

Facility Needs Increase for Special Education

Article from Pipestone County Star

www.pipestonestar.com/articles/facility-needs-increase-for-special-education/

By Debra Fitzgerald | on April 11, 2018

Steve Rops' position as Dean of Students at Blue Mounds Learning Center in Pipestone didn't even exist until a year ago.

But the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative (SWWC) Learning Center that serves the K-12 student population almost doubled this year and with it, the teaching staff.

They now have 22 students at the Minnesota West campus in Pipestone, where Blue Mounds operates in leased space, up from 12 students last year; maximum enrollment would be 33.

The increase in student population at Blue Mounds is happening at all five of the Alternative Learning Centers that SWWC operates in Minnesota, according to Cliff Carmody, SWWC executive director.

Why that's happening is a harder question to answer, he said.

"There are more mental health issues than a generation ago, more students with autism, more students with more severe emotional behavior problems," he said.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted in 1975, mandates that children and youth ages 3–21 with disabilities be provided a free and appropriate public school education. Since then, the number of school-aged children who receive special education climbed before leveling off at 13 percent in 2014-15, or 6.6 million students, according to the latest data from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics.

Special education funds are paid by the students' member districts, which includes staffing, educational supplies and all the costs associated with programming.

"To pay for the bricks and mortar has always been a challenge," Carmody said.

Leasing space in old elementary schools or in Pipestone at the Minnesota West campus, for example, has been the model for facilities to date. To create facilities designed to meet special-needs students, SWWC is looking for state bonding money somewhere between \$40-\$50 million. The money would help renovate existing space to meet the unique needs of special needs students, and add a sixth facility.

"We all know we want appropriate facilities for kids," Carmody said. "It doesn't matter if it's a disability or regular traditional school setting. We need appropriate facilities."

SWWC is currently asking its 54 member school districts across its 18 south/southwest counties to encourage state legislators to recognize the need and invest in the facilities for the programs.

“I want to be able to say look, we have 54 school boards and they all recognize this need and we need to find solutions and you need to help us do that,” he said.

To date, Carmody has received resolutions from half the districts signaling their support, including Pipestone Area Schools, which approved the supporting resolution at their last regular meeting.

Though it's a bonding year for legislators, Carmody doesn't have illusions about the ask. Legislators across their service area have told him they don't like to put school requests into the bonding bill.

“So I think it's going to be a long shot this session to make headway, but we know how the legislative process works,” he said. For now, they'll continue to press. “You shine a light on it and let people know it's a need.”