November 21, 2024 Durant High School

Students 'sick' of new lowa truancy

A Cedar County Public Health official says the state's new truancy law may be causing kids to come to school when they're

"Throughout the county, there have been a few concerns raised about this new legislation, including the likelihood of children being sent to school ill because parents are worried they may get into 'trouble' if they do not send them," said Ms. Joanna Foor, manager of Cedar County Public Health.

"Other school nurses have reported that they have had parents send their kids to school with things like sore throat, cough, etc."

Under the new truancy law, students who are absent for 10 percent of a grading period will be notified by a school's administration. For Durant High School, this 10 percent threshold is reached after nine days in a semester grading period.

After students are absent for 15 percent of a grading period, the school will hold an absentee prevention program with the student and the parents, and the school

will complete weekly check-ins with the students. For Durant students, this step would occur after 13 absences.

Once a student is absent for 20 percent of the grading period, the county attorney may begin criminal action against the parents. For Durant students, this criminal action could happen after 18 absences.

The law does include exemptions for religious holidays and "legitimate" medical reasons but not for family vacations.

Durant High School Principal Joel Diederichs said the school does not take out those absences that might be considered exempt when the student reaches the 20 percent threshold and the county attorney must

"We just do the recording of it here, and once they reach a threshold no matter what, then it's moved on to the county attorney by law," he said.

"It's out of our hands at that time. We're just recording the data down."

After receiving a case, the Cedar County Attorney's office will conduct its own investigation to determine whether any

Mr. Diederichs believes that some students who might have stayed home with a cold in the past feel like they have to come to school under the new truancy law.

Wilton High School Principal Jeromiah Bliss said parents of his students are also "concerned" about the new law because "vacations count toward this policy."

However, Mr. Bliss reassures parents that medically excused absences will not be counted against their child.

"I believe that they are excused absences because a doctor/professional has given the reason for the absence(s) being excused," he said.

An email was sent to the Durant parents last month regarding at least one positive case of pertussis, or whooping cough, at the school.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than five times as many cases of pertussis were reported nationwide late last month as compared to the same month in 2023.

Ms. Foor said it's hard to say how

much this new truancy law will affect students spreading illnesses at school,

"It is still early in the 'illness season,' so right now only time will tell how this updated law will impact our schools and families across Cedar County," said Ms.

"We are hopeful that school districts will support families who keep their ill child(ren) home, and families will reach out to their school district with questions or concerns about the law."

Ms. Foor says that even with the new law, students should still stay home if

"Despite the recent changes, public health messaging hasn't really changed," she said. "If you are feeling ill, no matter the age, please stay home."

Ms. Foor pointed to a series of criteria issued by Iowa's Public Health to determine whether a child over two months old should stay home due to illness. These criteria include a fever above 101 degrees coupled with other symptoms such as sore throat, rash, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Wildcats prepare for Battle of the

By Allison Toft

Fans will once again rock the Bomber Dome, Bennett's school gym, when it hosts two upcoming Durant varsity competitions.

Durant's boys' basketball team will scrimmage Calamus-Wheatland November 25, and the girls' and boys' wrestling teams will hold a dual meet with Tipton on December 19.

Bennett used to be a K-12 school, but it lost its high school in 2005, and now the elementary school students at Bennett have the choice to go to either the Durant or Tipton school districts once they reach the seventh grade, according to Bennett Principal Jeremiah Costello.

about the games in the gym, just how loud it would be and what a great atmosphere it was to hold a game in the gym," said Mr. Costel-

"Our current community has persevered, and we're not only surviving, but thriving, with a K-6 building and then the great sharing agreements that we have with both Durant and Tipton."

This won't be the first game played in the Bomber Dome since the high school closed.

Former 2014 Durant graduate Von Glaser, a Wildcat guard, remembers playing a game against Preston in the Bomber Dome his junior year.

"It was extra special for me as both "There's always stories being told my dad and grandma played basketball and

graduated from Bennett," Glaser said.

"The atmosphere was incredible. Everyone in Bennett gave a lot of support."

Durant Athletic Director Matt Straube and Mr. Casey Strub, a gym teacher at both Durant High School and Bennett Elementary School, came up with the idea of hosting Durant sporting events at Bennett.

