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Zach Stich/Daily Journal

Open enrollment has caused a competition between neighboring school districts for students. The first mandatory open enrollment law was passed in 1987, according to a report titled, "Moving On: Why students move between districts under open enrollment," written by John F. Witte, Deven E. Carlson and Lesley Lavery, in 2008.

Districts become rivals

Open enrollment in area schools

School	Gained	Lost
Battle Lake	50	100
Fergus Falls	411	362
Pelican Rapids	32	175
Rothsay	100	15
Underwood	304	59

Schools put best foot forward in an attempt to entice parents and students to their district

By Zach Stich
Daily Journal

It is the elephant in the room for most school districts. The issue of open enrollment in Minnesota has forced several schools to take a page out of the college recruiting handbook as schools update facilities, offer new programs and put on its best smile, in an attempt to entice parents to send their student to the school.

"Parents have demanded choice of schools in Minnesota as a right, so we must work hard to deliver an excellent education in a great environment to keep our students," Fergus Falls superintendent Jerry Ness said. "As a regional center, we want to ensure that we offer many classes and activities for our students."

Ness points to the school's junior engineering, auto and vocational classes and extracurricular activities, including math league, history day, music and sports, as ways to interest the school's population.

Another issue for schools is the loss of jobs in the community. Fergus Falls job reports estimate a loss of more than 1,200 students in the past 20 years due to the decrease in occupational opportunities.

In Underwood, the success of open enrollment has allowed the school to add two additional classrooms, more teachers and additional bus routes as students outside the community contin-

ue to be drawn to the small school. The District 550 boasts 304 students who live outside the school's district who attend the school, compared to 59 in the community that chose to go to another school district.

Open enrollment is not only a financial boost for the district, but the caliber of students who come from outside of the community are a valuable asset.

"Our open enrolled students have greatly helped our programs by giving our program additional numbers as well as additional talent," Underwood Superintendent Jeremiah Olson said. "The addition of open enrolled students have helped all of our athletic and academic programs."

On the opposite end, the Pelican Rapids School District has seen a large exodus from the school district. Stephanie Winjum, business office manager of Pelican Rapids, said the school has surveyed families in the community to find out why it seems they are leaving the district and the answer came down to two reasons: either a student will enroll in a town where a parent works or in a district where a parent has graduated.

Busing has also been a big issue in regards to open enrollment. With the expansion of busing routes, it is common practice to see three buses pass each other in the same town — each of the vehicles taking students to different districts.

"Some districts became very deliberate in marketing their schools to

surrounding communities and it was easy to understand why," Battle Lake Superintendent Jeff Drake said. "Door-to-door busing service was provided, although it meant extending routes beyond the district boundaries. Before long, all districts were faced with a choice: Either join in the practice of marketing and promoting or risk losing programs and services through reductions as revenue continued to decline."

Drake said the extra revenue — about \$5,000 per student annually in state funds — outweigh the cost of sending a school bus to pick up a student miles away. The superintendent pointed out the positives that it brings, not only to the student, but to the school as districts focus on providing the best educational experience and gives parents the option to decide which school fits their student the best.

In the future, most superintendents in the area see their school's numbers remaining consistent.

Rothsay superintendent Warren Schmidt said he believes that the district's recent vote to build a new school in Rothsay may increase the district's enrollment from outside sources.

Time will only tell if the issues of open enrollment will force schools to scale back or to change its philosophy toward the topic.

With constant competition, parents and students will continue to benefit as schools jostle for academic funding in a dwindling student population.

New owners begin restoring building ravaged by summer fire

By Heather Rule
Daily Journal

New owners have taken on the downtown Fergus Falls building damaged by an electrical fire this summer, with the hopes of making it inhabitable again within a few months.

The electrical fire in the building in the 200 block of Lincoln Avenue in July displaced businesses and families living in the upper-level apartments. Construction crews stabilized the building later that month, but it still sat damaged and empty until HLS Properties bought the building Oct. 3.

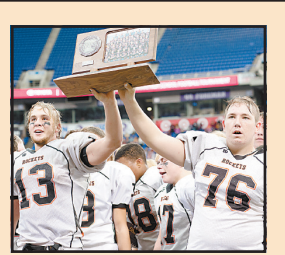
"Nobody was doing anything with it," said Sander Habraken, who owns the building with Jim Langman and Stacy Stock. "Things just worked out. Our mission is to first and foremost improve Fergus Falls the best way we can."

They want to "get it back up and running, make it part of downtown again," Habraken said. "It'll be just like it was."

The plan is to have retail space downstairs with one or two tenants, and then four apartments upstairs.

They've been working on the building since

See **Fire** — Page 2



Rocket pride

Underwood football finished second in the state playoffs. For coverage of the finals, see Page 7.

NEIGHBORS



Photo provided

About 50 people volunteered their time from Nov. 15-17 to clean and remodel the home of Rebekah and Adam Ekelund, which had become quite cluttered since Rebekah's sixth pregnancy and Adam's back injury.

Season of thanks Family's home cleaned, remodeled by church friends

By Chris Reinoso
Daily Journal

To Adam Ekelund, his family's problems with keeping their house clean needed to be addressed head-on rather than with small fixes here and there.

"We were putting band-aids on the problem and what we really needed was surgery," he said. Luckily for Ekelund and the rest of his family, their friends from Bethel Lutheran Church were more than willing to operate on the home.

After visiting Adam and Rebekah Ekelund at home on Nov. 12, Christine Lawson saw just how cluttered the house had become. The mantlepiece was full, piles of clothes filled the basement floor and two upstairs bedrooms were being used for storage.

"I saw the wheels moving in her head," Rebekah said about Lawson.

See **Family** — Page 3

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OBITUARIES

In today's Journal, Page 2

- Gerald Nagel, 78, Hillsboro, Ore.
- Edwin Preitauer, 81, Fergus Falls
- Roy Fjestad, 57, Fergus Falls
- Velma Herman, 92
- Karen Moske, 64, Fergus Falls
- Mathias Winkels, 89, Perham



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