

District to Tout Successes

By Dave Murray

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GRAND RAPIDS -- Faced with years of declining enrollment, Grand Rapids Public Schools are preparing a marketing plan leaders believe will show people city schools have as many success stories as they do challenges.

Superintendent Bert Bleke said the idea is to paint a realistic portrait of the struggles of an urban district so people in the philanthropic and corporate world can see how they can help.

But the plan also is meant to show families who are headed elsewhere there are strong programs in city schools.

The plan could be unveiled in the fall, and is a collaboration of the Williams Group, a local marketing consulting firm, and the Grand Rapids Student Advancement Foundation.

"In effect, everybody is enrolled in the Grand Rapids Public Schools because we all have a stake in the schools being successful," said Robert Tobin, Williams Group president.

Tobin's company is donating its services and is planning a multiyear partnership. Williams Group became interested after sponsoring the Congress Elementary library through the Student Advancement Foundation.

The campaign is expected to be more than a flashy logo or catchy slogan.

Administrators are projecting another loss of 800 students this fall, bringing enrollment to about 21,500 students, down from nearly 27,000 a decade ago.

Bleke believes it's the right time for the district to trumpet the things that are going right. He said the district, like all urban school systems, has challenges. But he doesn't think people know what is really going on in the city schools.

"I think that much of the broader community has misperceptions about the schools," he said. "We have tremendous things to offer. And now that we have these things in place, we need to make sure that we tell our story."

The small programs in the high schools, an emphasis on reading that has boosted test scores, and specialized programs such as City Middle-High School are expected to be spotlighted, as well as diversity and other cultural aspects of the district.

Bleke said the package won't be completed until the fall to allow incoming school chief Bernard Taylor the chance to get his fingerprints on the plan.

It's not unusual for school districts to assemble communication plans, said Ron Koehler, assistant superintendent for the Kent Intermediate School District.

"Over the last five years, districts have been forced to make so many budget cuts that few of them have been able to capitalize on a plan," he said.