Chapter 6: Education and Public Communication
Introduction

Public education is an investment in the future of a community. Having reputable schools and the opportunity they provide is vital to the current and future health of the region. Quality schools are attractive for families who want to provide their children with the best opportunities available. Likewise, a strong educational environment is also attractive for business and industry that strive to recruit an educated, well-adjusted, and skilled labor force. A region’s educational institutions don’t just prepare students to be degree or certificate holders, but active and contributing members of society. In order for Boone County to continue to be a livable place, the educational environment, which includes the public K-12 schools, regional higher education institutions, and adult education programs, must continue to be one of the major strengths for the region. The county supports these institutions by partnering with them in order to support their infrastructure, programmatic, and facility needs. In this way, the county has a role in driving the positive community impacts of quality education.

This chapter will include a profile of the educational institutions within Boone County, the links between education and other important regional assets, as well as the relationship between schools and local governments.

Profile of School Districts

Boone County’s K-12 education system consists of two school districts. Belvidere Community Unit School District 100 (CUSD100) serves Belvidere and the rural areas in the southern half of the county. It includes five elementary, two middle, two high schools, and one STEM academy. The North Boone Community Unit School District 200’s (CUSD 200) service area includes Capron, Poplar Grove, and the northern rural areas of the county. The district consists of three elementary, one upper elementary, one middle school, and one high school. In 2017, approximately 8,070 students were enrolled in the Belvidere School District, and 1,644 were enrolled in the North Boone School District.\textsuperscript{1,2}

In 2017, both school districts performed just below the state level in PARCC scores, the statewide standardized test. However, the two districts graduation rates were on par with the overall state average. By these measures, Boone County’s school districts are well-performing, but still have room for improvement. While both schools spend less per student than the state average, both instructional and operational per student spending has increased in-tandem with state spending increases since at least 2012.\textsuperscript{3,4}

Like many school districts across the country, District 100 and 200 don’t just focus on these graduation rates, but also work to prepare students to either enter the workforce or continue on with post-secondary education. Emblematic of this, is the partnership with Rock Valley College in the form of the Running Start program, which allows high school students to earn their Associate’s degree along with their high school diploma during their junior and senior years. All three high schools in
both Boone County school districts participate in Running Start and Running Start Engineering. These programs have been well received by students, parents, employers, and faculty alike.

University of Illinois’ Project Lead the Way (PLTW) currently provides STEM focused curricular activities in some Boone County schools. Through PLTW, students are not only exposed to engineering, computer, and environmental concepts, but can also earn college credit hours. Programs like these were identified as priorities within public workshops and should continue to be expanded and promoted.

These initiatives show a commitment within the district to experiment with new educational ideas. Both the Belvidere and North Boone School Districts should continue with this adaptive mentality to prepare for a changing regional and national economy.

**Challenges for School Districts**

While both of Boone County’s public school districts have enjoyed strong financial positions, public education funding and finances will remain a challenge to be monitored and managed closely. According to Moody’s 2017 municipal bond reports, both school districts have healthy credit positions, and though not perfect, credit strength indicator trends for both districts are positive. In particular, available fund balances for both districts are far above the U.S. median. One of the strongest indicators is Boone County’s economy and strong residential tax base, which should continue to be the backbone of the County’s K-12 schools. However, there have been recent concerns related to the declines in the County’s fund balance. Although the County’s General Obligation Bonds are still highly rated because of its strong property tax base, the county was downgraded in 2018 by Moody’s to a bond rating of Aa3. Financial challenges like these at state and county levels of government can adversely affect the school districts’ finances. As more expansionary opportunities arise for schools - whether they be financial, physical, programmatic, or systematic – the districts should be cognizant of the county and region’s present financial situation.

Another challenge faced by many school districts is how to close the achievement gap between student demographic groups. Both Boone County school districts have had lower achievement gaps between students of various racial backgrounds, measured by PARCC scores, than the state averages since 2015. However, both districts have a larger portion of Hispanic students who do not meet PARCC score standards relative to the entire student body. In both Belvidere 100 and North Boone 200, the percentage of Hispanic Origin and mixed-race students has been increasing since 2013. In response to these trends, both districts have developed robust and immersive dual-language programs to help close achievement gaps between demographics. These programs have been received positively and should continue to be prioritized over the next decade to prepare students of all backgrounds to better integrate into an ever-changing world.

