

Programs stay as classes shrink

By Kimberly Davis

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The Oberlin Herald

While the enrollment at the Oberlin School District may be dropping, the number of classes and extracurricular activities the district offers has remained steady.

The number of kids attending the grade school and high school, both in Oberlin, has steadily decreased in the last 10 years, but the number of programs hasn't, said Superintendent Duane Dorshorst. The district, with fewer kids and, under the school finance law, less money from the state, is still offering the same programs.

By consolidating in other areas, Mr. Dorshorst said, they have been able to keep the programs and continue to offer the well rounded education that students need.

Not all kids are athletes, said Mr. Dorshorst. Kids need the opportunity to take part in athletics, speech, drama, music, vocational agriculture and more, all of which is offered in the district.

Kids have different creative outlets, he said; some excel at one thing and others in a different area.


It's important for the district to be able to keep industrial arts and a strong music program, the superintendent, who took over in July, said.

While some districts are no longer even able to offer art, the Oberlin School District does at both the grade and high schools. The district has one art teacher who works a split schedule at both schools.

Looking at the students who attend classes in Oberlin, he said, they are a well-rounded group of kids. There are lots of students who do as much as they can and are active in as many extra curricular as they can, said Mr. Dorshorst, and there are others who just focus on one area.

While the district has been able to keep its programs, it's not to say that the schools haven't faced issues.

All districts face challenges, said Mr. Dorshorst, and for those that continue to decrease in size, like Oberlin, these include keeping up



School District

Oberlin

Enrollment fall 2009 — 386
Plus/Minus from 2008 — minus 5
Trend — down 84 since fall 2002

with technology and the right staffing to provide the curriculum the students need.

While receiving less from money the state, he said, the district has continually made changes to still provide a top-quality education. Some of those recent ones have been combining the grade school principal's and superintendent's position. This is the first year that Mr. Dorshorst has filled both jobs.

Other area districts, including Hoxie, St. Francis and Atwood, have already done this, he said. Combining the positions, said Mr. Dorshorst, it helps save money in salary and benefits, and that helps save other programs.

In the past, the district had a band teacher at both schools, in the past few years that job went to one person. Last year, one of the custodians retired, and that position wasn't filled. The district no longer offers towel service in the locker rooms, said Mr. Dorshorst, which has saved money and the need of another custodian.

Preliminary numbers for this year, he said, show the grade school with 198 students and he high school with 188 for a total of 386, down about five from last fall. The official numbers won't be released until after count day on Monday, Sept. 21.

The weighted full-time equivalency number of 755.3 is used to decide how much money



With colored paint on his hand, Dustin Nichols got help from Oberlin Elementary School Principal Duane Dorshorst to put his print on a white wall outside the school. Students do this every fall to seal a promise to follow the school's code of conduct.

— Photo by Kimberly Davis/The Oberlin Herald

the district gets from the state. The head count is weighted, or increased, because the district is smaller, and for students who are bussed to town, need special services or take vocational classes, among other things. For each weighted-enrollment number, said Mr. Dorshorst, the district gets \$4,218 per pupil from the state, down from \$4,433 last year because of state budget cuts.

With a declining enrollment, the Oberlin district is using a three-year average for that number.

Five years ago, in 2004-2005, the district had a head count of 450 kids, 64 more than this year, while 10 years ago there were 547 students, 161 more than today.

Mr. Dorshorst said he thinks the enrollment will start to even out somewhere about 300, with classes all having about 25 to 30 students. This year's kindergarten class has 23 students, he said, while the sixth grade has 22 and the senior class has 28.

That could require some staffing changes especially at the grade school, where the first second, third and fifth grades still have two sections. Grades with only one section include kindergarten, fourth and sixth, he said. Eventually, said Mr. Dorshorst, he sees all of the classes going to one teacher.

Small schools, said Mr. Dorshorst, are good schools. The teachers are better able to get to know the students and better instruct them.

The Oberlin district, he said, prepares student for the next step, no matter what they choose that to be.

About 95 percent of the students go onto higher learning, he said. This community continues to grow the financial support it gives them from private donors and a school foundation to help students going on to college or another type of post-secondary education.

The Oberlin community and district are both great, he said, or he wouldn't have stayed for 27 years and raised four daughters here.

