

What is the status at our school?

By John Carpenter
Gazette Staff

"What's happening at the school?" "They say the State is going to close our school." "They say that some of the teachers and administrators are going to get fired." "They say that the school is going to drop sports." "They say that our administration might close our school and re-open it as a charter school." The Gazette has been hearing these rumors for quite some time now, but no one seems to be able to tell us who "They" are. No one quotes an official source or is able to point out any document stating these facts, they just heard it. It's no secret that our school is not rated as a high performing school by the Department of Education, but it's doubtful that our school is in a situation that would render any of the above statements accurate. So in order to find out what is really happening, the Gazette visited the school last week.

Prior to the visit we did some research on our school and the current focus of education. For many years the focus of education was on accessibility. Every student had a right to an education, and it was the responsibility of the school to provide whatever accommodations were necessary to accomplish this. Students needing special education were accommodated in the regular classrooms. Students with language needs were provided the instruction to allow them to understand the curriculum. Students with physical handicaps were given the same opportunities to participate in classroom activities as those without the handicaps. Although these requirements were at times expensive and presented their own difficulties, all schools were able to find a way to comply.

But with the passage of the "No Child Left Behind" legislation, the focus on accessibility was lessened and the focus on accountability increased. This put schools such as Columbus in a difficult position. In the past, it was possible to find ways to make an education available to all students. Most accessibility problems could be solved with imagination, innovation, and dedication. But accountability put a different light on education. All teachers are dedicated and take pride in their students' accomplishments, but not all teachers are given the same opportunities.

To explain the above point, consider our unique student body. We have urban school issues in a rural setting. This isn't necessarily bad, it's just different. Our county is one of the lowest income counties in the state of Iowa. We have a 7% homeless rate in our district (homeless is defined as not having a permanent residence). Many of our students have limited command of the English language, and when they go home after school, and during holidays and vacations, hear only their native language in the home. Columbus occasionally receives new students that have not had the education equivalent to their age. Recently a junior high student enrolled whose last grade completed was 2nd grade. The issues in many of our students' homes are economic, not education. Many of our upper grade level students are unable to receive help from their parents on homework because the work is beyond the parents' level of education.

Now consider the above points, and then consider that our students' test scores are ranked with other schools that may be more typical of Iowa: middle class incomes, educated parents, common language with the school, etc. How can we rank high? How can teachers and administrators be held accountable for a situation such as this? Of course we will be considered a low-achieving school. But are we?

I am prone to question how the Department of Education defines achievement. Give a teacher a bright kid from an affluent and educated family, and the teacher will succeed. And the Department of Education will state that the teacher is doing a wonderful job, the administration is doing a wonderful job, the school will be designated as a wonderful performing school, and everything will be wonderful. It would be difficult for the scenario to fail, but I question whether this truly defines achievement?

Now give this teacher a bright kid from a hardworking immigrant family. The family struggles every day to make ends meet, they struggle with the language and the new culture, and they are unable to offer the student much support other than encouragement. The student is intelligent, friendly, and excited to learn. But this student does have issues. He or she

has a very limited education. Possibly the student has had to skip years of school because of the family's movements. Although the student has some command of English, it is limited. (I was told that the average kindergarten student has a command of 5,000 words when they start school, but we have many students that may have a command of only 300 English words when they start school.)

Then let's assume that this student is the one mentioned earlier, he is of junior high age, but his education is limited to second grade. He has no understanding of math, and his reading skills are minimal at the beginning of the school year. But by the end of the year the teacher has taught this student an understanding of basic math skills, has possibly taken his reading skills to an upper elementary level, and, more importantly, given him an appreciation of learning and the desire to continue.

Now admittedly this student's test scores, when compared to the rest of the state, will be considered under-achieving. But tell me, who has achieved more, the first teacher, or this teacher?

This is the situation that our school faces today. It is underachieving when compared to other schools in the state, but, in my opinion, is overachieving when considering the factors that it faces. So what can be done about this? "We can accept our situation and continue to do our best," said Columbus Superintendent Rich Bridenstine, "and nothing will really happen to us. But is this in the best interests of our students?" A possible option that our school is considering is applying for funding from the Race To the Top legislation that will give us access to more resources such as additional translators, after school programs, and more professional development. Although Iowa was not a state selected for Race To the Top funding, grant money for under performing schools has been made available.