Finally, the patterns and choices related to future growth in the county is another potential challenge for school districts. Boone County is experiencing a gradual recovery from the 2008 Recession and some new growth is starting to take place. This makes it an optimal time for the school districts to stay informed in land use decision making processes that affect overall county growth patterns within each district’s boundaries. Both districts currently participate in the Boone County Planning Commission, which meets on a monthly basis to discuss such land use issues. In order to continuously stay abreast to new growth and possible district effects, it is recommended that District 100 and 200 remain as active participants in these meetings.

**Boone County’s public school districts are committed to technological, career-focused, and innovative programming. For example, in 2016 Belvidere 100 School District rolled out their 1:1 Initiative, which provides Chromebooks or other electronic devices to students in order to incorporate technology with students’ learning, assignments, and organizational skills.**

It is the goal for every student in the district’s middle and high schools to take part in the program.
Additional Community Resources for Education

Day cares are a valuable portion of a community’s education network, as they allow children to develop academic and social skills before entering the formal education system. Boone County is home to exceptional preschools and child development centers, with at least ten private childcare providers in addition to scattered in-home daycares within communities. Convenience is a key factor in day care siting, so local government officials should advocate for locating daycare facilities in neighborhoods or population centers where it is convenient for working families to drop off and pick up their children.

Several other educational opportunities exist within community-oriented organizations. Many of these are geared toward adults or groups who wish to learn new skills. For example, the Boone County Council on Aging is a community organization which offers educational, recreational, and social activities, geared towards the older populations in Boone County. This programming primarily takes place at the Keen Age Center. Another example is the Ida Public Library, which is the only public library in Boone County. It primarily serves the City of Belvidere, but is available for county residents to use by paying a non-resident fee that is comparable to city residents’ library property tax. In addition to borrowing and gathering services, the library also offers youth-focused resources and programs through their Children’s Department, tutoring programs, Spanish resources, and adult and youth book clubs. Importantly, the library is also home to historical and genealogical community records. During public input sessions, residents outside Belvidere expressed interest in the library’s service area being expanded to a countywide district, which could be done under several state-prescribed processes.

Post-Secondary and Adult Education

While Boone County does not have any colleges or universities, it benefits from proximity to multiple post-secondary schools, which provides opportunities to build on existing partnerships. There are multiple colleges within 20 miles of Boone County, including the region’s community college, Rock Valley College (RVC). In addition, within 30 miles, there are multiple universities including Northern Illinois University (NIU). Both RVC and NIU have existing partnerships with the Boone County school districts.

RVC offers 30+ associate’s degree or certification programs in 60 course areas. It is also a major player in regional workforce development efforts, providing coursework that aligns with major...
NOT-FOR-PROFIT POST-SECONDARY SCHOOLS WITHIN 30 MILES OF BOONE COUNTY

**KEY**
- **Boone County**
- **Illinois**
- **Wisconsin**

**Post Secondary Schools**
1. Rockford University
2. Rock Valley College
3. University of Illinois College of Medicine
4. Saint Anthony College of Nursing
5. Kishwaukee College
6. Northern Illinois University
7. McHenry County College
8. Beloit College
9. Blackhawk Technical College

Source: Boone County GIS Department, 2015; Region 1 Planning Council, 2018.
regional industry needs. Other non-profit higher education institutions within a drivable distance include Rockford University, McHenry County College, Kishwaukee College, Saint Anthony College of Nursing, Northern Illinois University, Beloit College, Blackhawk Technical College, and University of Illinois at Chicago’s Health Science Campus in Rockford. Creative partnerships with these higher education institutions, particularly those which advance adult education, workforce training, and community development efforts should continue to be welcomed and utilized by Boone County residents and entities.

Education and Economic Development

Though quality education has many other benefits for the region outside of economic growth, the ability for Boone County to grow and increase its economic competitiveness in an ever-evolving global economy hinges on the county’s ability to create and sustain an educated workforce. In this way, a region’s approach to human capital is fundamental to economic development, and should not be overlooked. The importance of workforce development may not be viewed as the most significant component of the county’s educational environment, especially when compared to the K-12 system. However, given the current and future challenges surrounding the region such as its aging workforce, brain drain, and minimal population growth post-recession, building upon the skills of the workforce will be integral to a thriving long-term Boone County economy. Because of this, workforce development efforts must continue to grow within the county.

Many institutions and programs in the region have proven themselves as successful workforce intermediaries who, through education and training services, have provided a strong link between education and economic development. Examples include not only the aforementioned Rock Valley College initiatives, vocational programs within the public school system, and other community resources, but also regional economic development agencies such as Growth Dimensions and the Workforce Connection. Coordinating regional workforce development to address business and community needs has been a consistent goal in recent regional workforce and economic development initiatives, such as the 2017 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Regional Plan (WIOA Plan), and the 2016-2020 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Both of these plans stress the importance of vocational and career training for regional economic growth that both the Workforce Connection and Growth Dimensions promote.

