

The Wildcat Chronicles

Durant High School December 14, 2023

Principal considers scheduling change

By Gus Thoma, Kylee Hahn, and Ava Streeter

Durant High School Principal Joel Diederichs is considering a switch in scheduling next school year.

The principal told the school board in a meeting on Nov. 13 he has discussed moving from a block schedule to a period schedule with Wilton High School Principal Sue O'Donnell. The two high schools share some classes together.

"At this time, it has only been discussion to get a feel if block scheduling is working as intended or if period scheduling would be more beneficial for students," the school board minutes stated.

The high school has been on a block schedule since 2012. It has four 80-minute blocks each day with a 17-minute seminar and a 40-minute skinny at the end of the day. Students have each class every other day, except skinny which meets daily.

Under a period schedule, classes are shorter and meet every day.

Teachers' reaction to the possible change is mixed, but students generally op-

pose it, according to interviews.

High school English teacher Mrs. Cathy Pearlman prefers block scheduling because she appreciates the flexibility of a longer time frame, which allows the students to work together on reading and writing assignments.

"I do not think periods would be beneficial to students," said Mrs. Pearlman. "Academically, students who see me in multiple English classes a semester will have a difficult work load by meeting for shorter, more intense times every single day."

If students have to meet everyday, it will be more challenging to make up work if a student were absent. When she turned her American Dream class into a skinny that met every day, she thought it would be as simple as splitting one block day into two, but that was not the case because it took longer to cover the material.

"Reading a text like *The Great Gatsby* was difficult to teach on a daily basis," said Mrs. Pearlman. "Students who missed class had less time to make up the reading and were not always prepared to move on

with the rest of the class. I lost flexibility in discussions, in showing students what to do in an activity, then allowing students time to complete the activity, and finally giving meaningful feedback on the activity.

Mrs. Pearlman realizes it can be challenging for students to focus for 80 minutes at a time under block scheduling. However, a block also leaves room for "brain breaks," which include free reading, completing homework in class, and conducting 1-1 conferences between teachers and students.

Mrs. Pearlman is familiar with a period schedule because she student taught with one at Muscatine High School.

"Right now I teach seven different English classes," said Mrs. Pearlman. "It helps that the mental shifting I need to competently teach this variety of classes is spread out over two days. I'm not sure how that will feel if I have to adjust to that many classes in one day, and I can only imagine the challenges that students may face in shifting through that many classes every single day."

At first, Mrs. Hailey Houk, the

Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) teacher at Durant High School, thought switching to shorter classes would make cooking in class harder, but she believes if she had to, she could make it work.

"My initial thought was how in the world am I going to cook in 42-45 minutes?" said Mrs. Houk. "Then I remembered when I went through Durant, I had periods. If Mrs. [Mary] Feuerbach [former FCS teacher] did it, then I can figure it out."

Mrs. Houk was a student at Durant when it used to have periods and is curious as to why the schedule was changed from periods to blocks in 2012.

"I think that we're all in agreement that kids' attention spans are much shorter than they were 10 years ago," said Mrs. Houk. "Eighty minutes is a long time for kids to sit and be productive on school work."

Mrs. Houk said period scheduling would be beneficial because students have the same class every day instead of every other day under block scheduling.

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Librarians caught between lawsuits, new state law



Photo by Ryan Brown
School librarian Mrs. Katy Dohrmann puts a book on a shelf.

By Ryan Brown

An Iowa educational law passed this year that has caused a flurry of confusion for librarians throughout the state is now being challenged by two federal lawsuits.

The law, Senate File 496, which was signed by Gov. Kim Reynolds in May, requires that all library books be age-appropriate and contain no depictions of sex acts. The law also prohibits any instruction related to gender identity and sexual orientation through sixth grade.

The law stipulates punishments for school staff, including administrators and librarians, who violate the law.

The new law caused school librarians statewide to begin pulling books that they feared might violate the law.

However, Durant school librarian

Mrs. Katy Dohrmann has not pulled any books off of her shelves in the K-12 library because she said it is very crucial for her to protect her students' First Amendment rights in being able to read a wide variety of literature.