However, this funding does not come without stipulations. In order to receive these funds, a school must follow one of several guidelines. In Columbus' case, the transformation model is the one being discussed. This would require the high school and junior high school principals to switch duties, provide more professional development for teachers, and

set testing standards that teachers would be required to meet. "Our school must continue to be a great place for kids to learn, yet we must find ways to remove the barriers that our students face in education," said curriculum director Tara Paul.

So the question stands, should we apply for these funds and make the required changes, or should we try to come up with solutions without the government help? I don't know the answer, and I'm sure that the School Administration will be the first to tell you that they also don't know the magic answer. It probably will require a combination of some limited government programs, along with constructive input and suggestions from the public. But regardless of the course of action that is eventually decided upon, it is important that we veer away from the easy answer, criticizing or discouraging students that have these issues when they enroll in our school. These students are not liabilities to our educational system, they are opportunities and, when the solutions are found, as I am confident they will be, these young people will become assets to our community and state.

The Midwest is changing and it is our duty, as it was for our ancestors, to become a part of the process where society can capitalize and grow from these changes. We can't simply disregard these students and write them off as problems, because if we do, we will be disregarding our future, and the contributions that these young people can make.

Now isn't the time to look for blame, there is no one that deserves any blame, it's the time to look for solutions. So, to answer the first question in this article: What's going on at the School? - Achievement is what's going on at the school. Every day, in the face of challenges, many small steps are being taken at our school that are achieving great things. So what can you do to help propel this achievement? Write your legislators and the department of education, volunteer your suggestions and time, encourage our students, compliment our teachers and administrators, become a part of the solution so we can look at our school with pride and know that it is truly a high achieving school in the face of a changing 21st century Iowa.

Briefly -

CCHS Alumni Banquet set

The annual Columbus-Cotter-Conesville Alumni Banquet will take place on Saturday, June 12, 2010 at Roundy Elementary School. Reserve the date on your calendar and plan on celebrating with fellow graduates!

City Council meets tonight

The City of Columbus Junction will hold a regular Council meeting on today, Wednesday, April 28, 2010 at 5:30 p.m., in the New Civic Center/City Hall.

Lions to hold pancake breakfast

The Lions Club will hold their semi-annual pancake breakfast on Saturday, May 15 and Sunday, May 16 from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the Columbus Senior Center. All-you-can-eat pancakes, eggs, sausage and drinks. Adults - \$6.00 and children under 12 - \$4.00. All bikers and friends are welcome. We serve good food to good people for a good cause (Lionism).

Columbus City Clean-up Day

The City of Columbus City will hold their Clean-Up Day on Saturday, May 1, 2010. Have all items at the curb by 7 a.m., Saturday morning. City Clerk will be at City Hall on Thursday, April 29, from 4-6 p.m., selling appliance tags. Please separate items like metal, furniture and appliances. APPLIANCES: Require \$15.00 tag, includes refrigerators, freezers, stoves, microwaves, water heaters and softeners, air conditioners, humidifiers and florescent fixtures and bulbs. WE WILL NOT TAKE: Tires, batteries, paint and cans, hazardous materials, chemicals - wood or building materials, anything in garbage bags, yard wastes.

Conesville Mother-Daughter tea

The United Methodist Women of Conesville will be having a Mother-Daughter Tea at the church on Thursday, May 6 at 7 p.m. The speaker, Evonne Avesing from Fruitland, Iowa will tell about her recent trip to Japan. Refreshments will follow the program. Everyone is welcome.

Conesville School Reunion

The Conesville School Reunion is slated for May 29, 2010 at the Community Center in Conesville, Iowa. Invitations have been sent but anyone interested in this event is more than welcome to attend. You may call Fran Morrison at 319-728-2319 or Rose Wagoner at 319-728-2027 for reservations. The doors will be open at 11:30 a.m. and Kalona Kountry Catering will be serving a full meal at 12:30 p.m. The cost is \$16.00 per person. Don't let this reunion be something you've always wanted to attend but didn't. Just do it!

Embroidery Club to meet

The Embroidery Club meeting for May at, OUR SHOP will be on May 3 and May 18 from 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. We are working on Brazilian Embroidery. May 5 at 1:00 p.m., we are working on Brazilian Embroidery, and knitting. Please feel free to come to either and bring your own project if you don't want to do these projects. It is a time to get out and enjoy people.

For Sale from the Horticulture Class

The Horticulture class at Columbus Community High School will be selling vegetables, herbs, bedding and household plants May 3-May 7 from 3:30-5:30 p.m. daily in the greenhouse. Greenhouse is located across from the art complex and parking lot and can be accessed by entering through the double gates and following the signs. Questions? Please contact Katie McWhirter at 319-728-2231 ext.3621.

