

Schools lose, gain students

Economics play a big role in whether districts grow, shrink

By Kimberly Davis

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The Oberlin Herald

While the smaller districts in northwest Kansas are again reporting a decline in students, some districts that are a little larger and have more business opportunities in town are reporting an increase in enrollment numbers over the previous.

All of the enrollment numbers are preliminary. The official count day isn't until Sept. 20, which falls on a Sunday, so the students will actually be counted on Monday, Sept. 21.

In the districts where enrollment numbers are down, generally, so is the county's population. In the districts reporting increases, the school officials say there are jobs for people to work at, which has attracted families and kept them in the counties.

While the Colby School District has fewer kids today than it did five years ago, in the 2004-2005 school year, the district actually reported an increase over last year.

Jo DeYoung, business manager for the district, said five years ago the district had 1,008 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, while this year they have 963, or 45 fewer enrolled.

Compared to last year, though, the district has 14 more students. Last year, there were 974 enrolled at the first of the year, while this year the first-day head count showed about 960.

The last time the district was up, said Mrs. DeYoung, was in 2004, with a 2 percent increase.

While the numbers increased this year, she said, that isn't the trend. She attributes the decline in numbers partly to shrinking family size. People are choosing to have fewer children, she said. Jobs can be scarce, though some can't be filled. In Colby, said Mrs. DeYoung, they could be building a new motel, but they can't find the people needed to actually build it.

Every year, she said, the district plans its budget for a 4 percent decrease in enrollment, so if it's a drop of just 2 or 3 percent, they're thrilled.

The Norton School District, said Superintendent Greg Mann, is down three students in kindergarten through high school, compared to when school opened last year. There were 676 students last year, and 673 this year.

If you include early childhood development, he said, the number is 699, two more than last year.

The district, said Mr. Mann, has remained steady over the last three to five years. While there has been a small drop, the numbers have hovered in the high 600s or low 700s.

In the 2005-2006 school year, he added, the district had 715 students.

Norton, he said, has a wide employment base with the state prison, the Department of

Transportation district office, Valley Hope corporate offices, three aluminum fabricating plants, two good-sized machine shops and a hospital. Norton County, said Mr. Mann, has employment opportunities where other rural communities might not.

Numbers show that Norton County's population has dropped 6.2 percent from 2000 to 2006. The county had 5,953 people in 2000 and 5,584 in 2006.

Looking at the overall enrollment trend, said Mr. Mann, he thinks the district will have lower enrollment for the next 10 to 15 years. He said he doesn't foresee any drastic drops, but thinks they will settle out in the 500s.

Families are smaller, he said, so the lower grades have fewer kids while the higher grades have more.

The St. Francis School District also has fewer students than five years ago, said Superintendent Rob Schiltz. In 2004, the district had 326 students, while the head count this year is 294, down 32.

Over the past few years, he said, it seems the numbers have dropped about 10 kids a year. Last year, the head count was 307, or 13 more than this year.

While families are having fewer children, said Mr. Schiltz, they are starting to see graduates return home to raise their families.

It's different nowadays, he said, because one child coming home to run the family farm might be enough, where it used to take two or three.

Declining enrollment is just a part of rural America, said Mr. Schiltz. It seems every school district in smaller towns is losing enrollment.