The Workforce Connection is a partnership between federal and state employment programs, economic development agencies, and educational entities that seeks to address workforce needs for the region’s business communities. The organization oversees many workforce-tailored programs such as:

- Youth services including tutoring, career exploration, and job placement assistance.
- Adult education and High School Equivalency classes.
- Employer services such as recruitment events, candidate assessment/testing, and numerous job-training opportunities.

Rock Valley College has directly addressed regional workforce by offering Workforce Training courses, which include RVC’s certification programs. These courses offer skills training for industries that the region has been targeting. These include manufacturing-focused classes as well as courses to bolster the healthcare industry. Many of those who go through these certifications/programs have easily found careers because of their training, and the programs have also been well received by employers. Workforce development will continue being a coordinated effort among regional economic development and educational institutions. Regional economic development institutions and their specific roles in Boone County’s economic development efforts are detailed further in Chapter 7: Economic Development.
Education Infrastructure and Land Use

The location of schools and educational institutions greatly affect local land use and infrastructure needs. As Boone County’s population grows, in part as a result from its educational strengths, the county will need to be ever-cognizant of these impacts and plan accordingly with the school districts. Currently, the districts coordinate with the county on planning issues, and that continued cooperation should be prioritized in order to avoid:

» Increased strain on transportation and infrastructure networks.

» Environmental issues that may arise from school operations such as transportation emissions, energy usage, etc.

» Sporadic development and housing patterns as a result of residential growth in relation to education infrastructure.

» Public health consequences of walkability levels, safe routes to school, and neighborhood continuity.

» Social equity issues as a result of school location, which can impact how far students, parents, and staff of all incomes have to travel, level of participation in extracurricular events, and parents' level of involvement in teacher conferences and other activities.

» Inefficient use of tax dollars on school expansions, community facilities, or transportation/utility upgrades.

The effects of schools' locations on land use patterns are commonly examined and many resources exist which could aid in a coordinated process for school siting. Principal among them is the EPA's Smart School Siting Tool, which aims to help school and local government agencies coordinate to align school siting and community development decisions through Smart Growth principles.\(^{12}\)

In 2018, Davis Demographics and Planning prepared the 10-year Student Population Projection report for the Belvidere School District, which included planned residential developments as a part of their projection methodology. Reports such as this signal that the districts are aware of development decisions and take part in their own internal school planning process for future enrollment changes. North Boone and Belvidere School District superintendents are also active in a variety of planning processes throughout the county. This coordination should continue over the next decade in order to avoid the potential land use issues previously mentioned.

County and municipal officials should consider land use and transportation patterns when siting new school and educational facilities, but also changes in patterns that could result from growth in school enrollment. Both school districts currently have excess capacity that could absorb new growth. However, should the county grow more rapidly and physical expansions become necessary in the future, land may need to be set aside for new school siting, as future commercial or residential development may impede on the acreage requirements for the elementary, middle, and high schools. County and school officials should be cognizant of potential impacts, and prepare for all growth scenarios, as well as contingencies that may affect land use within Boone County in the future.

Education and Public Health

Education and childhood experiences can both positively and negatively affect the public health of Boone County’s population. A resident achieving higher education levels can lead to overall better health outcomes, however a resident experiencing stress, trauma, and abuse can lead to negative health outcomes. These events often times come in the form of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which is when a child witnesses or becomes a victim of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. ACEs are more prevalent than previously known and can lead to significant long-term negative health outcomes of a population. In turn, this can affect the county’s workforce preparedness, demand on

The 10-Year Student Population Report for School District 100 projects the change in student population in 2027. The results were 0% change in elementary school students, -10.5% change in middle school students, and -15.2% change in high school students over the next decade.\(^{13}\)
social services, and likelihood of increased crime and substance abuse rates.\textsuperscript{13}

In an attempt to recognize and counter the effects of ACEs on children within Boone County, Belvidere School District 100 is in the process of becoming a trauma informed district. The district is actively taking steps to have more prepared, informed, and cognizant staff, parents, and students when it comes to recognizing and responding to someone who has been effected by traumatic stress.\textsuperscript{14}

This is just one attempt to counter the negative long-term health effects of ACEs on Boone County’s residents. This and other programs are extremely important to continue over the next decade in an attempt to continuously improve the county’s overall public health, develop a strong workforce, and provide sufficient social and public safety services overtime.