"The sixth graders have a choice to go to Durant or Tipton," said Mr. Strub, Durant's wrestling coach. "I thought it would be fun to have 'the battle of the Bomber Dome.'

Sophomore wrestler Gunner Klahn wrestles for Durant in the 138-pound class but went to Bennett from preschool to first grade.

"I think this will be a good way to



Photo by Allison Toft

Sophomore Gunner Klahn will wrestle in a dual meet at Bennett's Bomber Dome next month.

showcase Bennett and the gym," Klahn said. Mr. Straube said he hopes the two sporting events "increases our presence in

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urant relies on open enrollment for one-third

By Royce Richman

More than a third of Durant's student population has open enrolled from outside the district this fall, including over 22 percent from Davenport.

According to the October enrollment count, the Durant student body is made up of 644 students, and 222 of these students live within the boundaries of other school districts, including Davenport, Muscatine, Wilton, Calamus-Wheatland, North Cedar, North Scott, and Pleasant Valley.

Durant Superintendent Mr. Joe Burnett said the large influx of students from outside the district shows that "we have a safe school, we have great teachers, we have good programming, and it's a place where people want to send their kids."

Most of these students, 146 to be exact, were able to enroll from Davenport after its diversity plan was shut down in 2021. There were only a dozen students from that district attending Durant in the 2021-2022 school year, but the number has grown rapidly since.

Prior to 2021, Durant's enrollment was on a slow decline, dropping from 671 in 2015 to 585 in 2021. But the district saw a jump in total number of students from 585 to 638 in just one year between 2021 and 2022

after the Iowa Legislature banned the use of diversity plans in Davenport and four other

Durant's total enrollment has stayed fairly steady since that year, but it's projected to drop in the next two years, reaching a low of 604.

Three high school gym classes currently have 30 or more students, and two seventh grade English classes have 26 and 28 students, but Mr. Burnett explained that those larger class sizes are simply due to scheduling conflicts, not a symptom of overcrowding.

"There's certain core classes that are offered at certain times," he said. "It's really more of a scheduling challenge than it is an overabundance of students."

PE and Fitness and Weights teacher Mr. Cody Wille agreed with Mr. Burnett on the scheduling issue.

"We only have one high school PE class going on at one time for the first five periods of the day," he said. "I've had 30 plus students in years prior as well, and while it's not ideal, it's still manageable."

To deal with the large class sizes, Mr. Wille alters the rules of some games to allow students more chances to be involved, such as allowing more outs in kickball. He explained that it's also hard to have productive weights classes since there are so many students in such a small space.

"One of the hardest things with big classes is finding enough time to interact with all the kids," said Mr. Wille. "That's part of the fun in teaching, but when you have a large class, it makes it more difficult to spend as much time being able to interact with them."

Although small rural schools like to boast small class sizes as an advantage over larger schools, Mr. Burnett said that "it's kind of a double-edged sword."

He explained that while he'd like to keep class sizes under 30 students, he doesn't want Durant to end up like Bennett, a neighboring town that no longer has grades 7-12 at its school.

"If you have really small class sizes, eventually you're going to not have a school anymore," he said.

"We don't want extremes on the small side, and we don't want extremes on the high side. I think where we're at in Durant is a pretty good sweet spot."

Bennett now has a grade sharing system with the Durant and Tipton school districts, where students can choose to go to either district once they finish sixth grade at Bennett's elementary school.

There are a lot of benefits to having a higher enrollment, including \$7,826 that schools receive from the state per student this school year, according to Mr. Burnett.

If schools get more funding, they can offer more classes and programs, such as foods, agricultural classes, foreign languages, or shop classes. Having too many students can cause overcrowding, but the superintendent thinks that Durant is nowhere near that point.

"If we want to have Durant grow as a community and remain viable as a community, we have to grow the school," said Mr. Burnett.

"Schools are often reflections of your community. If your school's shrinking, that says something about your community as well."

Only 51 Durant students have open enrolled out of the district this year, which is a positive sign for the school.

"If we had a large exodus of Durant students to other districts, then you've got to start looking inward and say, 'What are we offering, and what can we do to entice people to stay?" Mr. Burnett said.

"We've got the opposite effect, and we should be proud of that."