

Schools trace history back to 1882 startup

By Erica Bradley

The Norton Telegram
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The Norton Community Schools have a long history, dating back to the Washington Street School in 1882, though the current district was not incorporated until 1966.

According to D.N. Bowers' book, "Seventy Years in Norton County," District 1, later known as Norton City Schools, opened in December 1873 with 16 students. Bowers called District 1's facility "primitive."

Samuel Means, in "Norton City Schools," said the first school was taught by J.H. Simmons, who was named superintendent in 1877. The first school building was a log structure in the southeast part of town.

Norton City Schools eventually grew to include a high school. In 1899, the Kansas Legislature passed a law allowing county commissioners to establish a county high school. Norton County High School was organized. A building was constructed in 1902 and expanded in 1907.


In 1923, Norton City High School became Norton Community High School, although the major unification of school districts did not take place until the 1960s.

Norton City Schools built a brick structure in 1916 which would later be called Washington School. The building housed first through eighth grades.

In the early 1900s, growing enrollment forced both Norton City Schools and Norton County Schools to expand. In 1926, the Norton County High School building was remodeled, and in 1937 the Norton Junior High School was built. In the early 1950s, Norton City Schools added the first part of the Eisenhower School to its facilities. The district also remodeled and added to Washington School.

On July 1, 1966, Norton City Schools and Norton Community High School became Norton Community Schools. The unified district has served Norton and the surrounding area since.

The district operates Eisenhower Elementary, Norton Community Junior High and Norton



School District

Norton

Enrollment fall 2009 — 699
Plus/Minus from 2008 — plus 15
Trend — Down two since fall 2002.

Community High School.

The schools face the same issues many rural schools have: declining enrollment, budget cuts and a shortage of teachers in areas like math and science.

Superintendent Greg Mann said the solution to these problems is to have more state money. He said he would also like to see more jobs in rural areas. That would attract more people to the area, boosting enrollment.

Mann said the district's budget is a concern, and he is watching the state, which might cut education money again in November.

"Any time there is less money during the year than on which the budget was built, it is a problem," he said.

Mann said it is too early to plan for next year's budget, but he is hoping for low utility costs again this year.

"We hope to again be fortunate, with low fuel prices, have another mild winter with low natural gas costs and no major problems that requires a larger-than-usual amount of money for repair or replacement," Mann said.

Last year's utility costs were much lower than what had been budgeted, he said, and that allowed the school board to move some money into this year's budget.

Enrollment determines the majority of any



Clay Sumner waited to meet the new teacher for the early education program during an open house at Norton's Eisenhower Elementary School. The event is held every year before the first day of school so students and parents get to meet the teacher and see the classrooms.

— Photo by Sherry Hickman/The Norton Telegram

school budget, and this year Norton will see a decrease of about nine students, Mann said.

In 1990 enrollment was 718, in 2002 it was 701 and this year the head count is 699. Mann said the enrollment number used for budget

purposes will not be known until Monday, Sept. 21, the official count day.

Last year, the district enrolled 684 students, he said, and they expected 675 this year.



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STUDENTS (from left) Roxanne Bochert, Jody Brooks, Crystal Franco and Bradley Gawith waited to sit after they walked into their graduation ceremony. The Class of 2005 was the last class to hold its commencement in the gym at Jennings High School.

— Photo by Kimberly Davis/The Oberlin Herald

Small school lasted from 1900s to 1965

By Erica Bradley

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Edmond and Densmore schools flourished in the early 1900s, but eventually closed due to low enrollment.

The first Edmond school was built in 1881, and a two-story building was constructed in 1888.

According to "A History of Norton County Schools," by F.H. Baker and H.M. Culter, 80 students enrolled in Edmond in 1888. Densmore's enrollment totaled 40.

D.N. Bowers, author of "Seventy Years in Norton County," said a petition for a high school in Edmond was presented to the county

commissioners on May 2, 1921. The petition was granted, and the high school was built later that year.

The high school graduated its last class in 1958. Edmond students began attending school in Lenora, a practice that continues.

Bowers said a petition was presented to the county commissioners on April 3, 1922, to establish a high school in Densmore. He said two previous petitions had been denied due to legal difficulties.

The petition passed in 1922, and voters decided to build the school, but rejected the bonds. The building was constructed with money borrowed on warrants.

Densmore closed its schools in 1965. Students are bused to Logan.

Last graduates received diplomas from high school

By Kimberly Davis

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The Oberlin Herald

Faced with a steadily decreasing enrollment, the Jennings Schools closed at the end of May, the high school graduating its last class in 2006 from neighboring districts.

The brick two-story school house, built in 1924 for \$75,000, now houses the operations of Bus and Coach International.

The district was first known as the Jennings Grade School District, then the Jennings Rural High School District, Jennings-Clayton Unified School District and finally Prairie Heights School District.

By the time the name was changed to Prairie Heights, the district included kids from Jennings, Clayton, Dresden and Allison.

In 1966, the unified district had two schools, one for kindergarten through fourth grade in Clayton and the other for fifth through twelfth grades in Jennings.

Later the school in Clayton closed and all of the students were taught in Jennings.

Lila Jennings, who taught at the Jennings School for a combined total of 16 years and served on the school board for three or four, said the board researched all its options before deciding to disorganize the district. The board members knew they were going to have to do something, she said. Surveys and projections of future enrollment showed no other way out.

In 2005, six seniors graduated and the projected numbers showed one or two kindergartners coming in.

The board held public meetings, said Mrs. Jennings, and talked with districts that were going through the same thing or had gone through it.

There weren't enough kids to consolidate

with another district, she said. In 2005, the district had 30 students, 16 in high school and 14 in grade school.

That was down drastically from the 2002-2003 school year, when the district had 79 students, followed by 61 in 2003-2004.

In 2005, the board voted to disorganize. This allowed students to go to other nearby districts as they chose.

The high school shut down first, with seniors attending other area schools. In May 2006, students graduating from nearby districts received not only a diploma from that school, but one from Prairie Heights.

That same year, 2006, she said, the Jennings Schools offered classes in kindergarten through second grade, with a handful of kids attending.

While looking at its options, the board decided to list the two-story school for sale on eBay. In early 2006 the building was sold to Bus and Coach International, and the firm uses the building as its headquarters.

The school closed that May, and in June items that were left in the building were sold in an auction.

The money, said Mrs. Jennings, was split between the City of Jennings and the Czech Museum.

The district's territory, she said, was split among the school districts in Hoxie, Norton and Oberlin. The percentage of land each district received was applied to the tax dollars each one got from the Prairie Heights School District.

Since the school closed, said Mrs. Jennings, she's seen a change in the community. Church attendance is down, there aren't many kids in town and the store downtown closed. The closing of the school, she said, has hurt the city not just financially, but in other ways, too.

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