

Budgets important to tiny, rural schools

By Linda Schneider

Bird City Times
dublinls@hotmail.com

Understanding what is happening to the money for our public schools is not easy. Trying to keep up with the Local Option Budget, the Full-Time Equivalent, Supplemental General Fund, Basic Student Aid Per Pupil and Capital Outlay can have anybody drowning in a sea of information while looking for a life preserver.

And it does not get any easier, because the list goes on and on.

Every year, schools must put together a budget, which begins with state money based on full-time student equivalent. For school districts with a large student population, even with recent state cuts, this may be still manageable. However, for rural schools with a smaller enrollment, the reduced state money can mean the difference between staying open, combining with other districts or closing the doors.

Equally important is the local option budget, which raises money from a local property tax for the general operations of the school, such as paying utilities, supplies and expenses, including payroll. This money goes into a district's Supplemental General Fund and other reserves.

It stands to reason that the states that are the hardest hit in budget cuts would be the High Plains states, the heart of America. With small farming communities, population is sparse and spread out. Some students are bused 20 miles or more to the nearest school, and school closures are a reality.

The Cheylin School District in Bird City has already been dealing with state budget cuts as student enrollment decreases. If the state continues to cut, Cheylin officials say, they will need more from local sources and this may mean the local option budget could be raised in Bird City and McDonald, increasing property taxes.

Another important budget account is the General Fund, which has a tax levy set by the state at 20 mills.

For the Cheylin district, a mill brought in \$14,737 for the present school year. From last school year to the this school year, the district's valuation has dropped from \$17,238,258 to

\$14,737,527.

Leftover money raised by local taxes can be carried over from year to year. State money, on the other hand, is determined by a complicated formula involving base student aid per pupil and full-time-equivalent enrollment.

The base can be calculated one of three ways, using the present student enrollment, the previous year's enrollment, or the average over three years. Kindergartners are counted for half-day attendance, with half the money, and preschoolers are not eligible for state funding. In order for Cheylin to have a preschool class, the school board applied for a grant from Bird City Century II Development Foundation.

Cheylin's enrollment has fluctuated over the years. In 1992, school enrollment was 225. In 2003, in was 161, last year 135 and this year 140, up five. Information on attendance came from Kansas Department of Education website. Despite the small increase in enrollment this year year, Cheylin has typically seen a drop in student population each year.

In 2006-07, Cheylin's enrollment was 144 students and the school received \$1,511,032 in state funding. In 2007-08, enrollment was 143 and the budget was \$1,564,580. Then last year, enrollment was down to 135, but the state provided \$1,622,720.

However, with state budget cuts this year, the base per student funding has been cut to \$4,218, and state funding \$1,491,063. The total loss in budget authority amounted to \$131,657 from the previous year.

"Cheylin's school board and administration have worked together to operate the district as efficiently as possible in the past," said Superintendent Bruce Bolen. He said staffing needs have been addressed and the board is watching expenditures closely.

"Possible future cuts will be decided on as enrollment and staff needs are determined," he said.

Bolen said girls' basketball and volleyball teams had new uniforms that could be worn by both, which he said saved some money.

"I have not been superintendent long and I'm unaware of past cuts," he said. "I do know last year teachers were given a pay raise and it was



Cheylin second graders listened as teacher, Kathy Weber, instructed students, (left to right) Jayden Boyson, Kimberly Velazquez, Daniel Monteiro and Kaylynn Hendricks.

— Photo by Linda Schneider/Bird City Times

not enough."

As with most small school districts, he said, it is difficult to keep up with new technology. However, Cheylin's board has supported spending the money needed. The district has a part-time computer/network technician.

"This is a great resource for us to not have to pay someone to drive from another town and also be on-call," Bolen said. "Not many districts our size have this service available."

Cheylin still has driver education, offered during the school day, which is a bonus for the students and a cost savings for the district.

"Sports are a very important part of school experience," said Bolen. "They teach our students the value of team work, cooperation, being a role model and a good citizen."

He added that academics are the first priority, and athletics and activities are a supplement to the educational experience. Academic achievement is Cheylin's No. 1 goal, he said.

