

State of the District Address

January 15, 2007

Broken Bow Board of Education, Faculty, Staff, Administration, Students, Parents, Patrons, and other interested persons, welcome to the 7th Annual State of the District Address.

A number of years ago (1958-1963), a television program call the Gary Moore Show highlighted a weekly segment called *That Wonderful Year*. The segment consisted of film comedy sketches, film clips, and production numbers based on the events and styles of a given year. After showing these sketches, clips, and numbers the audience was to guess the year the events occurred. While I never did guess the correct year, it still was a fascinating weekly exercise for me.

I mention this because in the history of Broken Bow Schools, the year 2006 will surely be a year to stand out. And if Gary Moore were to do his weekly production from Broken Bow Schools, the events of 2006 would be easily retrieved from the depths of our collective memories and identified as *That Wonderful Year*.

Overview

As predicted in last year's address, the news concerning school finance at the State level in 2006 was pretty much a non-event. It seems as though the Omaha Public School merger issue, the OPS lawsuit, and fallout of LB 126 seemed to occupy most of the legislature's educational agenda. Perhaps there just wasn't enough time for the legislature to move into broad fiscal issues that would have had great impact on schools like Broken Bow.

We were able to accomplish several tasks of local initiative, but the major task undertaken was the closure of Tappan Valley and the assimilation of the Gates, Round Hill, Berwyn, and Oconto Class I schools by the various K-12 district in the area.

It seems as if never ending, but several major technological upgrades were implemented.

And, as probably expected, several curricular, or at least student centered, initiatives were undertaken.

Accomplishments

High School Principal

A notable, visible change at Broken Bow in 2006 was the appearance of Mr. Ken Kujath, the High School Principal. Mr. Kujath is the first principal hired from outside our school system at Broken Bow since Mr. Ridenour and Mr. Brown were hired 23 years ago. Mr. Kujath hit the ground running and has already contributed to the High School, the School District, and the community of Broken Bow.

Broken Bow Alternative High School

Although not a program implemented this year, the significance of the program continues in the Broken Bow community. The CHOICE (Curriculum Having Opportunities for Individual Choices in Education) program, which is the Broken Bow incarnation of an alternative high school, continues to shine. Young people are able to earn a high school diploma, which correlates to greater earning power through a lifetime, even after previously unsuccessful attempts at school.

Currently there are 8 students enrolled in the CHOICE program with 3 part-time students. We are predicting graduating 4 students this spring with a 5th student possibly completing the course of study to graduate yet this year.

Standards Based Grading

This past month we rolled out the new reporting system, a system in which students are rated against the standards on which our curriculum is based. A major component of the new reporting system is a report to parents on the community developed character traits. As with any change to something with which we are accustomed to and comfortable with, regardless of its effectiveness, there are some questions about this new reporting paradigm. To that end, I plan to sponsor a Lunch and Learn session so that the new system can be explained in detail and parents provided an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.

Reading Programs

Reading programs at the elementary and middle schools made news this year. After a two and a half year run with the Federal grant program known as Reading First, Broken Bow Schools did not renew the grant for the second round of funding. Reading First is a strictly prescriptive, formulaic method of teaching reading that removes the teacher from professional decisions regarding a student's reading process. After struggling with the program for those two plus years we returned to the phonics reading program our teachers developed over 7 years ago, and had great success with prior to the lure of Federal money. We did retain the best features of Reading First program, yet kept our teachers and principal's professional judgment as a part of the process.

The Read Naturally program was implemented at the Middle School. The program was developed on the premise that some Middle School students need support and instruction in the mechanics and practice of reading. A process is in place to identify the struggling readers and provide them with the instruction and practice designed to bolster their still-developing reading skills.

PTA Playground Project

The PTA Playground Project was completed this past year. The dedication of the playground took place in mid-August, complete with Governor Dave Heineman in attendance. Landscaping was a part of the project and the grass sod was installed a little later, making a vast improvement in the play environment and visual esthetics at Custer Elementary.

Essential Finance Planning Initiative and Facilities Audit

Facilitated by Marge Beatty, the Educational Service Unit #16 Administrator, this program was vast in its scope: Virtually anyone in the Broken Bow community who had an interest was able to see, study, and comment on essentially every aspect of the Broken Bow Schools. This group, though relatively small, met through the winter and spring studying the District's political, social, economic, and education opportunities and challenges.

A concurrent initiative during the Essential Finance Planning meeting was a complete audit of the Broken Bow Schools facilities. The buildings were studied and evaluated concerning repair, life safety, Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility, and curriculum delivery issues. This audit was first reported to the Essential Finance Planning Committee since facilities and finances are inevitably linked together.

I'll present more on this later in the Current Challenges and Initiatives section.

Class I Schools

The educational landscape in Custer County was forever changed in the past year, regardless of the outcome of the repeal of LB 126. Gates school was assimilated by Anselmo-Merna Schools and Callaway received Oconto. Berwyn School was closed by its Board of Education just prior to the LB 126 transfer date which took place June 14, 2006. As Broken Bow Schools acquired the building and property of the old Berwyn School, a facility not needed by the Broken Bow Schools, the Broken Bow Board of Education subsequently sold the facility and property to the Village of Berwyn. The last legal obligation of Broken Bow to the Berwyn School takes place tonight with the transfer of the last 4 property lots adjacent to the school to the Village.

Tappan Valley, while closed by the Reorganization Committee of the Nebraska Department of Education as of June 1, 2006, was not a victim of LB 126. As a result of the closure, the Tappan Valley school house became the Sandhills Education Services Cooperative Preschool. After untold years of wandering, the preschool finally has a home. The open house introducing the facility was held just prior to the beginning of the school year. The building was in excellent condition when acquired by Broken Bow and needed only cosmetic alterations to make it conducive to meeting its new occupants' needs. The SESC Preschool is really second to none in terms of facility and programming quality.

