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Budget wrangling leaves schools on financial roller coaster

Elkhart school district fights to keep alternative programs

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By **Celia Llopis-Jepsen**

celia.llopisjepsen@cjonline.com

ELKHART — The schools of Elkhart, a town of about 2,200 people tucked into Kansas' southwest corner, aren't the main source of revenue for this oil and gas community.

Nor are they the main employer, according to county officials, in a county seat where more than 200 people work at the hospital — which serves Morton County and visitors from Oklahoma, just one mile away, and Colorado, just nine.

Yet residents of Elkhart describe their schools as community glue.

"School is probably the central location for just about everything that goes on here," said Vienna Lee, the county's economic development director. "We can assure you that if there's a school function, everybody in town is there."

Just a few days earlier, Elkhart's high-schoolers had put on a musical, "Bye Bye Birdie." Nearly half of the students had participated, making it a major event for friends and parents excited to show their support.

That kind of community pride and engagement makes Elkhart Unified School District 218's financial roller coaster all the more difficult.

In the years after the 2008 recession and 2012 state tax cuts, Kansas' base state aid for K-12 education fell to levels not seen since the early 2000s. Elkhart cut after-school tutoring, classroom aides, lunch staff, field trips and other spending.

The situation didn't improve this school year, though the Kansas Supreme Court last spring ordered that millions more dollars must go to schools. The Legislature complied, but in the same appropriations bill sliced other categories of school funding, which hit Elkhart hard.

Statewide, it appears dozens of school districts — mostly rural — lost more money through these cuts than they gained through the court ruling. Elkhart lost the biggest chunk of its budget.

In a single school year, the district's superintendent, Nancy Crowell, found herself dealing with the loss of \$1.66 million — one-fifth of the district's general and supplemental general dollars, the two main pots of money she uses to pay the district's bills, from teacher salaries to utilities to classroom supplies.

"We have contingency funds," Crowell said, "and if I didn't have that extra money, this year I probably couldn't have made payroll."

About half of her district's loss came from the state aid cuts and half from a steep drop in virtual school enrollment that appears to have been linked to the cuts.

The district froze pay for teachers, custodians, bus drivers, administrators and other employees for this and next year.

"Next year is going to be a lot uglier," Crowell said. "I still have kids in the schools. It costs

me the same to heat the schools, cool them. To put a teacher in the classroom.”

USD 218 will see part of its funding restored next school year under a bill signed by lawmakers last week, but not enough to prevent further staffing reductions.

The district plans on cutting a counseling position, reducing the hours of its mechanic, consolidating its athletic director position with its high school principal position, and possibly switching a full-time family and consumer science teacher to part-time.

She is worried, too, about the future of USD 218’s alternative school, Point Rock Alternative High School, which the district is struggling to keep open. This school shares space with the traditional high school and is designed for teenagers at risk of dropping out, or who won’t attend the district’s regular high school for cultural reasons, as administrators say is sometimes the case for German Mennonites.

The 87-student school, open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., also is the only place in Morton County — a sparsely populated, 730-square-mile area split into two school districts — where adults who dropped out can return and earn a diploma, and where adult immigrants new to the area can study English. It attracts students from neighboring districts that lack such options.

Many are part-time students who attend in the evenings.

“I feel like it’s a very important part of the school system,” said Lee. “Those people are getting educated, and they get out in the community and share that.”

Evening classes

At 5:15 a.m., Elkhart’s houses were mostly dark. But a light shone in the Tellez home, where Antonio Tellez and his wife, Gabriela Romero, quietly finished their cereal and packed book bags and school clothes for their children, 5-year-old Sofia and 8-year-old Leo.

Tellez carried an armful of bags and jackets to their SUV beneath a starry November sky and started the engine. Once the car was warm, he carried his sleeping son, bundled in blankets, through the frigid morning air to the front seat.

Still in bed, Sofia whimpered as her mother swaddled a purple comforter around her to carry her, too.

“I want to stay with you,” she whispered in Spanish, and her mother responded, “I’m with you right here.”

By 5:50 a.m., the family was ready to go. Tellez and Romero drove the children to a babysitter’s house, where they would sleep a while longer before dressing for school.

