



## Boards Making a Difference

### Storm Lake Embraces Diversity and Thrives

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Storm Lake, Iowa has one of the most diverse populations in the state. The student body is 85 percent nonwhite with 23 languages spoken. This community is thriving because of immigration and how the school district is embracing and empowering all students—no matter where they come from.

Storm Lake Schools Superintendent Stacey Cole believes strongly that the purpose of school is to have an educated community population, and that starts with educating your students.

“John Dewey spoke of the importance of education being a means to ensuring that young people can develop into productive members of society. The first part of educating others is understanding who they are and then bridging the gap between where people come from and what society expects of them. If we don’t embrace all students and understand who they are then it will be very hard to educate a future democratic society,” said Cole.

#### TRADITION OF DIVERSITY

Storm Lake has a long history as a meat packing and processing plant community. Even before then, diversity was on the rise after the Vietnam War in the 60s and 70s, when Southeast Asian people under persecution made the city their home. This gave the community its first taste of what diversity looked like. Then in the 80s and 90s, it became a pipeline from Mexico for the packing and processing plants to bring in workers to meet the increasing need.



“Storm Lake struggled with immigration at first, but it came to the point where this was an opportunity for growth and a chance to survive as a small rural community. Now, we are grounded in a community that is diverse, and everything we do as a school board is aimed in that direction,” said Storm Lake Schools Board President Peter Steinfeld.

With a 53 percent Latinx student body, the school board understands the importance of a board that reflects the student population. A Hispanic board member, Emilia Marroquin, has brought a new perspective and energy to the board. “We have a completely new understanding of the Hispanic community now with this representation— and it gives more credibility to our decisions. It’s been transformational to have a Hispanic board member on the board,” said Steinfeld.

## MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH IS WORKING

The district has a multi-pronged approach to serving all students— from offering a comprehensive English Learners program, to offering a full-time new Director of Social Services position to support students, to engaging families, to offering unique leadership opportunities for students. All of these efforts begin with the school board.

“The entire community has come together around the school. Amazing things are happening, and they all circle around the school. All these efforts start with the school board,” said Cole, “When you tell one of our school board members that a program or initiative or decision is good for kids, the response is always—how do we make that happen?”

## NEW POSITION SUPPORTS STUDENTS

Ensuring students are fully supported—academically, behaviorally and social emotionally—is important for the board. For example, Storm Lake has more instructional assistants per student than anywhere in the state. Another example—the board approved hiring a new full-time position, Student Services Director, funded through Dropout Prevention dollars.

Cole says, “The idea of the student services director will be to help more students become aware of the hidden curriculum and how that impacts their schooling experience. It is also our intent that we use student voice when we recognize that norms and values are hidden to some students and this person will help us work to either make those norms explicit or use the perspectives of our students to



enact policies that might be more consistent with the values of our mission and vision, meaning more inclusive of all students.”

The Student Services Director will work with the school, family and community to maximize opportunities for students. This is just one way of many that Storm Lake works to support students—and ensure students feel that support.

## **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AN IMPORTANT PIECE OF THE PUZZLE**

The board is so serious about family engagement and believes so strongly that it is an integral part of the overall educational experience for students, that it has adopted family engagement as a board goal. Storm Lake strives to be a culturally responsive district that engages parents around learning.

Cole says, “A lot of our kids are first generation high school students, so we’re really trying to help families learn about social capital, like an understanding of how school works, expected behaviors at school and at home, being on time, and more. If I (as a mom) have immigrated to Storm Lake and I didn’t attend high school there, I don’t know how to advocate for my child to set them up for success.”

Training will begin later this spring to help parents understand where their student should be, where their student currently lands, and what they can do at home to help them succeed. The board plans to build capacity of all staff around the importance of family engagement.

## **ENCOURAGING STUDENTS OF COLOR TODAY TO BE LEADERS TOMORROW**

Storm Lake makes a concentrated effort to offer leadership opportunities for their Latinx students (and all students), through conferences and professional development and initiatives that encourage students to learn to be leaders in the extracurricular opportunities they are participating in.

Cole says, “We believe it is important for all of our students to see themselves as leaders in our school community and future leaders in our community at large. It is one thing for us to tell our students that we want them to be leaders, but we need to make sure that we’re providing opportunities for our students to learn exactly what leadership means.”

The board has supported sending Latinx students to a national leadership conference the past several years, with hopes that offering these leadership opportunities will help develop these leaders and eventually add to the Latinx representation on the school board.

“We will do whatever is necessary to find the resources to make these kinds of experiences happen for kids. It’s so much part of our blood at this point,” said Steinfeld.

Storm Lake continues to grow, evidence of a successful school district and a safe, secure environment for students.

**Meet the Storm Lake School Board**