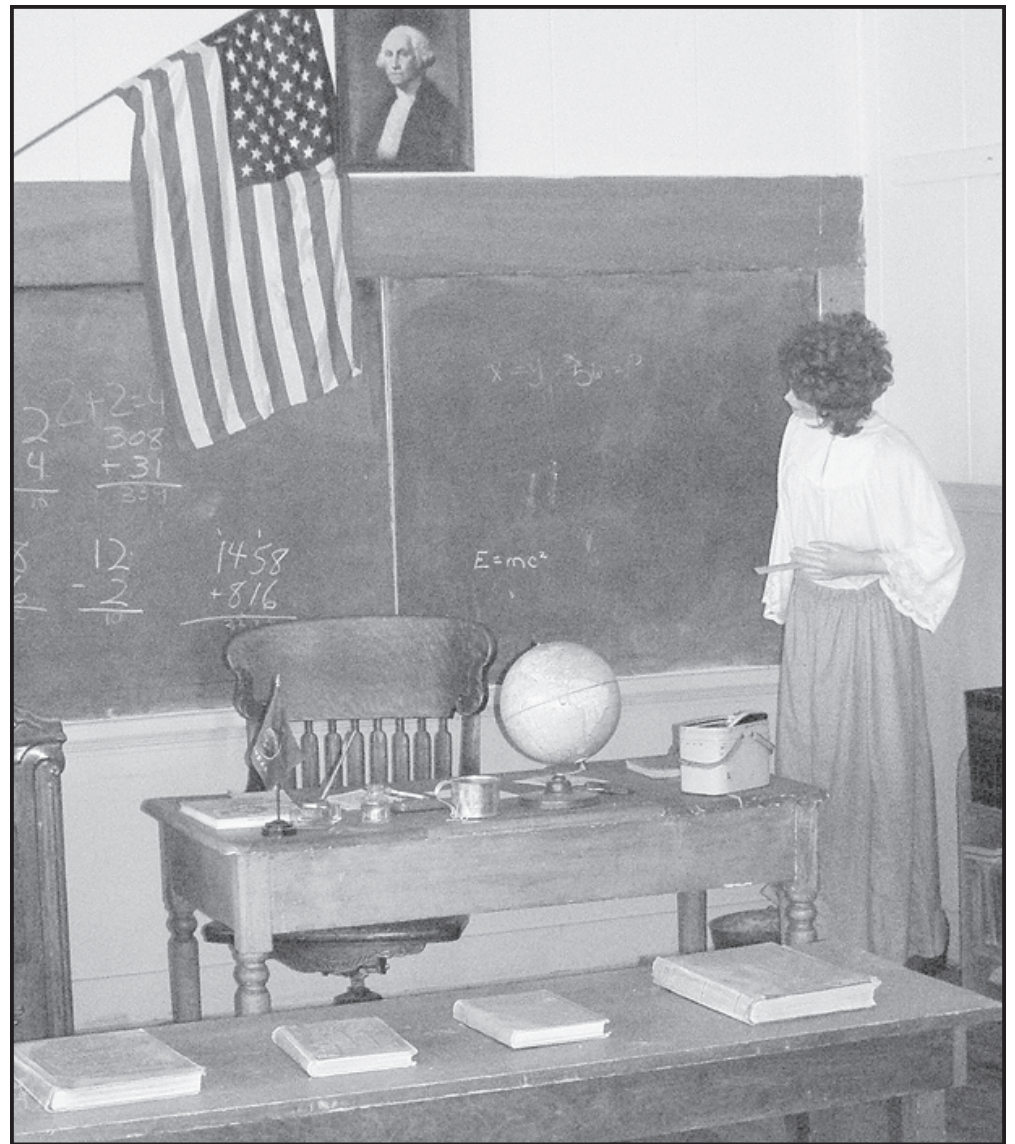
In St. Francis, he said, they have cut all the little things they can, trying to focus on items that won't affect the education of students, or at least trying to minimize the effect on students. School officials are seriously talking about consolidating the kitchens at the grade and high schools, he said.

The district has also started making sure the buses going to events are full. The league has helped with that in a way, said Mr. Schiltz, by combining the junior high and high school wrestling duals.

The district has tried to save money in other ways, too, including going to two administrators, himself and another who serves as the principal at both the grade and high schools.

He added that he sees the state per-pupil base aid being chopped even more over the next year. The state keeps cutting taxes and cutting taxes, he said, and now will have to make that up somewhere. He said he thinks the district can hold out another year and then probably will have to start cutting staff.

The Oberlin School District also has seen enrollment drop compared to five years ago, by a total of 64 students. The first-day count for this year is 386, compared to 450 five years ago.