Then they headed out of town to the hog farm where they work as veterinarians, passing along the way several miles of the Cimarron National Grasslands — the arid, rocky fields, dotted with sagebrush, yucca and tumbleweed that are iconic for the county.

In the afternoon, they would pick up their children, and in the evening wrap up a long day by attending school themselves. All four members of this family are students at USD 218.

“I like it a lot to go to the class,” Romero explained in English. “And it’s important, I think, for the community to see that we are interested to learn.”

Romero and Tellez said they feel welcomed by Elkhart. Upon arriving in the U.S. half a year earlier to take up jobs as veterinarians, the couple rented a house there. English-speaking neighbors soon brought them blankets, furniture, dishes — whatever they could spare to help the family settle in.

USD 218 doesn’t receive state aid for students like Romero and Tellez, who already have finished high school and college in Mexico and can’t formally enroll. But the teachers and administrators invite them to sit in at the alternative school anyway, as long as the school can accommodate them without needing extra staff.

The idea, said Antonia Villa — a Spanish teacher at Elkhart who doubles as director of the

alternative school — is that education benefits the community as a whole, and inviting new residents to learn English and socialize at school brings them into the fold.

“We just opened our doors,” Villa said, “because that’s what kind of district we are. Our school board is wonderful — they’ve always told me, if they want an education, you keep that door open.”

Budget wrangling

The decision of whether to keep open Elkhart’s alternative school has become a year-by-year struggle. For next year, Point Rock Alternative will stay open, but with a smaller staff.

A year ago, the Kansas Supreme Court compelled lawmakers to restore full payments of aid meant to give poorer districts resources on par with wealthier ones. The aid had been scaled back during the recession.

Elkhart benefited from the court funds but lost overall, when lawmakers slashed spending elsewhere. According to tallies at the time by the Kansas State Department of Education, legislators pulled about \$4.9 million in statewide aid for educating students with low test scores, \$3.6 million in operating funds indirectly linked to virtual school enrollment, and \$3.4 million related to educating part-time K-12 students and adults pursuing high school diplomas.

That means Elkhart lost aid for educating many of its Point Rock students.

Those students include Amber Osborn, a 26-year-old who quit school as a junior in Wichita.

Standing in the living room of her home, just a few blocks from the school she now attends weekly, Osborn watched her 4-year-old son, Ethan, swaying back and forth as he took in one of his favorite movies, “Wreck-It Ralph,” on their TV.

Clad in a yellow T-shirt and jeans, Ethan had finished his afternoon snack and crawled into a red and blue children’s tent at one end of the room, meant to offer a sanctuary when sights and sounds overwhelm him.

The swaying and sensory sensitivity are common among children with autism.

In the years since Amber moved to the area with her husband, Scott, so he could work on his family’s farm, Scott was diagnosed with brain cancer, and Ethan, who Osborn said was largely nonverbal until last year, was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome.

Scott underwent surgery and is back at work. With the uncertainty of his health, Amber, who stays at home to care for their son, returned to school in the early afternoons and evenings, hoping a diploma could eventually help her earn money as a paramedic.

“I want to have something, you know?” she said, rifling through the satchel of neatly organized spiral notebooks and high school textbooks in their home office. “I don’t think they make a whole lot, but as far as the options here, I think that probably would suit me best.”

When she was a teen, Osborn said, she fought drug addiction and high school didn’t seem important. So far, she has completed five credits in Elkhart and has 11 to go. She discovered she enjoys school, and she is earning straight A’s.

“It makes me feel ridiculous, because I waited this long to do it,” she said. “I have three chapters left of this math book that I’m working on. I’m trying to just hurry up and get that done, so I can give them back the book. It feels so good when you finish one and say, ‘That’s a credit — give me that credit.’ ”

Virtual classrooms

Elkhart’s major losses this school year were a confluence of factors. The state’s \$3.4 million cut to adult and part-time schooling affected this district because it runs an alternative school, and the \$3.6 million in cuts to supplementary operating funds hit hard because it runs a virtual school.

“We were one of the biggest losers,” Crowell said.

Crowell also said the Legislature's actions led to less advertising for USD 218's virtual school, which she believes is linked to a drop in its enrollment of about 200 students this school year.

