Educational Foundation Marks Achievements

Event at Scarlett Middle School noted district's challenges, too

BY MARY MORGAN

“Everybody’s proud in the Scarlett Nation!” Ben Edmondson, principal of Scarlett Middle School, proclaimed to the 200 or so people gathered in the school’s cafeteria Saturday night. He could have been talking about the eighth-grade boys who were dressed in suits and leading tours of the building. Or the orchestra that played a solid performance of William Hofeldt’s “Toccatina.” Or the kids who contributed to the school’s first literary magazine, a draft of which was on display in the media center. Or the $11 million that’s been spent on building renovations over the past few years.

Highlighting Scarlett’s achievements was just one goal of the evening for the Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Foundation, which hosted the event. It was the nonprofit’s second annual Celebration of Innovation and Excellence, a way to draw attention to the district’s accomplishments as well as challenges, and to raise money for supporting the schools.

The evening included tours of the building, led by Scarlett students and alums, displays and demonstrations of projects both specific to the school and districtwide, and performances by student musicians. The Chronicle’s tour was led by eighth-grader Orion Rosales and UM sophomore Chris Bowerbank, a Scarlett graduate who’d been enlisted by a friend whose mother, Ellen Daniel, teaches there. (In response to some mild snark from the group, Rosales said he didn’t think the display in the science classroom designed to illustrate the atomic structure of gases was actually a Chinese checkers set.)

The tour included a demonstration of a program called Elevate Math, which two Scarlett students were demonstrating in the media center. They were sitting at computers with headsets on, talking to tutors who were helping them work through math problems displayed on their computer screens. The tutors on the other end of the line were in Mumbai, India. Why Mumbai? The program, part of a broader business called Elevate Learning, was started by Shaily Baranwal and Suhas Ghuge, who developed it while they were MBA students at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business – and they’re from Mumbai.

Marla McKelvey, a Scarlett math teacher who was on hand to explain the program, said it was paid for with funding from the state. Scarlett is eligible for this funding, which targets high-poverty schools, because of the number of kids who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. (Later in the evening, Edmondson said that 50% of Scarlett’s roughly 570 students receive free or reduced-price lunches.)

A few tables away in the media center, sixth-graders Travon Larkin-Warren and Rong “Tim” Situ were working on computers using a different program, My Access. Scarlett had been the pilot site several years ago for this writing program, which is now used in fifth-grade classes districtwide. The program provides writing prompts, feedback on things like grammar and punctuation, as well as more global writing assessments, according to Carroll Caudill, a Scarlett language arts teacher. Students can get more writing practice and feedback this way than any single teacher can provide, he said. In fiscal 2009, the educational foundation contributed $25,000 to funding the My Access program.

Ellen Daniel, who teaches language arts at Scarlett, was also in the media center, with draft copies of the school’s first literary magazine, which includes artwork, poetry, short stories and other work by students. They would have been further along with the completed version, she said, but a power outage on Tuesday caused students to be sent home before they could meet to do the final proofing and copyediting. The project is funded with $1,000 from one of the foundation’s mini-grants.
Several other projects that received mini-grant funding were exhibited at Saturday's event, including Latino family workshops and a program that brings local farmers into the classrooms to talk about their work.

In remarks during a formal presentation at the event, superintendent Todd Roberts said that even though the district faces financial challenges, they were still able to achieve great things. One example he cited was the work of Pioneer High School teacher Jeff Kass – Roberts noted that last Wednesday had been declared Jeff Kass Day by the mayor. (Not coincidentally, Wednesday was the day of his one-man show, “Wrestling the Great Fear: A Performance Poetica.”)

Roberts said that because Proposal A caps what a district can do in terms of tax revenues for schools, there are two other options: 1) increase private giving, and 2) think seriously about a countywide enhancement millage. Roberts said that Ann Arbor is well-positioned to make private giving a strong component of funding in the future.

Wendy Correll, the foundation's president, echoed that sentiment. She said that in its early years, the foundation provided about $2 per pupil to the district. Now, that amount is around $10 per pupil for the district, which has about 16,500 students. But their goal, Correll said, is to raise $100 per pupil to fund innovative programs for all students and schools.

The evening ended as people finished up their desserts – the event was catered by Chartwells, which holds the contract for food service in the district. There was also opportunity to learn about the many relationships and connections that people had to Scarlett. Russ Collins, who hosted the formal presentation and is himself a product of Ann Arbor schools, noted that his wife, Deb Polich, had briefly worked as head cook at Scarlett's cafeteria when she was in college. (Polich is now CEO of Artrain. Collins is CEO of the Michigan Theater.)

The notion of pride came up again, too, as the evening wound down. Scott Westerman Jr., who was superintendent of the Ann Arbor district in the late 1960s and early '70s, chatted with Scarlett principal Ben Edmondson and praised his work and leadership at the school. Edmondson had recently been in the running for the superintendent's job at the Ypsilanti public school district, but was not one of the two finalists. Westerman told him not to worry – it was just a matter of time before the right opportunity came along. He assured Edmondson that he'd be a superintendent one day, because he had those kind of leadership skills.