Cascade School District Develops a Strategic Framework

by Marlene Farrell

Continuous Student Development.

These three words represent Cascade School District’s identity and the essence of the 49-word mission statement, developed almost a decade ago. Many people connected to the district—staff, students and families—know these words and take them to heart.

In the beginning of 2020, superintendent Tracey Beckendorf-Edou tasked herself, the school board and others to move to the next step. She said, “It’s time to answer, ‘Where are we going based upon that foundation?’” The district needed to define its values within the context of a Strategic Framework.

“Strategic planning establishes the ability to set priorities and match resources to opportunities, leads to action while holding the district accountable to stakeholders, and encourages an increased level of commitment to the district and its goals,” said Gene Sharratt, retired Executive Director for the Association of Educational Service Districts, and a thought partner for Beckendorf-Edou.

Starting in fall 2019, for the first six months of Beckendorf-Edou’s tenure as superintendent, she went on a listening tour, both in-person and then virtually as that became necessary. She listened to student groups, staff, parents and community members, and heard certain priorities and themes reiterated. These became the values central to the completed Strategic Framework, which can be found on the left menu here: www.cascadesd.org/domain/50.

Specifically, the values are: 1) Every Student; 2) Artful Creativity; 3) Quality Education; 4) Connected Relationships; 5) Inclusive Diversity; and 6) The Outdoors. Quality Education would likely be a priority of every school district. Some of the other values, however, are uniquely tied to CSD.

Every Student, for instance, means each person is treated “as an individual so that learning is personal to each and every student.” This is the proud reality of a small school district like CSD. While a larger district might hope to individualize learning, it is more difficult.

“Artful Creativity came up again and again,” said Beckendorf-Edou, referring to her listening tour. The arts, recognized as important for learning, innovating, performing and inspiring, will be connected to strategies for district growth.

“Having a core value of the Outdoors is very unusual for a school district, but perfectly reflects the beautiful location in which our communities’ children have the opportunity to grow up and explore,” said Beckendorf-Edou. District strategies will increase the utilization of the outdoors for learning, physical activity and applied studies.
Deriving from those values are the four parts of CSD’s vision: 1) Prepare each student for secondary success; 2) Create opportunities for whole child growth; 3) Recognize each student as an individual and 4) Engage students in outdoor learning.

The vision yields strategies of implementation, which can evolve as stakeholders see fit. Some newer initiatives serve as great examples, including the collaboration with the Methow Arts Alliance for elementary art classes and the partnership with Cascade Medical for a school-based clinic. These programs help meet students’ individual needs and create whole child growth.

Beckendorf-Edou also spoke of the district’s trajectory toward improved bilingual access, support and outreach, starting with having bilingual secretarial staff at most of the schools. This is critical for the individual needs of Spanish-speaking students and families.

Beckendorf-Edou chose to accomplish the strategic framework in her first year. Steve McKenna, former CSD superintendent, served as another thought partner during this process. McKenna explained, “It is impossible to develop and sustain a results-oriented culture unless we are clear about the core of our work (mission), about the kind of school we’re seeking to become (vision), and the commitments we need to make (values).

“The quality of these building blocks will be directly related to the quality of leadership, collaboration and staff development in the future. Change is constant and often destabilizing, such as the effects of a pandemic. But an organization based on strong building blocks, with everyone pulling in the same direction, can weather any storm.”

The completed Strategic Framework serves as a touchstone for all that comes next. “As we develop our strategies, grounded in our mission, values and vision, we can always circle back to ask ourselves how what we are doing aligns and exemplifies what we, our students, and our communities believe are important,” said Beckendorf-Edou.