

BIG TIME INNOVATION

**WOOD RIVER
RURAL SCHOOLS**
2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT





Wood River Community:

The term “diamond in the rough” may seem cliché, but it can’t help but take up residency in my mind when I’m considering our school district. Here we are, a small community in the middle of Nebraska, right between a few of the state’s mid-sized cities, somewhat hidden in the cornfields. What makes us special?

It would be easy for an outsider to assume we’re just another rural school district with the usual offerings for our students: FFA, athletics and the expected assortment of academic classes.

What is exciting to share with the world is not just how we exceed those expectations, but how we truly innovate in all areas to give our kids in this little rural area a top-rank education with enriching experiences inside and outside of the classroom.

As you read this report, you'll see just a few ways this diamond is innovating right here in the rough of Central Nebraska and what it means to you: We are continuing to graduate productive, educated and bright students ready for what comes next - whether it be seeking the bright lights of those bigger cities around the world or sharing their successes right here in our community.

Yes, we're a small community. But with the big-time innovations happening within our district, our diamond shines bright.

TERRY ZESSIN
SUPERINTENDENT



**NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION CLASSIFICATIONS:**

**DISTRICT:
GREAT**

**ELEMENTARY:
GREAT**

**MIDDLE SCHOOL:
GREAT**

**HIGH SCHOOL:
EXCELLENT**

SMALL **SCHOOL DISTRICT** OFFERS **BIG-TIME**

INNOVATION



Whether it's facilities, technology or programs, innovation at Wood River Rural Schools means one thing: investing in students.

Take, for instance, how the district handled the pandemic. Wood River Rural was prepared before it happened.

"We had been working on the Zoom program in the fall and had done a number of practice connections," Superintendent Terry Zessin said.

"We had schedules prepared for students and staff about a month in advance of the pandemic shutdown."

Classes were up and running within two days.

"Our students didn't miss out on their classes," Zessin said. "If our staff wasn't forward-thinking and ingrained in technology, our students would be behind."

While some districts struggled to connect with students, Wood River Rural experienced great attendance and student achievement.

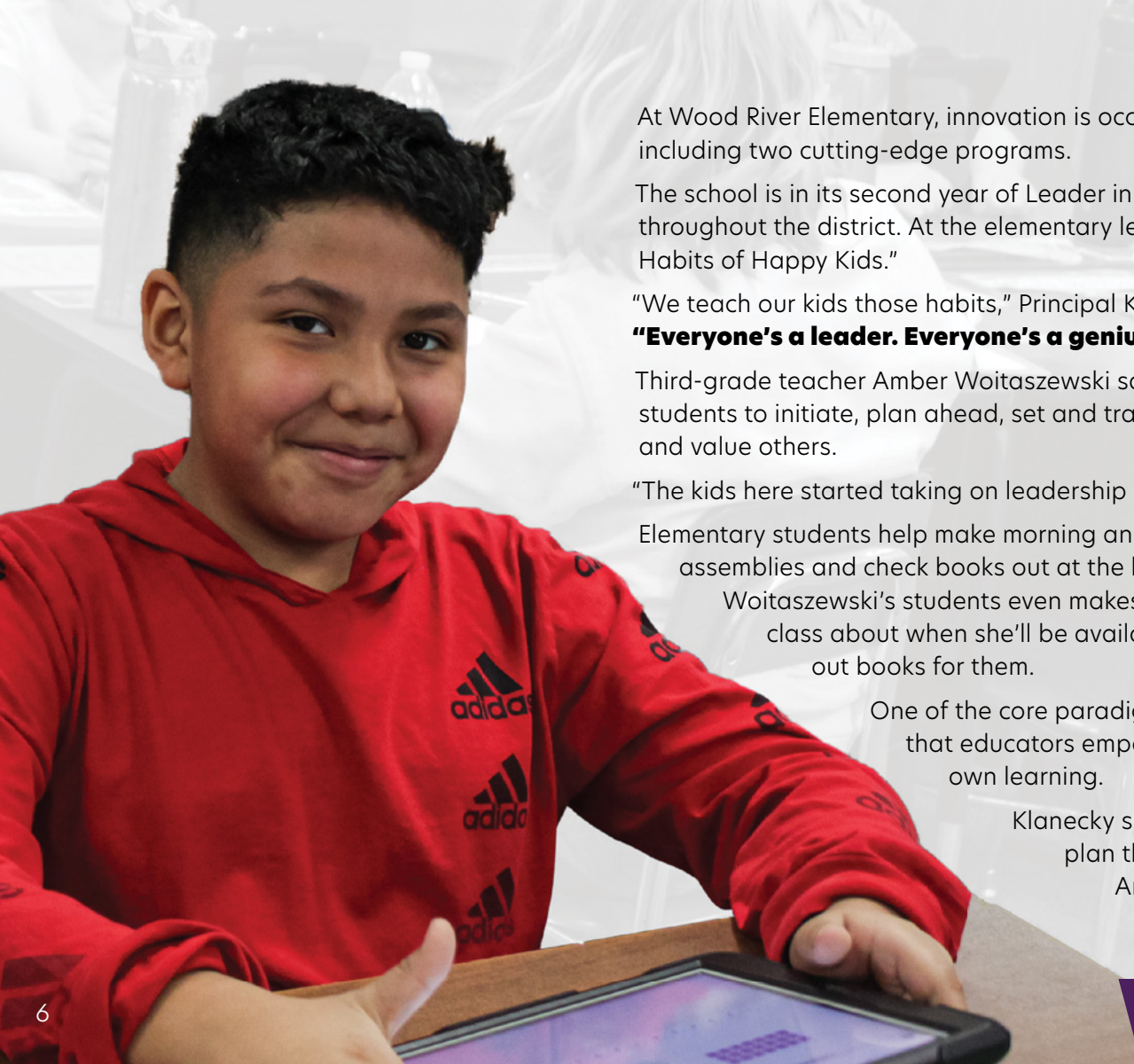
"Our teachers were used to creating online assignments, and our students were used to doing them," Zessin said. "We even held Zoom assemblies with guest speakers and a virtual honors night to recognize the efforts of our students."