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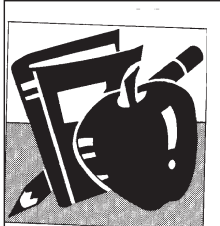
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County district formed in 2004

By Aubrey Spencer

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"The last ones out the door in May 2004" was the final graduation ceremony for the Herndon School District, as the students bid farewell to life as Herndon Beavers.

The Herndon and Atwood school districts had agreed to consolidate in April 2003, after residents of the combined districts voted 786-119 in favor of consolidation, and on July 1, 2003, the Rawlins County School District was formed.

The road to consolidation was not easy. It is a lot to ask a school district to give up its individual identity to create an entirely new district. Usually, one district loses its location, its mascot and sometimes its staff.

In Herndon's case, the district merged with Atwood, moving to Atwood's campus and adopting Atwood's mascot, the Buffalo. Not surprisingly, Herndon people didn't want to see their school close, but they realized they didn't have a choice. Enrollment had dropped below 100 and it was getting tough to offer a complete program.

Herndon representatives met with school boards in Atwood, Oberlin and Golden Plains before agreeing to consolidate with Atwood. The decision was not made without difficulty, in fact, the Herndon board wavered back and forth several times before ultimately agreeing to the consolidation, with the understanding that the Herndon High School would remain open for one more year and the grade school for at least four.

The high school did remain open the one year because it had a bigger senior class coming up, but after that, enrollment was projected to be quite small, with only three to six students per grade. The grade school was to remain open because it had more students, and at the time of the agreement, the school boards could foresee that lasting at least the four years.

Both schools in Herndon stayed open the one year, but the grade school didn't make it beyond that. Although it seemed feasible for the grade school to remain open before the merger, reality



School District

Rawlins County

Enrollment fall 2009 — 318
Plus/Minus from 2008 — minus 3
Trend — down 12 since fall 2003.

offered a different outcome. Most of the parents of the elementary students chose to send their kids to Atwood when the high school students went there, making it nearly impossible for the grade school to continue. Superintendent Mark Wolters said there would have been fewer than 10 students left at Herndon — definitely not enough to support a staff or a school.

Beginning in the fall of 2004, the former Herndon students moved to Atwood. When asked if the transition was difficult for students, staff and community, Superintendent Wolters said it was, at least in some ways.

"Yes and no. It's very difficult for a community to close their school," he said. "The Herndon community was proud of its school, and rightly so."

Changing schools always involves a degree of difficulty for students, Wolters added.

"But the students adapted well, jumped right into class and into activities," he said. "Staff members from Herndon were transferred to Atwood and have done very well."

Wolters said that Atwood benefited by merging with the Herndon district. Although, the extra students didn't allow Atwood schools to add any new classes, he said, they definitely helped them keep programs they might not have been able to keep otherwise. Herndon had good families with good kids, he said, and Atwood gained a lot because of the consolidation.



The Rawlins County buffalo stands guard over the school in Atwood.

— Photo by Aubrey Spencer/Colby Free Press

What does Rawlins County School District look like now, six years after consolidation?

"It looks like a good school," Wolters said, "with students that come from all areas of a 740-square-mile district."

As of Sept. 9, preliminary head count was 318, down three from last year. In 2002, before consolidation, enrollment in Herndon was 84 and in Atwood, 330. Wolters said the drop continues is a 25-year trend. Basically, the school district is graduating more students than come into kindergarten each year.

Wolters doesn't see the decline in enrollment as necessarily a threat to the future existence of the district, but said that it does make it harder to keep all the programs they'd like to have in the schools.

At the time Herndon and Atwood consolidated, he said, they were the first schools in the area to merge in 20 years. Wolters thinks there had been five or six consolidations since then, with other districts working under various co-

operative agreements. He offered some advice to school districts that find themselves in the same consolidation boat.

He said to give people a chance to talk and communicate, noting that a good facilitator could help the process.

"Understand that closing a school is a big blow to a community," Wolters said. "There will be strong feelings regarding this issue."

He said that people need an opportunity to express their feelings, and after a merger, time to adjust.

Wolters said it was important to keep coming back to the question of what is going to be best for the students and how the district could provide the best opportunities for the kids.

He said consolidation shouldn't be primarily a financial question, even though that is definitely a big factor.

"Bottom line, it has to be about providing opportunities for students in the best possible way," the superintendent said.

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