

This editorial was submitted by Superintendent Kowalski to the Findlay Courier and ran on January 25, 2019 as a guest column.

OPEN ENROLLMENT OFFERS MANY BENEFITS

According to the Ohio Department of Education, “Open enrollment allows a student to attend school tuition-free in a district other than the district where his or her parents reside.” Sure, it sounds simple enough but the way open enrollment plays out in Ohio school districts is more nuanced than that.

Out of 609 school districts in the state, 82.4 percent offer some level of open enrollment, including all of the school districts in Hancock County.

Liberty-Benton Local Schools has participated in Ohio’s widely used open enrollment program since the 2010-2011 school year. Our district enrollment is currently at 1451 students in grades K-12. We have 309 students who are open enrolled from various school districts. Conversely, we have 104 students who are open enrolled out of our district.

In our recent community surveys, we saw a little bit of skepticism about open enrollment, and I would like to address these concerns because I truly believe that open enrollment comes with great benefits to participating school districts.

Let me make it clear that there are limits to the number of students accepted into our district from outside of the school district. For example, we cap each grade level at a sustainable number of students, and if that cap is reached with students residing inside the school district then we do not accept students from outside of the district. That is generally how open enrollment works. In other words, open enrollment is only used to fill empty seats. That being said, all districts have bubble years in which there are larger numbers of students in certain grade levels due to high birth rates and other factors. If that is the case, then we make accommodations to meet the needs of our district residents and will add classroom staff, if necessary, to accommodate larger grade levels.

And there are many benefits to open enrollment—more choices for families, more choices for students through expanded course and extracurricular offerings and a more diverse student population. Added to that, open enrollment helps combat our state’s fragmented school funding model. Because all districts in Hancock County participate in the state’s open enrollment program, if a Liberty-Benton resident chooses to attend another school district, the state’s funding for that student follows him or her, which means our school district loses critical state funding. The converse is also true—if a child from outside our district attends Liberty-Benton, then the state funding for that child follows that child. Since 2010, the district has offset the expense of resident students attending school elsewhere by accepting students from other districts. **From a financial prospective, open enrollment generated \$1,885,625.00 in fiscal year 2018—more than our two emergency levies combined which produce \$1,424,000 annually.**

Ultimately, the goal is to stay cost neutral and balance the loss of revenue we have from our students attending school in other districts. Our district offers a great value to residents with a great quality of education and a mindset of carefully stretching our precious resources as far as possible. We are not looking at renovating or replacing our buildings because of open enrollment; our school buildings have serious mechanical and structural issues that must be addressed to protect the investment in the school and maintain the great quality of education all Liberty-Benton students receive.

LETTER FROM THE TREASURER

At Liberty-Benton Local Schools, we want to provide exceptional learning opportunities to our students and support our staff with the materials, resources and development they need. We carefully budget so we only spend the money we have and we allocate most of our budget to where it matters most – the classroom. Not only do we have some of the best teachers in the state, but we are also implementing the best research-based instructional practices in the classroom to enhance every student’s opportunity at success.

We are able to provide these experiences to our students at a great value through our responsible fiscal management.

We are proud to spend 67% of our funding directly in the classroom and strive to maintain this commitment to our students and our teachers. This is a priority for us as a school district and for me personally. Unfortunately, this commitment is becoming more and more challenging because of the growing maintenance investments our aging school facilities require to keep our students warm, safe and dry. Additional challenges like the unpredictable state funding model and rising costs of education put this commitment in greater jeopardy in the near future.

The effort to address our aging facilities through May’s ballot issue is yet another step toward responsible fiscal management for the district and the community.

I am proud of our district’s strong fiscal management and how we have optimized our current resources to make the biggest impact in the lives of our students. Addressing our facilities while \$19,900,000 of state funds are available will not only allow us to prevent the drain on daily operations created by our aging buildings, but will allow our students to thrive in the 21st century learning environments they need to compete on the global stage. Additionally, the property taxes that funded construction of the high school will expire at the end of this calendar year, meaning our local taxpayers will not foot the bill for multiple projects at once.

Fiscal responsibility is one of our key priorities and every facet of that commitment points to now being the right time to pursue the facility goals that will make our community, our district and our students stronger.

If you have any questions about the district’s budget, please do not hesitate to contact me directly. These schools belong to our community, a community I am grateful to serve.

Respectfully,



Lisa Dobbins, Treasurer



MASTER FACILITY PLANNING UPDATE

In January, the district completed an 18-month long, community-driven master planning process, which was led by the Community Advisory Team – a group of parents, community leaders, business partners, teachers, administrators and board members. This team was tasked with reviewing and developing master facility plan options and ultimately making a recommendation to the district’s Board of Education.