In fact, Wood River Rural High School was rated Excellent for 2020-21 by the Nebraska Department of Education. Only 12% of all schools received the Excellent rating.

"The Excellent rating is confirmation that we have outstanding students, staff and overall school, despite what people think of small schools," Zessin said.

He added that Wood River is in the top 20% of ACT scores in the state.

"We have all the opportunities that bigger districts have," Zessin said, but Wood River Rural's lower student-to-teacher ratio means kids receive more individual attention.



At Wood River Elementary, innovation is occurring in a number of ways, including two cutting-edge programs.

The school is in its second year of Leader in Me, a program in use throughout the district. At the elementary level, it teaches “The 7 Habits of Happy Kids.”

“We teach our kids those habits,” Principal Kelly Klanecky said.

“Everyone’s a leader. Everyone’s a genius.”

Third-grade teacher Amber Woitaszewski said Leader in Me teaches students to initiate, plan ahead, set and track goals, be considerate and value others.


“The kids here started taking on leadership roles,” Woitaszewski said.

Elementary students help make morning announcements, plan assemblies and check books out at the library. One of

Woitaszewski’s students even makes an announcement to the class about when she’ll be available in the library to check out books for them.

One of the core paradigms of Leader in Me is that educators empower students to lead their own learning.

Klanecky said students helped plan this year’s Read Across America Day activities.



When they see a problem, they don't just come to their teacher or principal. Now they offer solutions.

"The further we get into Leader in Me, the more ownership I see kids taking," she said.

The elementary school is in its third year of using an innovative reading program called Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA), which is attracting the attention of other schools.

"Other districts will come and observe what we're doing," Klanecky said.

Many of the readings are related to social studies and science, and each grade focuses on a special topic. For instance, this year, the second grade is focusing on the War of 1812; fourth grade, the Middle Ages; and fifth grade, Renaissance and Reformation.

