

## Alvey Shares School District Update

By Sarah Wetzel For the Plain Talk, Oct 17, 2025

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Dr. Damon Alvey, superintendent of the Vermillion School District, provided a status report of Vermillion's schools to the Vermillion Rotary Club at a recent meeting.

The Vermillion School District was established in 1876, Alvey noted. The current high school was built in 1966. The middle school was constructed in 1972.

“And now, with our brand new Vermillion Elementary School being completed last year, we’ve taken two buildings off our roster and completed one big building,” he said.

Alvey stated that the district size is the same as it has been in the past comprising 179 square miles.

“We go up to the north and meet up with the Beresford and Irene-Wakonda districts,” he said. “And of course we head to the west and we bump into Gayville ... we head to the south and to the east and we run into Elk Point’s district there.”

### SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Most of the district data has been consistent as well, Alvey said, with the exception of enrollment which grew for seven years by over 170 students then experienced a decline in the past two years.

“Some of that is attributed to kids going to homeschool and some of it’s the kids that have moved away with families just like we typically have,” he said. “It’s a pretty transient community at K-12 here in Vermillion.”

Alvey shared how he reported enrollment of 1,315 to the school board two weeks ago then gained 10 students the next day then lost eight by Friday of the same week.

“It’s a rolling obstacle to try to figure out what enrollment is,” he said.

Alvey said the district is doing all they can to ensure kids are enrolled, present and situated before the Sept. 26 deadline where enrollment determines funding.



Damon Alvey  
Vermillion School District

“Each of those students is worth about \$7,000 in state aid,” he said. “About \$550,000 is not coming into the district to serve the needs of the students this year as compared to the past, so enrollment is a very big deal. Attendance is a very big deal and keeping kids engaged in schools and being competitive so they want to attend your school is something that all K-12 public schools are trying to deal with.”

Alvey said the district has about a \$20 million budget with 53% of revenue coming from taxpayers, 38% from the federal government and some from local and county sources.

Students who qualify for free or reduced lunch have also stayed consistent, currently at 32%.

“You can do the math,” he said. “One out of every three of our students probably has some insecurities of some kind with food or income-based concerns.”

Students requiring Special Education services are currently at 16.3%, Alvey said.

“What we are seeing, which I think is a trend nationally, are the needs of the students are greater,” he said. “Students are requiring extra services for the needs that they have to come to public education.”

Alvey said the district hires staff and specialists to meet the physical and mental needs of the students.

“Where those kids are is where we meet them and then we as a public school provide all the services necessary for them to get their free and appropriate public education,” he said.

There are 350 students utilizing school transportation in the morning and 450 in the afternoon, Alvey reported.

The larger number in the afternoon is due to students being transported for the Boys and Girls Club.

“As one of our great partners, the Boys and Girls Club is providing free services for before and after school care for kids,” Alvey said. “Grades 3 through 11, tutor club, nutritious snacks, programming, a great place for kids to hang out and be safe and have supervision after school.”

Certified staff to student ratio sits at one to 12, he said.

The school board makes a concerted effort to make sure the lower grades have the lowest student to teacher ratio possible.

“We know that when we get engagement with kids at those younger grades that we’re going to see the dividends later in third, fourth, fifth grade,” Alvey said. “We hope that the extra attention with five, six, seven less kids in that classroom will pay off not only for those kids but for the teacher to make sure that we’re giving those kids high quality, personalized attention that they need and deserve.”

The declining enrollment has also contributed to lower class sizes even in the upper grades, he said, with an average of about 21 in grades three through five.

Attendance rate sits at an admirable 92% Alvey said, though the district is shooting for a goal of 95%.

“What we can say is of the 8% that we’re missing that is chronic absenteeism,” he said. “Those are kids that are missing 20, 30, 40 days of school in a

year. So, they’re missing a third of their school year and then expected to master that material and then progress.”

Alvey said the district puts forth a lot of effort to make sure the kids are in school.

“If they’re not there we can’t get them in front of our great teachers and help them achieve some of their learning goals and objectives,” he said. “And of course leading to graduation and lifelong income and good quality of life.”

The district graduation rate is gauged on on-time graduation and completion.

“The state again holds us accountable on a report card of how many kids graduate,” Alvey said. “A typical class will graduate 85 to 90 kids a grade as a senior.”

Alvey said a good 91% of those students graduate “on time” or completed in four years.

“Fair or unfair, that’s the mark that we have to hit,” he said. “Not all kids can make that grade in four years.”

The vast majority of students, 95%, do graduate and receive a diploma from Vermillion High School, Alvey said.

The district will be putting forth an annual report detailing other aspects of district operations including 18 different extracurriculars at the elementary level, 15 extracurriculars at the middle school and 30 extracurriculars at the high school.

“These are just things that this district values and wants to give the kids for a good experience,” he said. “Of course, sports take up a lot of that...but we also have fine arts with show choir and marching band and debate and all the things that our fine arts kids enjoy there.”

A wide variety of clubs round out the extracurriculars.

“Kids will get a very good educational background academically here as well as the opportunity to explore and dabble in a lot of extracurriculars which we feel really make the kids more well-rounded and prepared for life,” Alvey said.

#### SCHOOL STAFF

One hundred fifteen certified teachers and about 190 full-time staff serve the student population

with the average teacher salary standing at a fairly competitive \$56,695, he said.

“That’s up considerably over the last five or six years from the half-cent sales tax that the state initiated as well as the things that the legislature has pushed forward trying to continually move those numbers up,” Alvey said. “The starting salary in our school district is \$50,000. If you compare this with neighbors, everybody’s hovering right around that.”

