



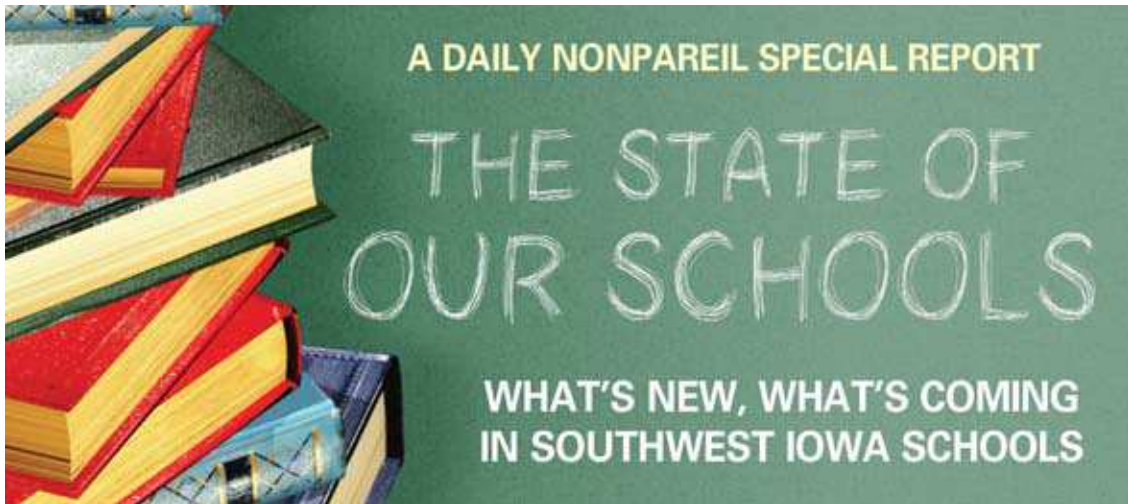
A DAILY NONPAREIL SPECIAL REPORT

# THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S COMING IN SOUTHWEST IOWA SCHOOLS



*September 2015*



This e-book is a special project of The Daily Nonpareil in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Our primary coverage area includes all of Pottawattame, Mills and Harrison counties in southwest Iowa. This report also includes school districts from the periphery of our coverage area, including all of Fremont and Page counties and portions of Montgomery, Cass, Shelby and Crawford counties.

This is the second year The Nonpareil has visited area schools in the summer months to report on developments and discuss some of the major issues facing the schools in the coming months.

The majority of the material in this publication ran in the print edition of The Nonpareil between July 26, 2015, and Aug. 30, 2015. The text, photos and design of this e-book were done by Deputy News Editor Scott Stewart. Other Nonpareil staff members contributed logo design, editing and other support for this project.

A few articles have been slightly modified from the original published articles, but no additional reporting has been added beyond the “Updates” section on Page 7.

In the “By the numbers” section following the public school districts, enrollment, subsidy, graduation, budget and teacher data was obtained from the Iowa Department of Education for 2014-15 school year, as reported by the Bureau of Information and Analysis at [educateiowa.gov](http://educateiowa.gov). Budget and tax levy data came from the Iowa Department of Management for fiscal year 2015, as reported at [www.dom.state.ia.us](http://www.dom.state.ia.us). Technology and Teacher Leadership and Compensation System information was provided by the school districts. Building list and website listings were compiled by The Daily Nonpareil.

To provide feedback on this project, please email The Nonpareil at [education@nonpareilonline.com](mailto:education@nonpareilonline.com).

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# Introduction

The Daily Nonpareil will spend the next five weeks, beginning Tuesday, exploring what's new and what's coming up at school districts across southwest Iowa.

Installments in our series, called the State of Our Schools, will focus on big-picture developments while also tracking two key pieces of information about area school districts: financial health and enrollment projections.

The past year has been one where school financing has been at the forefront of state politics, culminating – for the time being, at least – with a dramatic veto of one-time funding by Gov. Terry Branstad shortly before the Independence Day holiday.

Officials across the region believe a fight over how our K-12 schools are funded is a sure bet when lawmakers return to Des Moines for their next session. Some are currently pushing for a special session to attempt to overturn Branstad's veto on one-time dollars as well as a veto of funding for two mental health insti-



tutions, including one in Clarinda.

School superintendents have said increasing state supplemental aid, the primary vehicle for state support of public schools, by 2 percent or less annually isn't enough to keep up with expenses, including rising prices and compensation increases negotiated by collective bargaining groups.

Lawmakers who haven't supported larger increases have said schools must live within their means because spending is inexorably linked to tax rates. Branstad and others also rejected using one-time allocations to schools because it prevents planning, as does the General Assembly's political inability to set state aid rates two years in advance.

Another piece of the financ-

ing puzzle is spending authority, a school district's legal ability to spend money on operational expenses including teacher salaries. Iowa doesn't limit property tax levies, like in neighboring Nebraska, but instead enforces a per-pupil spending cap on expenditures from each district's general fund. So some districts have more cash than they can legally spend without facing consequences, up to and including dissolution.

Those districts with sufficient banked spending authority – depending who is asked, somewhere above 10 percent, 12 percent or 15 percent of the district's operating budget – can use it as a cushion when revenue dips or as a defense if across-the-board reductions are made at the state level. Districts without much of a cushion can be forced to make deep cuts in times of reduced revenue or higher-than-anticipated costs.

Spending authority issues also



make it difficult for districts with enrollment of 300 students or less to remain financially viable, although the state offers incentives for sharing employees and programs that can provide relief. For example, the Walnut Community School District is planning to ask voters in September to reorganize the district with Avoca-based AHST because Walnut has too low of an enrollment to avoid exceeding its spending authority in the future.

Council Bluffs is spending down some of its banked authority this year, with plans to look at making reductions so it's not losing ground indefinitely. At the same time, it has spent the past few years improving its facilities because the state government sets aside two special funding streams for infrastructure projects: proceeds from one cent of sales tax, which is set to expire in 2029, and districts' physical plant and equipment levies.

Those monies are outside the spending authority limitations, which is why several southwest Iowa districts that face legal issues with overspending are simultaneously able to make investments in facilities, and it's also why those same districts cannot simply raise taxes to cover the difference.

Enrollment drives Iowa's school finance formula, and Iowa has seen

a decline in rural population in recent years. Some districts expect an influx of students, but data from the Iowa Department of Education project that 20 of 27 districts in the area will experience a decline in enrollment by 2020.

The importance of enrollment and finances, particularly spending authority, is why The Nonpareil has focused on looking at those topics as we visit area school districts.

In addition, we've also asked about the Teacher Leadership and Compensation program, an initiative of the state looking to invest tens of millions of dollars in model teachers, instructional coaches and other leadership roles for classroom educators to improve the quality of instruction in their buildings and districts.

Council Bluffs was among a handful of schools that implemented TLC this past school year. This school year, the district will be joined by Lewis Central, Glenwood, Atlantic and Red Oak. Other area districts are planning to implement programs in the 2016-17 school year or are working on grant applications due this fall.

Technology also continues to be prevalent in area schools, with most offering a 1:1 program with some sort of Internet-capable device, be it



a Chromebook, a laptop, a tablet or even by encouraging students to use their smartphones for class assignments.

Each school district has its own identity, often one that reflects the varying communities it supports. While common threads run through southwest Iowa schools, so too does the influence of local decisions, leaders, educators, students, parents and community needs.

We invite you to come along with us as we explore some of these elements in our school communities over the coming days. We would also welcome your feedback on these stories and what you see happening in area schools.

Send us your thoughts at [education@nonpareilonline.com](mailto:education@nonpareilonline.com), tweet us at [@nonpareilonline](https://twitter.com/nonpareilonline), post on our Facebook timeline at [facebook.com/TheDailyNonpareil](https://facebook.com/TheDailyNonpareil) or leave a comment on our website, [nonpareilonline.com](http://nonpareilonline.com).

# Updates

What a difference a couple months can make.

Since the initial publication of these stories in The Daily Nonpareil's print edition, several stories traced throughout the State of Our Schools have developed. Here's a quick overview of some of the most important updates:

- Voters in Avoca, Hancock, Shelby, Tennant and Walnut approved the reorganization of the AHST and Walnut school districts into AHSTW. The final tally was more than 88 percent in favor, or 614-74, in the rural Pottawattamie County election.

The consolidated district will come into existence this summer, but a

school board has already been selected. The fate of the Walnut Community School building has yet to be determined.

- Council Bluffs announced its theme for the school year: Defy Gravity. The school district also received a significant donation for its athletic complex project, which will be named after Gale Wickersham.

- Accreditation problems persist for Farragut. The State Board of Education heard a report from an accreditation visit team describing several issues, which the school district has said are largely resolved. The board meets again in November. The next question to address is whether Farragut kept within its

spending authority last fiscal year.

“We have serious concerns about the lack of progress made by the Farragut Community School District in meeting the conditions outlined in the district's plan of correction,” said Staci Hupp, communications director





for the Iowa Department of Education. “This is about ensuring all students receive the quality education they deserve. The State Board of Education will continue to monitor Farragut’s progress in meeting these requirements.”

Voters also rejected a physical plant and equipment levy proposed by Farragut. The district is expecting to ask for a PPEL again in February after the 135-125 defeat in the September school elections.

- Fremont-Mills voters approved a \$3.6 million general obligation bond, which will allow the school district to build a new auditorium as well as parking improvements and an early childhood center. The district believes it can repay the bond without raising taxes.

- An assault in Glenwood in late September hospitalized Richard Hutchinson, the high school principal. His stepson, a former Iowa State University basketball player, was suspected to have been involved in a shooting during the incident. Three

men face charges in connection with the disturbance, while a fourth was arrested for allegedly posting threats on social media.

- The president of the Red Oak school board was voted out of office, signaling a possible shift on the board. Lee Fellers, along with incumbent William Drey, were not re-elected. Bryce Johnson and Mark Johnson, who are not related, were given the nod instead.

Both Johnsons have publicly called on Red Oak to show down its Tiger Vision facility project and have more community discussions. Paul Griffin, the new board president, voted against the first phase of Tiger Vision, a project supported by both Fellers and Drey.

- A write-in candidate seeking changes in Treynor’s administration was elected to office. Former board president Jerry Hempel was sent packing in a seven-way race. Kent Boese was among the three people elected.

Voters spoke convincingly that they want change, Boese said, but not to disrupt the quality program offered in Treynor. “A lot of folks are worried it is going to be the French Revolution, and we’ll chop a bunch of heads off,” he said. “Nobody wants to throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

Continue reading *The Nonpareil* for additional coverage of these stories and other developments over the upcoming school year across southwest Iowa.

# Council Bluffs

COUNCIL BLUFFS – The theme for the 2015-16 school year is hush-hush until teachers gather for the Council Bluffs Community School District's back-to-school pep rally.

There's a good chance, though, it will have something to do with continuing to promote positive change through a variety of initiatives, programs and improvements the school district has implemented in recent years. A safe bet could be made that the district's graduation rate, attendance and Iowa Assessment scores will be areas of focus, too.

Among those major initiatives and programs currently underway:

- A capital campaign to improve the Council Bluffs Athletic Complex is approaching its conclusion, Bruckner said, with the first phase being completed in the next couple weeks. The second phase will have bids accepted soon, too, as the district is wrapping up property acquisition and fundraising to complete the complex over the next year or so.
- Teacher Leadership and Compensation is continuing for a second year to empower teacher-leaders to improve instruction through coaching, by using model classrooms and through other reforms brought about by groups of classroom teachers instead of central office administrators.



- The Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch Program has been expanded to bring free breakfast and lunch to all students at Thomas Jefferson High School, Kirn and Wilson middle schools and Bloomer, Carter Lake, Edison, Franklin, Hoover, Longfellow, Roosevelt and Rue elementary schools. (Other district elementary schools still have the regular meal subsidies for low-income students, and the district is considering bringing CEP to all schools in the future.)

- Extracurricular opportunities have been expanded at Kirn and Wilson – and this year, in a more limited capacity, at Franklin, Longfellow and Rue – through a federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. Students can join various clubs and participate in one-time activities intended to boost engagement as well as extend the learning day.

- Training is beginning for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in preparation for a district-wide adoption next school year as part of efforts to improve safe learning environments for students.

- Carter Lake is adding the International Baccalaureate Organization's Primary Years Programme, which is currently offered to students at College View Elementary School. The IB program is a unique offering of Council Bluffs in southwest Iowa.

- The district adopted the Standard Response Protocol and is work-



ing with city and county law enforcement on better preparing for the possibility of a mass response during an emergency situation.

- Attendance and graduation programs continue at each of the district's buildings, too, as the district continues to work with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, focusing on attendance and early literacy, as well as forging partnerships such as the Pottawattamie Promise and GROW CB to encourage college attainment, graduation and future success for students.

"This is the year we're going to see some of those really take flight," Bruckner said.

She said she occasionally fields phone calls asking how Council Bluffs has turned around its graduation rate or otherwise made improvements. She said such questions miss the point, and you can't just make a reform in isolation.

"You create a culture that says this is really, really important," she said. "Then you consistently nurse that culture, and then you do everything you can along the way. ... You do those things year after year after year."

Much of what the district needs to do is already in place, she said. She said everyone in the district has bought into the idea of educating every child, and she doesn't have to focus as much on the culture as keeping everything moving forward.

"There is some benefit to consistency," she said. "Every time a new



superintendent comes in, and often time every time a new principal comes in, he or she needs to reboot. If you do that too often, you spend all your time rebooting and not any of your time making progress.”

## **Financial health**

Bruckner said she spends more time on funding than she did when she first became superintendent, and finances are expected to remain a significant issue this upcoming school year.

One of Bruckner’s five formal goals for the year is to develop a plan to sustain the district’s initiatives while laying the groundwork for ongoing financial health. She said the district needs to seriously look at cuts in its future.

“We’re looking at it seriously before the school year even starts,” she said, adding that three strategies are being looked at to start generating some savings in the district budget.

The district could look at not replacing staff members who leave, and Bruckner said her staff will be

“beating the bushes for grants” to help sustain programs. The Teacher Leadership and Compensation program will also be placed under scrutiny.

“We have to look at teacher leadership,” Bruckner said. “We have a Cadillac model.”

Council Bluffs does have some “rainy day” funds that are available, especially if it looks like the financial situation will start to improve down the road. The district is already expecting to spend a couple million dollars out of its banked spending authority over the next school year.

“We do have to acknowledge it can come down,” Bruckner said of the spending authority, which is the legal ability to spend dollars collected by the district for operational expenses and salaries. “It may mean that we’re a little more worried.”

## **Enrollment forecast**

Council Bluffs is watching its enrollment as an indicator of community satisfaction as well as for its effect on the district’s bottom line.

The district's buildings have capacity for hundreds of additional students. Bruckner said last fall that she celebrated when the district picked up 105 students, and she credited it as being partly due to the community shifting its attitudes to being more positive about Council Bluffs.

Open enrollment is a particularly important factor for the district, which has a significant net loss to neighboring Lewis Central as well as dozens of students to Underwood and Treynor. It pulls in students from Lewis Central, too, as well as a net gain from Glenwood and other area school districts.

State projections, based on past data, show the district faces a 1 percent decline in certified enrollment by 2020.

### By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 9,102

**Lunch Subsidy:** 51 percent

(Note: CEP probably suppressed rate)

**Graduation:** 80 percent

**School Buildings:** Abraham Lincoln High, 1205 Bonham Ave.; Thomas Jefferson High, 2501 W. Broadway; Kirn Middle, 100 North

Ave.; Wilson, 715 N. 21st St; Bloomer Elementary, 210 S. Seventh St.; Carter Lake Elementary, 1000 Willow Drive, Carter Lake; College View



Elementary, 1225 College Road; Crescent Elementary, 401 E. Welch, Crescent; Edison Elementary, 2218 Third Ave.; Franklin Elementary, 3130 Ave. C; Hoover Elementary, 1205 N. Broadway; Lewis & Clark, 1603 Grand Ave.; Longfellow Elementary, 2011 S. 10th St.; Roosevelt Elementary, 517 N. 17th St.; Rue Elementary, 3326 Sixth Ave.; Kaneshville Alternative Learning Center, 807 Ave. G

**Overall Budget:** \$169,362,209

**Property Tax Levy:** \$17.05765 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$58,556

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,448

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$87,130

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 in grades 3-12 using Chromebooks

**TLC System:** Going into second year of implementation

**Website:** cb-schools.org

# Lewis Central

COUNCIL BLUFFS – Professional development isn't new for educators in the Lewis Central Community School District, but it will look different this school year.

The district is modifying its calendar to be based on hours instead of days, which will boost instructional time over the course of the year, said Superintendent Mark Schweer.

“For students and parents, that calendar is going to look the same as it always has,” he said. “One of the significant differences that they will notice in this calendar is we will have only five early-out professional development days.”

Typically, the district has about 20 shortened school days in its calendar. By dropping to only a handful, Schweer said schedules will be more consistent for students, and more hours for instruction will be the result.

“That will give us 19 uninterrupted weeks of instruction,” he said. “We're actually garnering more instructional time.”

Teachers will still have a few full-day professional development spots in their calendar, and contracts are still based on 180 days instead of the more than 1,080 hours provided in the 177 student days for the 2015-16 school year.

To help teachers continue to im-



prove, the district will also join a few others in southwest Iowa in launching a Teacher Leadership and Compensation program. About 70 teacher-leaders will serve as instructional coaches, mentors, model classroom teachers, curriculum team members, building leadership team members and other positions.

“We also have program champions in each of the buildings,” he said.

Those positions will serve to advocate for programs and initiatives, such as new reading efforts or be-

havior interventions.

