

OLD SCHOOL, NEW LIFE

Consolidated schools: A hard thing but a good thing for kids and community

Story

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Nebraska had 7,200 separate school districts in 1920, according to Nebraska Department of Education Chief of Staff Brian Halstead. Today, there are 245.

Neighboring school districts often decide to merge because of low enrollment and high costs.

“It’s just like any business,” Halstead said. “You have to have enough customers to justify the costs.”



Zach Mayhew

Cindy Chinn talks about how she sets up a Christmas lights show Tuesday at the former Chester Public School in Chester. Chinn painted a picture of her home, the school, that she uses as a switchboard to control all the lights in a specific area during the Christmas lights show. (Independent/Zach Mayhew)



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A base cause of school district consolidations is a shift in Nebraska's population.

"There are more and more people living in urban centers and less that live in rural areas and farm towns," he said.

Rural counties have decreased in population at far higher percentages than Lancaster and Douglas counties have increased since 1900.

A major factor for the population shift stems from the expansion of farms in order for farmers to make a living, Halstead said.

It's up to the patrons and officials of each school district whether they want to demolish vacant schools after consolidation or attempt to sell the



Zach Mayhew

properties to the city or a private buyer. The fate of some vacant schools is more positive than others. Residents from Valley, Polk and Thayer counties shared what happened to vacant schools in their hometowns and how the situations affected the communities.

Chester, Thayer County

The town of Chester and its old school building provide one of the more fortunate examples of post-school district reorganization.

What was once Chester Public School, built in 1907, is now the home and ample studio space for two artists who bought the 30,000-square-foot building in 2006 and moved in from Las Vegas in 2007.

Jean Crouse, a Chester native and 1952 graduate, said the village of 230 was hoping for "anything good" to happen to her old school, anything but for it to sit and rot.

Chester-Hubbell-Byron Public School, as it was later known, was only vacant for about a year before the couple, Cindy Chinn and Art Whitton, bought it. Crouse said the closing of the school was a sad day for the residents and alumni.

"It's the beginning of the end for a little town," she said. "Or that's the feeling anyway."

The CHB students now attend Thayer Central.

The town of Chester has had a positive response to the sale and use of the old school, said Crouse and Reuben Schleifer, a 93-year-old resident of Chester and a retired basketball and football coach of Chester-Hubbell-Byron school.

“I think it’s a source of pride,” Schleifer said. “Cindy is a tremendous artist. She can take this chair and turn it into an amazing work of art.”

Chinn paints, carves wood, welds, makes mosaics, jewelry and T-shirts, and creates art out of pencils, saws and just about any other material she wants to work with. Her lifelike murals have been commissioned for hospitals, dentists’ offices and private residences across the country. Chinn was looking for a large space to hold her large murals.

The public has stepped into the old school on occasion to view one of Chinn’s finished murals, which she lays out on the gymnasium floor. Chinn and Whitton also put on a sound and light show on the exterior of the building every Christmas and most Halloweens.

“It’s just amazing how they’ve assimilated into the community,” Schleifer said. “I hope it continues because we definitely need to keep her.”

Chinn said the community has been very accepting, positive and supportive.

The home and studio, which Chinn calls “The School” or “an artists’ retreat,” is presented proudly on the Chester website and is featured as a Nebraska tourism destination.

“Most schoolhouses, they become instruments for the Fire Department to practice on,” Schleifer said. “Windows get broken, and pretty soon they fall to the wrecking ball. We’re very fortunate to have somebody buy it.”

North Loup, Valley County

The fate of the vacant and closed North Loup-Scotia Public School is perhaps not as fortunate.

The two school districts merged in 1959. Fifty-six years later, Central Valley elementary and high schools took in students from North Loup and Scotia this year in addition to their existing Greeley and Wolbach students.

“They’re probably going to auction off the remaining contents, and the building will likely be demolished,” said Jim Goodrich, a member of the North Loup Village Board and a native of North Loup. “The school board has the prerogative to change its mind. But it seems like the most logical thing.”

He said it would cost about \$1.5 million to bring the school up to code, versus \$100,000 to demolish it.

“We’d rather demolish it than let it go into further disrepair and decay and fall in,” Goodrich said.

He graduated from North Loup-Scotia in 1972 and taught sixth grade there for 13 years.

“So I have a vested interest in the school, and it’s difficult to watch,” Goodrich said. “It’s a hard thing for the town.”

The closed school is impacting North Loup economically, he said. People lost jobs, families moved away, and it’s more difficult to attract people to a town without a school.

“We just don’t see as many kids around as there used to be,” Goodrich said. “My fear is that we’re going to see even less and less. How much of an effect over the long term it will have, I guess that’s hard to predict.”

But hope remains.

“I see a continued effort to make things work in order to provide our children with the best education possible, while complying with necessary regulations and requirements,” Goodrich said. “I see all of our communities working together toward that purpose.”

Stromsburg, Polk County

The schools of Stromsburg and Benedict joined in 2002 to form the current preschool-through-12th-grade Cross County Community School at a separate location three miles south of Stromsburg and five miles north of Benedict.

“Ultimately, your community needs a strong school,” said Brent Hollinger, Cross County superintendent.

The consolidated school is a stronger and better option for the communities than the two separate schools, Hollinger said.

“We have a variety of curriculum that wouldn’t be available to a smaller school,” he said. Cross County accommodates 365 students.

However, a community doesn’t need a local school in order to survive and flourish, Hollinger said.

“Stromsburg is thriving, and Benedict is doing well,” he said.

The towns’ old school buildings were put to good use.

The old kindergarten-through-12th-grade school building in Benedict was bought by a family.

“The community is satisfied,” Hollinger said. “They’re keeping it up.”

The old high school in Stromsburg was also bought by a private owner and is being used as a community civic center.

“All kinds of things happen there,” Hollinger said, mentioning weddings, movies and meetings. “The civic center has been a big hit. ... It turned out to be a pretty neat deal.”

Stromsburg’s old elementary school was demolished, and the nine acres were sold to the city. The land is home to a housing development.

“Currently, three are finished, and three more are going up,” Hollinger said. “It’s allowing the community to grow.”

He said the communities are proud of the changes and of the new school district.

“Here’s the reality of what happens: No community ever wants to lose its identity,” Hollinger said.

“Stromsburg used to be the Vikings, and Benedict used to be the Eagles. Well, now we’re the Cougars. ... Everybody’s behind the school, cheering on the teams. And we’re doing great things for our kids, and we’re very proud of it.”