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District has faced as it has grown,

By Kevin Bottrell

Colby Free Press
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While the 120-year history of the Colby School District is one of growth, economic challenges and a gradual decline in enrollment have curbed expansion in the past decade.

Enrollment is down from a peak in the mid-1990s of more than 1,300 to about 965 today. District Business Manager Jo DeYoung said the district budgets each year for a 4 percent decline in enrollment, but the final numbers have shown that, while enrollment has dropped most years over the past decade, some years it's held steady.

Enrollment was 971 in 2008 and 1,075 in 2003.

By far the biggest challenge to the district today is the budget cuts being handed down by the state. Superintendent Terrell Harrison characterized the situation as “the worst budget crisis Kansas has ever faced.”

The state aid cuts by the Legislature forced school boards to make their own cuts to compensate for less money coming in. The Colby School Board made budget cuts recommended by the administration throughout the 2008-2009 school year to prepare for the crisis, but the exact number that would be needed did not immediately materialize. Harrison set a goal of \$500,000, which she hoped would cover any eventuality.

The cut that has received the most public attention has been elimination of in-town busing. Students who live more than 2 1/2 miles from their school are still picked up by busses, since the district gets some reimbursement from the state for them. That cut, and resulting changes in pick-up and drop-off procedures at the schools, received the majority of the public scrutiny at the community meetings held by the district in August.

In addition to busing, the board increased enrollment fees, decided not to pay for most overnight activities trips and held off on any new purchases.

In July, the governor implemented another round of budget cuts, making for a total of \$125.5 million less in state aid coming to the schools. Base state per student is down to \$4,218. However, because the board had already made about \$500,000 in cuts, the latest reductions caused little problem the district. Harrison has said she and other administrators around the state remain concerned that the budget may be cut still further.

The board has also considered reinstating a property tax levy for the capital outlay fund. In recent years, the district has made purchases from the general fund, since it's had no tax in place to replenish the capital outlay fund since 1998. However, the budget cuts will likely mean no more large projects.

Until this past decade, the history of Colby schools was one of growth, expansion and more growth.

Betty Secrest, a 1940 graduate of Colby High



School
District

Colby

Enrollment fall 2009 — 965
Plus/Minus from 2008 — minus 6
Trend — down 110 since fall 2003.

School, created a history of the district for the 1971 alumni reunion. Through old clips from Colby newspapers, Secrest found that the first school in Colby was built in sometime in the 1870s. It was a 40-foot-by-60-foot building between Fourth and Fifth streets on what is now known as School Street, close to the current site of the Pioneer Memorial Library. Before that, she wrote, classes had been held in a building several miles south of town.

Colby was growing rapidly and so was school attendance. The growth forced the school into a larger building. Classes were temporarily held on the second floor of the Thomas County courthouse. At the time, the school employed just three teachers and a principal.

A new building was approved in 1887 for \$10,000, which would be about \$237,000 today. It was considerably larger than the old school at 68 feet by 68 feet, with two floors and eight rooms, each heated by a pot-bellied stove. Secrest describe the building as having a brick exterior and hardwood and plaster interior, with a 78-foot tower. It was built on the corner of Third Street and Grant Avenue, where the present-day school administration building is.

The first seniors, Ferd Buschow and William Martin, didn't graduate until 1894. In 1899-1900, total enrollment was 106.

The first high school in Colby was created by an act of the state Legislature in 1897. The Thomas County High School was the only high school in the county, which at the time had dozens of small grade schools scattered around. Enrollment cost \$2 for out-of-county students but was free for those in county.

The high school was on a four-year schedule, teaching college preparatory classes as well as business and accounting. The school day was not much different than it is today, beginning at 7:45 a.m. and ending at 2:45 p.m. This year's schedule has the students beginning around 8 a.m. and ending around 3:20 p.m.

Enrollment grew so much, from out-of-county students in addition to those in county, that the school had to start charging admission to graduation ceremonies to anyone who was not a student or family member of a student. W.G. Riste, principal at the time, was quoted in *The*

many challenges shrunk in students

Colby Free Press as saying that the fee kept the ceremony much more orderly. He said people who were not family members and had no interest in the school had been causing trouble.

Maybe it wasn't only the attendees at graduation who had been causing trouble. The Class of 1905 left this message: "We bid the high school, our teachers and fellow students farewell, hoping you will remember the good deeds and not the misdeeds of the senior Class of 1905."

