

**“STATE OF THE SCHOOLS”**  
**SUPERINTENDENT’S ANNUAL REPORT TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**AND THE COMMUNITY**  
**BY**  
**MICHAEL S. SHONK**  
**UNIT 7 SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS**  
**2005 - 2007**

As I have done in the past, I thought this time of the year, with the President and Governor giving their “state of the union” and “state of the state” addresses, would be a nice time to share some of the highlights of the preceding year(s) with you through a “state of the schools” address. As we revisit the events and accomplishments up through December 31, 2007, it is easy to see that Community Unit School District #7 experienced yet another outstanding year. Each and every year goals are set for the District based on past accomplishments, successes, setbacks, federal and state legislation, court decisions, test scores, and current educational practices. We always look back over previous goals to see where we have been, where we are, and where we need to go. We have two new Board members that were seated on the Board of Education in 2007, Roger Oakes and Tracy Wilson. Our sincere thanks and appreciation to Linda Friedemann and Jim Fellman for their years of service to the students, staff, and communities of the Unit 7 School District. I am not sure the public is aware of the dedication and commitment that these people who serve and have served on the Unit 7 Board of Education have made over the past years. Sometimes it is a thankless job with no pay but the seven men and women on the Board of Education continue to serve the children, staff, parents and taxpayers of the Unit 7 school district.

In the area of curriculum, instruction, and student achievement, test scores were once again above state averages. Our students’ performance on the ISAT, ACT, and PSAE tests shows that a majority of Unit 7 students are meeting or exceeding state standards and averages. These results are available at each building or at the unit office if you are interested in looking at a copy of the test results and our website at [www.unitsevenschools.com](http://www.unitsevenschools.com) along with our School Report Card information. We are always striving to improve upon these scores and will continue working toward meeting not only the Illinois State Learning Standards but also the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements for improvement. School buildings and school districts continue to not meet AYP based on our special needs IEP (Individual Education Plan) sub-groups. NCLB needs to be fixed in order to stop penalizing good schools. I believe, as do many of my colleagues across the state, that students who have an IEP should be measured by the academic progress made on their IEP rather than by their performance on statewide tests. I think we should be held accountable for the services we provide to special education students but No Child Left Behind is not accurately measuring what they’re accomplishing. Changes are needed to NCLB to ensure that the law is truly measuring the progress of all students. Special education and bilingual students have unique needs. Labeling them as a sub-group and setting an arbitrary target ignores those needs and flies in the face of common sense. It is unfair to these kids, their teachers and their communities. NCLB has created a situation where some good schools are

inappropriately labeled as failing. Educators are working hard, students are working hard, and it's discouraging for them to be labeled as failing when they're achieving good progress.

Our commitment to technology has grown well beyond our expectations for this time period. Even though we are still in need of new and upgraded hardware, implementing technology into our curriculum has taken giant steps over the past ten years and last year was no exception. Our infrastructure has improved greatly through the efforts of Paul Bierman, our technology technician, and now Mr. Bob Case who is also helping with that. Tim Gateley, our technology coordinator, has worked with a committee on our three-year technology plan that sets our goals for improving technology and incorporating it into our curriculum at all grade levels. As a result of this commitment, Unit 7 schools will continue to bridge the communication gap between the school and communities through the school web sites and the district web site. Please visit our websites and click on the links that keep you abreast of the happenings of the Unit 7 schools. Parents continue to have the capability of paying for school lunches and milk via the Nutri-Kids program link known as Revtrak allowing them to pay online and giving them a line of credit. Parents also have the capability of tracking nutritional needs and food purchases of their child or children. This past year we also gave parents the option of paying their registration and textbook fees by credit card.

Through the efforts of our administrative and teaching staffs, Unit Seven Schools took advantage of the opportunity to implement another Pre-K program for 3 – 5 year olds at Unity West by applying for and receiving a grant in the amount of \$119,000. Judy Rushton, our Director of Special Education, led those efforts and applied for and received this grant. Even though this group was being serviced by our program at Unity East, this will better assist our 3 – 5 year old students on the west side of the district to transition into Kindergarten without the long bus trip. It also allows us to service more students on both sides of the district. We have also added class sections at Unity West and Unity East due to increased enrollments to maintain appropriate class sizes.