Model teachers are also new for Lewis Central. Those teachers will serve as examples for others to learn best practices and tips on how to best deliver instruction to students.

Facilities will be another priority for the district this school year.

Schweer said the master facility plan should be wrapped up soon, as architects and financial consultants work on setting a timetable for a list of projects identified by the district and the school board.

“The exciting thing is we’ll have

those state sales tax dollars to pay for all of those projects,” he said.

“We get to do them all, and we’re going to do them as quickly as conceivably possible. It’s exciting.”

It’s important for residents to understand that funding for facilities is a separate pot of money than those used for regular operating expenses, such as teacher salaries. The TLC program is also specially earmarked by the state for those purposes. So as regular funding is restricted, Lewis Central needs to continue to be mindful.

“We, like every other district, will now really have to pay even closer attention to the district’s finances,” Schweer said. “We’ve not had to

reduce staff; we’ve not had to reduce programs. We’ve been able to absorb these kinds of situations.”

Part of responsible budgeting is not overcommitting resources. Facilities, for example, shouldn’t be built anticipating open enrollment students will continue to choose to attend Lewis Central. It wouldn’t be fiscally sound to build facilities on the backs of open enrolled families, he said.

“Let’s face it: They don’t pay taxes to the district,” he said.

The money is only available when students are in school.

As the district plans for the future, it could reach the point that open en-

rolled students aren’t a major part of the district. Schweer said that’s not something he expects in the next few years without a large influx of resident students.

“We’re probably fairly close to capacity,” Schweer said. “Could there be a point in time where we might have to limit open enrollment? Sure. I don’t necessarily foresee that in the foreseeable future, but that is an option if we find ourselves with space issues.”

## Financial health

Lewis Central’s finances are in good shape, Schweer said. Its unspent authority is healthy, and so is



its tax base.

“One of the reasons we are in good shape is we’ve tried to be good stewards,” he said.

At the end of the 2014 fiscal year, the district had about \$5.95 million in spending authority left, which was 16.8 percent of its maximum authorized budget. Schweer said the solvency

ratio remains strong, but it wouldn’t take too long to burn through it if the district had to begin relying on its savings.

“It’s really no different than a person’s own financial situation,” he said. “If expenditures continuously exceed revenue and you have to dip into your savings account to make ends meet, if you don’t replenish your savings account in a period of time, your savings account is going to be depleted.”

### **Enrollment forecast**

Open enrollment has made the difference for Lewis Central’s enrollment. With it, the district’s enrollment has remained “relatively stable,” Schweer said, despite a decline in resident enrollment.

A new subdivision could bring more families into Lewis Central, but those residents could choose to

open enroll elsewhere or might not bring that many new children to the area. It should, however, mean an increase in valuation to the tax base.

“Obviously, we’re excited about it,” he said.

Projections from the Iowa Department of Education projects Lewis Central will experience a decline of 4 percent in enrollment, although that doesn’t consider open enrollment into the district.



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### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 2,560

**Lunch Subsidy:** 36 percent

**Graduation:** 91 percent

**School Buildings:** Lewis Central High, 3504 Harry Langdon Blvd.; Lewis Central Middle, 3820 Harry Langdon Blvd.; Titan Hill Intermediate, 4125 Harry Langdon Blvd.; Kreft Primary, 3206 Renner Drive

**Overall Budget:** \$54,212,824

**Property Tax Levy:** \$12.77452 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$61,609

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$39,947

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$87,324

**Technology:** Currently, 1:1 with Chromebooks for 6-12

**TLC System:** Implementing this upcoming year

**Website:** lewiscentral.org

# St. Albert Catholic



COUNCIL BLUFFS – St. Albert Catholic Schools will work on transitions this year.

Sixth-graders will join their classmates as part of a new middle school concept, replacing the former junior high school wing of the PK-12 campus.

Dave Schweitzer, the school's secondary principal, will prepare to replace Joe Connolly, who will wrap up his fifth full year as the school's president.

The school also will continue to transition the 50-year-old portion of its building into a modern space, with renovations wrapping up this summer on restrooms following last year's classroom remodeling.

Lastly, more 4-year-olds will make the transition to being students this

year after St. Albert added a third section of its prekindergarten program.

"In June, we found ourselves pretty full and had a pretty lengthy waiting list," Connolly said. "We've added a third section of 4-year-old prekindergarten. We're blessed to have an available classroom to do that."

The school usually has room for 48 prekindergarten students, but this year it could have up to 72. Enrollment is about 60 right now, but Schweitzer said he expects the rooms will be full by the end of the year.

"People wanted to be here," he said. "Families really responded well."

Discounts have helped as well, with a \$500 reduction per student

offered to families new to the school in first through 12th grade. Connolly said that move reflects a trend in Catholic education across the country.

“That savings up front is an appropriate benefit for people who are making a commitment to our school,” Schweitzer said.

Connolly said St. Albert can be more affordable than lower-income families expect. Those elementary students qualifying for the maximum grant from the Catholic Tuition Organization can have tuition less than \$100 a month, he said.

“That’s made it more affordable for more families,” Connolly said.

Those families will find improved facilities for secondary students. Last summer, the school worked on classrooms, improving heating, air conditioning, lighting, finishes, doors and other hardware. This summer, the school completed the second phase, renovating the restrooms in the main part of the junior-senior high areas.

“If we look at the 50-year-old part of our building, we’ve been through the two academic wings,” Connolly said, adding that work still needs to happen on the central wing including the secondary office, cafeteria, gym, locker rooms and chapel. “There are some areas in there that need the same sort of updating.”

An anonymous donor gave an undisclosed amount to complete the first two phases. Contractors have provided some in-kind donations, Connolly said, and nearly all of that significant donation has been spent.

Security improvements were also made this summer, including new parking lot cameras.

Schweitzer said parents now just need to give a vehicle description and time to report misconduct, instead of having to identify the student or deduce who might have been in the area at the time.

“We can go to the video and pull that information up and confront the student directly,” Schweitzer said.

Having that improvement helps to increase accountability, he added.

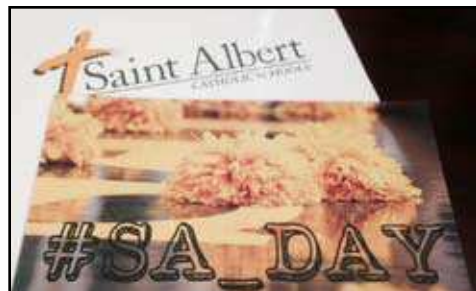
“People behave better when they have a sense that somebody knows what they’re doing,” he said.

One additional change this upcoming year will be in the chaplain’s office, Connolly said.

The Rev. Ross Parker went to the St. Joseph Parish in Des Moines, he said. St.

Albert’s new chaplain is the Rev. Fabian Moncada, who comes from Des Moines’ Sacred Heart Parish. He will assist with ninth-grade religion, faith formation and the campus ministry team, Connolly said.

St. Albert’s faith formation program, School of Faith, is also being replaced by the Diocese of Des



Moines' new program called Faith Journey. Connolly said it's similar to what St. Albert piloted and will consist of six sessions over the school year with presentations on various aspects of the Catholic faith.

The Rev. Paul Monahan, the school's senior chaplain, will also hold weekly reflection and faith sharing events, Schweitzer said.

## Financial health

"We're a lot different from public schools," Connolly said. "They have to count on the government, and we have to count on the kindness of our community."

"And parish support," Schweitzer added. "We had to be very conservative in previous years."

However, St. Albert has turned the corner by paying off its elementary school and moving forward with renovation projects now that enrollment has solidified, Connolly said. He said gracious donors have been the key to making progress.

Looking forward, Schweitzer said faculty compensation is something he wants to address. He said he wants salaries to be more compa-

rable with those in the surrounding public schools and parochial schools in Iowa. The goal, he said, was to make it so a teacher wouldn't have to pay "a tremendous premium" to choose to work at St. Albert instead of elsewhere.

## Enrollment forecast

Schweitzer said enrollment for this fall is already ahead of projections for the spring.

"We were conservative," he said.

About 35 new students in first through 12th grade have joined the school. The numbers remain fluid with enrollments taking place in the days before school starts. Connolly said enrollment had dropped off the past couple years because of larger graduating classes and smaller cohorts of young students.

Abby Jares, director of community relations, said the school budgeted for 641 students but should exceed that figure.

"Of course, we never know the exact final number until the first day of school," she said. "We estimate total enrollment to be in the range of 660-670 students."



# Heartland Christian

COUNCIL BLUFFS – Faith is behind much of the decisions that go into shaping Heartland Christian School.

The private Council Bluffs school has grown by about 10 percent annually the past three years, and each year enrollment is a bit of a guessing game – a familiar pattern at many schools for the summer.

This year, Director Gary Wilson decided to add a section of kindergarten and split the first and second grade classes, which required opening a wing of the building.

“There’s a faith walk in saying, ‘This is what we’re going to do,’” he said. “You’re spending your time asking the Lord to send me some kids, and He’s been doing that faithfully.”

This year’s current enrollment for kindergarten is 20 students, which was enough to prompt a second section so classes are small and manageable.

“The kids get a quality education,” Wilson said. “It’s a huge blessing to us.”

The school still has a combined third and fourth grade classroom, but a large kindergarten group last year meant there were too many first

graders not to separate them. Wilson said Heartland should be fine next year but will then face a similar situation with third grade the year after.

“I’m guessing we’ll have to do it again,” he said. “We want our quality of our education that we’re giving to the kids to be noticeable by the parents.”

Heartland sits at 400 Wright Road at the site of the former Lakeview Elementary School. It opened its southwest wing, which had previ-



ously been used for storage, and has a couple more rooms available for class space, enough to expand it elementary to having divided grades.

“This is the oldest and original section of the school building,” Wilson said.

Heartland is also reaching out further to the home school families in the area who might want to take



classes a la carte, participate in athletics or otherwise use some of the resources at the school.

“Our avenues are just sending fliers,” Wilson said.

In the past, a couple students have taken a partial schedule at Heartland. But now the school is officially making that service available to home schools, allowing instruction in a particular subject or participation in a certain activity.

## **Financial health**

Finding the money to keep the doors open at Heartland is always year-by-year.

“You never know for sure,” Wilson said. “You always trust that the Lord is going to take care of it.”

Wilson said he believes Heartland is ordained as God’s school.

“If you believe that, you also believe that God pays for what he ordains,” he said.

Fundraisers are a major vehicle for paying for the school, which cannot support itself on tuition alone. In fact, Wilson said tuition is among

the lowest in the area for a Christian education.

“We’ve done that on purpose,” he said, adding that he doesn’t feel Heartland competes with other Christian schools. “We’re just happy to see Christian kids get into a Christian school. If they’re Council Bluffs kids, we’d love for them to be here.”

One of the school’s primary fundraisers will be kicked off as part of the school’s Sneak Peak night from 5 to 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 27. Families will be able to enter for a chance to win a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

Loess Hills Harley-Davidson will be on hand at the event with a Jumpstart Rider Experience, which sets a Harley-Davidson on a stationary support stand to give an impression of what it would be like to ride the motorcycle. Wilson said he’s excited for that opportunity to be offered at the back-to-school night.

## **Enrollment forecast**

Heartland had 147 students registered last summer, and it had 178 students signed up this week.

Wilson said last year he was praying for more students, and 190 students showed up the first day of school. This year, he expects the school to end up with at least that many again.

“I could be sitting at 200 kids on the first day,” he said. “It will be a pleasant surprise if it is.”

Students primarily come from



Council Bluffs, but some come from Omaha, Bellevue and Blair in Nebraska and from southwest Iowa communities as far away as Little Sioux, Shenandoah, Griswold and Woodbine, he said.

“They show a lot of commitment,” Wilson said.

### **Other area options**

Heartland is one of several options for families who don’t want to send their students to public school.

Council Bluffs is also home to Liberty Christian School, a small non-accredited school based out of the Open Door Baptist Church at 2701 Ave. N.

Liberty uses the School of Tomorrow curriculum, while Heartland uses the A Beka and Bob Jones curriculum for its students.

For those looking for a Catho-

lic education, St. Albert Catholic Schools operates its campus in Council Bluffs. In Harlan, the Shelby County Catholic Schools offers an option for primary students, although it has cut its junior high grades. Omaha has several schools operated under the Archdiocese of Omaha as well.

In Clarinda, St. John Lutheran Church sponsors the Clarinda Lutheran School.

Home schools are another option, and local home school groups provide support for families, as well as private classes and a la carte opportunities for students.

Other private schools can be found on the Nebraska side of the metropolitan area, such as the college preparatory environment at Brownell-Talbot School in Omaha or the nondenominational Cornerstone Christian School in Bellevue.

# Iowa School for the Deaf

COUNCIL BLUFFS – Raises at the Iowa School for the Deaf were about a third of the average compensation increases in southwest Iowa, allowing the gap to grow for teachers of the deaf versus other highly skilled teachers in the region.

That situation concerns Steve Gettel, who heads the state’s special schools for deaf and blind students. If ISD continues to slip, along with the Iowa Educational Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, a time could come where vacancies cannot be filled.

The state leadership team for the specialty schools is looking at ways to address the teacher preparation recruitment issue, Gettel said. How instruction is delivered is also changing, with the new Northeast Regional Academy in Charles City offering regional supports beyond traveling teachers and the residential option at ISD for deaf students.

Eventually, ISD could become a regional academy as well, although

he said the Council Bluffs site already provides services to day students and is a de facto regional site as well as the state site for intensive support for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

Gettel said the two special schools, ISD and the Braille School, also are looking at how to work with the region universities to gather and analyze data on how well deaf and blind students are being served across the state and how to improve instruction.

At ISD this fall, a larger group of elementary school students has pushed the school’s middle school grades into the high school building. Gettel said that building received a new roof, which was the major facility project the school undertook

recently.

“Those are really expensive projects, so it is hard to get money for anything else when you have to replace the roof,” he said. “We’re real hopeful that we can get some approval for capital expenditures for the next fiscal year, not this one, to do some renovation to the high school building.”



The school has upgraded some security equipment, such as moving to single access points to buildings and adding new video cameras, he said. ISD's budget is linked to what

increased teacher pay an average of about 3 percent this spring. Gettel said the special schools need teachers with endorsements as well as qualifications in their area of in-



struction, and he said it's tough to find candidates, although vacancies have been filled this year.

The same cannot be said for area educational agencies, which are also struggling with finances the same as ISD, he said. If increases remain small or flat, Gettel said that would likely have an effect

the state approves for K-12 public schools, but ISD doesn't have access to other funding – such as physical plant and equipment levies or state sales tax dollars – for infrastructure projects, which are approved by the Iowa Board of Regents.

Gettel said the 1.25 percent increase in funding from the state is less than what was needed to give 1 percent raises to the special school's faculty and professional-scientific staff positions.

"It doesn't even really maintain status quo," he said. "It's a little disheartening when you look around at the public schools."

Data from the School Administrators of Iowa showed area schools

on future recruiting

"It might get to the point that people just aren't interested in looking at our vacancies," he said.

## Financial health

ISD is not operated like other public schools, nor is it funded the same way. The school is overseen by the Iowa Board of Regents, which treats ISD and the Braille School as its two special school programs, in addition to its three universities.

The schools' funding was linked this year to the increase in state supplemental aid that was given to K-12 schools. Lawmakers, however, could budget for ISD separately as



it is part of the regents' budget allocation and not the money filtered through the funding formula and the Iowa Department of Education.

Similarly, the financial health of ISD doesn't have the same indicators as K-12 schools, such as budget authority. Gettel said the school is losing ground, though, and had to shift money around in its operational budget to pay for negotiated wage increases.

"We're just going to have to eat that overage in our operating budgets," he said.

### **Enrollment forecast**

More elementary students are attending ISD this year, although the school's total enrollment remain at 106 to start the school year – the same as last year, Gettel said.

"It's probably a trend because



we've got growing elementary populations," he said. "We went through a dip in school enrollments."

More students in the state overall mean, statistically, more students with hearing loss. And bringing in a few more students to ISD, which offers a residential option to those students who need additional support beyond what can be offered locally, can make a big difference to the school's total enrollment.

# AHST

AVOCA – Construction is underway this summer on a new addition to the AHSTW Secondary School to move middle-schoolers back inside the school building.

Work will continue throughout the school year, with substantial completion by August 2016, adding seven new classrooms along with a weight room, wrestling room and locker rooms.

“It is really a middle school addition to our K-12 campus,” said Superintendent Jesse Ulrich. “Right now, four of our classrooms are in portable trailers that are not connected to our school.”

Students in seventh and eighth grades have their core classes such as English and math in the trailers. They transition to the main building for elective courses, Ulrich said.

The first phase of construction will be the exterior of the addition.

Some students may be displaced temporarily, but class will continue through the work on the new space.

“The summer immediately prior to opening it, they will bust through the walls and do the entrances and the corridors to the new facilities,”

Ulrich said.

Beyond the addition project, AHST opened a new alternative high school program, called Viking Ex-



cel, in a building that was donated to the district. The Green Hills Area Education Agency also opened up a regional office in the building, moving employees from a former office in Harlan to Avoca.

Ulrich said about 10 students are part of Viking Excel at a time.

“We were fortunate that we had five graduates out of that program,” he said. “They were at pretty severe risk of dropping out.”

The district is preparing for the Teacher Leadership and Compensa-

tion program in the 2016-17 school year, which will use a teacher curriculum leader, two instructional coaches and six model teachers in classrooms. Ulrich said the district will hire a new talented and gifted instructional coach as part of the process, too.

Voters in AHST will also be asked this September if they want to reorganize with the Walnut Community School District, which has faced declining enrollment the past few years. AHST already brings in Walnut's secondary students, and high school athletes compete as AHSTW, the proposed name of the combined district.

