

Committee should ban open enrollment

Written by Mark Dukes

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As populations shift and neighborhoods change, so does the landscape of high school district boundaries.

In a short time, the lines for the Jefferson, Kennedy and Washington districts may well change.

At a meeting last week at the Grant Wood Area Education Agency, the Enrollment Study Stakeholder Committee comprised of teachers, parents, administrators and community members convened to discuss the matter.

The committee, formed by the Cedar Rapids School District, was given these marching orders for the three local high schools: "Make recommendations regarding boundaries with attention to longevity and balance enrollment consistent with the projected future of the District."

Enrollment in the high schools is at a historically low level, but the dip has affected some more than others. Tumbling enrollments naturally affect athletic teams and their success. Larger schools often win many of the championships.

Jefferson and Washington, once bustling high schools in the 1960s and '70s, have seen enrollments fall over the years. According to the 2010-2011 Iowa BEDS document, Jefferson is the 14th-largest school in the state with 1,209 students in grades 9 through 11. Washington is 24th (1,070). Kennedy is eighth (1,320).

In the 1966-67 school year, Jefferson had an enrollment of 2,082 students in three grades. Washington was similar. In the fall of 1967, Kennedy opened its doors, drawing many students from the Washington district and a few from Jefferson.

Kennedy's district has experienced residential development while neighborhoods that feed

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Jefferson and Washington have not regenerated with younger families, were affected by flooding, or have had families move to other parts of town.

Cedar Rapids public schools arguably are at a competitive disadvantage because of the middle-school feeder system. You compete with the same people at Roosevelt, Taft, Harding, McKinley, Franklin and Wilson middle schools, but those teams are split up in the ninth grade because of the high school boundaries (for example: Some Roosevelt and Taft students will attend Jefferson, some Kennedy).

One suggestion to the committee studying school boundaries: Take open enrollment into consideration. Open enrollment has been allowed in Iowa since 1989 and it has had mixed results, with sometimes controversial results in athletics.

Last year, more students open enrolled out of the Cedar Rapids school district (860) than those who came in (431). Obviously, more than a few included in those numbers are athletes.

If you're going to re-do the boundaries, there has to be a consideration to ban open enrollment. In 2010, Iowa City West closed open enrollment and requested transfers. Prairie hasn't accepted outside enrollment for about 10 years. Dubuque is reconsidering its policies.

Changing high school boundaries will not guarantee more parity on the athletic fields. But as times change, it's good to take stock and determine if those lines are still relevant.

The enrollment committee is under way with its work, and will meet next on Aug. 23.

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