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Pirate Pals
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BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

Mayor Mike Wellner (left) presented a plaque to wastewater superintendent Ben Brooks during a ceremony held November 18. Brooks resigned his post in leading the city's wastewater treatment facility to take over as superintendent of the city of Wausau wastewater utility. Under his leadership, the city of Medford completed major renovations of the treatment plant and gained statewide attention as being a leader in implementing processes that reduce chemical usage and meet stringent phosphorus requirements. The Medford plant has become a model for other utilities around the state.

Making the grade

Local school districts meet or exceed state requirements in reports

BY BRIAN WILSON
NEWS EDITOR

The impacts of COVID-19 on education in the region were in evidence in the annual Department of Public Instruction report cards which were recently released for each district and each school building.

Overall, Rib Lake, Medford and Gilman school districts met or exceeded expectations on the report card, but each district saw evidence of scores impacted by COVID-19 and other factors.

As with past years, DPI has continued to make changes to the grading system used by parents and policy makers to gauge how schools compare across the state. This makes it a challenge to use the data as a tool in comparing one year to another in any district.

Both federal and state law require DPI to annually release accountability reports, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these report requirements were suspended for the 2019-20 school year.

See **AREA SCHOOLS** on page 4



Laura Lundy, curriculum director at Medford Area Public Schools

Jail ordered in power of attorney theft

BY BRIAN WILSON
NEWS EDITOR

A Taylor County woman who pled no contest to stealing more than \$100,000 from her father while serving as power

of attorney was ordered to pay restitution and serve a year in county jail with work release privileges.

Cartherine Sanders (AKA Catherine Evans), 49, of Medford was found guilty of theft of movable property greater

than \$10,000, the Class G felony is punishable by up to \$25,000 in fines and 10 years in prison.

See **JAIL** on page 13

PAGE 9: Abbotsford parade celebrates 50 years



SPORTS: Area girls basketball action



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★ Area schools see impact of COVID-19 on state DPI report card results

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Because of ongoing pandemic impacts, the U.S. Department of Education again waived federal Every Student Succeeds Act accountability requirements for 2020-21 school year data. However, the Wisconsin State Legislature did not grant another suspension. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the DPI urges using caution when interpreting scores and ratings.

Report card ratings range from five stars, denoting schools and districts that significantly exceed expectations, to one star for those that fail to meet expectations. For 2020-21, 2,101 public schools and 376 choice schools received report cards. Of those schools, 1,781 met, exceeded, or significantly exceeded expectations which is 71.9% of schools. Of the total schools, 199 public schools and 240 choice schools did not have enough available data to receive scored report cards. Of the 421 school districts that received report cards, 399 met (94.7%), exceeded, or significantly exceeded expectations.

Scores are calculated in four priority areas: achievement; growth; target group outcomes; and on-track to graduation. By law, the larger the percentage of a school or district's students who are economically disadvantaged, the more the growth measure contributes to its overall score. This allows schools and districts to be rewarded for advancing students' progress regardless of their starting level. If there is insufficient data to calculate a priority area score, the measure is omitted and the remaining measures weigh more heavily in the overall score.

This year's report cards replace the closing gaps priority area of past years with the new target group outcomes priority area. The priority area target group outcomes shed additional light on students in the school with test scores in the lowest quartile. This measure was designed to help focus support on the learners who need it most, while also improving outcomes for all students. Another new addition to report cards this year is an optional narrative statement for districts and schools to showcase information that is not otherwise communicated in the report card.

Medford Schools

As a whole the Medford Area Public School district scored 69.9 placing it at the high end of the meets expectations range. Student achievement in both English language arts (ELA) and math exceeded the state score. District growth was just under the state score, and on-track and postsecondary readiness was slightly above the state. In target group outcomes the district had a score of 66.2 which was the same or higher than 61.8% of districts in the states.

Medford Area Elementary School was at the high end of local scores with an overall score of 78 putting it in the four-star exceeds expectations category. Stetsonville Elementary School had a score of 69.9 which while enough for meets expectations was just a fraction of point shy of being in the exceeding expectations. Medford Area Middle School with a score of 70.6 was in the exceeds expectations category. Medford Area Senior High School likewise met expectations with a score of 66.7. Rural Virtual Academy, the online charter school which is operated by a consortium of school districts, recovered a meets expectations rating with an overall score of 69.8.

"We really look for trends," explains Laura Lundy, curriculum director at Medford Area Public Schools. "If we see a downward trend we start to investigate a little more."

She noted that the results for Medford schools showed that scores slipped from where they have been in the past. She said they could see this in particular with the

current elementary school children especially those in younger grades who are still catching up from losing in-person classroom instruction in the end of 2020 when schools were closed due to the pandemic. "The end of kindergarten is a huge deal to lose," Lundy said. "They are behind in knowing their letters and knowing their numbers." She noted that getting the children caught up to where they should be remains a priority.

While she was pleased Medford schools met or exceeded expectations, she said there remain some issues which skew results and punish schools for having high scores in the past.