The districts that appear to have lost more through last year's cuts than they gained through the court ruling include some with significant virtual operations, like Elkhart, and some that didn't qualify for the influx of court-related aid because their local tax bases are among the state's strongest.

Like other virtual schools in Kansas, Elkhart's program — called Kansas Connections Academy — is controversial among educators.

Virtual education allows students to take classes remotely, either because they don't want to attend a brick-and-mortar school or because they want to take classes not available locally, such as advanced placement courses.

During the past decade and a half, virtual schools have burgeoned in Kansas, offering a buoy for districts facing declining local enrollment, hoping to boost their funding or seeking a cushion against the massive cuts to base state aid after the recession.

Last year, about a third of Kansas districts offered virtual programs, enrolling the equivalent of 6,400 full-time students, legislative tallies show. Some, like Elkhart, recruit statewide, a key reason for their contentiousness.

Though Kansas' overall public school enrollment has grown in recent years, most rural districts have shrunk, including USD 218, where residents say a gas company buyout and financial difficulties at the hospital have cost some local jobs.

A handful of districts, such as this one, appear to control most of the open-enrollment virtual school market, and some superintendents see them as cutting into their own student body, and thereby state aid.

They also question the quality of virtual schools. A recent legislative audit, however, suggested virtual school students perform similarly to traditional students on state math and reading tests.

Crowell is familiar with the controversy, saying she has felt the tension at times when meeting other superintendents. But she stands by the quality of Kansas Connections Academy.

"I feel like we offer one of the best," Crowell said, adding that schools like these offer alternatives for children who can't or don't want to attend traditional schools.

That could include children who are training for professional sports, are chronically ill or have experienced bullying, for example.

Kansas Connections Academy is operated by Connections Academy, a branch of the for-profit education giant Pearson. Crowell said it employs fully certified Kansas teachers, who work directly with the students, and offers more course choices for the students than Elkhart would be able to do in-house.

Elkhart outsourced its virtual school after the recession. In the first year of privatization, enrollment shot from a little more than 100 students to just under 300. Last year, it operated the third-largest virtual school in the state, according to the Legislature's audit. This year, it has 522 students, slightly less than its nonvirtual enrollment of about 532.

Though the Legislature cut funds last year that were indirectly linked to virtual enrollment, lawmakers appear to support virtual schooling, and last week voted to put more money into it during the next few years.

That will restore hundreds of thousands of dollars for USD 218, though that money will go to the district's contract for virtual services, Crowell said.

The Legislature's cuts to indirect virtual dollars won't be restored, as some superintendents with virtual programs had hoped.

The indirect funds were a key incentive to operate virtual schools. In addition to receiving direct state aid to run the schools, districts had been allowed supplemental operating dollars they could use for other operating costs — dollars that became more attractive as schools struggled to cope with budget cuts.

Instability

Fewer than 10 students graduate from Elkhart’s alternative school annually.

Like many small schools, on its own, this is a drop in the bucket of statewide education.

But proponents of small schools argue numbers like these are meaningful in the context of remote, rural communities, and that school boards should be trusted to make local decisions on how to serve their patrons.

“We feel like it’s a benefit to the community,” Crowell said of Point Rock Alternative.

Students like Osborn, Tellez and Romero are examples of why. All said they appreciate having this option in their town.

Osborn said she would like to continue her studies in the district, but understands USD 218 may not keep the school open past next year.

“It would definitely be a huge setback,” she said of the possibility that it could close.

Crowell said funding stability is important for planning and managing academic programs long-term. But like many superintendents, the Legislature’s annual budget wrangling and repeated funding losses have kept her on edge, scrambling to determine each year what she can keep and what she must drop.

By the end of last week’s legislative push to adjust funding for the current school year — more than halfway through the fiscal year — her district had lost another \$92,145 in operating and maintenance funds. That is in addition to the losses USD 218 sustained from last spring’s bill.

“I start getting nervous and panicking about all of this,” said Crowell, who has watched the Legislature’s moves anxiously this spring from 400 miles away. “Who knows what we end up with?”

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Celia Llopis-Jepsen can be reached at (785) 295-1285 or celia.llopisjepsen@cjonline.com. Follow Celia on Twitter [@Celia_LJ](https://twitter.com/Celia_LJ).

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