Ulrich has said the move would reduce taxes for residents, with a \$2 per \$1,000 of taxable valuation reduction possible in the near term.

No objections from AHST residents were heard at a hearing before the Green Hills AEA in May.

“We will have a greater tax base, so our property taxes will go down,” Ulrich said at the hearing. “As two districts, we have worked together and worked on things and made sure we’re jointly operating for max efficiency.”

## **Financial health**

AHST's finances were bad several years ago, when the district had to close buildings, cut programs and run on a skeleton crew. Ulrich said it has since added back staffing, programming and grown back some of its enrollment, which fell by about 100 students when AHST was suffering.





“Now, we are in a very good financial shape with the state’s unspent balance formula,” Ulrich said. “We’re still stable and actually increasing our financial advantage.”

Low growth in state supplemental aid isn’t sustainable for AHST, he said. He said the state’s finance formula needs to be reviewed, because many other school districts will be in similar situations if funding stays flat.

### **Enrollment forecast**

Student numbers have grown for the past two years, Ulrich said, with 25 new students. He said that’s pretty good for a rural school district in southwest Iowa.

State projections estimate AHST will grow by 2 percent by 2020. Should Walnut join the district through reorganization, its projected

enrollment is relatively flat, and its approximately 90 students would join AHST’s enrollment.

### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 612

**Lunch Subsidy:** 35 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** AHST Community School, 768 S. Maple St., Avoca

**Overall Budget:** \$11,492,074

**Property Tax Levy:** \$11.48492 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$47,552

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$38,679

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$60,228

**Technology:** Already 1:1 for K-12 with Macbook Pros for 7-12 and iPads for K-6

**TLC System:** Implementing in 2016-17 school year

**Website:** [ahst.k12.ia.us](http://ahst.k12.ia.us)

# Atlantic

ATLANTIC – The past year was a rough one for paraprofessionals and teachers in the Atlantic Community School District.

During the past school year, the district eliminated several para positions, as well as a teacher, in an effort to reduce its spending to better match spending limits imposed by state regulation.

An additional eight teaching positions were cut, along with 10 more paras, going into this fiscal year, Superintendent Michael Amstein said. Four new teaching positions were picked up as part of the Teacher Leadership and Compensation program.

Cuts were required to bring Atlantic back in line with its spending authority, Amstein said.

“Our spending authority is kind of

like the credit card limit for school districts,” he said.

Typically, school districts should keep between 5 and 15 percent in unused authority, because schools cannot spend more on operational expenses than they have authority without facing serious consequences.

“We were dipping close to that 5 percent, and, if we continued, we were taking a look at going negative,” Amstein said. “When you couple that with low supplemental state aid, it is hard to keep up with doing business year to year.”

The school board adopted a five year plan that included reductions to avoid reaching a spend-

ing crisis. He said even with the loss of one-time finding from the state, the district should be all right.

“Next year’s going to be tight, but I think we’re going to be OK,” Am-



stein said. “Based on how we finished the year this year and the cuts that we plan to implement for the current school year, we believe our latest information indicates that we’ll probably begin turning that around after this school year.”

Despite the cuts in its general fund, Atlantic will receive new state funding designated for the Teacher Leadership and Compensation program, which it will launch this fall with four instructional coaches.

“That’s going to be our primary focus for the upcoming year,” Amstein said. “TLC is going to be a big initiative for us.”

The district decided to release the teachers from all classroom duties to focus on mentoring others. Amstein said in his 36-year career in education, using instructional coaches like that has been a dream situation.

“We’ve talked about what a great opportunity it would be to have instructional coaches,” he said. “I’m excited about the implementation of this program.”

## **Financial health**

By reducing its staff and acting on the spending this past year, Atlantic hopes to avoid a confrontation with the School Budget Review Committee that other area districts have faced.



The district cut \$650,000 from its spending last year, Amstein said, and it ended up spending \$300,000 too much, prompting more cuts for this fiscal year. It now has a five-year plan to right-size its spending.

“We feel like we’re in pretty good shape,” he said. “The board approved almost a million (dollars) in cuts.”

Atlantic had seen its unspent budget authority fall from a high of \$6.39 million in fiscal year 2011 to only an estimated \$2.72 million for fiscal year 2014, according to the Iowa Department of Management. It was on the path to reach a negative balance by 2018, Amstein said.

“The board took enough steps as far as reductions,” he said.

## **Enrollment forecast**

In the six years Amstein has been superintendent, he said enrollment has climbed each year.



“We feel like we’re going to have another increase for next year,” he said. “You never know until they show up.”

An improvement would be based on anticipated kindergarten enrollment and high school graduation, Amstein said. But the Iowa Department of Education is predicting flat enrollment for the next few years.

The state projected enrollment would be down by about five students by 2020, which is negligible for the district’s certified enrollment of about 1,455, based on state data. Amstein said enrollment is a critical part of the budget.

“A good portion of our state supplement aid for next year is based on our student increase,” he said.

## **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 1,455

**Lunch Subsidy:** 50 percent

**Graduation:** 84 percent

**School Buildings:** Atlantic High, 1201 E. 14th St.; Atlantic Middle, 1100 Linn St.; Schuler Elementary, 501 E. 11th St.; Washington Elementary, 500 E. 14th St.

**Overall Budget:** \$21,928,268

**Property Tax Levy:** \$14.87067 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$53,598

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$35,059

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$75,530

**Technology:** As of last fall, 1:1 with MacBook Air laptops 9-12

**TLC System:** Implementing this upcoming year

**Website:** [atlanticiaschools.org](http://atlanticiaschools.org)

# Boyer Valley

DUNLAP – A greenhouse will be built this fall for the Boyer Valley Community School District’s students to learn about agricultural science.

Superintendent Doug Gee said a new agriculture program will begin this upcoming school year, along with a chapter of FFA, for the district’s high school students.

The greenhouse is being donated by John and Dede Sullivan of Sullivan Farms in Dunlap. A new Boyer Valley Agricultural Foundation, where John Sullivan serves on the board, is also doing fundraising for the district’s new ag program and FFA group to help pay for initial expenses.

“The ag foundation has been real instrumental,” Gee said. “You can’t have an FFA program without having an ag program.”

Money from the foundation will pay for an extended contract for an ag teacher, as well as startup costs, materials and travel expenses to conventions for the students.

In addition to the ag program, Boyer Valley will also roll out its 1:1 technology initiative to all grade levels after taking its time with the initial grades last year to ensure teachers were trained.

“We’ve taken the approach that technology is a tool to enhance instruction,” Gee said. “It’s not a substitute in any way for instruction.”

Another change for the upcoming year will be a couple shifts at the ad-



ministrative level. Mike Weber will serve as the principal for elementary and secondary students, allowing Gee to be shared as superintendent of the Woodbine Community School District as well.

Gee just wrapped up his first year as superintendent of Boyer Valley, and he said he was appreciative of the school district’s staff, students and the community for supporting him and making him feel welcome.

The sharing agreement with Woodbine brings in some additional spending authority for Boyer Valley, and it returns to an arrangement the two districts had in place prior to the past school year. So, after one year as the new guy, Gee will be go-

ing through the same process in the neighboring district, while helping his first district's new K-12 principal.

"I will still help out with some of those duties," he said.

The two districts – which together span portions of Harrison, Monona,

teachers and the community for a meeting.

A group of six people, three from each district, has done the bulk of the work preparing the details of the TLC program, which would share committees and other resources.



Crawford and Shelby counties – will also work together on a grant application for the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System through the Iowa Department of Education.

State officials have indicated they want all Iowa districts involved in the voluntary program by the 2016-17 school year. Gee said Boyer Valley and Woodbine expect to file a joint grant request in October.

"We're pretty well done with the grant right now," he said. "We did a survey of each district about leadership roles. Then we brought in the

Other districts in the state have approached the program using partnerships as well.

"Woodbine and Boyer Valley are doing it together," Gee said.

### **Financial health**

After four years of reducing its unspent budget authority by a considerable margin, Gee said some cuts were made to Boyer Valley's spending.

"We did have to do some things to stop that decline," he said. "We



didn't need to do a major overhaul.”

Some custodial positions were eliminated, and a teaching position was made half-time, he said. Sharing agreements will also allow some additional authority for operational expenses.

“Right now my goal is to stay steady,” Gee said. “Our problem, like most (school districts), is the authority, it's not the cash part. We're in this crazy situation where our cash is going up and our authority is going down.”

Increases in enrollment should help, though, as should the steps to avoid overspending, he said.

### **Enrollment forecast**

Five additional students were enrolled in the last school year, a pace Gee said he hopes the district maintains the next few years.

“Even just going up four or five kids is great,” he said.

The Iowa Department of Education projects enrollment will grow by

6 percent by 2020.

Open enrollment into Boyer Valley also improved, with 12 more coming in than going out to districts like Denison and Woodbine, Gee said.

### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 438

**Lunch Subsidy:** 41 percent

**Graduation:** 89 percent

**School Buildings:** Boyer Valley South, 1102 Iowa Ave., Dunlap; Boyer Valley North, 212 S. School St., Dow City

**Overall Budget:** \$8,741,428

**Property Tax Levy:** \$13.18151 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$52,057

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$36,184

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$69,731

**Technology:** Will be 1:1 across K-12 this fall, with LearnPads for K-2 and Chromebooks for 3-12

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying with Woodbine; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** boyer-valley.k12.ia.us

# Clarinda

CLARINDA – Administrative shuffling this summer has brought some new leaders to the Clarinda Community School District for the coming school year.

Superintendent Paul Honnold, in an email interview with *The Daily Nonpareil*, said the district also welcomed seven new teachers to the district.

Brian Wedemeyer came from Tri-Center to serve as the new assistant principal and activities director at Clarinda High School. He will also serve as head volleyball coach, Honnold said.

At Clarinda Middle School, Josh Porter is the new principal, replacing Gary McNeal, who is now Treynor High School's principal. Porter was a physical education teacher at Clarinda Middle School prior to his promotion.

"Mr. Porter completed his administrative degree a couple years ago and has been wanting to get into administration," Honnold said. "We believe he will be a great fit for our middle school programs."

Additionally, Allie Wellhausen has taken over as director of special programs. Honnold said her primary duty is to oversee the Clarinda Academy.

"Mrs. Wellhausen is a former teacher who has been a stay-at-



home mom for the past few years, but, with her kids in school, she wanted to get back into the schools part time," he said. "She has a half-time contract with primary duties assisting with the special education programs at the academy and assisting in our school improvement process."

Honnold said Clarinda focuses on professional development as a staff using curricular and instructional teams working on improving student learning and the social-emotional growth of students.

"We have a leadership team that includes teachers and administrators who work together to develop strategies for teachers to implement in their classrooms," he said. "The leadership team provides guidance to their professional learning group during our professional development times. We look at a lot of data to drive what we do and where we need to improve."

## Financial health

Along with other area districts, Clarinda is struggling with reductions in funding from the state following a gubernatorial veto earlier this summer.

“The reduction in revenue for 2015-16 is going to be a challenge,” Honnold said, “but we work very hard to watch our spending and hope to minimize how much we have to go into our unspent balance.”

The district’s unspent budget authority, representing Clarinda’s savings account, remains healthy. Last fiscal year’s unspent balance was about 13.8 percent of the district’s maximum authority.

“Our finances are still very good,” Honnold said. “Our board has stayed focused on sustaining a positive balance financially while providing the essential materials to sustain quality programs.”

## Enrollment forecast

Honnold said enrollment is a variable in the first days of school. The district started classes on Monday.

“I really don’t have a clue about our enrollment until we start school,” he said. “In general, you see a lot of people who move in and out of a district, which is why it is difficult to predict what we will have in numbers.”

The key indicator for enrollment is a survey of how many students are

in a district on Oct. 1. That number is used in the Iowa School Finance Formula to calculate certified enrollment.

A projection by the Iowa Department of Education suggests Clarinda should see an enrollment growth of 2 percent by 2020. Honnold said he hopes to see an uptick this year, too.

“I am hoping we see an increase based on the number of seniors who graduated in comparison to the number of kindergarten kids entering our school,” he said.



## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 928

**Lunch Subsidy:** 31 percent

**Graduation:** 93 percent

**School Buildings:** Clarinda High, 100 N. Cardinal Drive; Clarinda Middle, 305 E. Glenn Miller Drive; Garfield Elementary, 910 S. 15th St.

**Overall Budget:** \$16,421,978

**Property Tax Levy:** \$10.5345 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$48,965

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$30,600

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$68,828

**Technology:** Now 1:1 with Chromebooks, laptops and iPads across all grades

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** [clarinda.k12.ia.us](http://clarinda.k12.ia.us)

# East Mills



HASTINGS – Paul Croghan is bullish on the East Mills Community School District.

The district, which reorganized Malvern and Nishna Valley in 2012, has made significant progress in the last few years by improving its financial position, focusing on the quality of its programs and setting itself up for growth in the coming years.

Growth could be on the district's horizon, after losing some ground through open enrollment to its neighbors, thanks to the opening of the U.S. Highway 34 bridge to Sarpy County, Nebraska. Croghan said the district expects to stabilize its enrollment after a downward trend.

“Everybody has some hopes with the coming of the bridge and what it's going to do,” he said. “Hopefully, we get (more enrollment) sooner rather than later.”

Student enrollment is the primary driver of funding for schools, and Croghan said he's not sure what to expect when the official count is taken this year. Last year, the district saw its certified enrollment fall by about one student, which held the line after a declining enrollment trend due to open enrollment to East Mills' neighboring school districts.

“About 85 percent of those we never see,” he said. “We try really hard to get people to look at our school district.”

Among East Mills' selling points, Croghan said, are its test scores and the facility improvements it has made, including adding heating and air conditioning to its elementary building and a new roof being installed on its high school building.

The district also closed a lagoon at East Mills Elementary School by

installing a filtration system, he said. Students from across the district go to school near Hastings through sixth grade and attend junior and senior high school on the north end of Malvern.

Discussions about facilities have been challenging for the district, which closed its elementary school in Malvern last school year. Croghan said the building names have changed to reflect East Mills, not the former school districts, and both buildings are needed to have enough capacity for students.

“Neither building can house our entire student body,” he said. “We’re doing the best we can with our facilities and doing a great job of educating our kids.”

Croghan said spending authority is the “one number that gets school districts in trouble,” and East Mills was in trouble back in 2012 when it had a negative balance – that is, it spend more than the state said it was allowed to based on its enrollment, exhausting its cushion of spending authorization.

“East Mills went through a rough stretch there,” Croghan said.

But the district has turned the corner, and it will end this fiscal year with about \$1.4 million in spending authority, which is more than 20 percent of its budget, a very healthy rainy day fund and cushion in case the district has cash flow disrup-

tions.

Croghan said the difference has been making cuts in spending, reductions in staff and realigning facilities to position the district where it needs to be. Operational sharing, which sends him and other employees to Essex and other districts as well, also helped to make up the spending deficit.

Pressures still exist, but they’re largely external, such as the effect of legislation, the governor’s veto of one-time money allocated to schools and the costs of transporting students. He said busing is a hardship for East Mills, which brings students from across a similar area as Glen-

wood, but it brings more students in from farther away and has natural barriers.

“We have a river that runs through our school district,” he said. “There are only three bridges to cross in East Mills.”

A similar challenge faces Essex, where Croghan is also superintendent. The two school districts continue to expand their cooperation, with plans to work together on a Teacher Leadership and Compensation program grant, which could make a significant difference for both school districts.

“We’re all looking at what’s going to be best for kids, which in turn means what we can do to support teaching and learning for our staff,” Croghan said. “The more support



we can give them there, the better job they're going to do in the classroom."

## Financial health

The financial picture for East Mills is one of stability, and Croghan said he would list finances among the strengths for the school district. Nevertheless, he said all Iowa districts need to continue to be cautious.

Voters in the district did approve an expanded physical plant and equipment levy last year, after it failed the first time, to help with facility programs. A bond issue is still something that is on the table down the road, but the situation is less pressing than it once was because the district's financial situation has improved.

## Enrollment forecast

The U.S. Highway 34 bridge should bring people into Mills County, and that should mean a larger residential enrollment for East Mills. The trick is to find ways to keep them there.

"The variable for us right now is open enrollment," Croghan said. "We try to keep a positive approach and try to show people what we're doing well. Our test scores show that."

State projections show enrollment climbing 5 percent by 2020, with growth also anticipated in Glenwood



and Sidney due to the influx of resident and development following the bridge project.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 543

**Lunch Subsidy:** 46 percent

**Graduation:** 94 percent

**School Buildings:** East Mills Junior-Senior High, 1505 E. 15th St., Malvern; East Mills Elementary, 58962 380th St., Hastings

**Overall Budget:** \$12,584,690

**Property Tax Levy:** \$12.68273 per \$1,000 taxable valuation (Note: Residents of the former Nishna Valley school district pay \$13.71380 per \$1,000 taxable valuation because those taxpayers also have to pay off a series of general obligation bonds issued in 2005 according to the terms of the East Mills reorganization in 2011.)

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$42,722

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$33,995

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$61,645

**Technology:** Currently, 1:1 in grades 5-12 with Apple laptops and iPads

**TLC System:** Planning on applying for TLC in cooperation with Essex

**Website:** [emschools.org](http://emschools.org)

# Essex

ESSEX – The school building in Essex is about to get cooler, at least until things start to heat up.

A new heating, ventilating and air conditioning system will be installed at the Essex Community School District, the first project coming out of a voter-approved levy increase last fall.

