



Boards Making a Difference

Council Bluffs—Preparing Students for the Future: Making Post-Secondary Education Inescapable

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Council Bluffs Schools is the 10th largest district in Iowa with more than 9,000 students enrolled. In 2005, they were also known for two other statistics—the district with the lowest graduation rate in the state at 68%, and the district with the highest dropout rate of 8%, or 238 students, in 2004–05. These staggering numbers prompted the school board to make drastic changes to turn the district around.

“It was a wake-up call for the board. We began to improve the leadership of the board/superintendent team and came together to focus on a board goal guaranteeing all graduates are future ready,” said Board President Dave Coziahr.

INCREASING GRAD RATES, REVERSING DROPOUT RATES

With a variety of initiatives, like ‘On Track on Time’ for freshman, ‘Promise to Succeed’ for 5th graders, and ‘Commitment to Graduate’ for 8th graders, the district saw these numbers improve. The initiatives helped demonstrate to students the importance of success, a glimpse of where they could be as seniors, and the ultimate goal of graduating. Learn more about these initiatives on Council Bluffs Schools' [Teaching and Learning homepage](#).

In addition to programs showcasing the importance of accountability and success, the district worked toward improving relationships with those students more likely to drop out of school. “We implemented new positions at the high school, graduation coaches, to



work with these students and motivate them to come to school and intervene when they began veering off track,” said Board Member Chris LaFerla.



The Council Bluffs district offers two traditional high schools Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, and Kaneshville Alternative Learning Center. The learning center, designed for nontraditional learners, had a tremendously low graduation rate of 20%. While the graduation rate was separate from the two high schools, the district knew changes were necessary to support these students. They increased the implementation of individual plans for students in the alternative center to give them every opportunity possible to succeed and graduate on time. Plus, they added credit recovery options to make graduation more attainable.

Over the next ten years, graduation rates increased by 20% and the dropout rate decreased to 76 students, or about 3% of its 9-12 student enrollment.

“With this focus of graduation rates and the great work that’s been done, one thing that was really exciting when I came to the district in the 2017-18 school year was to see the board poised and ready for that next level. Our students are graduating, so the board began wondering, what other opportunities can we provide?” said Superintendent Dr. Vicki Murillo.

MOVING BEYOND GRAD RATES WITH D+1

With a graduation rate of 87.01% in 2018-19, the board has broadened the goal to more than just increasing graduation rates—they are laser-focused on setting students up for success beyond high school. The goal is still a 100% graduation rate across the district, but in addition to that, for every single student to graduate with a certificate, associate's degree or other credential. The initiative, ‘D+1’ sets higher expectations for students and prepares them for a meaningful career after high school.

“Our vision for Council Bluffs is that every student graduates with a diploma and certificate. That's what D+1 means. We want postsecondary education to be inescapable for our students,” said Murillo.

The district partnered with Iowa Western Community College to provide concurrent enrollment opportunities for students to earn certificates or associate’s degrees along with their high school diploma through the [Early College Academy](#). And they developed a [TradeWorks Academy](#) for freshmen and sophomore students interested in learning more about careers involving mechanics, construction, fabrication, electrical, and plumbing and HVAC/refrigeration.

“We realized we need to be more relevant. Our students needed to be more prepared for the 21st century. We see D+1 as a very effective way of making sure our students are prepared for their life after high school. Learning doesn’t stop at high school, it’s only the beginning of a lifelong continuation of their adult learning,” said Coziahr.

The board set a three-year goal of 66% of students earning college credit. They met that goal of 66% during the 2018-19 school year. Now, the superintendent will set a new goal to present to the board after a summer retreat.

SCHOOL BOARD LEARNING ALONG WITH STUDENTS, STAFF

Over the past few years, the board has continued improvement efforts on its own leadership and blending together as a team.

“Under Dave’s leadership, we’ve worked really hard coming together as a group and learning how to lead better. We’ve been going through IASB book studies and workbooks to get there. We’ve had a lot of conversations around creating an atmosphere and a culture of high expectations,” said LaFerla.

The board is the embodiment of lifelong learning and understands it would be hypocritical not to learn along with students and staff in the district. “We encourage teachers and staff to participate in professional development. We expect our students to continue their education— why should the school board get a pass and not do anything? This is what it means to be a good leader in schools,” said Coziahr.

When the governance team learns together and is united under common goals for the district, there’s a healthy culture and trusting environment.

“I can speak for the board in saying, we are aligned in our vision. Our superintendent set the vision for where we want to go and talks about the different ways to get there – and the support from the board has come unanimously all along. A big part of that is because we are trying to be a better board. We take time at every board meeting to talk about where we want to go as a group,” LaFerla says.

GOALS FOR 2021 AND BEYOND

The board has set goals for both the graduation rate and D+1 initiative at 100%. The board, students, teachers and staff, and the community are all excited about the direction Council Bluffs is heading.

“The support of the board in providing more opportunities for students is invaluable. It’s like a new season for us and our students and families. We hear community members talking about it. They have children, grandchildren, cousins that are enrolled in these new programs and are making a huge difference for those students. We are doing some pretty exciting things in Council Bluffs,” says Murillo.

Don’t just take Dr. Murillo’s word for it. The data shows that students are excited for these new experiences. More than 150 students are enrolled in the health science program; 60+ students in the culinary arts program; 50 students in Early College Academy; and 378 students in the TradeWorks Academy.

“We recognize not all our students will go to college. There are still very good jobs available in our community that don’t require a college degree. We are preparing our students to be ready for these jobs the day after they graduate. I’m proud that we’re paying attention to what the local workforce

data is telling us, creating pathways for students in those areas. We're addressing local needs and providing opportunities for kids," said LaFerla.

Meet the Council Bluffs School Board