

Davenport Schools Form Committee to Push for Legislative Changes

Written by Jesse Virgil

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More money for local schools, as well as more freedom in terms of spending levels, are the top priorities of a new committee in Davenport. The Legislative Advocacy Committee was formed by the Davenport Community School District Board in February to work with local legislators and community members on those issues.

“Local legislators do respond,” said Karen Farley, a committee member and communications specialist for the district. “They have to respond to what’s happening in their own district, in their own neighborhood, and the people they are going to run into at the grocery store or at work or at functions when they are out in the community. That’s the expectation we should hold these people to, by being able to then put a face on these problems.”

The committee consists of members from the Davenport Community School District Board, its staff, and the community. Its goals are to work with the community and legislature to provide more school funding; a “quality” classroom experience; and “quality,” accessible preschool programming.

The Davenport school district receives two types of funding: general and categorical. “General funding includes dollars generated by property tax, state aid, and certain types of miscellaneous revenue,” the Davenport schools publication “Dollars & Sense” noted. General funding dollars are unrestricted, not designated for a specific purpose.

Categorical funding is revenue that is restricted and must be used for a specific purpose. Examples of categorical funding include grants such as Title I, Carl Perkins, and Safe & Drug Free Schools.

According to “Dollars & Sense,” the Davenport Community School District received nearly \$127 million in fiscal year 2002-3 for both general and categorical funding. Within that budget, the district was able to spend \$7,979 per student – \$879 more per student compared to the statewide average.

However, Farley said that the district is struggling now because of the rising costs of doing business.

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“During the past three years, we’ve seen costs for everything from gasoline, energy, building-construction materials, textbooks, and many other items go up an average of 15 percent,” she said in an e-mail. “Some (like fuel) have gone up more than 30 percent. When your funding does not keep pace with your costs, something has to give.” The district has had layoffs at almost every educational level, cut before- and after-school programs, consolidated other school programs, and closed three elementary schools in the past three years.

Because schools receive “X amount per student that’s enrolled,” said Farley, declining enrollment in Davenport has led to less money. According to Farley, there were 16,264 students during the 2003 school year. In 2005, there were 16,181 – a decline of 83 students.

Another problem the committee is tackling is allowable growth, which restricts the amount of money school districts can spend in a given year. Currently, Iowa school districts can only increase their budgets from the previous fiscal year by 4 percent.

Farley said the committee would like to see an increase in allowable growth to 6 percent, a measure that was recently voted down by the Iowa Senate.

“We’d like to use it [money gained from higher allowable growth] to improve the classroom experience by providing additional professional development for staff; better compensation for our teachers and other staff; to increase both recruitment and retention; provide for classroom materials – books, equipment, etc.; [and] out-of-school program opportunities,” Farley said in an e-mail.

One of the first actions of the Legislative Advocacy Committee is a trip to the state capital entitled Hop on the Bus. Students, parents, and staff members will ride up to Des Moines on March 28 to meet directly with state legislators to discuss ideas on how to change the current situation.