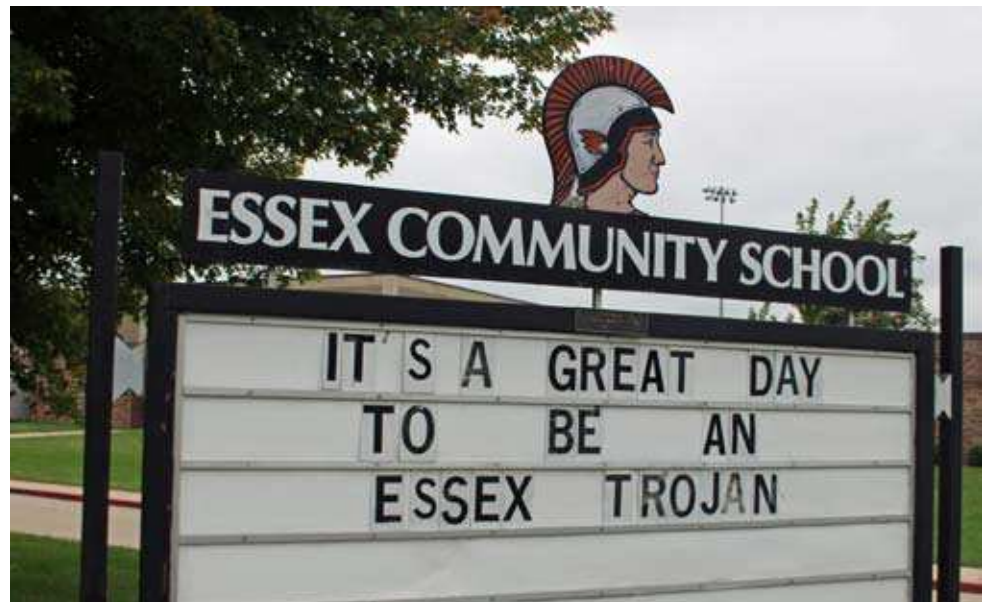
Voters approved a \$1.34 per \$1,000 taxable valuation increase to property taxes to go to infrastructure needs for the district. About 73 percent of voters supported the PPEL ballot measure, which will also go to replace buses and update the district's technology in addition to the HVAC system.

Croghan said the high level of support shows the commitment Essex has for its students.

"They get behind their schools," he said, adding that time, equipment and money are always there for what's important. "It just amazes me how we can get things done some-

times."

As a show of good faith, the school district cut its management levy by about 10 percent, softening the blow of the tax increase. Essex is now levying the maximum amount it can for PPEL, and many school districts in Iowa levy at that amount so they can continue to make investments in their systems.



Essex is partnering with East Mills – with whom they already share a superintendent, nurse, guidance counselor and human resource official – to submit a grant request for the state's Teacher Leadership and Compensation program. Croghan said that funding could make a difference in Page County school.

"I'm excited," he said. "Rural small schools have an edge because they

can think outside the box and implement things a little more efficient.”

Croghan grew up on a farm, he said, and he views himself as a farm-



er of schools, not of the ground.

“A farmer is always looking at what’s the next opportunity, how do I shift with the trends and commodities or with my facilities and resources,” he said.

To educate students for the workforce they will face in the future, he said problem solving has to be the target.

“We’re looking at educating our kids to be collaborative problem-solvers,” Croghan said. “That skill set is tremendous.”

Smaller schools are more nimble, and Croghan said they ultimately cost less money than further consolidation.

“Small schools can be efficient, and there’s a place for them in comparison with the larger schools,” he

said.

People need choices for where to live, the city or the country, and having a balance between urban

and rural makes Iowa stronger. Croghan said the point of public education is to make people better citizens and more productive members of the society, which requires a diversity in backgrounds.

“That balance makes the whole thing work,” he said. “I think sometimes we lose sight of that.”

## Financial health

Croghan said Essex should be sitting around \$600,000 for its unspent budget authority, the legal right to spend money in the bank on operational expenses such as salaries. He said that represents about 20 percent of the school district’s budget, a healthy amount to have in reserve as a rainy day fund.

The district’s solid financial shape, despite its low enrollment, comes from having a budget guarantee from the state as well as through saving with operational sharing expenses, controlling costs and by running an efficient school system.

Croghan said rural schools can be more efficient, and ultimately cost less money, than continuing to consolidate into massive schools that have to bus students even farther.

One legislative adjustment that could help Essex, though, would be having all school districts in the state receive the same amount of funding per student. Right now, Essex receives less funding per student than some, although not all, other Iowa school districts, an issue that was brought up in last session's disputes over state funding of schools.

### **Enrollment forecast**

As of the beginning of the school year, Essex has 235 students in seats, including 18 children in pre-school, Croghan said.

"We're going to be up just a little bit from where we were last year," he said.

Stabilizing enrollment would be

a significant benefit for the school district, and growth – even by a few students – can be a helpful factor in finances. State projections, however, estimate a 1 percent drop-off by 2020.

### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 222

**Lunch Subsidy:** 43 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** Essex Community School, 111 Forbes St.

**Overall Budget:** \$4,213,171

**Property Tax Levy:** \$13.13193 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$43,551

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,018

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$60,615

**Technology:** Not 1:1 yet but looking at it for the future

**TLC System:** Planning on applying for TLC in cooperation with East Mills

**Website:** ehs-ees.com



# Farragut

FARRAGUT – Middle-schoolers will be attending class in Farragut this year, as the Nishnabotna school districts realign their grade configurations.

Elementary students will head to Marnie Simons Elementary School in Hamburg, while secondary students from both Farragut and Hamburg will meet at Nishnabotna Junior-Senior High School, which is slated for an addition if voters approve a levy expansion this September.

Farragut Superintendent Tom Hinrichs said the shift represents a “huge change” for the community, but the Iowa Department of Education required buildings to be shuttered as both Nishnabotna districts work on meeting accessibility and other requirements to maintain their accreditation, which is necessary for the school districts to continue serving students.

“Our elementary could no longer house students,” Hinrichs said. “That’s why we have the elementary students over at Hamburg.”

Middle-schoolers will now have access to advanced classes, and high-schoolers will have more col-

lege-level options as part of the move, Hinrichs said.

The hands-on portions of the district’s vocational and agricultural programs are now housed in Sidney,

one of several sharing agreements the districts in Fremont County have relied on to keep offering electives.

“Our primary focus is on providing our students with every opportunity to be successful,” Hinrichs said. “We’re just focusing on making sure our students have

opportunities, have support and that we provide everything that they need to be successful.”

Voters will be asked to approve an expanded physical plant and equipment levy, which would pay for an addition to Nishnabotna Junior-Senior High that would add accessible locker rooms, restrooms, a weight room and a health classroom. The addition would cost as much as renovating the old space for the locker rooms and restrooms, Hinrichs said.

If it doesn’t pass, a modified plan for some sort of fix for those spaces would have to be put together to satisfy the state’s requirements.

“Not providing these accessible facilities is not an option,” he said.





“The Department of Education has told us we have to do that to maintain accreditation, and we have to move forward with that sooner rather than later.”

Some voters are concerned the district isn’t keeping auto tech and ag in the community. Hinrichs said the school board will consider a bond issue to do that down the road, but maintaining accreditation is a more pressing concern.

“What happens after that is certain a community and a board decision,” he said. “The most important thing we can do, the best thing that we can do, is try to be transparent.”

## **Financial health**

Spending authority has been a challenge for Farragut, which has

spent more than the state allows it to based on a formula driven by its student enrollment.

Last year, the Iowa School Budget Review Committee allowed the district to write-off its negative balance for spending authority, giving it a blank slate for the 2014-15 fiscal year. Hinrichs said Farragut will be close to staying under the spending limit.

“Things look pretty good,” he said. “It’s going to be close. We might have to request some additional spending authority, but nowhere near what we did in the past.”

Projecting into the next fiscal year, Hinrichs said spending cuts should be sufficient for the district to spend within its legal means. It took a little longer to adjust because staff contracts were already in place, he said.

A full recovery is expected by the end of the 2015-16 fiscal year.

“We told (the SBRC) it was going to be close,” he said. “Year-to-date spending is down almost \$200,000, which is a tremendous effort on the part of all of our staff and our board to cut cots. I think we’ve demonstrated that we can live within our spending authority, and we’re taking those steps to be positive in terms of spending authority.”

### **Enrollment forecast**

Farragut is estimating it will be about 10 students down from last year’s enrollment, Hinrichs said.

“After registration, we still have a few kids who haven’t registered yet,” he said. “It’s certainly not a trend we like, but that’s pretty much in line with where we’ve been.”

As in Hamburg, economic development would make a big difference for Farragut. Hinrichs said more students would bring in new dollars and create more reliable programs and balanced classrooms.

“More kids would definitely help in every aspect,” he said. “It’s not secret the funding follows the students.”

Enrollment for the district is es-

timated to drop 1 percent by 2020, according to state projections. A lot hinges on how the communities in Fremont County continue to fare economically.

### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 200

**Lunch Subsidy:** 44 percent

**Graduation:** 80 percent

**School Buildings:** Nishnabotna High, 907 Hartford Ave.; Marnie Simons Elementary, 309 S St., Hamburg (whole-grade sharing)

**Overall Budget:** \$5,178,237

**Property Tax Levy:** \$17.18419 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$43,683

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$32,150

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$53,575

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 with Chromebooks

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** nishbd.org



# Fremont-Mills

TABOR – Chris Herrick sits under a sign reading “No slacking at any time” at his desk at the Fremont-Mills Community School District.

Herrick, who’s the shared superintendent of Fremont-Mills and Stanton, has been working on a “monumental” project for the school district that serves students in south-central Mills County and much of northern Fremont County.

The district is proposing a \$3.6 million bond on the Sept. 8 ballot to pay for a new early childhood center, an auditorium and additional parking near the entrance to the Lied Gymnasium.

Facilities have been a priority for the district, which has a single building in Tabor. An addition was completed in 2004 for the high school, and the community gym opened in 2010.

“We’ve been pretty aggressive with our facilities in term of providing learning spaces for kids,” Herrick said. “We’ve really been able to do some significant upgrades.”

Additional revenue is available from the district’s sales tax proceeds and physical plant and equipment



levy that, along with its debt service levy, Herrick said will allow the district to avoid raising taxes if voters approve the bond issue. Infrastructure funds – sales tax and PPEL – have also gone to work this summer, including hallway renovations, locker room upgrades, new carpet and installing new football bleachers.

“We are just really fortunate that our community has provided funding,” Herrick said.

He hopes that support will include the bond this September. The district could have bypassed a vote, but he said it was important to involve the public in making the decision, because facility improvements can be divisive.

“We want our community involved in it,” he said. “We’re basically saying, ‘Hey, we think we can do this without raising your taxes. Do you



support us doing this?”

Currently, the district offers pre-kindergarten programs for 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, which take up three classrooms – pushing fifth- and sixth-graders into the high school wing of the building. A dedicated early childhood space would be more appropriate, and it would give the district some flexibility for its classrooms.

Fremont-Mills will benefit from growth along the U.S. Highway 34 corridor, Herrick said. In the long term, he envisions more students, perhaps as much as an enrollment of 550 or 600 students in 15 years.

“I don’t see us having exponential, exploding growth, but I see us having slow, steady growth,” he said. “At some point, the metropolitan area can go no further west, and the next

logical place for them to go is south, especially on the Nebraska side.”

Sarpy County, across the Missouri River from Mills County, is projected to have its population potentially double in the next 30 years, Herrick said, bringing jobs with it. That makes schools such as Fremont-Mills, East Mills and Glenwood more attractive to families who want to commute to Sarpy County but want to live in rural southwest Iowa communities.

“They become viable options for families that are relocated who possibly don’t want their children going to a Bellevue West or a larger system, and they want their children in a smaller community,” he said. “The stability of our district really depends on location.”

## Financial health

Fremont-Mills is among the area's most healthy districts in terms of spending authority, the legal ability to spend money on teacher salaries and other operational expenses.

Herrick said the district projects a reserve of \$1.69 million in authority, or about 27 percent of its annual budget. A healthy district typically has around 15 percent of its budget in unspent authority.

"It's healthy," he said. "We're pretty solid there."

He expects the balance to tick up this year but then drop off a little as the district makes investments.

"We've added some programming to the school in recent years that will help serve kids," he said.

## Enrollment forecast

While Herrick sees growth long term, projections by the Iowa Department of Education are more conservative, predicting a 3 percent decline by 2020. Herrick said historically, Fremont-Mills enrollment has been between 424 and 478, but it has been slowly moving up in recent years.

He expects to be near that record enrollment this fall. And with fast-

selling houses in Tabor and families choosing to return to or join the community, he expects steady to rising enrollment in the next few years.

As jobs are created in the metro area, he said the question becomes: "Is that a reasonable commute for people?" If Sarpy County sees growth, the Highway 34 bridge will make that an

easier answer for families willing to exchange a commute for the advantages of living in a community like Tabor.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 468

**Lunch Subsidy:** 38 percent

**Graduation:** 91 percent

**School Buildings:** Fremont-Mills Community School, 1114 Highway 275, Tabor

**Overall Budget:** \$8,530,174

**Property Tax Levy:** \$10.9954 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$48,946

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,100

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$80,683

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 with netbooks for grades 4-12; lower elementary about 2:1 with iPads

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying this fall; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** [fmtabor.org](http://fmtabor.org)



# Glenwood

GLENWOOD – OK, let’s just jump into the eduspeak.

The Glenwood Community School District’s current trajectory revolves around a few key buzzwords in education, which essentially are fancy lingo for common-sense ideas. (Watch out, there may be a pop quiz.) Here’s what you need to know:

- **Competency-based grading:** It doesn’t matter if you understood the material on the first try or the 100th, a student’s grade reflects what they know and the skills they have (competency). Usually, this is through the delivery of a “summative” (the root word is “sum,” bringing it all together) assessment; the work that goes into learning is called “formative” because it helps to form the idea for the students.

This is also called standards-based because those items a student is responsible for becoming competent in are outlined in standards, both locally and based on the Iowa Core, which reflects the national Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards.

Glenwood is looking to launch a

competency-based report card for its secondary students, Superintendent Devin Embray said. Similar approaches have been taken at elementary grades through happy faces, check marks or related grading systems.

“I hope we roll it out sometime



this year,” she said. “We’re about student success, and we’re about kids reaching mastery.”

- **Mastery vs. proficiency:** In a competency-based approach, grades reflect “proficiency” or “mastery” of a skill or subject domain. Too often, Embray said, the focus is on just reaching the point of being successful at the next level, described as being proficient. In order to do calculus, for example, a student must first know algebra and geometry. But to

master a concept is to go beyond and possess a deeper understanding of the material.

“Our minimum mastery level at the high school level is 60 percent,” Embray said. “We’d love to move that to 70. The middle school is set at 70 right now.”

- **Teacher Leadership and Compensation:** Principals and other administrators are supposed to be instructional leaders, but they can be perceived – rightly or wrongly – as being too removed from the classroom. The state’s TLC program is structured so teachers can help teach each other tips, approaches and lessons that work well, with feedback given by someone whose job doesn’t include evaluating job performance or determining whether your career advances.

Glenwood is one of the districts launching TLC this year, with about 50 people involved in some sort of leadership capacity this year, Embray said. Instructional coaches and professional group facilitators will make up the bulk of the program along with model classroom teachers.

“We had mentor teachers in the past, and we’ve had some technology lead teachers,” he said. “We haven’t had the opportunity to have instructional coaches.”

- **Curriculum development cycle:**



Students are expected to meet certain standards, which are implemented using curriculum – the actual course of instruction given in the classroom. Curriculum is established locally, even if standards are set at the state level using national frameworks.

To keep learning up-to-date, curriculum is reviewed periodically. In many districts, this has traditionally revolved around selecting materials, such as a textbook. In Glenwood, however, the focus has been more comprehensive, Embray said.

Educators work as a group to study and write out a curriculum based on the Iowa Core standards, spending a year to pilot it to ensure the standards are adequately met by students. At that point, materials are purchased – instead of handing out a new textbook and worksheets to determine how they go over in classes.

“We’ve really upped the ante in that part,” Embray said. “We develop instructional planning resources for all the components that go along with each of the outcomes that go along in the curriculum.”

- **Early literacy:** A new law com-



ing down the pipe in Iowa will begin retaining students who aren't reading at grade level by the end of third grade, which has focused a lot of effort on reading comprehension for young students.

Third grade is considered the point where students stop "learning to read" and instead are "reading to learn," so not being a good reader at that point starts delaying progress in other subjects, too.

"That's why we want to make sure we're hitting the mark there," Embrey said.

## Financial health

Unspent budget authority – the legal right to spend money on operational costs – is healthy in Glenwood, Embrey said. But as budgets are tighter across the state, the district can't continue to grow its saving account.

"It's not like a river; it's a pond without a spring feeding it," Embrey said. "We've been very, very prudent and frugal with what we do with our dollars."

## Enrollment forecast

Glenwood expects its enrollment to remain flat to slightly increased based on enrollment studies. Its long-range projection out to 2025 shows an increase, but Embrey cautions no one knows what will happen.

The state projects a 9 percent decline by 2020, but Embrey said recent trends have been down two years out of five and up or flat the other three years.

"With the new bridge to Bellevue, we're seeing a lot more Nebraska plates in Glenwood," he said.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 1,960

**Lunch Subsidy:** 34 percent

**Graduation:** 92 percent

**School Buildings:** Glenwood Community High, 504 E. Sharp St.; Glenwood Middle, 400 Sivers Road; Northeast Elementary, 901 N. Vine St.; West Elementary, 707 Sharp St.

