Heartland Community Schools
Nebraska

Superintendent: Dr. Norm Yoder
Primary contacts: Dr. Norm Yoder and Cindy Huebert, curriculum coordinator
334 students, K-12, rural

District Description
The Heartland Community Schools in rural southeastern Nebraska emerged in March 1998 from the union of two small districts, Henderson and Bradshaw, which had declining enrollments. At the time of the merger, the new district consisted of two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Since then, one elementary school has closed and the continuing decline in enrollment may lead to the closing of one more school. Currently, the district consists of three schools located in two cities, Henderson and Bradshaw, about 11 miles apart. In Henderson, one school houses K-4 and another houses the high school, consisting of grades 9-12. In Bradshaw, the middle school houses grades 5-8. Agriculture is a major source of income in the area, with farmers growing mainly corn and soybeans and raising beef cattle. Most of the farmland is family-owned, with some growth of small farm corporations.

Key Findings
- In Nebraska, students are assessed for No Child Left Behind purposes using locally developed tests coupled with state-selected standardized tests. Teachers in Heartland have participated in the development of state tests used to determine adequate yearly progress. Teacher participation creates a sense of ownership and facilitates curriculum adjustment.

- Although overall funding for Heartland Community Schools continues to decline as a result of decreasing enrollment, all of the district’s schools continue to make AYP, as has been the case since the implementation of NCLB.

Overall Impact of NCLB
Heartland’s superintendent, Dr. Norm Yoder, expressed concern that NCLB’s greater emphasis on mathematics and reading/language arts may cut into the district’s efforts to sustain a strong music program. Thus far, the district has been able to retain two music teachers, one for instruments and one for voice, who work fulltime and interchange to serve all grade levels in the three schools. But with the continuing decrease in enrollment and strong emphasis on core academic subjects, district staff members fear that these programs will have to be cut from the curriculum.

Overall, however, Yoder said that NCLB has not had a major impact on the district. He noted that the Act has pushed for more accountability through state standards and assessment and has led to more focused teaching, but it has not had major impact on curriculum. Instead, he said, the extra paperwork and required professional development take teachers out of the classroom, decreasing valuable teaching time.
NCLB and Student Achievement

The district complies with the School Based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS), which consists of locally developed tests coupled with state-selected standardized tests to measure student learning for NCLB. The first tests were developed locally with teacher participation and input, as allowed by the state of Nebraska. These tests are aligned to the Nebraska state standards, which specify what students at each grade level should know and be able to do.

According to Nebraska’s annual State of the Schools Reports, in the past few years Heartland has seen improvement in reading and mathematics. In the 2004-05 school year, the district saw an increase over 2002-03 in the percentage of 4th and 11th grade students who scored at or above the state target for proficiency in reading. Fourth grade scores increased by almost 14 percentage points, and 11th grade scores increased by 5 percentage points. Although 8th grade scores decreased by about 3 percentage points, the district exceeded the state targets for adequate yearly progress in all three grade levels, with 95% of 4th graders, 86% of 8th graders, and 84% of 11th graders meeting or exceeding state targets in reading.

With the exception of 8th grade performance, the case was rather similar in mathematics. In the 2004-05 school year, the district saw an increase over 2002-03 in the percentage of 4th and 11th grade students who scored at or above the state target for proficiency in math. Fourth grade scores increased by 6 percentage points and 11th grade scores increased by almost 17 percentage points. Although the district’s 8th grade scores were lower than the state’s overall 8th grade scores both years, the district made AYP, with 97% of 4th, 77% of 8th, and 91% of 11th grade students meeting or exceeding state targets for proficiency in mathematics.

