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Willingness to invest in education has paid off

By **KEN BLACK**

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If the measure of a community were solely based on how much it invested in its educational facilities, Marshalltown may well be approaching world-class status.

Since the Marshalltown Community Vision and Five-Year Strategic Plan was put into effect in 2002, Marshalltown Community School District residents have approved \$25 million in additional taxes for school facilities.



T-R PHOTO BY KEN BLACK

The construction technology building on the campus of Marshalltown Community College is just one of the new additions that are on the campus or will soon be coming. The Marshalltown Community School District and East Marshall School District also made major facilities improvements in the past five years.

The same amount has been approved for the Iowa Valley Community College District, which includes projects at Marshalltown Community College and elsewhere in the community.

Superintendent Harrison Cass said he believes the community's willingness to invest in education has paid huge dividends.

"You can see it. All you have to do is look at Hoglan, Lenihan, Miller and Rogers to see," he said.

At the college, the investment has made a huge difference as well.

"It says an awful lot about local support for growth and economic development," said IVCCD Chancellor Tim Wynes.

When the Marshalltown Community Vision and Five-Year Strategic Plan was compiled in 2002, facility improvements at both learning institutions were in the early phases of development. Some of the projects were not planned at all.

"We made a huge dent in the projects to the tune of \$27 million over the last few years, but we could easily use another \$15 to \$20 million," Cass said. "While we may not have that much available, there's plenty to work on."

In addition to the bond issue passed for the community college district, the

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Marshalltown Community College had other significant projects developed over the past five years as well, such as the inclusion of on-campus housing and a new construction technology building.

Barbara Burrows, dean of Marshalltown Community College, said the construction technology building allows the college to offer not only increased programming for traditional students, but more continuing education opportunities.

The five year plan called for new buildings or at least a way to fund improvements in educational facilities around the community.

It would be hard to argue that did not happen, given the millions in improvements that have happened and will soon be commencing.

Cass said facilities have a huge impact on education, creating a more inviting atmosphere that is more conducive to learning.

“Our children spend a good deal of time in these buildings,” Cass said. “It makes them [buildings] more functional, too. They just weren’t as functional before.”

But facilities are not the only thing it takes to provide a good education. Recruiting and retaining the proper staff is a huge part, which is why the five year plan also put an emphasis on that.

“We do not see a very large applicant pool in some areas,” Cass said of the search for instructors

Among the areas where the school has more limited options in faculty choices include physics, chemistry, advanced math and foreign languages.

Administration is also an area that is suffering from decreased interest. Whereas in the past, 100 applicants may have sought a principal’s position, now that the number of applications coming in averages in the 20s.

Because of the decrease in qualified applicants for some of those higher learning areas, the school district is looking at other ways to deliver educational services, such as over computers and through the Iowa Communications Network.

“There are ways to do that. It’s a lot easier to share a foreign language teacher than it would be a chemistry teacher. You kind of need someone in the lab,” Cass said.

Technology is also an option at the community college level, which just recently began offering an entire associates degree online.

Again, increasing technological capability for educational purposes was also outlined in the five year plan.

There’s always going to be a place for [face-to-face] education,” Wynes said. “It will just be augmented with other types of education.”

Further, that technology has aided in offering opportunities for high school

students to earn college credit before graduating.

“Five years ago, a student coming to us with 20 hours of college credit was rare,” Wynes said.

Now, it is not uncommon for high school students to come with even more credits than that toward a college degree.

And even though finding teachers for higher sciences and mathematics can be a problem, Cass said he is impressed with how the district has managed to find the right people.

“It’s suprising how many students get scholarships in sciences in our district,” the superintendent said. “We have a pretty good science program.”

The plan also called for an emphasis on continuing education.

Bettie Bolar, director of the college’s continuing education program said there has been a noticeable increase in enrollment in continuing education programs over the last couple of years.

She also noted there is a misconception that continuing education only means classes designed to teach a hobby such as dancing or quilting.

“Classes that prepare someone to go into a job is more than 60 percent of enrollment,” Bolar added.

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