Union School, District 51 in Sherman County, was built in 1912 and served Grant Township until 1961. The building was remodeled in the 1930s and all the windows were moved to the south side to improve energy use. The schoolhouse was donated to the Sherman County Historical Society and moved to its present location next to the High Plains Museum in 1992. The classroom has been set up to show what it would have looked like when the school was in operation back in the '30s and '40s.

— Photo by Tom Betz/The Goodland Star-News

Last year, the count was 391.

Superintendent Duane Dorshorst said the main reason for the decrease is the decline in population in the county. The county no longer has the businesses on Main Street that rural towns had 20 years ago.

Farming is changing, he said, with bigger equipment and farmers don't have as many kids to help with the family business.

Over the years, the district has made changes to save money, trying not to impact the education and extracurricular activities the schools offer. The two schools share an art teacher and librarian, meals are made at the high school and driven to the grade school, he said, and when people resign or retire, the jobs aren't always filled.

Most recently, the district went to two administrators, with a principal at the high school and Mr. Dorshorst serving as the superintendent and grade-school principal.

The county has seen a few graduates return

home to raise their families, he said, but he'd like to find ways to have more of them come back.

The Goodland School District saw a slight increase this year over the numbers last fall with 874 kids now and 869 enrolled at the beginning of last school year. In the 2007-2008 school year, although the district started with 869 students, it lost 16 by February.

While the district has a few more students this year, it's declined from three and six years ago. In 2003 Goodland had 966 students and in 2007 886.

The Rawlins County School District, in Atwood, which is a consolidation of schools in Herndon and Atwood is also down this year. Superintendent Mark Wolters projected the district would have 305 student, 10 less than last year.

This is part of the 25 year trend of declining enrollment, he said.

Even with painful state budget cuts student numbers translate into cash

By Tom Betz

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The big economic news this year has been about the drop in state income forcing two rounds of budget cuts affecting Kansas school districts and speculation about whether the schools will face more cuts in the coming months.

Schools are back in session now, and each district is looking to see if its enrollment is up or down, because those numbers translate into money from the state.

When people talk about education, the issues are usually having good teachers and showing that the students are learning what they are supposed to in class.

Mission statements for educational organizations say things about how it is their job to educate the future generation to be able to take over the country.

Schools are big business, though, and in Kansas the public school budget represents about 30 percent of total state budget spending.

The state expenditures for fiscal year 2008 (July 1, 2007, to June 30, 2008) for education reported by Kan-View, an Internet-based government financial information database for taxpayers, was \$6,151,357,519, or 29 percent of total state spending.

The largest piece of the pie is general government at 32 percent, \$6,730,112,918.

Agriculture and natural resources account for 2 percent of state spending at \$444,453,418.

Highways and transportation are 7 percent at \$3,485,401,044. Public safety (Kansas Highway Patrol and KBI) are 4 percent \$811,130,899.

The third largest piece of the pie is human resources at 26 percent, which includes social programs and departments dealing with health and environment, aging, veterans, labor, state hospitals and social and rehabilitation services, with a total spending of \$5,529,400,865.

Flat and declining state income figures created a problem for the Legislature earlier this year, as the members had to find ways to cut about \$350 million to balance the budget. That included a small 2 percent cut for schools. Not 30 days after the Legislature adjourned, Gov. Mark Parkinson announced another round of cuts totaling \$69.9 million – and

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Cover — Leaving school in Bird City at the end of the day (from left) Luis Solis, Aleece Kosales, Shayla Hubbard and Grant Shrader were headed home.

— Photo by Linda Schneider/Bird City Times

another 2 percent cut for school districts.

State Rep. Jim Morrison (R-Colby) said he thinks the schools could be in for another round of cuts if state income continues to come in under projections. (July figures showed a small increase, however.)

He said it will be interesting, with the House Appropriations Committee holding hearings this month, but there'll be an effort to try to hold the school budget as close to where it is as possible.

Morrison said he had seen a report from the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, a conservative think tank headquartered in Wichita, that says the state has about \$2 billion in the "unencumbered" balances of more than 1,000 state funds.