New hours for immigration clinic

The Diocese of Davenport has new hours for its Immigration Clinic. The Clinic is now held on the first Wednesday of each month from 10 am to 1 pm at the Rectory of the Church of Saint Joseph (815 Second Street, Columbus Junction). For more information, please call 319-728-8210.

Mother-Daughter Banquet in Letts

The Letts Bible Church will be hosting a Mother-Daughter Banquet on Friday, April 30th at 6 p.m. The speaker will be Tanya Hakes of Muscatine. The theme will be "Heavenly Handbags." All ladies and girls are invited to attend. Please bring a salad to pass. No charge, but reservations would be appreciated by Wednesday, April 28th. Please call these numbers for more information and reservations: 319-726-4911 or 319-729-5042.

PEO Salad Luncheon

If you want to see "Stars" before your eyes and have wonderful food and companionship, come to the P.E.O. salad luncheon. This lovely meal will be served at the American Legion on Monday, May 3rd, 11:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. Take-out meals are available. Tickets may be purchased at Plants and Things (who has a special bouquet/ticket combo available), Special Effects, The Feed Wagon, or any P.E.O. member. Proceeds from the luncheon go to a senior scholarship.

PEO to meet

The next meeting of PEO Chapter CX will be held at the Civic Center Library in Columbus Junction hosted by Jenny Humphreys on Monday, May 3 at 7:00 pm and co-hosted by Jane Thomann. The program will be "Columbus Art Students." All members are encouraged to attend. State Convention will be June 5 and 6.

School Board to meet

The Board of Education for the Columbus Community School District will hold a Special Public Meeting on Monday, May 3, 2010 at 6:30 p.m. at the Roundy Elementary School Library.

Wapello All-Alumni Banquet

The planning committee for the Wapello All-Alumni Banquet needs to know if any graduates did not receive letters regarding the July 17 event. Anyone who did not get the letter is asked to contact Jean Brauns at 319-523-3462 or by email at bjbrauns@mchsi.com or Paula Buckman at pbuckman@louisacomm.net. The letters are needed for making reservations.

Mincer Ford joins Ford's 25-Year Partner Group

Recently, Randy L. Ortiz, the General Manager for Ford and Lincoln Mercury Sales in Dearborn, Michigan, notified Larry Mincer of Mincer Ford in Columbus Junction, that his dealership has been welcomed to Ford Motor Company's 25-year partner group. It is an exclusive group who has maintained the same family-owned franchise over the last quarter century.

Larry Mincer started in Ford dealership in 1971. He bought the Columbus Junction Ford dealership in June 1984. In October 1984, he was officially granted the franchise.

Mincer Ford is a four-time President's Award winner. The dealership stresses customer service. Mincer added, "We're proud to serve Louisa County and surrounding areas. Mincer Ford has been able to survive in a small town because of its very dedicated employees that truly care about their customers."

Pictured is Larry Mincer, left, receiving a 25th anniversary plaque from Ford Motor Company.



New fire training simulator

By Deb Bean
Gazette Staff

A grant from FireAct (an organization of Homeland Security), written by Andy White, a resident and firefighter from Conesville, provided \$260,000, and seventeen community fire departments donated \$60,000 to purchase a new fire training trailer simulator. The communities involved were: Atalissa, Blue Grass, Conesville, Columbus Junction, Durant, Grandview, Fruitland, Morning Sun, Muscatine, Montpelier, Nichols, Letts, Oakville, West Liberty, Wilton, Walcott and Wapello.

Also seeing the need and helping the firefighters purchase the simulator was Carver Trust in Muscatine, donating \$15,000. The trailer's total cost was \$335,000. To date ten operators have been trained by the company, FireBlast from California, that specializes in training firefighters all over the world about fire behaviors, techniques appropriate for each situation as well as learning valuable search and rescue skills.

Grants are awarded to fire departments to enhance their ability to protect the public. With constant new construction and technology it re-

quires a firefighter to have more training time and with the trailer simulator availability they can practice in a controlled environment. The firefighters practice wearing breathing apparatus, while navigating the different rooms, stairs, floors and walls. The flames in the unit are oper-

ator controlled and quickly extinguished.

As the old saying goes, 'practice makes perfect' and with this shared simulator we can rest assured this will not only train our firefighters but will help to bring all firefighters home to their families.