The performance pattern of two of the district’s subgroups, students with disabilities and low-income students, cannot be determined from the State of the Schools Reports because the state reports scores by grade level and does not provide information for subgroups consisting of fewer than 10 students. The numbers of Heartland students in each subgroup in grades 4, 8, and 11 are too small for reporting as individual groups.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

As has been the case for the past few years, students in Heartland made adequate yearly progress in all areas. Particularly impressive is the performance of students with disabilities, who comprise 23% of the district’s enrollment—much higher than the state’s average enrollment of students with disabilities, which is 15%. According to Yoder, the percentage of students with disabilities in the district is largely influenced by a local group home that houses adolescent boys and girls. The group home was recently licensed to house eight more children, for a total of 28 residents. The facility enrolls all its students in Heartland’s 7th to 12th grades.

Most of these adolescents come from neglected homes. Many have speech and language difficulties and come to the district academically disadvantaged. Yoder attributes this subgroup’s success to the hard work of district staff and the group home’s efforts to provide additional tutoring and guidance services to all their students. Furthermore, Yoder credits the success of students with disabilities to the district’s implementation of the Reading is FAME (foundations, adventure, mastery, explorations) program sponsored by Girls and Boys Town, an organization that works with neglected and abused youth. Language arts and special education teachers in the districts received training to implement Reading is FAME. Cindy Huebert, curriculum coordinator for the district, also attributes the academic success of students with disabilities to the district’s efforts to identify students with special learning needs at an early age.

Since all the schools in the district have made AYP the past three consecutive years, the district has no schools in NCLB improvement, corrective action, or restructuring.
Testing Issues

As mentioned previously, the district uses locally developed tests aligned to state standards to assess student progress for NCLB purposes. To develop these tests, the district worked with a regional cooperative that covers several districts. The cooperative subdivided into service units in which teachers from several districts worked together to develop the test content for particular subjects. According to Yoder, these locally developed tests have more similarities than differences across the state. “It might be easier to have a statewide test,” he said, but allowing teacher participation in the development process creates a sense of ownership and facilitates curriculum adjustment. According to the district’s Annual Report to Patrons, language arts and math were the only subjects tested until the 2004-05 school year. Science assessments will begin in 2005-06 and social studies will be added in 2006-07. Additionally, in February of every year students participate in a state-selected standardized test that was recently changed from the California Achievement Test (CAT) to the TerraNova test.

According to Huebert, the district allows three minor testing accommodations for students with disabilities. First, students with disabilities are allowed additional time to complete exams, even though these tests are not timed. Second, students are sometimes allowed to take tests in their special education classroom if they feel most comfortable there. And third, word problems in math tests and directions in non-reading tests are often read out loud for the students.

In accordance with NCLB, all students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 will be tested this year. Prior to this change, the district had assessments only in grades 4, 8, and 11. For grades 3, 5, 6, and 7, tests were developed and piloted in 2004-05.

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

NCLB has not had a major impact on curriculum and instruction in Heartland, according to Superintendent Yoder. All three of Heartland’s schools have made AYP every year since the implementation of the Act. Consequently, Yoder did not report any major changes due to NCLB, other than a greater focus on math, reading, and language arts. Additionally, the district has only three subgroups: white students, students with disabilities, and low-income students. According to Dr. Yoder, all three subgroups have made adequate yearly progress since the implementation of NCLB. Therefore, no major changes have been implemented or are planned for these subgroups.

Curriculum coordinator Cindy Huebert agreed with Yoder that NCLB has not had a direct impact on the district’s curriculum and instruction. But she did say that when the two districts merged and the new district was developing its standards, it took into account not only the standards of its two predecessor districts, but also the new state standards that Nebraska had developed in anticipation of NCLB requirements. Consequently, curriculum and instruction have been influenced mainly by state standards developed prior to the implementation of NCLB. Huebert added, though, that she did not know whether the state would have developed standards if it had not anticipated national mandates.