Lundy explained that in place of the "closing gaps" rating in the past, this year's report has a "target" score which was more focused on certain demographic and economic groups. She also noted that there was increased emphasis on the growth scores which compare how students did on this year's testing compared to previous year's testing. With the weighting toward improvement over time rather than consistently high scores, Lundy explains it effectively punishes schools which had high scores in the past because there is no place to grow.

Lundy said an important takeaway from this year's reports is that traditional brick and mortar schools work. She noted that when students were at home attempting to learn on their own without structure it was difficult and challenging. While the RVA shows that virtual learning can be successful for some, that is heavily structured.

"Kids need face to face. They need teacher to be by them. They need that structure," Lundy said.

Even more than with the DPI report cards, the impact of COVID-19 on test scores was seen with the district's aggregate ACT scores. She said the district has followed the composite ACT scores over time and has consistently been at or above the state for many years. However, this year, the Medford district dipped below the state composite, something she attributed more to do with other factors than with actual student knowledge.

"I believe the kids know the skills they need to know," she said. She noted that many colleges downplayed the importance of the ACT last year and that some students who were not planning to go on to school did not see the importance of doing well on the test. "It is not a real indication of what our kids can do," Lundy said, noting that this year they are stepping up efforts including bringing in additional resources to help students with test taking strategies and preparation in order to do better on the ACT.

"I think our kids will do well when the motivation is there," she said.

Rib Lake Schools

Rib Lake School District scored consistently well on the DPI report cards although numbers were impacted from past years largely due to COVID-19. As a district, Rib Lake received a score of 73.9 which exceeds expectations. Rib Lake Elementary School had a score of 80.2 which exceeds expectations. Rib Lake Middle School also exceeded expectations with a score of 76.9 and Rib Lake High School meets expectations with a score of 62.1.

"Overall, the school district received a very positive report card. In most areas, the district's scores were consistently as high in comparison with pre-pandemic levels," said district administrator Rick Cardey. "We continue to see many areas of high quality achievement while still seeing student growth that school districts strive to achieve. This is a tribute to the staff, students, and parents who have worked together to overcome the many challenges to learning."

Cardey said that as a staff, they see the school report card as a tool to engage in healthy discussions on contin-

ued school improvements.

"Over the past year, the district has engaged in initiatives designed to improve academic success and improvement. A few examples of these initiatives are LETRS Training to improve reading skills, extended learning time refinement to target student academic area growth, and alignment of curriculum standards to instruction," he said.

Cardey noted that the impact of COVID-19 on students was very real, as has been the increasing polarization when it comes to education-related issues. "There is no middle ground in politics anymore," Cardey said, expressing concern about the state of education in the state. He said that he has been lucky to work with people in his career in Rib Lake that regardless of if they agreed or disagreed on a topic that there was always a line of respect. He noted this mutual respect was increasingly missing at the state level.

Gilman Schools

The Gilman School District continues to be impacted by not only COVID-19 but by the continued declining enrollment in the region. With a smaller group, scores in a particular area can have a greater impact than in a school with much higher numbers.

With a total student enrollment of 320 for reporting purposes, Gilman has the lowest overall student population. By comparison Rib Lake has 460 students for reporting purposes and Medford has 2,075.

Gilman meets expectations as a district with a score of 69 however the district's assessment scores in English/language arts and math trailed the state averages. Achievement scores district wide for math were 50.2 and for English/language arts were 52.6 compared to 61.4 for math statewide and 59.4 for English/language arts.

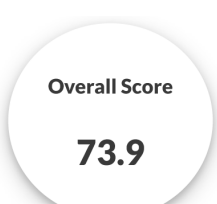
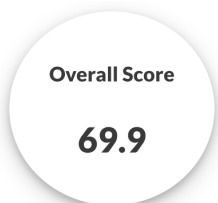
"While we are encouraged with the growth of our students, we recognize that we can do better," said district administrator Walter Leipart in a statement about the DPI scores. "We also recognize that by working together we will help students become more successful. As you review the details of the report card, please note that the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction encourages individuals to use caution when interpreting scores and ratings due to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on student achievement."

Gilman High School exceeds expectations with a score of 77.8 while Gilman Elementary School had the lowest grade among Taylor County schools with a score of 56.9 earning a "meets few expectations" result.

"A preliminary review of the School District of Gilman report card indicates student growth is the same or higher than 50% of districts in the state and the same or higher than 51.1% of districts in the state when supporting outcomes for students who struggle the most. This means we have done a great job supporting the growth of all students regardless of their abilities. An area for us to improve on is overall student achievement. As a District we meet expectations; however, as we experience a 14% decline in enrollment we see how a small group of students with increased needs does have a greater impact on overall student achievement and scores on the report card," Leipart stated.

According to the report 19.6% of students at the elementary level in Gilman were identified as having disabilities. By comparison 17% of students at Rib Lake Elementary and 16% of those at Medford Area Elementary School were identified as having disabilities.

Leipart said a full presentation of the school report cards will occur at the December 20 Gilman school board meeting.



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