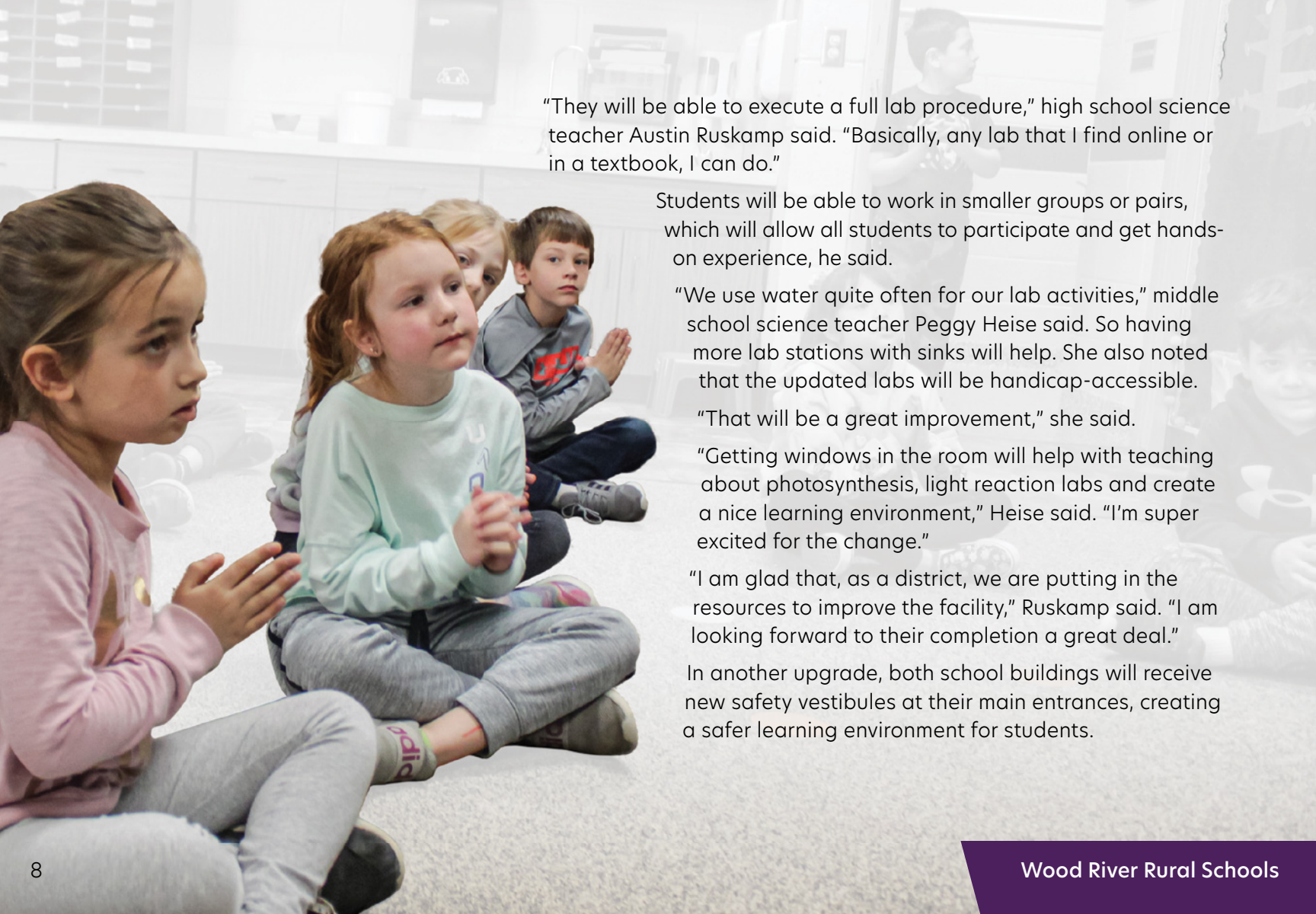
"I love just listening to the kids and how excited they are about history and science," Klanecky said about the program, which emphasizes collaboration and higher-order thinking skills.

"We've been inviting a lot of people from the community to talk about their areas of expertise," Woitaszewski said.

Elementary students have learned about the weather, astronomy, nutrition and Native American culture, all from special presenters. The kindergartners even built a tepee with the help of Stuhr Museum.

Edgerton Explorit Center will be visiting Wood River Elementary with hands-on learning stations. Fourth- and fifth-graders will go to the middle school/high school to use a STEM trailer provided by ESU 10.

This summer at the high school, the science labs will receive a major upgrade, allowing students to do more activities involving propane burners and snorkle exhausts.



“They will be able to execute a full lab procedure,” high school science teacher Austin Ruskamp said. “Basically, any lab that I find online or in a textbook, I can do.”

Students will be able to work in smaller groups or pairs, which will allow all students to participate and get hands-on experience, he said.

“We use water quite often for our lab activities,” middle school science teacher Peggy Heise said. So having more lab stations with sinks will help. She also noted that the updated labs will be handicap-accessible.

“That will be a great improvement,” she said.

“Getting windows in the room will help with teaching about photosynthesis, light reaction labs and create a nice learning environment,” Heise said. “I’m super excited for the change.”

“I am glad that, as a district, we are putting in the resources to improve the facility,” Ruskamp said. “I am looking forward to their completion a great deal.”

In another upgrade, both school buildings will receive new safety vestibules at their main entrances, creating a safer learning environment for students.

Other examples of facility innovation include the district's Jumbotron video boards, new basketball court, resurfaced track, new weight room for athletes, community fitness center and state-of-the-art theater. There is also a walking trail around the school.


Twelve acres of drip-irrigated land behind the school give students real-world experiences in farming innovation, technology and marketing.

Zessin said the district offers 15 college credits that transfer to all colleges and universities in the state, along with many other college and dual credit opportunities.

"We offer a class, Personal Leadership, for our seniors to prepare for

their next step after high school," he said. Students take part in job shadowing, make college visits and apply for college, all while earning scholarships and learning about personal finance.