Round Hill is still operating, largely under the same conditions it always has, but with Board oversight by the Broken Bow Board of Education. How long this will continue is THE issue of contention. This contention is not between the Round Hill people and Broken Bow, but at the State level. Several bills have been introduced to return the Class I's to pre-December 1, 2005 conditions, but there is certainly no sense of agreement on the best way to accomplish this. Stay tuned to see how this turns out. Hopefully in next year's address I can report that the issue has been put to rest. The Broken Bow Board of Education has been steadfast in its position that the Board will not hasten the demise of the Class I's.

Infinite Campus and Connect Ed

Two major technological innovations were undertaken by Broken Bow Schools this past year. Infinite Campus was probably invisible to the average patron of Broken Bow Schools while ConnectEd is probably one of the most visible innovations in some time.

As you might imagine, with the advent of the computer age, a great deal more information can now be easily stored and transmitted than at any previous time. The computer program that took care of this task for us was a fairly comprehensive program and was used by Broken Bow Schools for about 10 years. This program was named WinSchool. This package served our needs to store information about students, class schedules and report cards very well until we had to report an increasing amount of detailed information to the Nebraska Department of Education and other external entities in ways that Winschool could not address.

WinSchool was completely inadequate for the new tasks and we had to search for a program that could accomplish these procedures. 6 months later, our office personnel and technology people are still trying to get the kinks worked out of the process. Early on we had some technical problems within Infinite Campus but those problems were resolved some time ago. The problem now isn't necessarily within the Infinite Campus package, but the problem is how Infinite Campus and the State reporting system, NSSRS (Nebraska Staff and Student Reporting System), communicate with each other. As with most things technological, we will get this resolved.

With the implementation of Infinite Campus we were able to streamline parental access to student information too. The Infinite Campus Parent Portal allows parents to easily access information about their child or children in school from their home computer.

One of the most exciting technological innovations in some time is Connect-Ed. This telephone notification system, while not foolproof, greatly enhanced our ability to communicate important messages to any of a number of pre-identified groups within our school community. Just this morning I was able to notify 1,033 people located at 623 telephone numbers that Broken Bow was having a 10:00 AM start. These calls are placed within minutes of approval. The success rate of these calls was 90.4%, meaning that only 60 telephone numbers didn't connect for some reason. This is an exceptionally powerful tool and one that we certainly want to implement wisely.

As you see from the items listed above, many items of interest that were of a positive nature occurred in 2006. In addition to the above, progress was made in two career exploration initiatives. These were Mechatronics, a collaboration with Mid-Plains and Central Community Colleges, BD, and Broken Bow Schools, and a Job Shadowing program which allows Juniors to identify jobs of interest in the community and spend a day at that job site.

All-in-all, we've had a busy year. There have been many improvements to our system, some of which are visible and some which are not.

Challenges

Current Facilities

As I've mentioned in each of the past addresses, our facilities continue to be a major concern.

This year, though, we have a facilities audit which supports the concerns expressed here for the past few years, plus a few more. As mentioned above, the audit examined our buildings concerning repair, life safety code, ADA, and curriculum delivery. All in all, the total bill to rectify the identified shortcomings of our facilities comes to \$7.8 million.

The Custer and Middle School buildings are 70 years old. North Park, built in the early 1950's is over 50 years old. The High School and the connecting media center and classrooms are the newest buildings at 35 and 20 years old, respectively, but still have life safety issues. The question to answer is: Do we spend this amount of money on buildings that are this old? And furthermore, as pointed out so succinctly, do we spend that money on the buildings and still have buildings that don't look any different?

These questions are huge. They are bedrock, foundation-type questions that require considerable thought and planning. To that end, the Board of Education commissioned the formation of a community facilities committee that had its first meeting last week. 90 people attended the first meeting. At that meeting the High School and Middle School facilities were reviewed against the audit and the participants were able to tour the building on a self-guided basis.

The next meeting is scheduled for January 29, 2007. As was the case at the High School and Middle School, the committee participants will review the audit as developed by the architect and have time to conduct self-guided tours of North Park and Custer elementary schools.

This is an important process for the Broken Bow school community. It isn't too late to become involved in the community planning. If you are interested in becoming a part of this exciting work, please call Alberta Crawley to get on the mailing notification list.

LB 126

LB 126 is repealed as of the November election. What this means legally is one thing, what it means practically is another.

The legal folks are all over the road with opinions about what the vote to repeal means. On the one hand is the group that says, "Give us back our checkbooks." They are sure that it is just a matter of course that possession and control of the Class I's has reverted to the local patrons. On the other hand we have the group that is of the opinion that all the repeal did was eliminate the legal protections due the former Class I's. There have been at least three bills introduced so far during this legislative session to reconstitute the Class I's so that they at least resemble their former selves, if not an outright reproduction.

What this means practically is that the Class I's remain under the control of the Class II or III district into which the district were merged until new orders are received from the Nebraska Department of Education Reorganization Committee. Stay tuned as this plays out in the legislature, and possibly the courts, over the next few months.

Conclusion

If Gary Moore were to do his *That Wonderful Year* production on 2006 any one of a number of highlights would tip the viewer to the year's importance. Many significant steps forward were taken in 2006 from which future generations of Broken Bow students will benefit. But the challenges before us regarding both our facilities and legislation will also have significance on the educational health of our students. Our task is to remain involved and strong in seeking to make future years potential candidates for *That Wonderful Year*.