**Overall Budget:** \$46,999,724

**Property Tax Levy:** \$14.53879 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$55,471

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$36,711

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$85,858

**Technology:** Currently 1:Web K-12 with tablets K-3, Chromebooks at school 3-5 and Chromebooks at home 6-12

**TLC System:** Implementing this upcoming year

**Website:** [glenwoodschoools.org](http://glenwoodschoools.org)

# Griswold

GRISWOLD – “We’re losing ground.”

Superintendent Dana Kunze doesn’t play the euphemism game when it comes to talking about the financial position for the Griswold Community School District.

The culprits? “A lack of sustainable allowable growth and the fact that we continue to lose students,” Kunze said.

To bring in new money with declining enrollment, a 4 percent increase in state supplemental aid would be needed, not the 1.25 percent schools received this year.

A budget guarantee from the state is a saving grace, but it’s potentially on the chopping block as lawmakers debate how to fund schools. The state has also adjusted how it enforces rules for sharing teachers, which makes that a

less viable option for districts. Kunze said the district shares a business manager with Riverside, and it may look to share other positions.

In fact, Kunze said the school board may even look at sharing his position.

“I think it’s only fair,” he said. If teacher positions are being discussed, “central office can’t be impervious to that either,” he said.

Everything’s on the table before the district gets to the point of announcing cuts. But first, a plan needs to be developed, Kunze said.

“We’re not talking cuts yet,” he said. “Everyone hopes you can handle reductions through attrition.”

Budget authority is a key part of the district’s financial health. The



state limits how much can be spend on operating costs, including salaries, and districts have to maintain unspent authority for cashflow and

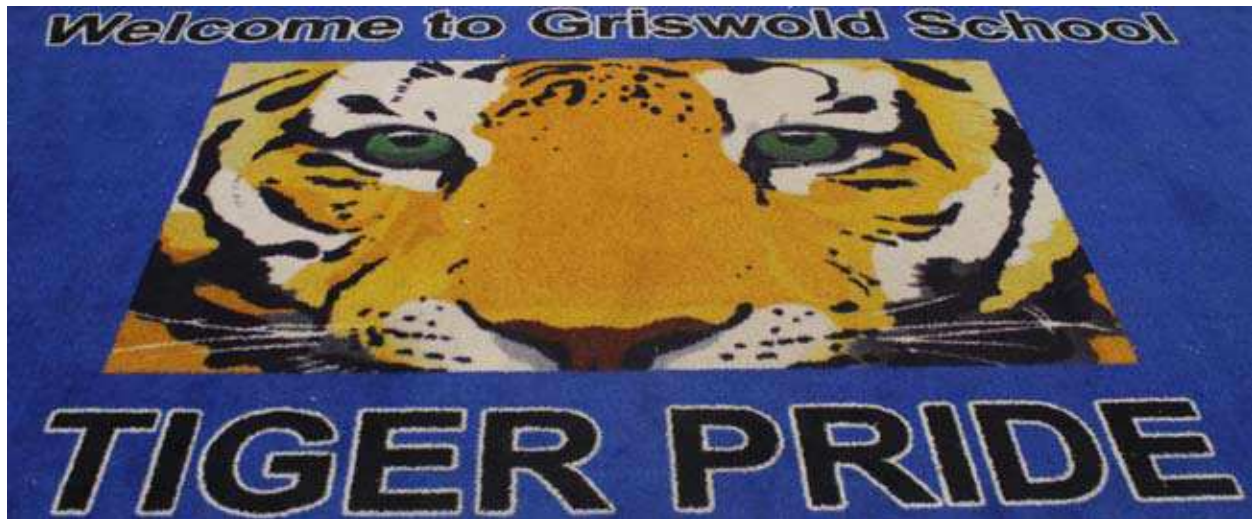
as a savings account.

“We had such a strong solvency ratio a couple of years ago, but we’ve been spending that down,” Kunze said.

The Iowa Department of Management reports that Griswold’s

term planning this fall, which will include a review of how well the district uses its facilities. Already, the group has compiled some comparisons of Griswold with similar-sized Iowa school districts.

The goal is to have a plan together



unspent budget authority dropped from \$2,135,547 in fiscal year 2012 to \$1,433,914 in fiscal year 2014. Kunze said it’s declining and is probably well under 20 percent, where he would be more comfortable. Instead, he said it’s closer to the recommended 10 percent, eliminating it as a “rainy day” option.

Still, there’s some time left. And Kunze said enrollment may level off this year, which would provide some relief. Last year, the district lost about 24 students, he said.

“If the population would stop declining, you at least wouldn’t start in the hole with new money,” he said.

A group affiliated with the Iowa Association of School Boards will help Griswold work on some long-

by the end of the first semester. Negotiations start in winter, and having community conversations can take time. Advanced notice of any cuts would also help anyone affected by them.

“The plan has to be implemented this school year,” Kunze said. “The sooner you address it, the better off you are. It’s never a great time to have to cut positions.”

Fortunately, Griswold isn’t the smallest school district, and it’s not facing as dire a problem as other districts that have slashed positions and implemented more drastic measures to control costs.

Facilities are also in good shape right now, with the district using its proceeds from state sales tax to

make improvements over the past few years. This year, baseball lights were replaced and lights are being updated to LED to improve longevity, save on energy and take advantage of utility company rebates, Kunze said.

“The board is open to all sorts of answers right now,” he said. “They’re not thinking one thing. I think they are search for lots of ways.”

## Financial health

Future budgets will be a topic for the school board and district officials to consider this semester.

Constraints are something to keep an eye on, too. For example, Kunze said the district plans to apply for the Teacher Leadership and Compensation grant but likely won’t be able to afford to take teachers out of the classroom to be leaders.

## Enrollment forecast

Griswold has been losing students the past few years, which makes it hard to hold its financially.

Kunze said enrollment may be more stable this school year. But

buildings have capacity leftover, he said.

The state projects enrollment will slide down 1 percent by 2020.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 547

**Lunch Subsidy:** 37 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** Griswold Middle-High, 20 Madison St.; Elliott Elementary, 305 First St., Elliott; Lewis Elementary, 201 First St., Lewis

**Overall Budget:** \$11,001,846

**Property Tax Levy:** \$10.72687 per \$1,000 assessed valuation



**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$48,771

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,347

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$68,875

**Technology:** Currently, 1:1 K-12 with Apple laptops for high school and iPads for elementary school

**TLC System:** Planning to submit a TLC application this fall

**Website:** [griswoldschools.org](http://griswoldschools.org)

# Hamburg

HAMBURG – Superintendent Mike Wells wants the Hamburg Community School District to thrive. Meeting the requirements to maintain state accreditation is only the first step along the path to recovery from enrollment shortfalls and financial challenges.

“Our goal is to have the best elementary in Iowa,” Wells said. “We’re looking at some progressive educational reforms for our district.”

Marnie Simons Elementary School will serve around 220 students this year, including those coming through whole-grade sharing with neighboring Farragut. Hamburg’s secondary students will attend class at Nishnabotna Junior-Senior High School.



Wells is looking to launch programs similar to those being touted as innovative in Council Bluffs and other larger urban districts and that are largely nonexistent in rural districts, especially those facing financial woes.

This fall, students at Marnie Simons will be given a choice of several new after-school clubs, which will provide services for students from 3:30 to 5 p.m., extending their learning days through a combination of enrichment and support.

Universal free breakfast will be offered to students as well, with a hot meal starting off every school day while actually generating income for the district’s nutrition services department by increasing participation and eliminating overhead.

Wells also wants to bring Spanish to elementary-schoolers, because he said every child should have two languages.

“All these things will be talked about and developed this year,” Wells said.

On the path to becoming the best elementary in the state, he said he also wants to see Hamburg no longer be classified as a School In Need of Assistance under federal accountability rules. He said all students will be put on personal learning plans.

“The fact that we’re a SINA school

is wrong,” he said. “We can’t allow that to happen. We’re a small school. No kids should fall through the cracks.”

Along with Farragut, he also plans to apply for the Teacher Leadership Compensation grant, as well as a variety of community and foundation grants available in the region. He said TLC was implemented in his previous job leading the Mount Pleasant Community School District, and it made a big difference for professional development.

Mount Pleasant brought in more than a million dollars in grants each year, he said. He would like to see Hamburg target about \$250,000, with half of that coming from the TLC grant if it’s awarded.

“The grants are there, it’s just a matter of getting out and seeking them,” he said. “We want to have a strong school system and put all the bickering and everything else aside because kids deserve a good education.”

To maintain its accreditation, Wells said Hamburg needs to make accessibility improvements. The district is asking permission from the state to build a \$3.6 addition funded



through existing infrastructure funding without raising taxes.

The district closed its former middle school building because of compliance issues, although the kitchen is still being used and food shipped to Marnie Simons. An addition would add office space, a new lunch room and commons space, a kitchen and security improvements to the elementary building.

Finances are being addressed using a line-item budget in coordination with Farragut. Because the two districts whole-grade share, they prorate the expenses of running the elementary and secondary portions of their joint school system. Their budgets are essentially linked, with spending by one affecting the partner district in a proportional amount.

“The district hasn’t operated under a line-item budget in the past,” Wells said.

Finances are priority No. 1, but

developing a strategic plan is a close priority No. 2, he said. A five-year plan should be developed later this school year with input from the community and district parents.

“That way we have a direction for the district,” Wells said.

“The district in the past has struggled with where we’ve been going.”



## Financial health

Hamburg’s troubles are connected with spending more than it was authorized to in previous years. For the past fiscal year, Wells said the district should just be under the state spending limits.

“We made the reductions that we need,” he said.

At the end of this year, Wells want to be about \$250,000 in the positive. The goal after two years is to have a spending authority balance between \$400,000 and \$500,000, which would be in line with the state recommended amount.

## Enrollment forecast

With open enrollment, a solid head count won’t be available until school starts. Wells expects about 220 students at the school for pre-

kindergarten through sixth grade.

The trend has been a slight declining enrollment, and the state forecasts another 1 percent fall by 2020. To go in the other direction, Wells said he wants to get the word out on Hamburg’s location, low taxes and cheap real estate.

“There’s potential here for growth,” he said. “An important role that the superintendent plays in the community is economic development.”

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 244

**Lunch Subsidy:** 58 percent

**Graduation:** 80 percent (Note: Hamburg shares secondary students with Farragut, which is the graduation rate shown.)

**School Buildings:** Nishnabotna High, 907 Hartford Ave., Farragut (whole-grade sharing); Marnie Simons Elementary, 309 S St.

**Overall Budget:** \$6,301,813

**Property Tax Levy:** \$11.98489 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$44,066

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$33,425

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$51,018

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** nishbd.org

# Harlan

HARLAN – Superintendent Justin Wagner isn't shy about touting the accomplishments of the Harlan Community School District.

A document he assembled on the highlights for the 2014-15 school year runs two pages of bullet points, such as:

- Above-average ACT and Iowa Assessment scores.
- Ninety-six percent of second-graders proficient in literacy, prior to the state adopting a mandate for literacy by third grade that will see students retained or facing mandatory summer school.
- A Making the Difference award from the Iowa Association of School Boards for Harlan's school board.
- A National Council of Distinction honor for Harlan Community High School's Student Council.
- A Program of Distinction accolade for Harlan's after-school science, technology, engineering and math program.
- Championships for girls volleyball and basketball, the first-ever Iowa girls program to win back-to-back titles in the sports.



- Competitive awards for band, Math Counts, baseball, family consumer science, agricultural science, foreign language, girls bowling, mock trial, choir, pom squad and cross-country.

In total, Wagner reported, 300 students participated in state contests this year. Thirteen students in HOSA and FFA each went to nationals, and one student won a national

title in the Business Professionals of America.

The Shelby County-based school district has been chugging along, following Wagner's style of keep-it-simple

leadership. This year also saw Wagner and others from the Harlan district aid Woodbine when its interim superintendent walked off the job, leaving the board there scrambling with no leader and a nearly half a million dollar budget deficit.

Wagner said Harlan's in a much

more stable position, although the district can remember when it suffered under across-the-board cuts several years ago that eliminated 36 positions. Sharing agreements and other strategies have helped build a healthy reserve in spending authority in Harlan since then, though.

In fact, Harlan's in such a solid position it has different problem. Wagner said it cannot have a cash reserve levy right now, which allows for taxes to be collected that the dis-

trict can then spend on special education or other required spending, save or spend using previous year's spending authority.

"We're in an opposite spot than maybe some other districts right around," Wagner said. "We're in a financially unique position where we've been able to carve out a low levy."

Teachers in the district are paid well, he said, coming in at 13th

across the state in terms of average salary. The district's programs are strong, too, as partially evidenced by Wagner's laundry list of accolades.

Next up will be applying for the



Teacher Leadership and Compensation program funding, Wagner said. That would bring instructional coaches, mentors or other teacher leader positions to Harlan with additional state dollars. He said the district plans to apply for that program this fall.

## **Financial health**

Harlan's solvency ratio, the

amount of its regular budget it has in unspent authority – the legal right to spend money on operational expenses like salaries – is about 19 percent, Wagner said.

“Our unspent authority is really high,” he said. “Our levy is as low as it has been in a decade.”

Having that reserve could provide a cushion if future cuts are required.

“Schools can always keep their doors open,” Wagner said. “It’s a matter of what arteries and veins you cut in order to keep them open.”

### **Enrollment forecast**

Harlan is expecting a steady slide in its enrollment, with the Iowa Department of Education estimating a 1 percent overall decline by 2020.

“We plan for losing 20 students a year,” Wagner said, which has a typical steady fall historically. “If we’re surprised by it, then we’re in a good spot.”

To lose 20 students results in about \$120,000 in needed cuts, or about two teacher positions. Wagner said he looks to save that money through attrition or moves like cutting a bus route, which the district did this year.



### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 1,393

**Lunch Subsidy:** 32 percent

**Graduation:** 91 percent

**School Buildings:** Harlan Community High, 2102 Durant St.; Harlan Middle, 2108 Durant St.; Harlan Intermediate, 1401 19th St.; Harlan Primary, 2105 Durant St.

**Overall Budget:** \$33,046,915

**Property Tax Levy:** \$11.55011 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$63,014

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$38,366

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$83,250

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 6-12 with HP laptops and 2:1 in elementary with iPads and laptops

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying this fall; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** [harlan.k12.ia.us](http://harlan.k12.ia.us)

# Logan-Magnolia

LOGAN – A group of children received brief permission to try out Logan-Magnolia’s new playground equipment.

They made a beeline to rope climbing equipment, working to scale to the top before Superintendent Tom Ridder told them it was time to get down.

Work was still being wrapped up on the playground installation near the elementary wing of the district’s campus in Logan. A rubber surface proved more difficult than expected, Ridder said, because the blacktop was so hard it needed to be cut into instead of drilled.

The playground replaced equipment that served the district for 40 years. Lo-Ma solicited donations, volunteers, grants and other supports for its Build the Dream campaign this year, and the district com-



mitted \$50,000 for the project.

Ridder, who is also the principal for pre-kindergarten through fourth grade, said the playground will primarily be used by PK-6 students.

The district also purchased new boilers this year, he said.

Looking forward to the fall, Ridder said the district will also be spending a lot of time on technology. Fifth grade is being added to the district’s



1:1 initiative, which uses iPads to connect students with the Internet and digital learning tools.

“We’re spending a lot of time on that,” Ridder said.

District officials are also working on an application for the Teacher Leadership and Compensation program, and a grant application is due in October to the Iowa Department of Education. Ridder said Lo-Ma has watched what has happened at the state level and in other districts over the past year.

“The main reason we didn’t (apply earlier) is we weren’t sure where it was going with the state department,” he said. “Now they have it spelled out pretty well. We just feel now is the right time to be getting involved with it.”

A lower-than-expected appropriation for state supplemental aid has Lo-Ma looking to curb spending next year, a theme similar to many area school districts.

“We’re like everyone else,” Ridder said. “We’ve got to tighten our belts.”

Last school year, the district reduced one staff position. A full-time equivalent of one teacher was moved to the elementary school because of larger classes coming through at that level, Ridder said.

“We feel the lower elementary is pretty solid right now,” he said in terms of enrollment.

The money Gov. Terry Branstad vetoed in one-time funding would have paid the equivalent of a teacher position, although it would have had to be spent on other items in the budget. Ridder said Lo-Ma had been planning on that money.

“That tells us we’ve got to tighten our belt,” he said. “It just doesn’t seem right.”

Should state aid remain relatively flat, the district could see a problem with its finances in the coming years. Lo-Ma would not be alone in that re-

ality, though, should it come to pass.

“We are sitting in a position where we are very cautious about the future,” Ridder said. “We’re all going to be having financial difficulties.”

## Financial health

Ridder said Lo-Ma has been dropping a little in its unspent authority balance, but the savings reserve remains at a level where he’s comfortable.

“It has dropped somewhat – not anything that we would say where we’re in panic mode,” he said. “It’s something that we have to continue to monitor and make sure it doesn’t continue to decrease.”

That means spending within the district’s means, even if that means reductions, rather than continuing to chip away at the legal ability to spend money for much the same reason a person should curb spending before their savings account is depleted so they maintain a cushion for emergencies.

## Enrollment forecast

One potential area of concern for Lo-Ma is future enrollment, with the Iowa Department of Education projecting a 9 percent drop by 2020.

Ridder said he’s not sure where that number comes from, because historically the district has seen changes no greater than increases or decreases of 10 students a year.

“It hasn’t been significant,” he



said. “Right now, it looks like our numbers are pretty stable.”

