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End of the 'Path'

By **JACKIE BORCHARDT** Star-Tribune staff writer | **Posted: Monday, July 5, 2010 12:50 pm**

Budget reports indicate the Natrona County School District spent at least a quarter of a million dollars on consultants whose recommendations ultimately had only moderate influence on the secondary school system.

Cambridge Strategies, a technical assistance consulting firm based in Texas, was paid about \$250,000 including travel expenses for its work as a consultant to the district on its Path to 2025 project, which was intended to produce a significant overhaul in the district's secondary education programs. But the path the district ultimately chose to follow was largely mapped out by a group of school administrators and staff members.

The group did base some of its decisions on the recommendations of the Path to 2025 "visioning committee" that worked with the consultants.

The Path to 2025 project began more than two years ago, charged with researching and planning the future of secondary education. The district hired a full-time administrator and initially budgeted \$888,530 for the project. The school board later reduced the budget by one-third, leaving \$517,300.

The budget covered contracting with the consulting firm, holding several small group and community meetings with the visioning committee and more than a dozen trips for district and school employees.

Other notable expenses outlined in the budget report include \$64,000 for travel and more than \$13,000 for food expenses. Office furniture in excess of \$3,000 was billed to the account, including \$836.57 for an ergonomic office chair.

The Path to 2025 visioning committee spent months researching and discussing common beliefs about education and suggestions for the future. The committee released a draft of these "findings and directions" and suggested three models for the district's high schools.

The school board didn't approve any of the three models but a "fourth option" developed by Superintendent Joel Dvorak, high school principals and district staff members.

The fourth option did not include a new comprehensive high school as had been proposed by the visioning committee and commented on by teachers and community members.

Instead, the board decided to build a new campus to house high-end career and technical courses for students at the district's existing high schools. Roosevelt High School and the Transitions credit recovery program, currently housed in old elementary schools, are slated to move to the new campus.

Rather than immediately establishing "career pathway academies" -- small learning communities focused on a profession or career category, which were part of the recommendations of the visioning committee -- the high schools will develop curriculum over time, Dvorak said.

The district still has \$110,000 remaining in the Path to 2025 budget. That money will be spent to plan curriculum and programming between the high schools and new campus, Dvorak said. Dvorak doesn't expect much travel in this stage of planning. He said most of the money will pay teachers to plan and be trained outside of contracted hours.

The work will go forward without the Path to 2025 project coordinator, Julia Collier Earl. In 2008, the district hired Collier Earl, who left her previous school district superintendent post after reports determined she spent public money on personal trips and expenses. Collier Earl was released from her contract in New Hampshire with positive letters of recommendation.

Collier Earl was hired as the "secondary systems specialist," a temporary cabinet position with an associate superintendent's salary and benefits. She was paid \$47,293 before her contract began July 2008. Her salary and benefits totaled \$132,348 in

2008-09 and \$134,439 in 2009-10.

Collier Earl's contract ended June 30 without renewal.

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