



scaffidi
GERCO
75XR

 LOG A LOAD For Kids
LogALoad.org
Timber Professionals
TimberPA.com



From Dissolution to **RESURRECTION**

How the School District of Florence County rebounded | *Ben Niehaus*



“We

Positively Affect the Lives of Children.” That is the

vision that the School District of Florence County embodies each and every day when the school bell rings. However, upon conclusion of the 2004-05 school year, that vision almost disappeared as the district began the process of dissolution.

A number of factors had caused the school district to fall into severe financial trouble. It began when the state implemented revenue limits in 1993; the district levied very conservatively, creating a low per-pupil spending threshold. Things came to a head when the district built a new elementary school in 1998, but did not accurately budget for the additional operational costs of a new campus.

In addition, almost immediately after the opening of the new elementary school, enrollment declined

from more than 900 students to less than 600, primarily due to an exodus of several area industries. All of this took place just as the Great Recession began to build. At this point, the level of trust the community had with the district was at an all-time low. The district had two failed referendum attempts and only \$214,000 in its general fund. Closing the school district for good appeared to be the only option.

Before dissolving, the school district decided to try one last time to pass a referendum and save the school district. District leaders ramped up communication efforts to community members, attended town meetings and reached out to the public. Representatives from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) held informational meetings and school leaders and various stakeholders shared the implications for the county if its only school

district were to close. The outreach efforts worked. In the fall of 2005, the community passed a referendum that allowed the school district to stay open.

Voters realized that not having a school in Florence County would be detrimental to a way of life and that their school was critical to their collective prosperity. The School District of Florence County had resurrected itself in its service to students, families and community. Yet even today, some from afar still comment, “I thought that school was closed.”

Today, it is quite the opposite. Not only does the School District of Florence County continue to proudly serve all of Florence County, the district is excelling in its mission. The passing of a \$14.5 million referendum during the fall of 2016 to completely renovate the aging high school is evidence that Florence

Today, not only does the School District of Florence County continue to proudly serve all of Florence County, **the district is excelling in its mission.**

County Schools has resurged from darker times a decade ago.

The school provides an array of opportunities for the 370 students in grades 4K-12, and does so at an exemplary level. The elementary school has earned numerous Title I School of Recognition awards, earning another this past spring. And this past year, Florence County High School was recognized by *US News & World Report* as a “Best High School in America.”

■ Florence County Schools

The transition from a district on the brink of dissolution to having a high school that is recognized as one of the best in America did not happen overnight. Once the referendum was passed in the fall of 2005 to save the district, school leaders in Florence worked hard to strengthen the district’s finances and academics.

The district rebuilt its general fund as quickly as possible so it didn’t need to short-term borrow. School leaders adopted a 10-year

capital plan that helped school leaders carefully manage the district’s finances. In addition, leadership charged the staff to come forth annually before the school board with responsible budgets and do away with the “If we don’t spend it, we will lose it” budget mentality.

The district also worked hard to maintain class offerings (even when the head count was less than 10) so that students received the courses they needed in preparation for post-secondary education. Most impor-



Most importantly, school board members from this time period said **the key was that they slowly regained the trust of the community.**

tantly, school board members from this time period said the key was that they slowly regained the trust of the community. They emphasized the importance of maintaining and keeping that trust and remembering where the district came from.

■ Cutting Edge Learning

Today, we're proud of the educational opportunities our small school district offers to students. Beginning with the 2015-16 school year, Florence County High School opened a Fab Lab and presently is partnering with UW-Stout in 4K-12th grade STEAM curriculum development.

During the past two school years, the outpouring of support and collaboration focused on the Fab Lab from the community and local and regional business partners has been growing in leaps and bounds. The school district meets quarterly with an industry advisory council that helps to provide guidance, support, and real-world, relevant learning experiences, along

with donations in supplies, equipment and monetary gifts. This work is benefitting our students.

"I believe the Fab Lab and my technical classes will help me in my future career as I intend to go into the engineering field," says Joshua Sonkowsky, a junior at Florence High School. "When I do go out into the engineering field, I will have a head start over the other people who I will be competing against."

Even with an enrollment that is half of what it was only a decade ago, the high school's offerings are more than ever. If a student wants to take a course not directly offered at Florence, there's a strong likelihood that the course, or a similar one, is available via NWECS (Northern Wisconsin Educational Communication Systems).

Our district and community has also benefitted from a close partnership with the local technical college — Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC). During the 2009-10 school year, NWTC

entered into an agreement with the district to utilize a former elementary school for what is now a highly utilized and successful business incubator.

NWTC has further expanded its use of the business incubator facility to provide Youth Options programming for not just Florence High School but several other surrounding districts. Most recently, during this past winter, the district and NWTC reached an agreement to transfer ownership of the vacant elementary school to NWTC and turn it into the Woodland Regional Learning Center.

The development of the learning center will be guided by a three-year strategic plan, formed with the support and facilitation of one of the larger regional employers. Because of this partnership with area schools NWTC and industry, the future is now brighter than ever for what was a vacant building.

The partnership with NWTC has also positively impacted our classrooms. Through these collaborative



About Florence County School District

As one of only two countywide school districts in Wisconsin, the School District of Florence County is the 10th largest in the state geographically, covering 488 square miles. The district-owned bus fleet is comprised of eight routes that travel 600 miles per day. This contributes to long bus rides, like those of many rural districts, and nearly \$400,000 per year in transportation costs.