Lower elementary enrollment is solid, and graduating classes have been smaller recently, adding more students overall to the district’s head count. A few years ago, the district had a significant drop-off, which may explain why it’s expected to remain on a downward trajectory, Ridder said.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 563

**Lunch Subsidy:** 29 percent

**Graduation:** 88 percent

**School Buildings:** Logan-Magnolia Community School, 1200 N. Second Ave., Logan

**Overall Budget:** \$10,481,578

**Property Tax Levy:** \$14.54977 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$51,490

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$33,489

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$69,323

**Technology:** This year, 1:1 for 5-12 with iPads and five per classroom at elementary

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying this fall; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** [lomaschools.org](http://lomaschools.org)

# Missouri Valley



## MISSOURI VALLEY – Dirt.

Moving dirt around is at the core from looking at the Missouri Valley Community School District's campus project, which is clearing space for athletic fields, new parking and improvements to connect the district's buildings.

Superintendent Deidre Drees said the district is doing a "balanced fill" project where soil from one area is being used as fill for another. The project's largest part is grading and dirt, she said.

The goal of the work is to bring the campus more together, upgrade facilities and make finding one's way around the area easier. The district

office will remain off site, Drees said, and roof repairs are being made on the high school this summer as well.

Overall, the project just increases the quality of the campus.

"They're just really jazzing it up," she said.

The \$6.8 million campus project includes an expansion and improvement of playgrounds for elementary students and a new athletic stadium for football, soccer and track. It also includes lighting upgrades for baseball, softball and the campus, as well as a new elementary bus drop-off area.

Accessibility to all parts of the campus will be improved, as will

the area's sidewalks, access roads, landscaping and signs. The goal, said school board president Brenda Doorly, is a "cohesive campus" for the district's students.

Ground was broken on the project in June. At that ceremony, a brochure was distributed that was created in 1968 that shows plans for a full campus – the vision of the current project, too. The district built its elementary school in 1955, its high school in 1977 and its middle school in 1998, with several additions and renovations along the way.

Forty percent of the funding for the master campus project comes from an expanded physical plant and equipment levy, which voters overwhelmingly approved last fall, and the rest will be paid for using state sales tax proceeds, which sunset for schools in 2029.

For younger students, the playground might be the most noticeable change, other than no longer being dropped off by their parents at the school's front door. Drees said the new equipment will include a hill slide, about 20 feet of slide built into the hill only about 1.5 feet off the ground.

"It is really fast," she said.

Light poles from the old baseball field will be used to create log steps

for the playground, while the lights themselves were donated to youth programs, Drees said.

By building the stadium, Missouri Valley will bring its football and soccer teams on campus from a field located near the Harrison County Fairgrounds. The new field will over-



look the community and the Loess Hills, as does the rest of the campus, and will connect students with their academic facilities.

"We're going to have a great view from the home bleachers," Drees said.

## Financial health

Missouri Valley is "very solvent" right now, with a strong reserve of both cash and unspent authority, Drees said.

"A lot will depend on this upcoming year because of the reduced funding that the district will be receiving from the state," she said. "We will be like most other districts in Iowa: looking to see if there are

places we can reduce expenditures.”

One-time funding cuts make the budget tighter, Drees said. The new revenue coming into the district doesn't cover staff salary increases and additional health insurance costs.

“I don't know for sure how that will impact us,” she said.

### **Enrollment forecast**

The district saw at least 25 new students move in during the second semester, which means enrollment is likely to tick up for the new school year – probably.

“We've also had some families move away,” Drees said. “I'm anticipating that we may see a slight increase over last year. But I don't know if that will be a trend.”

The Iowa Department of Education projects a 3 percent enrollment drop by 2020. Drees said Missouri Valley is pretty typical for a community of its size in Iowa.

“There's a greater mobility across the entire country,” she said.

### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 833

**Lunch Subsidy:** 41 percent

**Graduation:** 84 percent

**School Buildings:** Missouri Valley High, 605 E. Lincoln Highway; Missouri Valley Middle, 607 Lincoln Highway; Missouri Valley Elementary, 602 N. Ninth St.; Missouri Valley Alternative, 109 E. Michigan St.

**Overall Budget:** \$17,545,717

**Property Tax Levy:** \$16.3374 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$48,366

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$32,796

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$63,173

**Technology:** Currently, 1:1 access at school 6-12 with labs and laptop carts by department

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying this fall; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** [movalleyschools.org](http://movalleyschools.org)



# Red Oak

RED OAK – Tom Messinger is trying to figure out how long he can play the “new guy” card.

The new superintendent of the Red Oak Community School District has been settling into the Montgomery County district and been taking meetings, shaking hands at the county fair and otherwise beginning to forge relationships with the community.

Red Oak has gone through some controversy in the past year, including multiple complaints filed with the Iowa Public Information Board stemming from, but ultimately going beyond, the ousting of its former high school principal. A facility project also prompted cries of concern from some community members.

For Messinger, that’s where the “new guy” card comes in handy, and it helps him work on mending fences.

“You’re not trying to escape issues,

but realistically, it’s a great way to say, ‘I don’t know a lot of the history, so let’s just move on,’” he said. “Even though there might be some issues with the relationship with the school and the community for whatever reason, people that I have



talked to genuinely are supportive of the school and want the school to do well.”

The past is not worth dwelling on, he said, except insofar as it’s helpful to be mindful to look where one’s heading.

“You build from there,” Messinger said. “If we all want the same thing in the end, then let’s start from

where we are right now and figure out how to get there.”

He said he was attracted to Red Oak because of its location in southwest Iowa and the stability of its community. It has a secure population and a county seat, and it’s not one of the many districts in Iowa that is facing a gradual decline for its long-term prospects.

“There are a lot of school districts in Iowa where the future is a little more uncertain,” Messinger said.

One known piece of Red Oak’s future will be a “top notch” new high school addition, part of the Tiger Vision campus plan that will also provide a new home for middle-schoolers in the old high school building. The \$13 million facility is one that students will be able to “take great pride in,” Messinger said, and it may also help academics.

“When you transition to a new building, a different building, the student achievement usually takes a dip,” he said. “When you have that middle school-high school together, you’re eliminating one of those transition periods. You’re going to take that culture shock and that complete change in moving out of the picture.”

The district is also launching the

Teacher Leadership and Compensation program this year, one of the few area districts to receive a grant for TLC in the second year. Technology is also being refreshed in the district, Messinger said.

On a personal level, he said his goals also include learning the district’s history and learning pro-



cedures that are already in place, as the ramping up continues for the beginning of the school year.

“Red Oak has been a community that has made my transition a lot easier,” he said. “It’s very welcoming, very helpful. It has been great to meet the people who have stopped in or even had just heard that I was here and wanted to stop by and say hello. It definitely makes me feel a lot more at home.”

At the county fair last month, Messinger said he met the first group of students since starting the job, a group of FFA officers presenting at the event.

“That’s always the type of thing that gets me excited about the start of the school year,” he said.

## Financial health

For fiscal year 2014, the Red Oak school district had about 20 percent of its regular program cost in unspent budget authority, which is a healthy level of reserves. Districts are restricted in spending on operational costs, and unspent authority provides an important cushion for their finances.

Messinger said Red Oak is “extremely lucky” to have a well-regarded business manager, which is helpful because forecasts can often be scary to school administrators wondering how everything will fall into place.

“She does a great job of keeping people informed,” he said. “We’re definitely, for the time being, in great shape.”

## Enrollment forecast

Messinger said Red Oak is a stable community. Projections do show the district may have declining enrollment in future years.

The state estimates enrollment will fall 10 percent by 2020, although that is based on previous enrollment data. Messinger said Red Oak is better positioned than some other places in the state.

“You’ve got the things that you need,” he said. “It’s a pretty stable

size for a school district in rural Iowa.”

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 1,129

**Lunch Subsidy:** 59 percent

**Graduation:** 93 percent

**School Buildings:** Red Oak High, 2011 N. Eighth St.; Red Oak Middle, 308 E. Corning St.; Washington Intermediate, 400 W. Second St.; Inman Primary, 900 Inman Drive

**Overall Budget:** \$23,349,140

**Property Tax Levy:** \$15.9285 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$50,700

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$30,475

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$74,189

**Technology:** Currently, elementary students are near 2:1 while secondary students are 1:1 with Windows laptops

**TLC System:** Implementing this upcoming year

**Website:** [redoakschooldistrict.com](http://redoakschooldistrict.com)



# Riverside

CARSON – A Christmas present for the Riverside Community School District might come in an Easter basket.

Work on a new junior and senior high school building is running behind, but Superintendent Jim Sutton hopes students and staff might be able to move in during spring break.

The current completion date has moved from Dec. 15 to April 5, 2016, he said. Costs have also grown, and the total project will finish between \$23.5 million and \$24 million, with the overrun covered through adjustments, bidding portions of the project separately and shifting around other dollars.

“We continue to see some delays that are primarily the effect of the weather,” Sutton said. “We’re anxious; we have a roof on our lowest section and our highest section, but the middle section still doesn’t have all of the walls up and the roof done. When we get that done, we’re going to be less reliant on good weather.”

Once the roof is installed work should be able to pick up. Sutton said there’s a possibility the construction workers could make up some time. A decision on when to move into the building will be made when more facts are known, he said.



“If they were able to pick up some time and get us in the middle of March, we could utilize some of spring break to get a lot of stuff moved over and move in after spring break,” he said. “We have no air conditioning in our old high school, and I would hate to see our kids and staff suffer through another hot spring when we know we have another building ready to go.”

When the new secondary building is finished, the junior high and high school in Oakland will close. The district will still have an elementary school in Oakland and an intermediate school in Carson.

No new taxes will be levied, though, Sutton said. The bond issue to pay for the building was for a fixed amount, and the district can’t add additional tax revenue to cover any difference in funding. Between that and the low increase to state supplemental aid this summer, Sutton said Riverside is being mindful

of its spending and asking staff to help address the challenge.

“One of the things that I addressed with the staff is we’re changing our approach as far as printers and copiers are concerned,” he said. “We’re going to get a little stingier about how we’re handling that.”



Computer and vehicle purchases are also on hold, and software is being audited to look for programs to discontinue that aren’t providing enough value compared to their cost. Sutton said classroom impact is the most important metric being used to consider whether to continue renewing licenses.

Even with the cost-cutting in place, Riverside has been adding new programs for its students.

Sutton said this district launched a summer school program to help younger students with literacy. Such a summer school program will become a requirement once state-mandated early reading standards are implemented.

“We didn’t want to wait until the last minute,” he said. “I’m anxious whether or not that has positive effects for our kids throughout the year.”

Seven students will also participate in the second year of the Pottawattamie Promise initiative with the Council Bluffs district, Iowa

West Foundation and Iowa Western Community College. Students will have support at both the high school and college level, along with a free ride, room and board at Iowa Western courtesy of the scholarship program.

All students at Riverside have a new math requirement for high school, and Pottawattamie Promise

scholars are also asked to take an additional English class, Sutton said. He said expectations will keep growing along with participation in the program.

“I have a lot of hopes for that, and I want to see the numbers increase and I want to see the dividends,” he said. “This group that are seniors are not going to be taking everything that is required of the sophomores who become selected.”

Riverside has also launched an ACT preparation course that had a significant effect on scores this year, and, this summer, a free breakfast and lunch program was offered for the first time.

“For the first year, we had a good turnout,” Sutton said. “Kids who came to the summer literacy program were there for breakfast and lunch, and we also continue to have a child care program that runs through the program, and we fed those guys as well. We had another group of kids just from the community who would drop in.”

## Financial health

When a veto reduced state supplemental aid to 1.25 percent this summer, Riverside took a \$76,000 hit from what it expected. Sutton said the district needed a 2 percent boost just to break even with teachers moving up the salary schedule going back to college and for years of service.



“I would have had to go back and go in reverse in the salary schedule to balance that budget, and that’s a hard thing to do with staff,” Sutton said. “We settled for a higher percentage for what we received as far as new money, and now I have to address it in other ways.”

Next year sounds like it will continue to see lean support from the state, and Riverside will join nearly all area districts in needing to keep an eye on its budget. Its spending authority is about 10 percent of its maximum authorized budget, based on 2014 fiscal year data, putting it within recommended levels.

“Our teachers are being asked to work harder than they have ever worked before,” he said, listing early literacy and the Teacher Leadership and Compensation grant program among recent additions.

## Enrollment forecast

So far for the new school year, enrollment looks steady, Sutton

said. In the coming years, though, the trend appears to be positive for Riverside.

“We’ll still see some growth over the next five or six years,” he said.

Primary classes are in the 60s, while graduating classes are in the 40s or even low 30s, Sutton said. He said that gives the district hope that slow growth will be in the future in the coming years.

“We’re in the valley right now in terms of those kids leaving,” he said.

State data agrees with that assessment. A projection by the Iowa Department of Education predicts growth of 4.5 percent in enrollment by 2020.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 684

**Lunch Subsidy:** 36 percent

**Graduation:** 96 percent

**School Buildings:** Riverside Junior-Senior High, 501 Oakland Ave., Oakland; Riverside Intermediate, 330 Pleasant St., Carson; Riverside Elementary, 708 Glass St., Oakland

**Overall Budget:** \$23,537,754

**Property Tax Levy:** \$11.94416 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$47,562

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,637

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$69,488

**TLC System:** Planning on applying this fall with Tri-Center.

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 with laptops 9-12 and Chromebooks and iPads 4-8

**Website:** [riversideschools.org](http://riversideschools.org)

# Shenandoah

SHENANDOAH – Learning the ropes of a new district takes some time, especially if it’s the Mustangs.

But Kerri Nelson, the new superintendent of the Shenandoah Community School District, is up for the task, focusing on making connections, building relationships and engaging with her new neighbors.

“It’s really been a very welcoming community and very open,” she said. “You can see a lot of pride in the community, and that’s important.”

In learning about Shenandoah, Nelson said her first stop was the ledger because the state has been actively changing the school finance landscape. Academic programs, and how students are performing, are other key areas, she said.

“The priority has to be to understand the financial status of the district,” she said. “You really need to take a deep look at where you’re at with your spending.”

The answer, she said, is Shenandoah is doing well. Line items could be tightened, and Nelson said she’s looking long-term at how to preserve the district’s financial sustainability.

“You need to plan and be prepared to make adjustments in your budget, because there will be years where the state aid is higher and there will

be years where it is lower,” she said. “The goal is to be in the position to withstand some of the changes that are coming. We are very fortunate that we have an influx of open enrollment students now.”

Bringing in students from other districts helps boost state

aid dollars, Nelson said. But a budget cannot be planned around open enrollment because those students could move elsewhere down the road.

Beyond the dollars and cents, Nelson has been laying the groundwork for two important initiatives. One is a brand new 1:1 program with Chromebooks, which will be made available for students in middle and high school.

“We’re really excited to have the new access for our students,” she said. “Technology piece is coming in





at a really neat time to see that shift in student learning and how teachers teach using technology.”

The other big program is the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System, which provides state money for teacher leadership positions in the district. Nelson said Shenandoah plans to apply in October and is working to select a coaching model.

“They are some really exciting things that are happening,” she said. “I’m spending the bulk of our time understanding the operations of the district.”

It’s been helpful to have Monte Munsinger available after his stint as interim superintendent. The superintendent vacancy came after Jeff Hiser, the former superintendent, was accused of submitting fraudulent expense requests, giving inaccurate information during an

investigation and misusing district property for personal gain, among other reasons offered by the school board for his ousting.

Hiser had been medically unable to perform his job since Oct. 6, 2014, and he decided against challenging his November 2014 termination because of his depression and anxiety. The state auditor’s office has since found he received \$1,183.86 in reimbursements by submitting false or unsupported mileage claims.

In addition, the audit report released in June found Hiser was employed by the University of Phoenix as a site supervisor for a student teacher, using district time and property for the unapproved outside employment and violating technology policies.

Coming into the district, Nelson said she’s had to focus on building trust.

“My charge is to come in and lead the district and move forward,” Nelson said. “We still have student needs. We still have staff. We still have an entire system that we need to move forward.”

## Financial health

Nelson said she has reviewed the district’s finances and feels comfortable Shenandoah is in a good position.

“It won’t be necessary to make cuts at this time,” she said. “The district has a nice solvency ratio. They have a nice cash balance. They’re fiscally sound.”

In terms of unspent budget authority, aka the solvency ratio, the district had \$2,293,732 at the end of fiscal year 2014, which is 27 percent of its expenses – a very healthy cushion for a school district.

## Enrollment forecast

A growth of about 30 students is expected in this year’s enrollment, Nelson said.

“When you look at the size of the district, that is a very nice increase,” she said.

Looking forward, though, the state predicts a 3 percent drop by 2020.

Nelson said that uses a regression formula, based on past enrollment, and has to be taken with a grain of salt.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 979

**Lunch Subsidy:** 50 percent

**Graduation:** 91 percent

**School Buildings:** Shenandoah High, 1000 Mustang Drive; Shenan-



doah Middle & Elementary, 601 Dr. Creighton Circle

**Overall Budget:** \$17,444,625

**Property Tax Levy:** \$15.94524 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$52,435

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$37,725

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$68,394

**Technology:** This year will go 1:1 for 5-12 using Chromebooks

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** [shenandoah.k12.ia.us](http://shenandoah.k12.ia.us)

# Sidney

SIDNEY – The further from the Council Bluffs-Omaha metropolitan area one drives along U.S. Highway 275, the smaller the communities and their corresponding school districts one encounters.

Sidney is situated south of Tabor, home of Fremont-Mills schools, which anticipates growth thanks to the new U.S. Highway 34 bridge from the Glenwood area into the Nebraska communities of Bellevue and Plattsmouth. It's further north than Hamburg, which along with grade-sharing partner Farragut have struggled financially the past few years.