NCLB has focused more teaching time on tested subjects and less on activities that are “just for fun,” noted Huebert. As standards rise, she explained, time has to be cut from untested material to allocate time for tested subjects. Some of that time can be found in non-core academic subjects, such as music, but Huebert felt that cutting these programs would be counterproductive. She explained that for some students, especially high school students, music is a primary motivator for attending school and performing well.
NCLB School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services

Since the district and all of its schools have made AYP for the past three consecutive years, neither the district nor any of its schools are required to provide choice or supplemental educational services under NCLB. Like most very small districts, Heartland would find it difficult if not impossible to offer choice if it had to, since it has only one school at each grade span.

Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS
Heartland continues to enjoy the advantages of a stable staff and minimal turnover. Most of the district’s faculty live in the community and have worked for the district for 16 to 20 years. Consequently, no serious recruitment has been necessary, and only one teacher was replaced last year. All 41 of the district’s teachers meet state standards for “highly qualified” teachers. Yoder predicted that the continuing decrease in student enrollment will lead to two elementary teachers being laid off in the next school year. He also said that in about seven years the district will be affected by a large number of its current teachers reaching retirement age. Until then, the district will have to gradually release teachers as the number of students continues to decline. Yoder expressed concern in meeting the highly qualified teacher requirements for special education teachers in the future.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
The Heartland district has made a tremendous effort to provide an array of professional development opportunities. Superintendent Yoder reported eight different staff development activities. For example, he explained, Heartland expanded the aforementioned Reading is FAME program to reach students in addition to those with disabilities. The program is implemented in the middle schools and the high school to help students who are reading below grade level improve their reading skills. In 2001, all English and special education teachers in grades 7-12 received specialized training for this program, and the training continues for current and new staff. The Girls and Boys Town organization, which sponsors Reading is FAME, also audits the program annually.

The district also provided a K-12 in-service workshop on best practices in teaching vocabulary. In this effort, Educational Service Unit #6 staff developer Lynette Block presented information about best practices, and staff members conducted workshops on effective vocabulary instruction. According to Yoder, these workshops facilitated the implementation of some of the best practices in teaching vocabulary in all classrooms.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support
Although Heartland has five paraprofessionals, none are funded through Title I. Two of them work with students with disabilities and three are library assistants. All five paraprofessionals meet state standards for highly qualified, and a few hold college degrees.

Funding and Costs
Heartland’s enrollment decreased by two students this year—a smaller decline than last year—yet the district’s Title I allocation dropped from $51,000 in 2004-05 to $47,000 in 2005-06—a reduction of more than 9%. Although Title I funds at Heartland are primarily used to improve math and reading skills at the K-6 level, all three of the district’s schools receive Title I funding. A small portion of the funding is specifically designated for improving math and reading skills for adolescents residing in the group home. Part of that money is used to pay a portion of the
salary for Cindy Huebert, who, in addition to responsibilities as district curriculum coordinator, serves as a liaison between the group home and the district. Title I funds are also used to pay part of the salary of one full-time teacher whose job it is to work with students individually and in study hall. Since part of the Title I funds the district receives are attributable to the youths in the group home, this teacher is also responsible for communicating student academic progress and needs with the staff at the home.

**Capacity Issues**

As is the case in most small districts, administrators in Heartland tend to wear several hats and have many responsibilities. Still, Yoder said that the district currently has sufficient capacity to implement NCLB.

**Data File—Heartland Community Schools**

**Location:** Southeastern Nebraska  
**Type:** Rural

**Number of Schools:**  
- Total: 3  
- Elementary: 1 (K-4)  
- Middle school: 1 (5-8)  
- High school: 1 (9-12)

**Number of Title I schools:** 3

**Student Enrollment and Demographics**  
- Total enrollment: 334
  - White: 95%
  - Latino: 2%
  - Asian: 2%
  - American Indian: 1%
  - African American: 0.3%
  - Low-income students: 24%
  - Students with disabilities: 23%

**Teachers**  
- Total number of teachers: 41  
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 100%

**Paraprofessionals**  
- Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 0  
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: NA

**Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-2005 Testing**  
- Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 0
### Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action

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### Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES

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