

Bridging the divide

By Mark Coddington

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WOLBACH — The tool that is being counted on to spearhead Greeley-Wolbach public schools' development over the next decade spends most of its time in a wood-paneled room in the old brick building at Wolbach school.

It's a high-definition flat-screen monitor and a camera slightly smaller than the size of a fist, accompanied by a remote and a mobile cart.

It's one of two mobile distance learning units between the district's two buildings. And most importantly, it's connected to a statewide network of hundreds of high school and community college courses, allowing Greeley-Wolbach students to take almost any class they want from almost anywhere.

This is not your father's distance learning system. This is Greeley-Wolbach's way to level the playing field with the Class A giants who have several times more students, teachers and class offerings.

"There are so many resources out there that are right there within our grasp," said Todd Beck, Greeley-Wolbach's principal. "It gives the small schools a chance to make these opportunities available that sometimes they wouldn't otherwise be able to offer."

Greeley-Wolbach was one of 83 districts across central and western Nebraska to connect this summer to the state's new high-bandwidth statewide telecommunications network.

For small schools, the upgrade offers an unprecedented opportunity to offer college courses, share teachers and classes with other schools, and close nagging gaps in curriculum coverage.

During a time when shrinking enrollment and hard-to-find staff are compressing those schools' budgets, the possibilities through this new distance learning model are tantalizing.

"Before, it would depend on the talents of the staff in your particular district," said Caroline Winchester, superintendent of Loup City public schools. "But now, the door's open."

A useful upgrade

Distance learning, of course, is nothing new. It's been around for at least a decade in Nebraska's schools, typically conjuring up images of small, little-used classrooms with awkward, often failing technology.

But it hasn't been the same since April 2006, when the state Legislature overwhelmingly approved LB 1208, a bill that authorized the creation of a statewide distance-learning network and the disbursement of incentives for schools that upgraded their distance-learning equipment.

Before the bill, schools were limited to the classes offered within their own regional consortiums and nearby community colleges. But the new network opened schools to send and receive

classes anywhere in the state.

The network, expected to cost about \$103.4 million to install and maintain through 2016, is rolling out across the state over three years (After federal and state assistance, its cost to the state's districts is expected to be \$8.8 million).

It began last year in northeast Nebraska with 87 school districts, along with educational service units and two community colleges, said Tom Rolfes, who is working with the Nebraska Information Technology Commission and the state's chief information officer to implement the network.

For less than \$200 a month, districts can tap into hundreds of classes across the state through the network, Rolfes said.

It's a lifesaver for many small schools who have difficulty finding teachers in specialized fields or whose small staff is stretched too thin to teach upper-level classes.

Greeley-Wolbach needs distance learning to remain compliant with the state's Rule 10 accreditation standards. Its Spanish teacher is actually an employee of nearby North Loup-Scotia schools and teaches all of her Greeley-Wolbach classes without leaving Scotia.

With the upgrade, Greeley-Wolbach can take that further. If enough students showed interest in, say, Japanese, it could offer that, too.

"The system allows us to go beyond," Superintendent Lee Sayer said. "We can meet Rule 10, but we really need to go beyond that and expand (students') education."

On the other side of the equation, districts can send classes from a teacher's normal classroom via a mobile unit across the state. This allows them to turn their teachers' specialties into added income, Rolfes said.

No superintendent has been more entrepreneurial than Dan Hoelsing, who oversees the Laurel-Concord, Coleridge, Newcastle and Wynot districts.

Last year, Rolfes said, those four districts sent or received 57 classes over distance learning, involving 860 students and running as many as seven classes at a time.

Hoelsing said at a workshop last month those offerings brought in \$300,000. Distance learning gives his districts free rein over their curriculum offerings, he said.

"We create the system that we want," Hoelsing said. "We create the system that our kids need."

Bridges beyond high school

It can be difficult in some small districts to find teachers willing to add a slew of faraway students to those in their physical classroom.

It takes time to send and receive assignments and tests, and it requires adapting teaching techniques to a new medium, said Dan Sich, Ansley schools' technology coordinator.

His district sends out two family and consumer science classes and takes Spanish classes with a teacher from Arcadia, but Sich said it's taken some getting used to.

"Teachers have been teaching for 25, 30 years and have never done anything like this," he said. "It's an adjustment."

Some schools also have concerns about discipline and classroom management under the system. But several administrators said today's students, raised in a visual culture, are almost as tuned in to a TV screen as to a live teacher.

The new system is a way not only to deepen small schools' class offerings, but also to give students a chance at gaining college credit before they finish high school.

Those opportunities were previously limited to schools near community colleges, but now they're opened up beyond geographical boundaries, thanks to dual-credit distance courses, said Eric Jones, dean of educational services at Central Community College in Grand Island.

An aggressive slate of distance courses allows about a half-dozen Pleasanton students each year to have at least a semester's worth of college courses under their belts before they step onto campus, said Superintendent Ron Wymore.

"While they're still in a high school setting, they're able to get a start on the college experience," Wymore said. "It's kind of like a bridge between the high school and college experiences."

For the students in these schools, distance learning can erase the limitations of learning in small, cash-strapped, rural districts, Beck said. Their only limitation is what they choose to challenge themselves with in a global community.

"It opens us to the reality that we can connect to all those other places," Beck said. "It's possible."