The board approved a limited cross country schedule because it could be done for a minimal cost, he said. Already, there are four students on the team. The school also has football, volleyball, basketball and track. The school has 24 boys in football, 10 girls in volleyball.

Bolen said he can see at least one more budget cut from the state this year and maybe more.



Enrollment fall 2009 — 140
Plus/Minus from 2008 — plus 5
Trend — down 35 since fall 2002.

"If this means the community may be asked to take on the additional burden," he said, "I feel most are willing to do this and not lose their local schools. We must do all that we can to insure our students are getting the best education so they will be competitive in the future with their education and skills."

He said Cheylin schools are the lifeblood of the two towns, and with a great staff and supportive community, the students will do well in whatever they endeavor after graduation.

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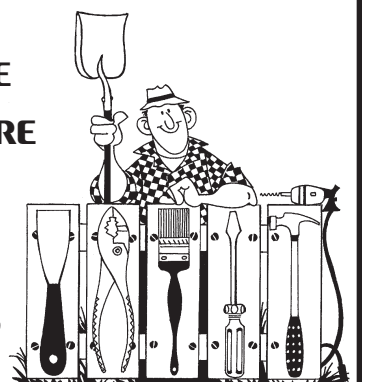


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Enrollment losses hurt small schools

By Karen Krien

The Saint Francis Herald
karen.k@nwkansas.com

The St. Francis schools, like so many other small districts in northwest Kansas, are struggling to keep enrollment from dropping, for with each drop in students comes a drop in state aid.

Since 2006, when the enrollment was 329, the figure has continued to slide, with 319 students in 2007; 307 in 2008 and, on the first day of school on Aug. 26, the count was 297.

In the 1960s, the population in Cheyenne County was 4,708, but that has steadily decreased to 2,911 in 2006. With population decrease, small farms were consumed by larger operations and business doors closed. Grade school classrooms have gone from two classes per grade to one, eliminating a full-time teacher for each level.

And fewer students means less state aid for schools.

Last year, the state aid received by the St. Francis District was \$1,656,284. This year, it is tentatively set at \$1,535,582

The school was cut \$18,695 in state money after the state had to cut back during the last school year.

What the state cuts, said Superintendent Rob Schiltz, the district needs to raise more money at home. That is done with the local option budget, which includes a property tax levy set by the board.

"The only reason we didn't have an increase in taxes this year," said Schiltz, "was the assessed valuation went up. We were lucky."

Last year, the district budget was \$2,492,600. This year, the board set the budget at \$2,514,772.

This year's local option budget, set at 11.21 mills, will bring in \$394,652. The school has hit the maximum that can be raised by local option budget dollars, he said.

In the last few years, the local option money has been used to pay for maintenance salaries and supplies, Schiltz said. In 2008-2009, those dollars also paid for all teaching supplies and, now all fuel will come out of local option budget



School District

St. Francis

Enrollment fall 2009 — 297
Plus/Minus from 2008 — minus 10
Trend — down 100 since fall 2002.

