate crowding in other elementary schools.

Successful programs at the old Malta High School would be replicated elsewhere in the district, Ali said.

Peters said he was excited because of what the programs will offer district and university students.

Further, he said having a quality school district is important to Northern as it strives to attract qualified staffers who want a good school district for their children.

"For us, this is good business," he said.

The joint program would help build bridges between the city and the university, some board members felt.

"For many people in this community, NIU is the 'big monster,'" said board member James Mitchell. "This would help alleviate that feeling."

Board member Holly Wallace raised several questions about the program, especially regarding the cost. But she said she would like to have her children take part.

"At first it sounds like my children will be laboratory rats in these classrooms, always being looked at," she said. "But that's not the case."

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