Most of you are well aware of the safety and security ideas that were built into our three new schools and the new 6<sup>th</sup> grade wing such as exits from every classroom so that we can empty a building in a matter of seconds but at the same time these cannot be accessed from the outside, telephones in each and every room, glass hallways to spot visitors to our buildings, locking of main hallway doors to force visitors to go through the office and sign in, etc. We have also placed AED's at each building and have one out close to our playing fields that can be accessed if needed. We have also taken it upon ourselves to make Unity High School a safe and secure educational environment as well. I would be glad to give anybody a tour, particularly those new to the district, who may not be aware of those safety and security projects we built into the new schools. Each one of our schools has an Emergency/Crisis Plan in place and periodically reviews these with first responders each and every year. This past year we have added security cameras at the UJHS/UHS site and are in the process of implementing a website based program called SchoolReach to notify every parent/guardian in the district within a matter of minutes of an emergency or school closing due to an inclement weather situation. We also hope to expand our capabilities with that system for other notifications as well. Each school continues its efforts to deal with bullying and now even cyber bullying via the internet. If you haven't heard of our Project Ignition project, please call the high school

and our school resource officer, Kevin Franzen, to find out more about it or go to our website. It is a great project that we hope will ensure the safety of our students when behind the wheel and save lives! We believe our three school nurses provide a valuable health service for our students and staff as well as training and performing our vision and hearing screenings.

District and school improvement plans (copies are available at each building as well as our website) include emphasis on math and reading and writing skill improvement at all grade levels. To accomplish this we have added a reading teacher at UJHS and UHS to help those students achieve reading at grade level. We have implemented research-based interventions and strategies at both elementary schools and UJHS and UHS to help students having reading difficulties achieve reading at grade level. Those include the Six-Minute Solution Fluency Program, DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Beginning Early Literacy Skills), PALS, STARS, CRISS (all acronyms for interventions devoted to reading improvement, phonics, and phonemic awareness), Read 180, and more time devoted to the teaching of reading in the daily teaching schedule. Mrs. Wickline, our grade 6 – 8 media specialist, has started a reading club which has been very popular. For more information about any of these programs, please feel free to contact any of our administrative staff.

Our professional staffs have been very adept at pursuing and receiving grants to complement and supplant our budget. Our media center staffs continue to compete for grants that provide for additional books and materials in all of our new media centers. Tapping into Medicaid resources has brought in extra dollars for our special needs programs at all levels. Each building staff has been responsible for aggressively pursuing grants in all areas and being successful with those grants. We can't say enough about the academic support from the Room for Unity Education Foundation and our PTO's. Through their efforts to support our academic programs, classroom teachers are able to pursue new, creative, and innovative programs. If you are interested in how you can help support these efforts, please feel free to contact any Room for Unity Education Foundation member or PTO member or contact this office or school offices.

We are above the state averages in the following categories even though we would all like to see 100% student attendance rates, 0% dropout rates, and 100% graduation rates. Our graduation rate is at 99% compared to the state AYP minimum target rate of 72%. Our dropout rate is 0.9% compared to the state average of 3.5%. Our attendance rate is 95.3% compared to the statewide AYP minimum target rate of 90.0%. Our truancy rate is 0.2% compared to the statewide average of 2.5%. We have a low income population of 20.0% compared to the state average of 40.9%. We continuously strive to improve upon all of these each year. Our district is attractive to parents and prospective employees, as our average class size in all grades is 19.95 and our K – 8 class size is 20.27. All of this information is available at each building and district office as well as all of our websites. Our serious student discipline problems have diminished and academic performance improved due to positive behavior programs and our flexible service delivery systems implemented in our elementary, junior high, and high school buildings.

Our students, parents, and communities not only enjoy many academic successes but also enjoy many extracurricular successes. I must compliment our booster groups for the support they give to our students and schools. The UAAA, Athletic Boosters, Music

Boosters, PTO's, Room For Unity Education Group, Ag Alumni Group, and other booster groups are second to none in supporting our students, programs and schools. My hats off to all of you! For this size of school district our athletic programs and facilities are second to none. We have added a new softball field and a new soccer field and are making improvements to our baseball field to accommodate our junior high baseball program. We added three new junior high sports programs that include baseball, softball, and wrestling to give our students more opportunities to participate. Our students continue to participate and find success through our fine arts programs. Our scholastic bowl team can compete with anybody! Our theater arts group participates in and competes with other theater arts groups from all over the state of Illinois. We realize there are always areas for improvement but we are proud of what we have accomplished both in and out of the classroom and continually strive to improve upon those accomplishments. Our band program has soared thanks to the efforts of Mr. Bill Jean and we look forward to the beginning or reinstatement of our marching band program. Since my arrival ten years ago, we have improved upon our course offerings and curriculum as well as our extracurricular activities. These programs provide participation opportunities to our students that they otherwise would never have enjoyed. Thanks to all of you! I have received nothing but favorable comments regarding our admittance into the Okaw Valley Conference. It has renewed the spirit of competition for the school and our athletes with surrounding area schools.