Morrison said if the figures are true, it would be something the Legislature would have to look into, and he would be upset if that much money is sitting around unused.

He said there may be some other places the state can find money, including the interest from unclaimed property.

He said the schools are in for a fight, though, if projections about a state shortfall close to \$500 million come to pass.

Another school lawsuit is possible, Morrison said, but he thinks if Salina is the district pushing it, it will be different this time.

And, he said, he's not sure the public will put up with another lawsuit paid for with tax money.

He said he sees a growing number

of students being home schooled while the private schools are filling up.

"We are seeing a strong east versus west and an 'us' versus 'them' developing in the funding fight," Morrison said. "This month, the process will really begin. We need to work with each other to help fix the funding program and not try to tear it down."

Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, (R-Grinnell), agreed the state's money figures don't look good.

"We sort of knew there were going to be more cuts when we left the Legislature," he said.

"There could have to be more cuts made. I think we need to have the money now. It is hard to wait seven months into the season. The schools need to know now."

Looking at the dismal figures coming out of Topeka, Ostmeyer said he does not know how deep the cuts may have to be.

"Could be anybody's guess," he said. "It has not been enjoyable being in the Legislature the past couple of years."

Asked about the report from Flint Hills about the nearly \$2 billion in state funds that could be available, Ostmeyer said he has heard that before, and believes much of the money is untouchable.

"Those figures include school districts," Ostmeyer said, "and the majority is money we let them carry over. I don't see our school districts abusing that."

Other than money for schools, Ostmeyer, who was a member of the

Grinnell School Board for 14 years, said he thinks the schools have to look for ways to start sharing more services.

He said Grinnell is working with Wheatland, but feels they need to consolidate and shut down a building.

"We need to start doing some of those things to survive," he said. "Do we want to survive as Gove County? We need to work on a plan to survive."

Thinking about some of the other small rural school districts in northwest Kansas, Ostmeyer mentioned Triplains at Winona as struggling.

"We have to find a way to keep something out there," he said.

He said it might be possible to maybe split the high school away and have one for both towns, but feels the younger kids need more hands on with a teacher in the classroom.

"You can do a lot with the computer," he said, "but what about the average student who may struggle on a computer. I think we need to have hands on with these people."

"We look back at our days in school and say it worked for us, and that going back might be an option. I know we have to be very careful about that, because it won't work with our society today."

Paul Soutar, an investigator for the Flint Hills Center, said the \$1.955 billion in unencumbered cash might include some school money, but it would take a lot more investigating to determine what is or isn't school money.

Soutar said quite a few of the 152 organizations participating in the Municipal Investment Pool are school districts, and seven of the top 10 with large balances are school districts.

He said the top is Blue Valley in Johnson County with an investment balance of \$72.9 million.

He said last year, the unencumbered cash for schools was \$1.36 billion, and that some of that is not included in the \$2 billion reported last week.

"We are saying this is a convoluted system and not the best way to do business," he said.

He agreed some of the money is in programs where if the agency or school doesn't spend it they lose it, but he said this is not true in all of the cases.

Soutar thinks the problems of the smaller schools could be handled if the Legislature would push back against the National Education Association, the primary union and lobbying group representing teachers.

One suggestion he made was to give parents the opportunity to find ways to educate their children with money from the state, up to half of the more than \$18,000 per pupil some schools are spending now.

Ostmeyer said he wants people who make such suggestions to come out here and sit down and see what is happening in the classroom. Then they can talk about what we can cut, he said.

He said there is a proposal in Topeka to get down to 12 school districts in the state.

Several years ago, the suggestion was to have 40. Today there are about 300 school districts in Kansas.

"It is not going to work as well out here," he said. "It would take 20 counties to make one school district. We don't have places to cut. I spent 14 years on a school board. I know what we have cut out."

Ostmeyer said he was on his way to Tribune, and kept losing the signal on his cell phone.

"That's another thing they think is so great," he said, "but we have lots of places out here where you can't call anyone."

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