He said over half of the district’s teachers have some sort of advanced degree making them highly qualified.

In addition to highly qualified teachers, Alvey said 99% of the staff are endorsed in their field.

He said they have hired staff from industry that teach while working towards their endorsement or degree thanks to flexibility from the state.

The district’s efforts last year yielded 85 graduates with 21 Regent Scholars, nine Opportunity Scholars and 36 Honor students.

“That’s sort of an honor that you see 50 some of our 85 graduates were on those two tracks,” Alvey said. “That says something about the kids that are coming through our district. As an average that class had over a 3.0 grade point average which is really good.”

Though the average grade point average looks good, he said some scores in the Smarter Balance Assessments haven’t been quite what district administrators have wanted leading to a collaboration with partners at the University of South Dakota to help with curriculum.

“A study group has been developed to talk about why the State of South Dakota is not performing well in this assessment,” he said. “Is the assessment aligned with the curriculum? That’s one of the things that we’re studying.”

Alvey said one thing they have learned is that South Dakota is one of only 13 states that still uses the Smarter Balance Assessments. Other states have moved on to different assessments.

“Of the 13 states that are still taking the Smarter Balance Assessment, South Dakota ranks number one and number two in language, math and science which is great news because when we’re compared

nationally, the data does not impress us and it gives us a lot of pause about what we can do differently to do some of those things,” he said. “But when we compare ourselves to the states that are taking the Smarter Balance then we’re much more impressed with our scores. That being said, we are not clearly where we want to be.”

The district is taking measures such as requiring high school juniors who do not score proficient in math to take a math class and also looking at when in the year the test is administered.

Alvey said South Dakota kids’ average ACT scores far exceed a lot of places in the country even though some of those same students scored low on the Smarter Balance Assessment.

“Our kids do very well on tests that mean something to them,” he said. “I’ll be quite honest that the Smarter Balance does nothing for the individual student other than gauge where they’re at, so sometimes the buy-in isn’t very good.”

Because of the different ways the data can be interpreted, he said several legislators are twisting it to either say the data is not as bad as it seems or that we are failing our kids, pushing either for more funding or less.

“Just depending on who you’re talking to, that’s sort of the answer around assessments,” Alvey said.

#### FINLAND PROJECT

The district has continued to be the only school in the state with the TransformED project, or the Finland project.

“You’ve heard me talk about this for four years now,” Alvey said. “This has started off as studying another country. Finland has great test scores. They do a lot of amazing things to get kids ready for life and it all starts with collaboration within the building and within their community.”

He said Finnish students are put in situations and real-life experiences at a young age, allowing them to flourish and giving them permission to fail.

“In America, often we think failure is a bad thing and that we just grind it out and do it again,” Alvey said. “Well, sometimes there’s something to be learned from failure.”

The first year, he said, the school district’s Finland project worked on developing strong partnerships

in the community. The second year they worked to solve a community problem, putting K-12 graders together on a collaborative project creating a tangible product that represented Vermillion.

“We took that one step further last year and we wanted to create a place on our campuses that would be another extension of the classrooms,” Alvey said. “We called it our outdoor learning experiences.”

The students again worked collaboratively on outdoor learning concepts, eventually using an \$80,000 grant from the Vermillion Public School Foundation to make those ideas come to life.

“Now on our campuses you’re seeing some of that transformation,” he said. “We’ve got some of our picnic tables in, our outdoor shelter is being constructed by a local company and the pieces that the kids had put in are now starting to show up on our campus.”

Now in the fourth year, Alvey said the focus is “Let it grow,” giving kids ideas and permissions to explore individual opportunities such as guiding a fourth grader through what it would take to open a dog-walking business.

“Then we’re going to ask them to try to make it happen,” he said. “Over the course of the next several months our kids will sometimes be grouped together because they might have the same idea.”

Other students will work individually to develop their own project, he said.

Alvey promised to report on the results of the project at the end of the year.

#### SCHOOL SECURITY

With school security being high on the priority list, he said the school district has received over \$100,000 from a grant to update all of the internal intercom systems and make it easier to communicate between all the buildings in the district.

Door access cameras and upgraded panic buttons are also a part of the security upgrade.

“There’s not a place in our district that you walk now that you’re not on camera which is good,” Alvey said. “It’s a safety feature but it’s also good for recording events that happened. If somebody says they’ve been bullied in this hallway every day for the last week and nobody’s doing anything about it, we can go back and we can identify the kids on the security film very clearly on who and what we’re looking for and AI will find it for us and we’ll be able to find out if that event happened or not.”

He said the school district has also improved communication with parents, investing in a program called Parent Square and updating its website and Facebook page which boasted 335,000 views in the last 90 days.

“It just is an example of the things we’re trying to do to promote the district, share what’s going on and make sure that we’re getting our message out there,” Alvey said.

Most of the followers are locals in the 35-44 age range but Alvey said some online followers actually hail from Indonesia, El Salvador, Germany and Japan among other countries.

“That means people have relatives here and they’re keeping an eye on what’s happening in their school district which we appreciate,” he said.

Alvey thanked Rotary members and other donors to the district, pointing out that many of the programs and initiatives mentioned would not be possible without taxpayers and interested organizations such as Rotary.

“We go out in this community and ask for something to help improve kids’ experiences in our district and people are lined up to help us out,” he said. “Whether it’s lunch money for kids in need, money for a field trip for a special experience, if we need judges for a Finland experience, if we need somebody to help come monitor the kids at recess or lunch because we had something going on with teachers, we’ve got everything we want in this community.”