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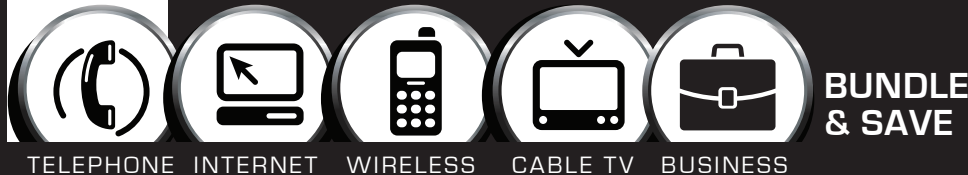
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Outdated buildings plague many schools

By Erica Bradley

The Norton Telegram
ebradley@nwkansas.com

Cuts in state money are affecting children's education in ways that are deeper than many may think. For one thing, children in some rural areas attend classes in buildings that are in desperate need of repair.

The Northern Valley School District needs to update its facilities, said Superintendent George Griffith. The buildings have new roofs, but need heating and cooling upgrades and energy efficient windows and lighting, among other things.

Northern Valley became a unified district in the fall of 1967 when Almena and Long Island schools consolidated. The elementary and high school are in Almena, while the junior high is in Long Island.

The high school was built in the 1920s, and while upgrades have been done over the years, it still needs work, Griffith said.

The superintendent said he thinks the state needs to put money into schools instead of giving tax breaks to big business.

"They need to fund schools the way they should be funded for our children," he said.

Griffith said lack of money available from the local property tax is another hurdle for rural schools. He said a one-mill increase in the Almena district would only bring in about \$19,000, while the same levy in a city would amount to a lot more.

The superintendent said he would like to see \$1.5 million worth of work done on Northern Valley buildings soon. He said this would include a modern heating and cooling system, as well as "going green" by updating the windows and lights. He said changing to energy-efficient windows would cost more, but it would save the district money on heating and cooling.

"There is a lot of opportunity to move our facilities to a more modern, better learning environment," Griffith said.

Over the summer, he said, the staff has been painting walls and doing other minor work.

Last year, Griffith said, the district got two grants to update playground equipment, which was dilapidated.

He said the district had \$95,000 set aside to replace the gymnasium floor in the high school. Due to the budget problems, he decided not to replace the floor, which allowed him to move the money into the 2009-10 budget.

The superintendent said the floor probably will be replaced next year.

He said he is looking for as many grants as possible so he can make improvements to the buildings. He said money to do major work would have to come from grants and low-interest loans.

"The goal the school board has, and I support, is to make Northern Valley a facility that will be here for a long time," he said.

For now, upgrades are done as needed. He said the roofs were replaced on the high school and elementary school last year, totaling \$175,000, but now the boiler and furnace in the high school need to be replaced.



School
District

Northern Valley

Enrollment fall 2009 — 194
Plus/Minus from 2008 — minus 9
Trend — Up eight since fall 2002.

Griffith said the water pipes probably need to be replaced as well. He said money has been put aside to do the repairs, but that money may have to be used for other operating costs.

"We're probably better off with financial reserves than we have been in the last 10 years," he said.

Griffith said technology equipment needs to be upgraded as well. Currently there are two computer labs at the high school, one at the junior high and a "laptop lab" at the elementary school.

He said the laptop lab is three years old and the computers in the labs are six years old.

Griffith said he would like to add computers to the science rooms, which would allow classes to do virtual lab work. He said it would be safer for students to learn on a computer than to use chemicals.

An increase in enrollment has helped Northern Valley with some of its budget problems, Griffith said.

"We will start this year at about what we started last year," Griffith said. "It has been very beneficial."

Griffith said enrollment has remained steady and sometimes increased over the last five years. In 1990, 200 students were enrolled, in 2003 enrollment had declined to 186, in 2008 enrollment climbed to 205 and this year enrollment decreased slightly to 194.

Northern Valley employs 24 teachers, 10 bus drivers, four cooks, four secretaries, four custodians, one full time teacher aide and one part time, he said.

Griffith said the district had to cut back by one staff member this year due to budget cuts. The art program was eliminated.