After an extensive planning review, which included community presentations, community surveys and multiple meetings to review future enrollment, facility assessments and half a dozen master plan options, the recommendation from the Community Advisory Team included the following:

Liberty-Benton should accept the offer from the state to pay for 57% of the following improvements:

- Build a new 128,000 square foot elementary school to house PK-8 students
- Renovate Liberty-Benton High School to bring the original mechanical and roofing systems up to current standards

The Community Advisory Team also recommended the following:

Include the following Locally Fund Initiatives (which the district must pay 100% of the cost):

- 800-seat performance auditorium to reflect the district’s growing student interest and commitment to the performing arts
- Funding for material upgrades to extend the life and longevity of the buildings

As a result, in late January, the Liberty-Benton Board of Education approved the resolutions necessary to put a 35-year, 7.3-mill bond issue on the May 7 ballot. All tax millage related to the construction of the high school will expire at the end of 2019, meaning the May 2019 ballot request will have a true tax impact of 5.5 mills or \$16.08 per month for the owner of a \$100,000 property.

“If the bond issue passes in May, we can adequately address our facility needs without having to divert funds away from our daily operating budget,” said Mark Kowalski, superintendent. “We are grateful for the involvement of all of the members of the Community Advisory Team for donating their time and making sure the needs and values of the community have been included in this important process in shaping the future here at Liberty-Benton.”

For more information about district facilities, please visit liberty-benton.org/facilities.aspx.

UPCOMING DATES

March 11, 2019

NEW DATE

State of Schools Presentation | 7 pm, LBHS

March 12, 2019

Music in Schools Month Concert | 7:30 pm, Gateway Church

March 18, 2019

3.5 Banquet | 6:30 pm, LBHS

March 22, 2019

Kindergarten Screening | 8:30 am, Gateway Church

March 28, 2019

High School Music Fest (featuring the Steel Blossoms) | 7 pm, The Nest

April 11, 2019

FFA Banquet | 6 pm, LBHS

April 12, 2019

Athletic Boosters Reverse Raffle | 7 pm, Hilton Garden Inn





SPECIAL PARTNERSHIPS BRING SPECIAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

At Liberty-Benton, we want to give all of our students the opportunity to soar. With this idea in mind, the district recently began partnering with a couple of local organizations to bring hands-on learning experiences to special needs students.

Twice a month, Awakening Minds Art, which “provides a place for people to be themselves and not judged” with programs that are “carefully designed for special needs individuals of all ages”, hosts art classes in the elementary and middle school ID (intellectually disabled) resource rooms.

Through the program, students learn about and utilize art concepts and tools to hone skills, such as following instructions, increasing hand-eye coordination, developing fine motor skills and improving art techniques.

“The kids look forward to the class every time and are always enthusiastic to learn new approaches to art,” said Deserae Patterson, intervention specialist at Liberty-Benton Middle School. “Because of this partnership, our students are empowered to embrace their unique talents and have consistent access to dedicated time during the school day to create works of art.”

Another special partnership for special needs students in grades K-8, is with Challenged Champions, whose mission is “to enrich and change the lives of children and adults with special needs through facilitated equine activities.”

Twice a year, every Monday for eight weeks, participating district students travel offsite to the Challenged Champions facility to work with animals while also learning and strengthening other key skills, such as building muscle strength, increasing self-confidence, recognizing social cues, following instructions and understanding safety.

During the sessions, students are partnered with volunteers in the riding arena to work together to check the horse and equestrian equipment and then ride. The facility also offers one of very few locations that have a mechanical lift to help riders mount the horses so students are able to use that assistance if necessary.



“One of the most fantastic aspects of the program is that it gives the students the knowledge and space to be in charge of their learning while connecting with not only another person but with an animal,” said Patterson. “Although the horseback riding is fun and the students love it, they are also building so many other skills; the benefits of taking time away from a typical classroom setting are immeasurable for these students.”

The district plans to continue to cultivate more opportunities like these for the students.

“I am grateful for the staff and organizations that make these experiences possible for our students. Our goal is to give each and every student the chance to discover and sharpen their strengths while also leaning into areas of improvement,” said Bruce Otley, principal at Liberty-Benton Middle School. “Any opportunity we can take to help our students build confidence, showcase compassion and learn life skills, is an opportunity worth taking.”

For more information about Awakening Minds Arts, visit awakeningmindsart.org and for more information about Challenged Champions, visit challengedchampions.com.



Artwork created collaboratively by the entire Awakening Minds class.

YOUR VOICE MATTERS

We are coming to a crossroads for our schools. On May 7, we will be placing an issue on the ballot that will help us address the serious issues we face with our aging facilities. We are moving forward with this ballot request because we do not want to divert funds from the exceptional learning that is happening in our classrooms to address our facility needs.

