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When Students are at Home, Fort Administrators Continue Learning

Fort Atkinson, WI – On Friday, January 20, 2016 the School District of Fort Atkinson welcomed representatives from the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) for a day-long session on best practices in school budgeting. The School District of Fort Atkinson has been a member of the Alliance for Excellence in School Budgeting (“The Alliance”) for the past year and a half. The Alliance is a growing group of 70+ districts that have undertaken the budgeting principles of Smarter School Spending, a national program facilitated by the GFOA.

Matt Bubness and Shayne Kavanagh of the GFOA, based out of Chicago, were onsite Friday at the Dwight Foster Public Library working with all of the School District of Fort Atkinson administrators to continue their learning about the Smarter School Spending model. Director of Business Services, Jason Demerath shared, “The Smarter School Spending model is more of a philosophy and a culture about budget focus, than a prescribed set of steps on what to reduce or what programs to provide. Traditionally, the budget drove the curriculum and academics with incremental increases or cuts as funding changed. This model flips that philosophy on its head. Realizing that resources will always be limited, this model uses the curriculum and academics to drive the budget by focusing funds where they will provide the most ‘bang for the buck’ to do as much as possible for our kids.”

One of the underlying principles of the program is to ensure that when programs are implemented a financial plan accompanies that implementation along with metrics to measure the success of a program. The program is not meant to simply be dropped into a district and up and running at a certain point in time. Rather, it is a change in the way the district thinks about the use of funds, an increase in the accountability of the use of funds, and a level of transparency that allows all stakeholders to understand the implications of a program. The District acknowledges that it will take time to shift the thinking about how it budgets towards the principles of Smarter School Spending and the best practices in school budgeting. Said Amy Oakley, Director of Instruction, about the model, “The Fort Atkinson Administrative Team is committed to maximizing the impact of every dollar spent to achieve our mission and vision. The tools in the Smarter School Spending Model are helping us leverage our budget and create new budget processes to assure that dollars are spent where there is the greatest impact on students. Our focus has always been on students, growth and achievement. It is great to have a model that helps us align our budget practices to these priorities.”

The GFOA has built this program to support the efforts of local districts across the nation by using research based best practices, providing numerous resources from industry experts, and sharing work between districts to improve their practices. GFOA leaders, Matt Bubness and Shayne Kavanagh make every effort to build momentum for the program throughout the nation, including traveling to local districts as they did here in Fort Atkinson, as well as presenting at national conferences. The professional development for administrators held on Friday, at little cost to the District, was meant to further build their understanding for the model as the District continues to work through the implementation and adoption of the best practices.

Delivering opportunities and services each student needs to achieve their academic and personal potential

There is no fee to the District to be a part of the Alliance for Excellence in School Budgeting. More information about the program can be found on the Smarter School Spending website at www.smarterschoolspending.org. More information about the local implementation of the program can be found by contacting the District's Director of Business Services, Jason Demerath.

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