



Boards Making a Difference

Bondurant-Farrar's Strong Enrollment Brings Challenges and Opportunities

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Across Iowa, many school districts are seeing declining enrollment as families move to larger cities due to lack of housing, jobs and other opportunities elsewhere. One school district is seeing the opposite of this trend – increasing enrollment, at a projected rate of 125 students per year through 2025. What's the secret sauce? Bondurant-Farrar Board President Chris Freese and Superintendent Rich Powers say it's a combination of factors.

“We are fortunate to be in the shadow of the Des Moines metro, which is convenient for our community members who commute for work. This access to the metro is unique for a small town and increases our quality of life. Our quality of life is high because of our access to the metro, and our small-town feel,” said Freese.

“I believe our great schools contributes to the core of our growth, plus the fact that we are a small town with great access to Des Moines. Our board has been proactive and strategic in planning both financially and facility-wise, so that has been immensely helpful as our growth has continued to increase rapidly,” said Powers.

About 10 years ago, enrollment began increasing rapidly for the school district, as more families moved into the area. In 2005-06, the district was serving 1,110 K-12 students compared to 2,207 in 2018-19. The city of Bondurant has grown by around 42% since 2010. None of this growth comes from students open enrolling-in. The district does not allow open enrollment.



GROWTH=CHALLENGES

But, this growth comes with its own set of challenges. According to Powers, “Our district is property poor and student rich. We’re forced to use the general fund to support facility and equipment needs, where other districts may use PPEL or SAVE funds. We have also had to hold back funds each year in case we need to hire a teacher or even three in the fall due to unanticipated student growth over the summer.”

Just what does ‘property poor and student rich’ mean? While the district has funds to support students and teachers from the general fund, they struggle with the appropriate ‘property valuation’ to support infrastructure.

“We have about \$189,000 of property valuation supporting each student and we rank 326 (out of 330) in state—only a few districts have lower property valuation. We are one of the fastest growing districts, but we actually become a bit poorer per student,” said Powers.

This low ranking means Bondurant-Farrar is one of the most property-tax poor districts in Iowa. Without a mix of commercial and residential valuation to support the district, it can negatively impact infrastructure and bonding capacity.

“We’ve had to be very prudent about how we spend money, where we spent it. We always refer back to our master plan. What’s coming down the road? We make sure we’re pulling the right levers at the right time and we work with the community to make sure they understand what we’re doing. We can’t afford to have a bond vote go to a no, to fail,” said Freese.

The district communicates with the public by sharing master plan updates and plans, projected needs, what it means for the community, bond resolutions and more through social media and public forums.

MASTER PLANNING IS KEY

The board has transitioned from reactive planning to master planning and work with a consultant to understand and study the growth of the community, enrollment, infrastructure today and 5-10 years from now. “We’ve settled into a really good cadence around developing a master plan and revisiting that master plan. We updated the master plan this fall and noted that previous projects are relatively on track. This is a great planning tool for the board to proactively plan,” said Freese.

Additionally, the board has several committees to tackle issues that come along with growth, like long-range planning for facilities, new construction, land purchasing, etc. “Our infrastructure committee takes into account long-range planning and building facilities. Our needs and finance committees work



with the infrastructure committee to figure out how we can afford these plans in both current and future years. Each committee has a community representative on it, to keep them engaged with the district,” said Freese.

EXPANDING FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

With student growth comes the need to update and expand facilities, hire additional teachers and staff, and even consider where the district will go in the future. They’ve completed about \$23 million in facilities projects, including a new community auditorium, 21 additional classrooms in the high school, eight new classrooms at an elementary, and a new elementary gymnasium.

Since enrollment spiked about 10 years ago, they’ve built a new 9-12 high school, added on at the middle school, and built a new K-2 building. Up next: the district plans to propose a grade 7-8 building, with an opening date of 2023-2024.

“As long as we don’t overspend on the front end, we have more financial flexibility to invest in staff. The growth we’re experiencing gives us this flexibility on that front—new money comes in every year with increasing enrollment. The challenges we face are on the infrastructure side,” said Freese.

BOARD SUPPORT AND TRUST IN LEADERSHIP

Freese says the board has learned some important lessons along the way: a strong administrative team is essential along with the right superintendent, you’ve got to have trust in the superintendent and hold them accountable, and be able to step back and let the superintendent execute the strategy and not fall into the micromanagement trap. “We’re looking forward, not over our shoulder. Our board wants what’s best for our district and has spent a lot of time getting the leadership team in place and tracking the right high-quality staff. When this happens, everything starts to come together.”

[Meet the Bondurant-Farrar School Board](#)