If the bond issue passes in May, it will fund our master facility plan created with your input and will allow us to address our facility needs and provide our students with great facilities that match the exceptional teaching they receive every day. The plan includes construction of a new pre-kindergarten through 8th grade building, which will include much-needed security upgrades to ensure everyone who enters our doors is safe at school and flexible learning spaces to provide inspiring environments as our children learn and grow. It will also fund a new performance auditorium and renovations to the high school.

There are several ways for your voice to be heard this spring. Polls will be open on May 7, 2019 from 6:30 am–7:30 pm and absentee (voting by mail) is available beginning on April 9. You can also vote early in-person at the county Board of Elections from April 9 until May 6. Please note that the deadline to register to vote is April 8 and I suggest taking a minute now to ensure you are registered to vote. Your voice matters! You can check your voter registration, request an absentee ballot and see all the early voting hours at hancockboardofelections.com.

The truth is, education has changed tremendously over the last 100 years, which is nearly how old our elementary building is. It’s time for us to re-invest in the future of learning, and the future of our children. Our teachers are using research-based instructional methods to teach critical thinking and creative problem solving tied to real-world experiences with the help of technology every day in our classrooms. These new methods of teaching and learning require more flexible and collaborative spaces, spaces we cannot provide in our current facilities.

I encourage you to join me on March 11 at our annual State of the Schools address at 7 pm at Liberty-Benton High School, where I will be sharing more about what is happening in our classrooms, what will be possible with our new facilities and how we are actively preparing our students to be successful, globally-minded citizens now and after graduation. See you there!

Sincerely,

Mark Kowalski, Superintendent



UPCOMING DATE

March 11, 2019

NEW DATE

State of Schools Presentation | 7 pm, LBHS

DID YOU KNOW?

FACT 1

66

electives are offered at Liberty-Benton High School

FACT 2

355

Liberty-Benton Middle School students participate in a 7-week vocational agriculture experience



At Liberty-Benton, 100% of district students have direct access to a computer device through the district’s one-to-one technology initiative. And starting this year, district students also have access to virtual learning opportunities to expand their educational experience at Liberty-Benton Local Schools.

Through the district’s Virtual Learning Academy, 50 Liberty-Benton High School students are enrolled in online elective classes offered by the district and taught by district staff.

This year, the district has offered four courses: Career Exploration, Marketing Basics, Study Skills and Games Through the Ages. Although the high school already offers dozens of elective courses, the Virtual Learning Academy is a useful—and sometimes necessary—option for many.

“We wanted to provide more options for our students while also giving them the flexibility they might need to explore interests or gain more credit hours,” said Ben Gerken, assistant principal at Liberty-Benton High School. “Not all students learn the same way or have the ability to fit in as much as they would like to in their schedules, due to other commitments or time constraints. Through our Virtual Learning Academy, the students are able avoid these obstacles and take while also sharpening their time management skills and self-discipline.”

The Jefferson County Educational Service Center provides the curriculum; high school administrators and the guidance staff chose the classes they thought would best fit the needs and interests of the high school population.

The classes range from completely virtual, as is the case with Games Through the Ages, to more of a hybrid, in which the class is taught in a classroom during the school day but the curriculum is online, as is the case with Career Exploration.

Noah Aschemeier, a Liberty-Benton High School senior who plans to major in Discovery Science at University of Dayton, felt that his experience in the Career Exploration course was influential in his process of identifying his career path. “I really enjoyed how the Career Exploration course was a combination of online learning and in-person interaction. We were able to talk with people from many different professions and it gave me insight on what I might be interested in the future. It was a rewarding class, and the job shadowing experience I had at Cooper Tire opened my eyes to what a chemist does in the tire industry.”

The district also offers students the opportunity to take core curriculum courses virtually.

“This is typically a last resort but it’s one we still want to offer our students who need flexibility in their schedules due life circumstances,” continued Gerken. “We want our kids to graduate with a high school diploma while also remaining in the Liberty-Benton community, if at all possible.”

These students can still participate in all district activities, such as dances, sports and arts performances, which gives them to chance to acquire a well-rounded educational experience as a Liberty-Benton Eagle.

“At Liberty-Benton Local Schools, we care about all of our students and support them in reaching their fullest potential,” said Mark Kowalski, superintendent. “Not only do we want them to achieve in the classes they choose to take, but we also want them to grow and gain the knowledge, skills and character necessary to be successful in the future.”

Liberty-Benton High School 2018 graduate Bobby Musselman spoke to the Career Explorations class about his experiences with the Bowling Green State University flight school.