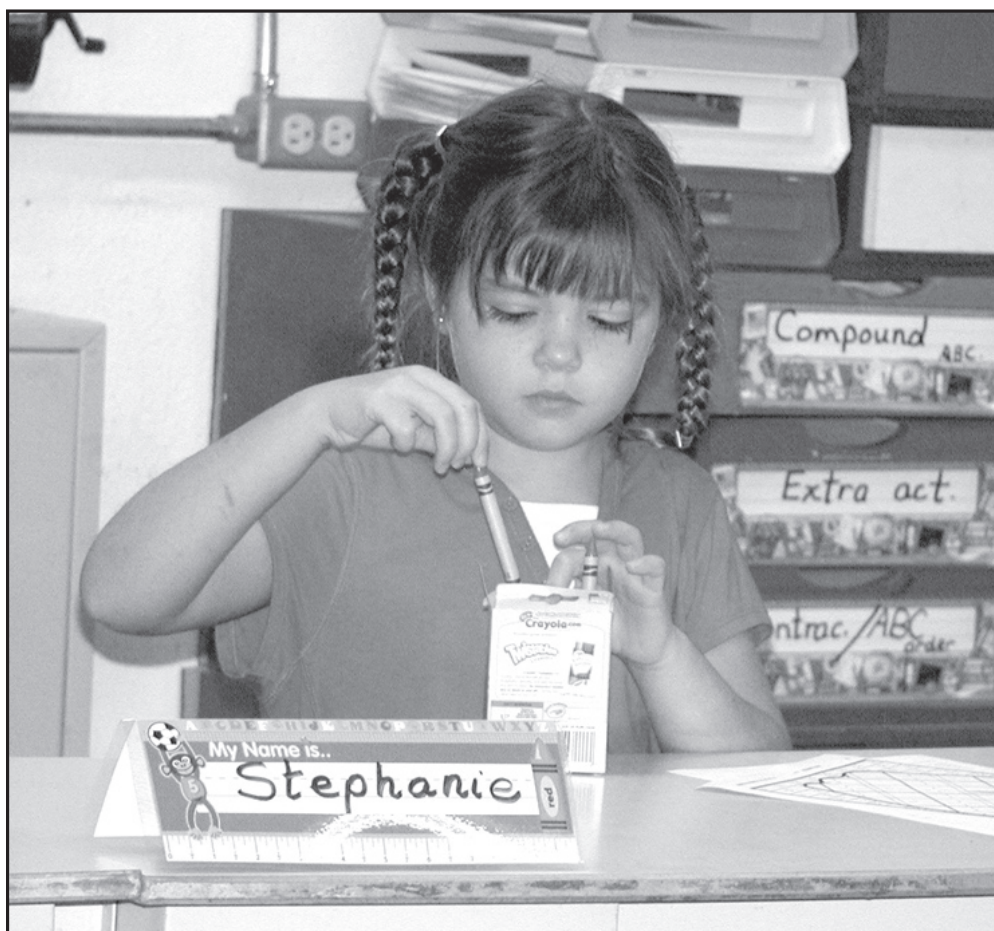
dollars as well. As money grows tighter, more items will be paid from the fund to relieve the shrinking general fund.

At some point in the near future, Schiltz said, the district will run out of local option budget money and will have no choice but to cut staff and/or programs.

In 2008, the board put a bond issue for a new gymnasium on the ballot in the general election. The cost of the gym, with a commons room and walking track, was set at \$2.5 million. However, the people voted against the bond issue 523 to 460.

The board and administration turned to updating the buildings, putting in new energy-efficient windows on the west side of the high school, lowering the hallway ceilings and installing new hallway lights which will save money. Other improvements were made in the grade school, using money from the capital outlay fund.

The board then turned to the smaller cuts, noting that every amount cut in other areas would help to save programs and teachers. Last year, a new boiler was installed in the grade school. This year, six coaching positions have been cut, the kindergarten went from two half day classes to one full day (cutting one bus route) and sack lunches sent with sports teams were eliminated. In the summer, the superintendent said, the



Picking the right color was important for Stephanie Meyer as she colored an apple the first day of school. Stephanie, a first grader in St. Francis Elementary, is the daughter of Mike and Nicole Meyer. — Photo by Karen Krien/St. Francis Herald

district was understaffed on the maintenance crew. Schiltz could be found mowing or fixing sprinkler heads to help out.

Several years ago, the home economics program was eliminated. However, the district still has one teacher in every grade, kindergarten through sixth. Students still have art, band and vocal music, drama, industrial arts, driver education and library.

Sports include 11-man football, volleyball, basketball, wrestling and track.

While Schiltz believes that academics are the most important, he says that if a sporting program has the right coach with the right priorities, it is good for the kids and the school. If the coach is just about wins and losses, he said, he or she can do more harm than good.

The district has steadily acquired more and more technology equipment. They have three computer labs in the high school plus laptop

carts which hold 24 computers each. There is the computer technology lab and class in the junior-senior high.

The superintendent said the district has handheld responders on which kids punch in their answers to questions. The teacher receives the answers instantly, and the system will compile the number of answers missed to each question. If there is some area where a class is having trouble, the teacher will know right away.

Schiltz said he believes devices such as these are the future of education, but it takes time and talent to set up the questions and decide how it will help the teacher and students.

New technology, he said, is where educators need to head.

"What is important," Schiltz said, "is that each student receives the best education possible that will prepare him or her for the future."

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