We continue to lose excellent staff members to retirement but have made a concentrated effort to pursue and hire the best candidates available to replace them. During my ten years as your superintendent we have turned over approximately 60% of our staff. We have made some excellent hires bringing to our district enthusiasm, excitement, knowledge, and best teaching practices to serve the students of the Unit 7 School District. In addition to the standard procedures for soliciting applications, listing, and advertising for job vacancies, we also attend recruiting fairs at Eastern Illinois University, the University of Illinois, and Illinois State University looking for the best possible candidates we can find. The application process is available on our website as well along with listed vacancies we currently have in the school district.

Through the efforts of our volunteers, senior citizens, and PTO's both our elementary schools continue to be upgraded and improved. The continued support of our classroom teachers by these groups helps supplant our classroom instruction and supplies and materials as well as sponsoring educational field trips. The addition of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade wing has freed up space at both of our elementary schools and is a great addition to the junior high building. As money becomes available or the School Maintenance Grants are reinstated, we hope to improve our high school science classrooms and lab, look at upgrading the high school locker rooms, and improve our Family and Consumer Science classroom and lab. We must move from our administrative offices and warehouse to new locations. As a cost saving measure we are looking at the industrial arts construction trades class to have a major role in the designing and construction of the administration building over the next year, if feasible. Scheduling, time availability, skill level of the class, etc. could be factors in determining how involved, if any, that class would be. We feel this hands-on experience would benefit our construction trades students as well as hold down costs for this project.

The status of the state of Illinois and its budget woes makes us all wary of what might or could happen to schools throughout Illinois. We certainly are appreciative of the efforts to get all Illinois schools additional funding but must be cognizant of the financial condition of the state and the impact the revenues and expenditures have on all programs in the state of Illinois, particularly education. Your superintendent will continue his efforts to support increased funding of our schools fairly and equitably.

With such an impressive array of accomplishments, it seems logical to wonder about the district's financial situation. We anticipate growth in our K – 12 enrollments through the housing developments going up throughout our district but realize as of this writing the impact the economy and housing market could have on this growth. The district is in solid shape for now. In past years the district has been recognized by the state of Illinois as being on their Financial Recognition List for fiscal responsibility and sound financial planning. Only about one-third of all Illinois school districts receive this recognition. We are committed to fiscal responsibility but yet providing the best opportunities, facilities, supplies, materials, equipment, and programs for our students that we can with the resources available to us. During the past ten years we have not only maintained our fund balances but have been able to make vast improvements to the facilities, staff, and programs available to the students of the Unit 7 School District. Our audit reports have been commendable and are available at the central office for anyone to peruse.

We continue to recognize highly successful Unity High School graduates by inducting past alumni into our "Hall of Fame." It is an honor and a pleasure to visit with each and every one of these past graduates and their families that are selected into the Hall of Fame. We look forward to many more ceremonies such as this by not only recognizing highly successful graduates but also sharing their stories as a role model for our current students. On a side note, it is always a pleasure to sit down with Oscar Hicks and other alumni and just listen to the past history of Unity High School and this school district. To know where we have been helps us to plan for where we want to be.

I serve with thirty other superintendents on the Board of Directors for the Illinois Association of School Administrators that represents all of the superintendents in the state of Illinois and after returning from these meetings, as well as job fairs at universities and the state School Board conference in Chicago this past November, I have come back with a sense of pride and more of an appreciation of what we have here in the Unit 7 School District. It seems as though we are always a step ahead of everyone else. I look at our Pre-K programs, full day Kindergarten programs, facilities, school breakfast programs, special teachers for elementary PE, media center specialists, elementary art, school nurses, etc. and what people are talking about doing, we have been doing for a long time. I know we have more work to do and certainly we will not get complacent; but how refreshing it is to know we are a step ahead. Our Board, staff, and communities are made up of clearly caring and responsible people who take the business of providing good educational opportunities for the district's kids seriously. It's caring people who make the Unit 7 schools special and have raised many an eyebrow about what's going on in south Champaign County! Stay tuned for future developments from the Unit 7 schools and why people are making their choice to consider our communities and schools as places to raise and educate their children. Please visit our website at [www.unitsevenschools.com](http://www.unitsevenschools.com).