It's all part of what Wood River Rural Schools calls "Small School, Big Opportunities, Unlimited Success."

"We create the big-school atmosphere within a small school," Zessin said. 

Playground plan to get boost during Go Big Give

Having a great playground is more than mere child's play.

While Wood River Elementary students are learning to set and track goals, be considerate and value others through the Leader in Me program, school leaders are doing the same with plans for a new playground.

Principal Kelly Klanecky said the playground's equipment is 25 to 30 years old, and the playground is covered with gravel, which doesn't accommodate students in wheelchairs.

Building a better playground – and raising money to pay for it – have been goals for some time, Klanecky said.

That fundraising should get a boost on May 5 with this year's Go Big Give, the 24-hour, online giving event for nonprofits in Hall, Hamilton, Howard and Merrick counties. The elementary playground will be the beneficiary of funds raised by the Wood River Community Foundation.

If all goes well, the new playground will be installed in the summer of 2023.

It's just another example of innovation equaling investment at Wood River Rural Schools.

"When people drive by the community, we want them to say, 'Oh, they've invested in their kids,'" Klanecky said.



Artist's renderings of the new playground.



**SCAN TO
GIVE NOW!**

District Snapshot

ENROLLMENT
501

TEACHERS
50

FREE/REDUCED LUNCH
42%

STATE AVG: 46%

SPECIAL EDUCATION
11%

STATE AVG: 16%

ATTENDANCE RATE
95%

STATE AVG: 93%

GRAD RATE
92%

STATE AVG: 88%

COLLEGE GOING RATE
85%

STATE AVG: 75%

2021 ACT PROFICIENCY

ELA
81%
STATE AVG: 46%

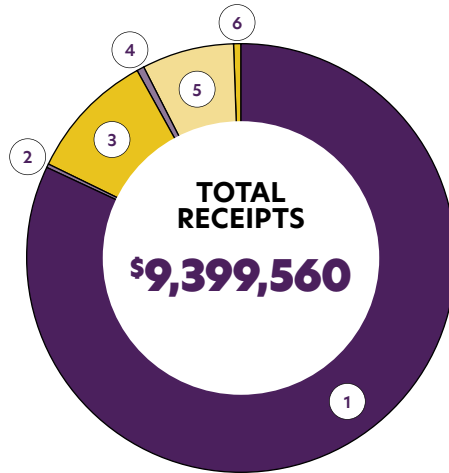
MATH
59%
STATE AVG: 44%

SCIENCE
70%
STATE AVG: 50%

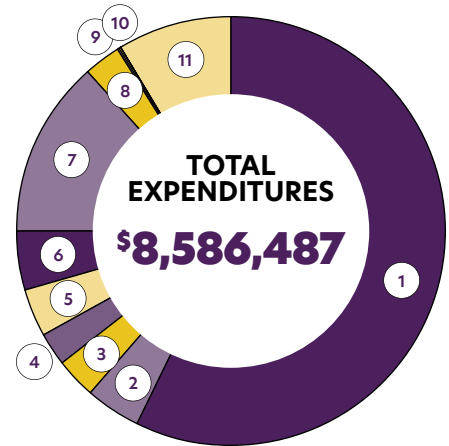
2021 NSCAS PROFICIENCY

ELA
46%
STATE AVG: 48%

MATH
53%
STATE AVG: 46%



1 Local Receipts	82.00%
2 County Receipts	0.39%
3 State Receipts other than TEEOSA	9.58%
4 State Aid (TEEOSA)	0.62%
5 Federal Receipts	7.04%
6 Total Other Financing Sources	0.33%



1 All Instruction Expenditures	56.80%
2 Support Services - Students	4.13%
3 Support Services - Instruction	3.14%
4 General Administration	2.37%
5 Office of the Principal Expenditures	3.54%
6 Central Services	4.63%
7 Maintenance & Operation Expenditures	13.20%
8 Support Services - Pupils Transportation	2.52%
9 State Categorical Programs	0.35%
10 Other Expenditures	0.93%
11 Total Federal Programs	8.37%



For more updated information, scan this code.



13800 West Wood River Road
Wood River, NE 68883

“On behalf of the Wood River Rural Schools Board of Education, I want to thank you for your support of our district, our staff and, most importantly, our students. We pride ourselves on the innovations we put in play to ensure we are meeting the needs of all students in our schools. The pandemic presented new challenges but we were prepared on day one to maintain academic excellence for our students. As you read this annual report, take notice of our achievement despite the many obstacles we faced. We hope you’ll share the feeling of pride. You play a part in our success!”

CRAIG HUXTABLE

BOARD OF EDUCATION PRESIDENT