



Future of Lincoln February 6, 2005 page 6B

### Crowded classrooms are key issue

BY JoANNE YOUNG / Lincoln Journal Star

On the city's rapidly growing south side, portable classrooms hug the outer walls of elementary schools opened in 1995.

Cavett Elementary, 7701 S. 36th St., has five portable buildings holding two classrooms each that house 250 of its 665 students. The school was designed to hold a maximum of 525 students.

Roper Elementary, 2323 S. Coddington Ave., also has five portables. Principal Dan Navratil said Roper has 717 students with a capacity of about 500.

Cavett Principal Mona Manley said having that many students in portables divides the students and can compromise the school community. It creates inequalities because portable classrooms aren't as large as school classrooms and don't have the same amenities.



Student teacher Amber Wondercheck leads second-grade students Makayla Hausseler and Rachael Holsteen from portable classrooms at Cavett Elementary School. (William Lauer)

At Roper, Navratil said, the core facilities — gym, computer room, media center, cafeteria and bathrooms — are being taxed. "We have to schedule tightly," he said, "and make sure we stay on that schedule. If we don't, it's chaos."

The same crowded conditions are happening on the north side, especially in developing northwest areas.

As Lincoln grows and more houses are built around the edges of the city, the school district is straining to keep up with the need for buildings and teachers. Enrollment is expected to increase in the next five years by 1,250 students, or about 250 students a year. The population of English Language Learners also continues to increase, even though immigration into the country has slowed.

One-third of 36 LPS elementary schools is scheduled to be closed to transfer next year because of overcrowding. Another 15 will have at least some grade levels closed. About half of the middle schools will be closed to transfer.

At a time when the number of students continues to increase, LPS has not kept up with staffing for the growth. In addition, it left more than 90 teaching positions vacant this year because of a tight budget.

LPS soon will convene a task force of about 50 community members who will advise the district on such issues as building more neighborhood schools, transporting students from new developments to the core of the city where schools are not at capacity and renovating existing schools.

Lincoln Board of Education member Keith Prettyman said a community expects its school system to provide an excellent education to every student who walks through its doors.

It's a laudable goal, he said, but increasingly more difficult with unsure financing, an increasingly diverse community in which a segment of children must learn a new language and customs, a growing special education population and children who are not always ready to learn when they come to school.

That doesn't even begin to address the issues of average students — those kids in the middle who are seeing resources for regular education shrinking as demands increase for special populations of gifted, learning disabled and developmentally handicapped students, he said.

"There comes a point in time when we say, 'We can't continue to reduce resources without affecting the quality of education,'" Prettyman said.

That quality is not only important to students and school personnel, but it's also important to the community's

businesses — for multiple reasons, said JoAnn Martin, president and CEO of Ameritas Life Insurance Corp.

Ameritas Acacia Cos. hires associates from the rich pool of LPS graduates, Martin said.

"There are a couple of other reasons," she said. "Because of the quality of LPS, it is easier to recruit to Lincoln families, especially families with children. It is a bonus for our community."

Once people move to Lincoln, a quality school system is important in keeping them here, Martin said. The school system gets them integrated into the community. LPS keeps them active and involved.

She understands the challenge to the community of needing more schools and of maintaining the quality of education while also maintaining a reasonable tax base.

"It's a challenging balance that more school systems and more communities must face," Martin said.

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