The small district – with an enrollment prompting a perfunctory recommendation from the Green Hills Area Education Agency that it consider grade sharing as a possible precursor to reorganization – isn't like its southern neighbors, though. It has a strong financial position, and it capitalizes on operational sharing incentives offered by the state.

Superintendent Gregg Cruickshank is shared with the much smaller South Page district in College Springs. Sidney also has sharing agreements with the Nishnabotna



districts – Hamburg and Farragut – as well as Fremont-Mills and Essex. It has shared sports programs, Cruickshank said, and the school board is open to new partnerships that meet two conditions: “(a) if it improves student opportunity and (b) if it is done in a fiscally responsible manner.”

Cruickshank said more significant changes, such as whole-grade sharing and consolidation, have to be thoughtfully considered and planned. The goal, with the best interest of students in mind, would be long-term fiscal viability that offers at least the same opportunities for students, and ideally expanding opportunities.

“The goal is to do something better educationally for kids,” Cruickshank said.

The Corner Conference – made up of the five previously mentioned dis-

districts along with East Mills, Stanton and Villisca along with the Clarinda Academy and Heartland Christian School – provides a support network for the area districts, including Sidney. A new state group, Rural School

key role.

Sidney launched a 1:1 initiative for technology in 2009-10, one of the first 13 schools in the state with such a program to connect students with digital devices, he said. Recent



agreements with the Nishnabotna districts have added agricultural and auto technology classes, too.

“We’ve actually increased opportunities for kids through all that sharing,” Cruickshank said. “We do as much moving of teachers instead of

Advocates of Iowa, also provides advocacy and organization.

“In the Corner Conference as a whole, there truly is a spirit of cooperation and collaboration to do what’s best for our kids,” Cruickshank said. “We do more sharing of resources than any other group of small schools in the state. There’s a lot of that spirit of collegiality among principals.”

For example, Sidney employs a Spanish teacher who uses video conferencing technology to simultaneously offer classes to high-schoolers in Nishnabotna, Essex and South Page. Cruickshank said small schools can continue operating, but people do need to come to grips with the idea that school may look a little different, with technology playing a

moving of kids as possible.”

## Financial health

Sidney is sitting in a comfortable position with its budget authority, Cruickshank said, with about \$1.2 million in unspent authority, the legal ability to spend on salaries and operational expenses.

The district’s general fund is about \$4.6 million, which puts the unspent balance at about 26 percent, which is well within the range of being financially healthy.

## Enrollment forecast

Sidney has a certified enrollment – the weighted number used for budget calculations – hovering right

around 300 students, although the district served 338 students last year.

The state projects relatively stable figures, with a certified enrollment projection of 302 by 2020, a decline of 1 percent.

Cruickshank said the district's enrollment was steady from 2005-06 through the 2012-13 school years, except for one year that had a spike of 25 additional students. The past two years have seen a dip.

"We're projecting this year we could possibly see an increase," he said. "We've seen a steady increase over the last three or four years in open enrollment in our district."

Elementary numbers are growing, which coupled with a small graduating class accounts for possible growth. The district added a second section for a couple grades at its

lower levels, which Cruickshank said is "a good thing."

## **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 302

**Lunch Subsidy:** 44 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** Sidney Junior-Senior High, 2754 Knox Road; Sidney Elementary, 1004 Illinois St.

**Overall Budget:** \$7,251,590

**Property Tax Levy:** \$15.7928 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$49,067

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$38,885

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$73,348

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 with iPad carts PK-2 and Mac laptops 3-12

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** [sidneyschools.org](http://sidneyschools.org)



# South Page

COLLEGE SPRINGS – Conventional wisdom says the South Page Community School District should close its doors.

The small Page County district is only a few minutes north of the Missouri border and served about 125 students last school year, less than half of what's considered a viable district that doesn't need to consider mergers and acquisitions.

South Page brings together students College Springs as well as four other communities that joined it in 1960: Coin to the northeast, Blanchard to the southeast, Bradyville on the southwest and Shambaugh to the northwest.

"It kind of forms a rough square,"

said Gregg Cruickshank, the shared superintendent of South Page and Sidney. "College Springs is the poster district for rural blight."

Meeting in a 1917 building sitting on the former site of Amity College, South Page has been losing students for years.

"Over the span of a little more than a half a century, the district has lost a little more than 80 percent of its student population," Cruickshank said.

To survive, the district has leveraged itself with its Corner Conference neighbors. Cruickshank said the state offers incentives for sharing resources – programs and individual educators – that have replaced bud-

get guaranties that once provided a floor to school budgets.

"What sustains South Page, at least being financially viable so they can provide educational programs for kids, is a lot of sharing," he said. "This coming year, I think we will have 20 different sharing





programs, whether they be sports, other extracurriculars, academic programs or operational functions.”

The district even shares a family consumer science teacher with North Nodaway R-VI School District in Missouri, employing the teacher with two days while she spends the rest of her week at Nodaway, about a 50-minute drive from College Springs.

Cruickshank said that deal was made by a principal who knew the teachers as well as educators in Nodaway and made connections. He said that’s what it takes to keep the district from being dissolved by the state and assigned to neighboring school districts, which are Shenandoah, Clarinda and Bedford.

“We either have to do a lot of sharing, a lot of collaboration, or proba-

bly dissolve,” Cruickshank said. “The patrons of the district and the board have given a pretty clear direction to the administration that they want to continue as a school district. They’re willing to look differently at how programs are offered for kids.”

Some students open enroll into Clarinda, he said. Students who want to play football, baseball and softball also travel there to participate in those teams.

Academic programs are also split among other districts. South Page shares Sidney’s Spanish teacher along with Hamburg, Farragut and Essex students who meet using video conferencing. South Page is also working with Sidney on a possible joint Teacher Leadership Compensation grant, although it may pursue that funding on its own

as well.

Cuts to the Green Hills Area Education Agency have hurt, though, Cruickshank said, as have smaller increases in state spending – although he said he was thankful for the sharing opportunities to leverage the ability to keep the finances in order.



but it also weighs those students on a variety of factors. With a headcount of 127 last year, the district's certified enrollment was 199.

State projections have enrollment down 1 percent by 2020. At its size, every student is significant to South Page.

## Financial health

Despite its size and enrollment trajectory over the past years, South Page is sitting comfortably when it comes to its savings account.

The district has a budget authority of about \$430,000 at the end of fiscal year 2014, which represented about 19 percent of its total expenditures for the year. Cruickshank said he wants to grow that account to between \$500,000 and \$600,000 so the district has a little bigger cushion.

"If things start sliding pretty fast, it's pretty hard to get it turned around," he said.

## Enrollment forecast

Certified enrollment is calculated using a formula based on students,

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 199

**Lunch Subsidy:** 61 percent

**Graduation:** 91 percent

**School Buildings:** South Page Community School, 606 Iowa Ave., College Springs

**Overall Budget:** \$3,593,026

**Property Tax Levy:** \$12.13332 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$47,206

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,000

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$82,300

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 with MacBook Pro laptops 5-12 and iPads for lower elementary grades

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** [www.southpageschools.com](http://www.southpageschools.com)



# Treynor



TREYNOR – More kindergartners are coming to the Treynor Community School District than ever before in the district’s history.

Superintendent Kevin Elwood said 78 kindergartners were registered as of Monday, with a new kindergarten teacher hired in the past few weeks. The district will offer four sections of 19 or 20 students each, he said.

“We are having a boom in our kindergarten, and our student enrollment is just continuing to grow,” he said. “This will be the first grade that we’ve extended to four sections in our district.”

Most classes are 60 to 65 students,

he said, although the district could accommodate growing to four sections each in its elementary school. A few classrooms are available in the secondary building, too, and Elwood said facilities are upgraded every five years or so by the district.

“This is going to be the largest class we’ve ever had in the Treynor school district,” he said. “Our board has taken the position that we want to accommodate as many students as we can.”

Along with the growth, Treynor has restructured its administrative team after its elementary principal was hired away by TS Bank. Elwood



Treynor is also moving to Chrome-books as it replaces technology for its secondary students, who had used Windows laptops. Elwood said about 200 iPads from the middle school will also be shifted down to the elementary students, and digital

said Jill Kay was hired from Omaha Public Schools for the elementary vacancy, and Gary McNeal was brought in from Clarinda to serve as the high school principal.

Tim Navara, the former high school principal, is now concentrating on his athletic director duties and running the new in-house alternative high school program, Elwood said.

“We were trying to do some other things just to enhance our programs and better meet our student and staff needs,” Elwood said. “Athletic director and high school principal had been combined, but it wasn’t generating the results I was hoping for. We decided to split those positions apart.”

Previously, the district had sent its at-risk students to Council Bluffs. But McNeal said keeping those students in Treynor will be a better fit for them.

“It’s going to meet the needs of our kids better than a bigger school system,” he said.

textbooks are becoming more common, with nearly all of the district’s math curriculum accessible electronically.

Looking forward, the district is working on a grant application for the state’s Teacher Leadership and Compensation program. An application is due in October, with funding announcements expected in December.

The district will also await a court decision in an appeal filed by Elwood in Polk County District Court regarding an appeal of the Iowa Board of Educational Examiners’ decision this summer to suspend Elwood’s superintendent license for 30 days for an ethics violation. Until the case is resolved in court, no disciplinary action will be taken.

## **Financial health**

Treynor’s ledger is stable and healthy, in large thanks to open enrollment and growth in the district.

“We’re in great shape,” Elwood

said. “We’ve been able to maintain our programming and also at the same point reduce our property tax request for the last five years.”

Taxpayers have seen a mill levy decline from \$15.15442 in 2010 to \$13.58669 for 2016, according to the Iowa Department of Management. Elwood

said that’s because of student growth in the district.

Valuation also climbs a little bit each year, but agricultural properties aren’t as valuable as commercial land. The school district has added a couple teachers each year as it’s been growing, too.

Maintaining state support remains important, too, Elwood said, because the growth helps in the short term but money is needed on the back end to pay for expanded facilities and instruction.

“Just by adding students, that is helping keep us stable,” he said.

## Enrollment forecast

Elwood said Treynor had about 775 students last year, including those who open enroll into the district. He said he expects the district will exceed 800 students once enrollment is finished for the fall.

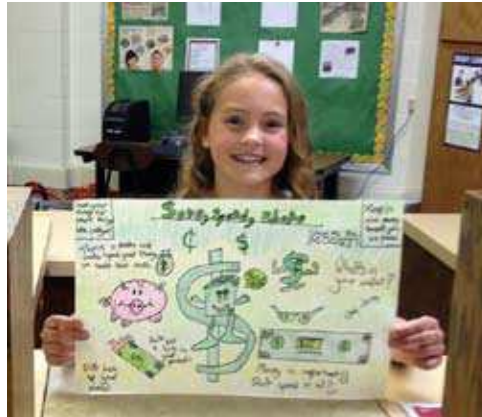
Typically, about 30 percent of Treynor students open enroll into

the district, Elwood said. About 200 students open enrolled into the district last year, which the state

reported had 578 residential students in the 2014-15 school year.

A combination of resident and open enrollment will continue to grow total enrollment, Elwood said.

The state projects the district’s resident enrollment to decline by 5 percent by 2020. But the superintendent said Treynor offers a great staff, curriculum, facilities, small-town environment, proximity to the metropolitan area and small class sizes, which will keep it a growing, prosperous school district.



## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 578

**Lunch Subsidy:** 6 percent

**Graduation Rate:** 96 percent

**School Buildings:** Treynor Middle-High, 102 E. Main St.; Treynor Elementary, 2 Elementary Drive

**Overall Budget:** \$12,313,798

**Property Tax Levy:** \$14.17355 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$50,255

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$28,000

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$72,376

**Technology:** Moving to Chrome-books this year for 1:1 for 6-12

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** treynorschools.org

# Tri-Center

NEOLA – The Tri-Center Community School District will go before the School Budget Review Committee again this year – but with much better news than the last go-around.

Superintendent Tony Weers said that, despite the district’s best effort, its books for the previous fiscal year did not show it fully recovering from its spending deficit.



“We’re getting closer,” he said. “It’s a really confusing thing.”

Essentially, the state requires school districts to spend no more than a certain amount – based roughly on student enrollment – on salaries and other operational expenses. Certain spending, such as on infrastructure, is exempt from the lid, while other more volatile por-

tions, such as transportation expenses, are subject to its restrictions.

Districts earn spending authority for their general funds, the legal right to spend on salaries, benefits, utilities, fuel, maintenance, repair, instructional supplies and other items. Tri-Center found itself about \$480,000 in the red for fiscal year 2014, and the SBRC decided to retroactively

grant it authority for that spending in exchange for a promise to make cuts and bring future spending back under the lid.

Tri-Center

– which serves Neola, Minden, Persia, Beebeetown – issued five pink slips, although only two teachers ultimately were cut from the payroll. The middle school principal role was dissolved, and the equivalent of 11.7 full-time jobs were cut between classified and certified positions.

But Weers said necessary spending was still enough to go beyond

the target for fiscal year 2015, even though the district's cash position has improved and its unspent balance will come in a lot lower than it was last year.

"We're still going to have a negative unspent balance as far as our spending authority goes," he said. "We will be positive at the conclusion of the next fiscal year."

He said he expects to go before the SBRC again this year, which has the option of granting back authority again, beginning to impose sanctions or waiting to see how the district performs by the next fiscal year. Weers said when Tri-Center went before the committee last year, he told them "we're doing everything we can."

Receiving the authority back helped significantly, because instead of digging itself out of a hole the district was able to work only cutting spending that was anticipated to be in excess of the lid in the future. Without the SBRC's assistance, the district would face hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional cuts to meet its legal obligations.

One-time funding vetoed by Gov. Terry Branstad earlier this summer would have brought \$72,289 in income, as well as spending authority, which would have helped build up a reserve again, Weers said.

"For a district like mine, that makes a big difference because that directly impacts spending authority," he said. "That one-time money would have gone into that miscel-



laneous income line, which will help drive spending authority."

Weers said the rate of growth for state supplemental aid is a concern for Tri-Center, too, and he described the 1.25 percent increase ultimately approved as "woefully inadequate" and the veto of one-time funds as "political posturing."

"Even with the one-time money, we still would have had to be watching (state supplemental aid) like a hawk," he said.

Looking forward, Weers said morale is as much of a focus as keeping track of nickels and dimes. The district is on the path to being on a sound financial footing, but spending cuts created acrimony. In community forums, Weers attempted to curtail rumors and worries, but he said it's still been tough in recent months.

"I hope we can begin the healing process that this district needs to go through after the year we had to go through," he said. "The truth is, when a district faces the kind of challenges we faced last year, it's



easy to get down, and it's easy to lose focus."

Like several other area school districts, though, Weers said he plans to highlight accomplishments and continue to show why the Neola-based school is a good fit for the children of its communities.

"There's all kinds of reasons why Tri-Center is a fantastic place for kids, and family and staff," Weers said.

## Financial health

Spending began to walk off a cliff for Tri-Center in the 2012 fiscal year.

According to data from the Iowa Department of Management, the district had an unspent budget authority of \$617,130 in fiscal year 2011, which was about 15 percent of its regular program cost, a healthy rate for the indicator. The unspent balance dropped to \$358,998 in fiscal year 2012 and crashed down to -\$378,976 in fiscal year 2013.

By the time the district faced the SBRC last January, its balance had reached -\$480,244 for fiscal year

2014. Weers said it is turning around, though, and should be back in the positive territory by fiscal year 2016.

## Enrollment forecast

Weers said the hope is to balance out enrollment this year, and the state's projected enrollment by 2020 keeps figures at Tri-Center flat. Stable to slightly increasing enrollment is a key part of budgets remaining healthy, too.

"With open enrollment out and in, it's always a bit of a guessing game until students show up for the first day of school," Weers said. "A few students between three districts in proximity can make a big difference."

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 648

**Lunch Subsidy:** 25 percent

**Graduation:** 94 percent

**School Buildings:** Tri-Center school campus, 33980 310th St.

**Overall Budget:** \$12,313,798

**Property Tax Levy:** \$14.42163 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$55,496

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$36,476

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$93,443

**Technology:** Currently not 1:1 but a bring-your-own-device district for a few years

**TLC System:** Has not yet applied for TLC funding

**Website:** [tctrojans.org](http://tctrojans.org)

# Underwood



UNDERWOOD – Although Google’s investing in southern Pottawattamie County, that’s not stopping the Underwood Community School District from jumping onto the bandwagon with other area school districts.

Superintendent Ed Hawks said Underwood is adopting Google Chromebooks this year as a replacement device after five years of offering students in fifth through 12th grade a laptop computer. The school district’s 1:1 program is a significant part of its approach to academics, and the new computers will be handed out as students return to class later this month.

Hawks said the decision to move to Chromebooks was made after piloting the devices last year with sixth grade.

“It really went well,” he said. “We

just decided to go Chromebooks all the way.”

The devices are less expensive, more portable, lighter and less susceptible to damage, he said. The middle school’s former computer lab has been transformed into a room for preparing, deploying and repairing the laptops.

Labs are still used for specialized software, such as computer assisted design and yearbook layout, but most of the day-to-day school work takes place on the students’ assigned computers.

“You can do just about everything on it that you could do with a more traditional laptop,” Hawks said. “Chromebooks did everything that teacher and students wanted to do.”

The Green Hills Area Education Agency will hold a professional learning opportunity, which he said



will be called “Google Day,” to help teachers in the district prepare to use the new equipment’s software.

Educators in the district will also prepare for the Teacher Leadership and Compensation program, which Underwood will launch for the 2016-17 school year. A technology strategist and a data-focused interventionist will be the district’s two instructional coaches, he said, and they will join model classroom teachers and mentor teachers.