After passing a referendum in the fall of 2005 and saving the district from

dissolution, Florence County is beginning to see their school again as it was during the often recollected "Glory Days" of the 80's and 90's. During this time, the district's enrollment was more than double what it is today and the high school athletic teams were terrorizing the field of play in northeast Wisconsin. Today, the district features a Fab Lab and is building partnerships with local business partners and technical colleges. □

partnerships and the utilization of staff who can teach for dual credit, 31 students of the graduating class of 2016 walked across the stage with 224 college credits earned.

■ Collaboration

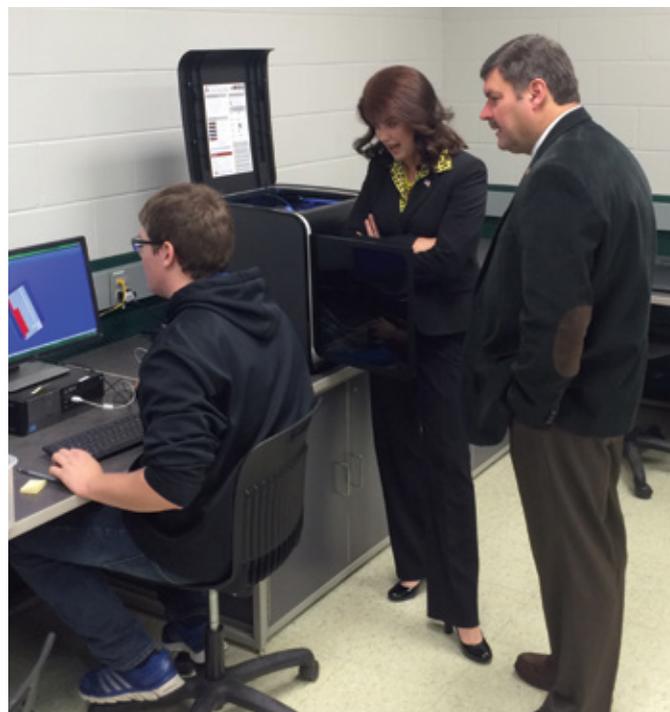
The new found success and growth of Florence County Schools was not accomplished alone. Beginning in 2005, Florence County hired an economic development director. The theme of economic development resonated, and the message to the community was that economic success relied on the success of the school district. Florence County passed a resolution to raise the county sales tax by 0.5 percent and to provide these revenues to the school for several years to help alleviate the fiscal challenges the district experienced.

Lifelong resident, alumni and County Board Chair Jeanette Bomberg, whose grandkids, nieces and nephews attend Florence Schools today is one of the school's greatest champions.

"We strongly believe that our school is our past, present and

future," Bomberg said. "Without a school, communities lose their identity, we did not want that for Florence. Thanks to the dedication of school leadership, county officials, town officials and residents of the county, everyone worked together to rally and save our school. The future for Florence School is nothing but bright, and we can be so proud to say we are from Florence, a school leader in academics and cutting-edge technology that puts students first."

Today, Florence County Economic Development Director Wendy Gehlhoff corresponds almost weekly on cooperative endeavors with the district. Together, we coordinate all meetings with industry partners, and, among other success, have written numerous grants together.



One recent success story was the hosting of a second annual tech fair that brought industry partners, NWTC and many other supporting agencies to the district to meet with all 7-12th grade students. Students presented their work from the Fab Lab and other STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) projects across all content areas, while employers shared what they are looking for in future employees.

It was great to see local employers asking students about their project designs. Students are always inspired when they see those from outside the walls of the school are highly interested in what they have accomplished.

Collaboration within our district has also been a focus. A few years ago, the teachers and administrators realized that for a culture of learning to grow, staff had to reflect and ask, 'What must we do to further change the culture of the school, close gaps and increase achievement levels?'

Upon investigation, and with the support of the school board, the district began steps to fully initiate



a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model. This collaborative effort has broken down the “silos” in instruction, created capacity for data analysis and time to plan for strategic interventions to see students succeed. There is much more work to be done. The willingness and desire of the staff to work together in the interest of all students has brought forth a swift change in culture, particularly in the high school.

“Major disciplinary referrals have decreased by 57 percent in one year,” states high school principal Brandon Jerue. “This is due to our focus on culture and building for positive behaviors through PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports), along with a continual reflection of best practices to improve a culture of learning and respect. In addition, student achievement has increased each of the past

three years, specifically in our efforts to close achievement gaps through RtI (Response to Intervention).”

■ The Future

The positive change in culture in our district has occurred not just from within, but from outside the walls via a supportive county that shows great pride in its school system.

With the offerings of a Fab Lab, renovation of the high school campus, and a plethora of dual credit opportunities in addition to many extracurricular and co-curricular activities, the future is bright for the School District of Florence County.

Our partnerships continue to grow with local and regional industry. They recognize the need for graduates with a quality education and technical skill set. Our community recognizes the importance a good school system plays in local

economic development.

The district continues to move forward. We are currently focused on STEAM integration across all grade levels to support the growing demand for career and technical education. We also look forward to the implementation of academic and career planning to provide students with guidance and direction to success. With a resurgence in commerce and employment opportunities, there is great optimism that enrollment will increase and maximize available seats.

The past is the past, but surely is not forgotten in Florence County. A continual reflection upon the past, in the present, will keep Florence County’s focus on its vision of “Positively Affecting the Lives of Children” for the future and many generations to come. ■

Ben Niehaus is district administrator for the School District of Florence County.



Annual Board Development Tool

Start the discussion on board effectiveness in your district.

Use the WASB/School Perceptions complimentary, online Annual Board Development Tool to evaluate your board’s effectiveness in 12 governance areas including vision, policy, continuous improvement, and more.

Contact the WASB today to learn more.



Customized Leadership Services | 608-257-2622 | 877-705-4422 | Visit wasb.org