That year, enrollment had risen to 149. Two years later, the high school got too big to share a building with the rest of the grades. A new building was constructed at 200 S. Range Ave., later the site of the Colby hospital.

In the 1920s, Secrest wrote, there was a big push to consolidate school districts. The increase in students from the former rural schools resulted in new schools being built in Brewster, Menlo, Gem, Levant and Colby. The Colby Free Press at the time led the campaign for a new grade school building, calling the 1887 building "unsafe, unsanitary and out of date."

The campaign bore fruit in 1922 when a \$130,000 bond issue passed 378-48 for the construction of a building at Third Street and Grant Avenue. This would be about \$1.66 million in today's money. In 1923, all county school districts were dissolved by law. Thomas County High School became Colby Community High School.

Another bond issue passed 1031-280 in 1933 for the construction of a new high school. Despite being in the middle of the Great Depression, the town approved borrowing \$220,000. It had been 26 years since the high school had been separated from the grade school, and the continued rise in enrollment had overwhelmed the 1907 building. The new building, finished in 1936 on Third Street, today houses grades three, four and five. In 2003, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

School facilities were expanded many times in the 1950s. A primary building was built in 1950. New classrooms, athletic fields, a bus barn and lunchroom were added in 1953. In 1962, grades 7, 8 and 9 were separated into a new Junior High School, again to relieve the overcrowded high school. Consolidations among school districts in the 1960s, forced by state law and declining rural enrollment, brought students from the small schools out in the county into town. The district reorganized as Unified School District 315 in 1964.

Dennen Field, the high school football stadium, was built in 1960 and remodeled in 2007. In 1968, a building on West Fourth Street was purchased to be the administration and school psychologist's office. In 1982, the district bought the old hospital building on Range Avenue as the administration offices. There were even some classes taught in the building. DeYoung said it wasn't until 2004 that the current Administration Building was built on the site of the original 1887 school at Third and Grant.

The largest building project yet for the district came with the completion of the new

Colby High School building on South Franklin Avenue. The project, completed in 1996, cost about \$9 million, much more than any previous school building even adjusted for inflation. Students and staff moved into the school in April 1996, a transition which, according to Curriculum Director Diane Wieland, took about 17 minutes due to efficient planning by the superintendent.

In 1995, Heartland Christian School was formed with three teachers and 28 students in various grades. It was first housed in Mingo, but moved to its currently facility in Colby in 2002. The first two seniors to graduate received their diplomas in 2007.

Extracurricular activities are a big part of school life and have been in Colby for much of its history. One of the first activities, according to Secrest, was orchestra, started in 1909 with mainly string instruments. The activity was dropped during World War II.

Secrest wrote that the school band first formed in 1926. The band played at Jimmy Carter's presidential inauguration ceremony in 1977 in Washington and next year will be returning to Washington to play in the Independence Day parade.

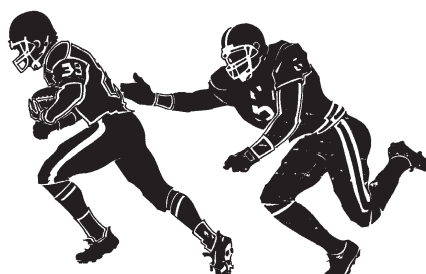
Before the first athletic teams organized, the school had an "athletic association," including both students and faculty. Teams played sports such as football and basketball when they could, as long as it didn't interfere with studying. Nearly everyone in the county came out for the school's field day.

Secrest found that football was one of the earliest sports in Colby. A team was organized in 1900 and the first official game against another school was played in 1902. The first real coach, Donald Frankenburger of Emporia, was hired in 1914. The team won its first Northwest Championship title in 1921.

Basketball was added to the athletic schedule in 1924. That year, the team placed second in the Northwest Tournament, which was held in Colby.

Other sports included wrestling in 1931, track in 1934—a sport which was often difficult in the 1930s because of the terrible dust storms—and cross country in 1967. Even as recently as the 1990s, the district was adding new teams. According to a Colby Free Press article dated 1995, the first girls golf team took to the links that year. This year, Activities Director Larry Gabel said, 10 girls came out for the team.

In 1934, the school mascot changed to the familiar Eagle. Before it had been simply, "The Orange and Black," a color scheme that remains to this day.



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