

## Education

### School District maintains education on a small scale



Kristyna Wentz-Graff

Sandy Ramczyk, one of six full-time teachers at Drought School, teaches reading and social studies and leads the response to intervention committee.

By *Amy Hetzner of the Journal Sentinel*

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Kristyna Wentz-Graff

The entire first-grade student body at Drought School, Selena Grundy, (from left) Hailey Huckstorf and Abigail Paskiewicz, joins kindergartner Marissa Fakes in a reading exercise in Heidi Jaworski's class last week.

**Norway** — The proverbial little red schoolhouse survives in the form of a brown brick building on the corner of W. Seven Mile Road and Highway 45 in Racine County.

Here at Drought School - the only school in the Norway School District - items from the eighth-grade bake sale sell for 25 to 75 cents each, the school administrator has been on the job for 20 years and the softball team can include students as young as third-graders.

There are advantages to the small school district in a 4-square-mile farmland oasis sandwiched between the urban Racine Unified School District and suburban Muskego-Norway School District.

But there also are downsides to this slice of rural life, preserved in small kindergarten-through-eighth-grade and high school districts in southeastern Wisconsin.

Last year, Norway's resident enrollment hit 76, the end of a five-year slide in which it lost more than 40% of its population, according to state records.

The plunge in students has caused the district to get more creative to live within its annual budget: Students from different grades have been combined into single classes, employees have picked up multiple duties, and administrators are writing more grants and requesting donations.

It doesn't seem to have caused many worries, however, even though Norway Superintendent Jeff Gorn doubts the district would be sustainable if its enrollment were to drop below 60.

"When you have a family atmosphere, the family survives no matter what," said Gorn, a clinical psychologist who also acts as guidance counselor and principal for the school.

### **Smallest K-8 district**

Enrollment has increased slightly, with eight more students attending for the current school year, Gorn said. That still makes the district the smallest of the state's kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school districts, most of which are located in southeastern Wisconsin.

Despite that, Drought offers art and music, serves hot lunch every day and provides Spanish instruction for first through eighth grades. The school has new computers in its library and computer lab as well as two interactive computerized Smart Boards for classroom use.

Flexibility has been key. Part-time teachers outnumber full-time teachers in the district, which reserves about \$20,000 to \$30,000 annually to pay teachers for extra hours if students need help on certain topics.

Art teacher Theresa Craig received emergency certification as a library media specialist last year and spends one day a week working with students in the district's library in addition to one day a week teaching art.

"It's two very, very different ways to see the kids," said Craig, who also fills in as a substitute teacher. "One's very, very quiet, and art's kind of loud."

The transition hasn't been that difficult because the school has never been very big, said Brenda Kostrzewa, who was a substitute teacher at Drought School for six years before becoming a classroom teacher 10 years ago. She is teaching a class with five third-graders and 11 fourth-graders, which means it's still small even by elementary school standards.

Last year, Kostrzewa taught a combined class of first- and second-grade students, so this makes it her second year with what is now the third-grade class. She moved up when the school decided to keep the fourth-grade teacher with her students as they transitioned into fifth grade.

"It keeps you on your toes," Kostrzewa said. "You're not stagnant. None of us get into a rut because it's always something new."

The district also relies on attracting students from outside its boundaries, which encompass residents from parts of the towns of Norway and Raymond. Drought receives state aid for

students who enroll through the state's open enrollment public school choice program and collects \$2,000 each from parents who pay to enroll eight children in Drought's morning 4-year-old kindergarten program.

## **Tight-knit district**

Even though the district accepts children from outside, it has resisted more permanent arrangements.

Less than 4 miles away, down Highway 45 near the corner with County Road K, is the single-school North Cape School District. With 228 students who, like the Norway students, feed into Waterford Union High School, the district seems like a natural candidate to combine with its tiny neighboring district. But there have never been serious discussions.

The Waterford Grade School District, just 8 miles to the west, explored consolidating with neighboring school districts several years ago, but it ruled out both Norway and North Cape because of a lack of classroom space at the time.

When the question of consolidation has come up, most residents in the Norway School District have been against it, school officials say.

"We have a fair amount of older people in the district that went to the school, and they like the small school, hometown, tight-knit community," said John Gultch, a Norway School Board member.

The district has existed for 110 years now, remaining a two-room school until 1956 when it underwent its first expansion. The school has been added onto twice since then, Gorn said.

Deanna Stever was the third generation of her family to go to Drought. Her eighth-grade daughter is the fourth.

Like many from the school, she cites Drought's close-knit environment as its main attraction. A nephew who moved from Drought to one of the larger public school districts in southern Milwaukee County is better friends with the kids back at Drought than he is with the children at his new school, she said.

The way Stever sees it, students at larger schools can get lost in the shuffle.

"You're just a number, and they don't know who you are," she said.

Not so at Drought School.

"This is the only time in our life that we'll not be a number here," said Stever, who is also on the Norway School Board. "Everybody has a name, and everybody at the school knows everybody's name."