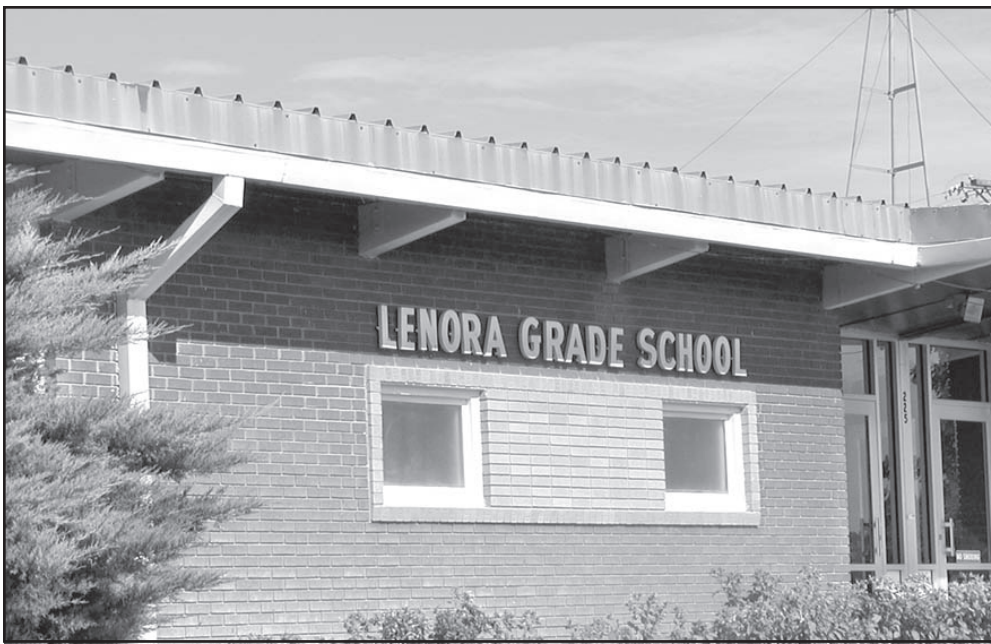
"I hope to bring it back in 2010," Griffith said. "It depends on what the economy does, but I think it's an important curriculum to have."

Griffith said another issue faced by rural schools is attracting teachers for areas like math and science.

"It's been difficult in the past," he said.

He said bigger districts have the money to have one science teacher for each specialty, chemistry, biology or physics. He said in smaller districts, one teacher has to be certified in all areas.

"I think our students deserve the best, and that is what we want to give them," he said.



Lenora High School closed due to low enrollment and graduated its last class in 2001. The school currently houses students in grades K–6. High school students are bused to Norton.

—Telegram photo by Erica Bradley

Small school educates elementary students

By Erica Bradley

The Norton Telegram
ebradley@nwkansas.com

Lenora Schools have a history of small enrollment from the district's creation in the 1870s to the high school's closing in 2001.

According to O.M. Becker, author of "Lenora Schools," the district was organized Sept. 1, 1877, and included 40 miles of the surrounding area.

A.S. Burrows served as director of the new district. During the winter of 1877, his wife taught school in their home. Only 12 students were enrolled that winter.

Enrollment began to grow in 1878, when 15 students attended school outside of town. In 1879, the district occupied a school house donated to the district by the Spring City Co.

By 1883, Lenora had grown, and the school became crowded with an enrollment of 50. In 1884, voters passed bonds totaling \$3,000 and a four-room school house was built.

By 1893, enrollment had grown to 110, and eight students were entering their first year of high school. At that time, the course of study included nine years of "grade" school and two of high school.

Lenora Schools continued to serve students in kindergarten through 12th grade until the spring of 2001, when Lenora High School graduated its last class. The district continues to operate a grade school.

Superintendent Gary Baxter said low enrollment forced the district to close the high school. High school students are now bused to Norton. The district pays Norton Community Schools for the high school students it sends there.

Enrollment has decreased from 61 in 1990, to 47 in 2002 to 17 in 2008. This fall, 19 students enrolled, a small increase.

Baxter said state budget cuts this year have affected the Lenora Schools.

"It has certainly impacted our budget and



School
District

Lenora

Enrollment fall 2009 — 19
Plus/Minus from 2008 — plus 2
Trend — Down 28 since fall 2002.

what we are able to do," he said.

He said he has reduced or eliminated teacher in-service training, cut travel, given only minimal raises to staff and is looking at ways to conserve energy.

"We're tightening everything up to complete the year," he said. "It's my hope the economy improves."

Mr. Baxter said maintaining enrollment has been one of Lenora's biggest challenges. He said he thinks the school has a lot to offer any student.

"We have an excellent school with a low student-to-teacher ratio," he said. "The state cuts are making it more and more difficult for us to maintain our programs."

Baxter said the district had cut out summer school as well as driver education.

"We're cutting across the board, trying to reduce our cost," he said.

The district employs 22, including nine teachers, four support staff, a cook, three bus drivers, a custodian, a groundskeeper and three in administration.

"We have an excellent staff," Baxter said.

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