Public Communication

School districts and local governments share a symbiotic relationship. As a community grows, more resources are needed for the school system, and the better schools perform, the more attractive a community becomes for future growth. Despite this cyclical relationship, school systems and local governments - especially county governments - often operate independently. Additionally, though this chapter has referred to the region’s educational environment as a system, that system is made up of individual governmental and educational institutions who make their own decisions, are beholden to differing organizational and funding structures, and may have differing relationships with other municipal, regional, and state actors. Challenging as it might be, open communication and coordination between educational and governmental agencies can result in decisions that positively impact the community.

Schools can be a major source of community pride, and many initiatives within them lend themselves to be shared. Examples could include changes in leadership, student or community led initiatives, success stories, or new programs. Beyond just dissemination of news, effective communication can help to improve coordination of regional goals and solutions between municipalities and educational institutions. Other school-government communication improvements that could benefit the region include establishment of conflict resolution mechanisms should they arise, distribution of appropriate municipal and educational news through various traditional and technological means, and clarifying any boundaries that may impede cooperation. This type of communication currently takes place between representatives from Belvidere 100, North Boone 200, Boone County, the City of Belvidere, Township Representatives, Belvidere Park District, and the Boone County Conservation District. These meetings occur monthly, and should continue as a means to not only share information, but to discuss pressing regional issues affecting the educational system.

One additional challenge that can be addressed through increased communication between community leaders and educators are the changing demographics of the region. As Boone County continues to evolve, so do the schools by providing opportunities for integration. In particular, Latinx and Hispanic communities will likely keep increasing within the County, and by coordinating their integration efforts, those communities can be better served by the educational system. At meetings between public representatives, action items such as updates from the schools to the city in regards to their Language Immersion successes could help frame decision making at the municipal level.
Goal 6.1 Increase the overall education and skill level of Boone County residents.

**OBJECTIVES**

a. Continue to prioritize adult education in order to improve and build upon the skills of the county’s workforce.

b. Help current students gain the skills, education, and preparation needed for the existing and future job market.

c. Continue to develop and utilize partnerships between educational services and government agencies to most efficiently coordinate and provide services to county residents.

**STRATEGIES**

Expand utilization of GED pathway programs by promoting existing programs or partnering on one specifically tailored for the Boone County population.

Increase the utilization of school and other community buildings after hours for adult education opportunities.

Prioritize and increase the number of English as a Second Language courses for adults.

Utilize The Workforce Connection to identify the skills gap between the current Boone County workforce and local employers’ needs, and ways to address it.

Promote increased usage of The Workforce Connection’s Belvidere facility and services for adults in the workforce to gain skills and education.

Identify opportunities for increased adult training and education opportunities within Boone County, and/or increase access to opportunities in surrounding counties through partnerships with regional colleges, technical schools, and universities.

Build on the success of the dual credit (Running Start) programs, developed by the school districts and Rock Valley College, to generate increased participation and local employer buy-in.

Continue to identify and prioritize career readiness and career pathways in all school districts in order to strengthen students’ ability to fill the jobs that will be needed by employers.

Increase the number of robotics and STEM programs in both school districts, and promote them to increase participation.

Increase special education transitional services and their timeline of implementation.

Expand or create new library service to include underserved and unserved Boone County residents.

Identify service gaps and overlap between existing partnerships.

Promote more connections between regional post-secondary education institutions and local government.

Create new partnerships between the library and school districts.
Education and Public Communication Goals, Objectives, & Strategies

**Goal 6.2 Establish equitable communication between public agencies and the community.**

**OBJECTIVES**

a. Develop a common communication vehicle that gets information to the entire community regarding public services provided and future opportunities.

b. Bridge the cultural divide between several demographic groups and local agencies.

**STRATEGIES**

Better utilize diverse/multiple forms of communication in both English and Spanish by government agencies.

Increase the types and amount of information provided to the public in an attempt to promote civic engagement by the community.

Utilize all communication avenues to better connect the community with volunteer opportunities and generate increased interest in those programs/activities.

Build on the successful model the school districts use to communicate with government agencies, non-profits, and private businesses on a regular basis through monthly meetings.

Gather data on the demographic information of participants in different public programs and activities in order to tack level of use.

Work with the Latinx and Hispanic community to build a leadership pipeline that fosters increased levels of communication with local agencies.

Increase communication between local employers and diverse student populations on available job opportunities and skills required.

Establish new and continue to increase the levels of partnerships between county government agencies and LULAC.
Chapter 6 Sources

Text

Figures