“We’ll be finalizing our plan and getting our positions filled,” Hawks said. “There are high expectations for what that will do for us.”

Looking forward, Hawks said he is also keeping an eye on the funding coming down from the state, particularly with the 1.25 percent increased handed down for state

supplemental aid – a fraction of the 4 to 6 percent sought by school districts.

“It was discouraging in July when the governor vetoed that one-time money,” Hawks said. “I know this year that we were hoping to update our reading language arts curriculum materials, and we’re not going to be able to do that.”

## **Financial health**

Hawks is satisfied with the district’s unspent budget authority, which he said is around \$500,000, but wants it to be a little stronger. It’s the difference between providing an emergency cash flow to make payroll and having a savings account that can be dipped into when money’s a little tight.

“We would like to see it a little bit higher,” he said. “It just seems like it’s becoming increasingly challenging, and I’m concerned about it.”



what Hawks expects given the proximity to growth in urban areas only a few minutes east along Railroad Highway or Interstate 80.

“A benefit we have is the proximity to the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area,” he said. “We do have a housing development here in Underwood, and there are at least two others that I’m aware of in the surrounding countryside. I think it won’t be explosive growth, but I would anticipate growth in the future for us.”

State data shows the district’s balance was nearly \$622,000 going into this fiscal year. That’s closer to where Hawks wants to keep it, around 10 to 15 percent of the district’s overall expenses, which would be around \$880,000.

“We always make that a priority,” he said. “It’s just good planning.”

### **Enrollment forecast**

Underwood expects about 15 to 20 more students this year, Hawks said.

“We need to see how the dust all settles,” he said. “There’s been some shifting since registration.”

Looking to the future, a state projection expects Underwood will dip by 14 percent by 2020. But that’s not

### **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 693

**Lunch Subsidy:** 17 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** Underwood High, 629 North St.; Underwood Elementary-Middle, 601 Third St.

**Overall Budget:** \$12,100,823

**Property Tax Levy:** \$14.83217 per \$1,000 assessed valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$51,588

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$34,450

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$65,281

**Technology:** Moving from laptops to Chromebooks for its 1:1 program in 5-12

**TLC System:** Implementing in 2016-17 school year

**Website:** [underwoodeagles.org](http://underwoodeagles.org)

# Walnut

WALNUT – This upcoming year will mark the end for the Walnut Community School.

Voters will be asked in September to approve a reorganization of Walnut with neighboring AHST, which operates a school in Avoca where Walnut secondary students already attend. Should the reorganization fail, the plan going forward would be to whole-grade share all students from Walnut with AHST.

So that means one more first day of school, and one final last day of

school, for the building located on the aptly named Antique City Drive.

Superintendent Jesse Ulrich – who is shared with AHST as part of the coordination between the two districts – said the consolidation is a deliberate, predictable outcome of state policy. Given how schools are funded, smaller districts are squeezed and merger becomes an increasingly likely result.

Enrollment in the district fell from 211 in 2010 to 158 in 2014, a decline of 25 percent in the five-year period.



Districts with fewer than 300 students in certified enrollment typically struggle financially, although some school districts are able to continue forward with smaller enrollments.

Walnut has signaled its intention to reorganize for a long time. AHST joined it as a partner in 2012 with

partial-day sharing and combined athletics. The secondary school carries the branding AHSTW, which would be the name of the new district if it wins voter approval. Whole-grade sharing began in 2014.

Regardless of the district's reasons, losing a school can be hard for a community.

Part of the solution for Walnut residents is to make sure two members of a seven-member school board are from Walnut's existing school board should the districts reorganize, providing local control in the new district's decisions.

Five members would come from the AHST school board. The new AHSTW school board then would create five districts, and two members would be elected at large, allowing for a balanced representation of the district's territory.

Historically, Walnut was last re-

organized back in the 1950s. The Green Hills Area Education Agency reviewed the current plan, which

would create a district with a combined enrollment of about 770 students. Walnut's territory is roughly a third of the size of AHST, which serves Avoca, Hancock, Shelby and Tennant.



Ulrich said the path toward closing the school has created challenges in recent years.

"The challenge we have is staffing the building," he said. "Getting high-quality teachers to take a position in a school district that has such uncertainty – it was a huge ordeal."

## **Financial health**

While enrollment has gone down, so too has funding.

Ulrich said Walnut has the most "negative new money," or reduction in funding based on how the state divvies up its support to schools. It saw a 11.3 percent decline in new dollars, and the district is operating on a little more than an 11 percent drop in state aid.

Nevertheless, the primary problem is spending authority, which allows teachers to be paid and operational

expenses to be paid. Walnut has enough cash, just not the ability to continue spending it legally.

“They are being very proactive by having this reorganization go through,” Ulrich said.

“Walnut will be sitting there with money in their bank that they can’t spend.”



## Enrollment forecast

Walnut has the largest drop in enrollment in southwest Iowa and the second-largest decline in the state, falling 25 percent since 2010. (Ventura in Cerro Gordo County fell 33 percent in that period, prompting a reorganization.)

State enrollment projections have enrollment sliding down 1 percent further by 2020, but the district plans to have reorganized with AHST by that point. Ulrich said enrollment would be “stable to a slight decline,” but it’s “too late” because of the funding situation facing the district.

The district currently serves about 90 students, Ulrich said. It has had the No. 1 declining certified enrollment in the state in the past five years.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 158

**Lunch Subsidy:** 47 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent (Note: Walnut shared secondary students with AHST, which is the graduation rate shown.)

**School Buildings:** Walnut Community School, 415 Antique City Drive; AHSTW Secondary School, 768 S. Maple St., Avoca (whole-grade sharing)

**Overall Budget:** \$4,000,029

**Property Tax Levy:** \$11.8119 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$39,894

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$36,306

**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$48,036

**Technology:** Primary students have access to iPads

**TLC System:** Attempting to reorganize with AHST, which implements in 2016-17

**Website:** [walnutschools.org](http://walnutschools.org)

# West Harrison

MONDAMIN – Three fewer teachers will return to the West Harrison Community School District this fall, jobs lost due to retirements after reduction-in-force notices were issued last year.

The district has struggled with its spending, with cuts needed to avoid exceeding its authority to spend general fund dollars, which pay for teacher salaries and other operational expenses but are limited by the state.

Superintendent Lyle Schwartz took over the district last year through a sharing agreement with West Monona. When he arrived, West Harrison had less than \$3,000 in spending authority – a number that should be hundreds of thousands of dollars larger.

Had the district spent just a few thousand dollars more, it would have faced an oversight hearing before the School Budget Review Committee. Schwartz said it will take a couple years to build back up to a healthy amount of spending authority, which will allow the district to loosen the reins on its

spending.

“I believe we are going to improve this year,” he said. “We are getting pretty bare bones.”

Just because the district’s hyper-mindful of its spending doesn’t mean students aren’t getting a good education, he said. Part of West

Harrison’s current push is to create some positive buzz about its accolades.

“We still have the things that most schools have,” Schwartz said. “We just maybe have fewer of them.”

Spanish is taught by an exchange teacher, for example. The district has the Project Lead the Way engineering curriculum, and it has 1:1 Macbook laptops. Teacher Gina Ruffcorn was named a 2015 Mi-

crosoft Innovative Educator Expert, one of a couple hundred teachers across the world selected for that recognition.

“We have everything, we just maybe don’t have as many different offerings within each department,”





Schwartz said. “We are actually going to have our own wrestling team again.”

About a decade ago, the East Monona school district dissolved after an unsuccessful reorganization attempt with Boyer Valley. Schwartz said that added to West Harrison’s boundaries, bringing in Moorhead. The district also serves Pisgah, Mondamin, Modale, Little Sioux and River Sioux.

Although West Harrison serves a large geographical territory, enrollment has been a factor in its contraction, and some students are opting for neighboring districts instead. That’s why Schwartz wants to get the word out on the quality of its programs.

“We’re trying to slow or turn the open enrollment trend around by

doing as many positive things as we can within the system,” he said. “A lot of good things happen. We can be a viable school district.”

Pride is an important part of community-building, as is the determination of those working to maintain the district.

“When I came to West Harrison, I picked up on a strong sense of pride in the school,” Schwartz said. “There are a lot of people who are willing to do whatever it takes to make it a quality, viable school district for as long as possible.”

## **Financial health**

Building back spending authority remains a priority for the district, as well as managing finances in a climate of limited increases in state

support and declining enrollment.

The strategy is simple, Schwartz said: “Just continue to build a positive climate and provide a high quality education.”

## **Enrollment forecast**

The district serves 320 children. Districts generally have long-term problems when enrollment dips below 300 students, the point where area education agencies have to have a plan for reorganization or dissolution.

Enrollment projections from the Iowa Department of Education show a decline of 15 percent by 2020, which would bring the district’s certified enrollment to 313 – much closer to that 300 trigger, and likely actually below that threshold in terms of actual students.

However, Schwartz said those state numbers aren’t always reliable.

“Over the years, I have found them to be sometimes on and sometimes off,” he said. “It is really hard.”

The district has seen decline the past several years. Data from Iowa State University shows a

decline each year since 2005, with a significant drop-off in 2010.

## **By the numbers**

**Enrollment:** 370

**Lunch Subsidy:** 45 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** West Harrison Community School, 401 Pine St.

**Overall Budget:** \$7,652,879

**Property Tax Levy:** \$11.10035 per \$1,000 of taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$49,177

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$29,202

**Max Teacher Salary:** \$63,123

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 across 9-12 with MacBooks

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying this fall; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** westharrison.org



# Woodbine

WOODBINE  
– Doug Gee is essentially the Woodbine Community School District’s fourth superintendent in about a year.

Until the end of the 2013-14 school year, Woodbine shared Tom Vint with Boyer Valley to fill its superintendent’s chair. When Vint left, Boyer Valley opted to hire Gee to serve as a hybrid superintendent-principal.

Woodbine brought in Chuck Scott as interim superintendent, who abruptly resigned after the school board didn’t go along with a staffing recommendation. Harlan Superintendent Justin Wagner stepped in, helping the district navigate financial troubles at the same time.

Finally, Boyer Valley agreed to resume sharing its superintendent, and Gee again took the reins at Woodbine on July 1. He will work two days a week in Woodbine and have 30 percent of his salary and benefits – roughly \$50,000 – paid by Woodbine based on contract that



runs through June 30, 2016.

Leadership hasn’t been the district’s only struggle. When Scott left, he described Woodbine’s general fund as being in “terrible shape,” with overspending projected to hit \$475,000 by the end of the fiscal year.

Wagner crafted a three-year plan to address spending, in part by finding almost \$500,000 in revenue through sharing positions, finding new funding sources, maximizing state allowances and finding other “pockets of money” for the budget.

Woodbine’s trouble isn’t with cash but with spending authority, the legal right to spend general fund dollars, which go toward operating expenses such as salaries. The state

limits how much districts can spend based on a formula driven by enrollment, and districts that spend too much face consequences as severe as eventual dissolution.

Wagner's mantra for Woodbine is to "keep running the play" – following the plan to general fund solvency. Gee said the moves by Wagner "made some good strides in the right direction."

"They've done some things proactively in this last half of the year," he said. "There is still going to be some things that we have to watch very closely."



For Gee, the next steps also include meeting with administrators, central office staff, union representatives and other key figures at the district. He plans to reach out to community leaders and ask for referrals for other important people to know as he learns more about the

district.

"The other way I do that is just to be at some of the activities," he said. "Once school starts, meeting the staff will be the next step."

The district is also installing an eight-lane, all-weather track, which involves moving bleachers, a scoreboard and some other smaller projects, Gee said. Woodbine could afford the track because it's paid for using infrastructure funds, not the general fund, so the spending is not limited by the state's lid.

Some healing will likely be needed, too. Wagner said the district

did have to cut overtime, reduce positions as staff left the district and reduce spending in a lot of areas. The key, he said, will be not to start making the same decisions that resulted in the overspending.

"It's a three-year plan," he said. "It says, 'This is the same

play for the next two years after we set it in motion.'"

## Financial health

Instead of facing a trip to the School Budget Review Committee, Woodbine is on the path to recover-

ing, Wagner said.

The district went through belt tightening and salary freezes several years ago, and the financial situation caught officials off-guard last summer. At the beginning of his tenure, Scott said the district was in a “comfortable position” before finding nearly a half-million dollar deficit in spending authority.

Austerity will continue, or else the same fate might face the district again. Wagner said if the district stays on track, though, it will find that comfortable position soon.

“In three years, starting next year, they should have right over a million dollars in unspent authority, which will put them in a really good spot,” Wagner said.

## Enrollment forecast

A projection from the Iowa Department of Education shows enrollment declining 7 percent by 2020, a significant drop for any district,



although such forecasts need to be taken with a grain of salt because they are based on past enrollment.

Should fewer students continue attending Woodbine, spending reductions will likely remain the norm even as the district builds up its unspent authority balance.

The district has experienced declining enrollment since 1999, according to data from Iowa State University. Back then, Woodbine had an enrollment of 578, more than 27 percent higher than its current certified figure.

## By the numbers

**Enrollment:** 453

**Lunch Subsidy:** 35 percent

**Graduation:** 100 percent

**School Buildings:** Woodbine Community School, 501 Weare St.

**Overall Budget:** \$9,365,567

**Property Tax Levy:** \$15.19427 per \$1,000 taxable valuation

**Avg. Teacher Salary:** \$48,225

**Min. Teacher Salary:** \$33,033

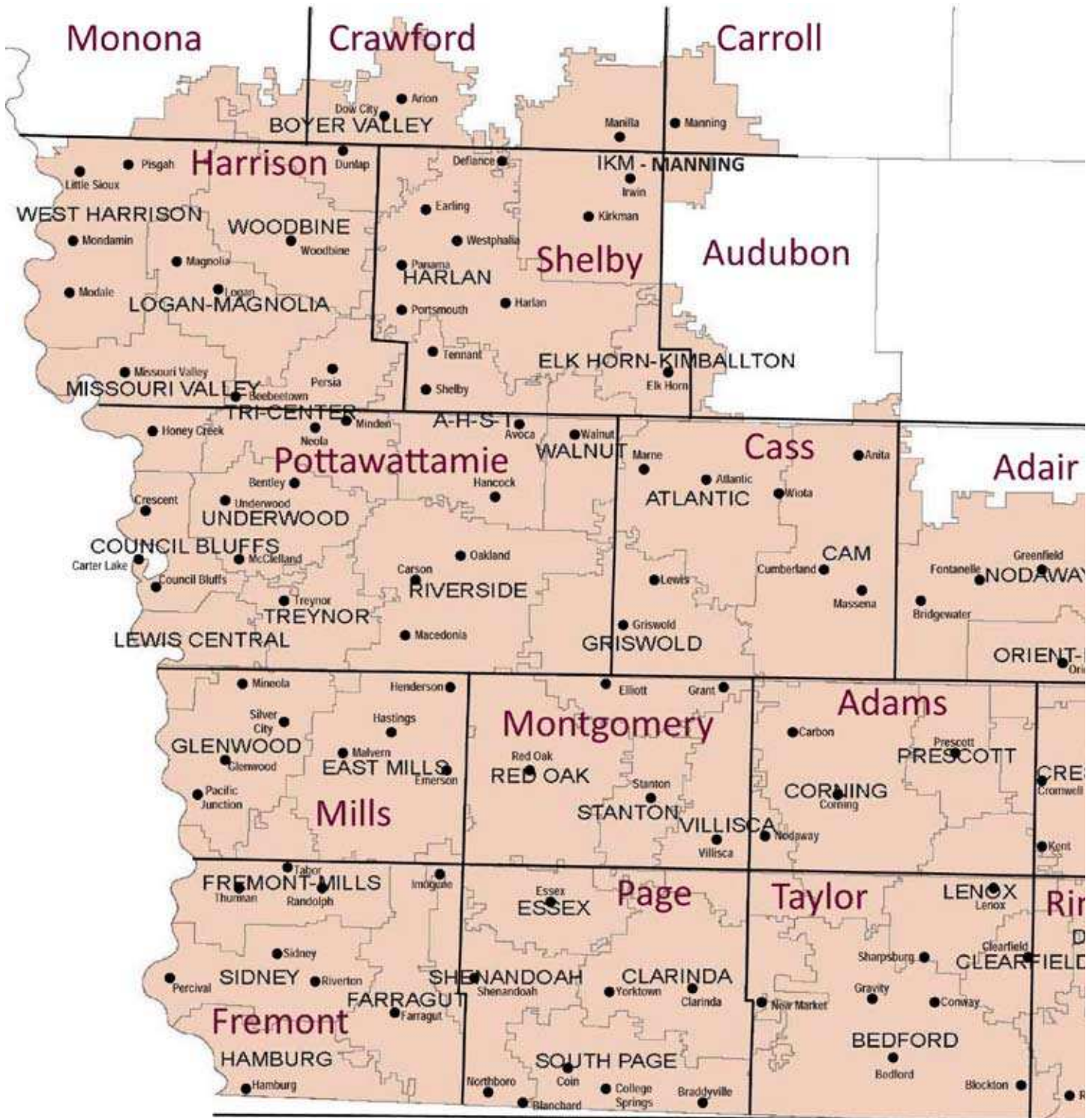
**Max. Teacher Salary:** \$63,159

**Technology:** Currently 1:1 with Chromebooks 5-12

**TLC System:** Anticipating applying with Boyer Valley; has not been awarded funds

**Website:** [www.woodbine.k12.ia.us](http://www.woodbine.k12.ia.us)

# School District Map



Source: Green Hills Area Education Agency



A DAILY NONPAREIL SPECIAL REPORT  
THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS  
WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S COMING IN SOUTHWEST IOWA SCHOOLS