"As a librarian, it is very important to me to support the growth and success of all our students at Durant," Mrs. Dohrmann stated. "I want to provide them with a collection of all kinds of views and voices."

Mrs. Dohrmann said that her fellow school librarians have been put in a really tough place this school year.

"On one side we have the state of Iowa, and on the other side, we have the U.S. Constitution," said Mrs. Dohrmann.

"If we abide by the state code, we are not protecting students' constitutional

rights, and if we protect our students' constitutional rights, SF 496 says we could be punished. So now we are seeing schools that have started pulling books being listed as defendants in lawsuits because of the state."

The first lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa (ACLU) names as defendants the superintendents and school board members of five school districts, along with Gov. Reynolds and the director of the state education department, and seeks to toss out the entire law as unconstitutional.

A second lawsuit filed by national publisher Penguin Random House, in conjunction with the Iowa State Education Association, alleges that portions of SF 496 requiring removal of books from school

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Timeline set for completion of bond-approved gymnasium

By Royce Richman

The new elementary-middle school gym could be completed as early as the beginning of the 2026-2027 school year, according to the lead architect on the school construction project.

The new gym was approved in November as part of a bond referendum that will feature projects totaling more than \$13.2 million. These projects also include updating the high school art and science classrooms and the building's sprinkler system and relocating the elementary school and superintendent's offices along with other general updates.

The first stage of building the new gym is designing it, which will take at least a year to complete, according to Senior Project Architect Joseph Tursi of OPN Architects of Cedar Rapids.

As a result, construction for the new gym project could begin as early as the winter 2024, but it will likely be delayed until the spring of 2025 to avoid starting it while school is in session.

"For your project, and for all schools, it is important to phase construction when it is least disruptive to students," Mr. Tursi explained. "That means we typically

aim to do as much as we can over the summer. This includes bigger projects like the gym as well as smaller projects."

Mr. Tursi estimates the gym could be completed in as little as eight months due to the size of the project.

"We are still experiencing delays due to the supply chain, so the overall timeline could be impacted by the availability of materials," he said.

Superintendent Mr. Joe Burnett said that when the gym is being worked on and can't be used for PE classes and sports practices, he will have to figure out a new place for those activities to happen.

"When the weather is nice in the fall and the spring, PE class can be outdoors," he said.

The high school science and art classrooms will also be updated during the school year, so replacement classrooms will need to be found for those as well.

"When they come in and start doing work in the classrooms, we will have to be creative on where we put students at those times," he said.

The old elementary-middle school gym will have to be demolished before the new gym can be built in its place. The dem-

olition process will consist of removing the south and east walls, the roof, the bleachers, the floor, and the stage.

Then building contractors will need to determine whether they need to remove the foundation of the gym. If they do need to remove the foundation, they will completely excavate the lower-level locker rooms and fill in the hole with soil or gravel.

"If we do not need to remove the foundation, we will likely remove the interior walls, leave the perimeter walls, and fill in the space with sand, gravel or a product called geofoam," said Mr. Tursi.

The reason that the design process can take a year or more is that there are many small but important decisions that need to be made, like choosing what material to use for the new gym walls.

"Currently we are leaning toward architectural precast panels because of the speed of installation, and this should help the budget," said Mr. Tursi.

OPN is also considering masonry and other wall materials based on what is best for the project and what is most cost-friendly.

Tursi explained that a few of the smaller projects will be constructed earlier

than that, including replacing old windows in the elementary wing.

According to Mr. Burnett, the windows will be replaced this summer using money that the school receives from the one cent sales tax.

Many of the windows are cracked and leak rainwater, so the school has been looking to replace them for a long time. However, the windows are very old and are connected within the walls, so replacing them isn't easy.

"Whether the bond passed or not, that is an immediate problem that we need to address," said Mr. Burnett.

The construction company building the new gym will be chosen through a process called "Design-Bid-Build," according to Mr. Tursi.

The design team will make the designs and construction documents and send them out to the general contractors of different companies to bid on.

"This competitive process is required by law, and the low bid will be accepted by the district if it meets the budget," said Mr. Tursi. Once the bid is accepted, the gym can start being constructed.

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