

OPINION

OUR VIEW

Planning for the future

We are saddened that St. Thomas School officials must eliminate any grades from its offerings. But we are heartened that this drastic action may put the school in a more stable situation to face the future.

The school will eliminate grades 5 through 8 from its classes starting next fall. And instead, the school will focus on revamping its preschool program, which feeds the kindergarten and other classes at the school.

While the change may seem small, impacting just nine students this year, it is the end of an era that many people experienced and count as a part of their strong Borderland heritage.

The private school is not unique in experiencing declining enrollment. It's an issue across northern Minnesota and has been for some years. Locally, International Falls school officials are in conversations about how to adjust to a roughly \$500,000 loss in revenue resulting from a drop

of about 70 students since last spring.

Sadly, St. Thomas' loss may be the Falls' gain as some of the students who planned to attend St. Thomas may end up learning at the Falls district schools.

The loss of 265 jobs at the local paper mill last year is clearly playing a role in the declining enrollment at area schools as some families seek employment opportunities outside the community. And at the same time families remaining in the parish and community appear to be cutting back on giving, which as impacted St. Thomas' bottom line.

Making changes at long-time institutions is difficult. And we're sure that deep thought and consideration were given to all feasible options before the decision to cut grades was reached.

Kudos to St. Thomas School official for facing the facts, making tough decisions and planning for a more stable future.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hospital motives, methods in new clinic suspect

To the editor,
We are physicians who have served the people of International Falls for over 60 years combined. In learning of the hospital's plan to open a rural health clinic, we are highly suspect both of the hospital's motives and methods.

The "hospital side" of the Rainy Lake Medical Center Board has stated on a number of occasions that the current organization is not meeting budget due to the clinic's failure to make a profit and the high expenses of paying physicians. If this is the case, why is the hospital planning to open its own clinic — something it has no experience in doing — and to pay its newly "recruited" providers salaries which are estimated to be 30 percent above what the providers at the current clinic are being paid?

The hospital states reasons for opening its own clinic are Essentia has not been successful in recruiting new physicians to the area and local access to routine medical care can be weeks out for a routine appointment. This is true. However, Essentia's recruiting has been hampered by the desire to recruit only physicians able to provide pregnancy and labor and delivery care. These physicians are in extremely limited supply and in great demand nationally. None of

the providers at the hospital's rural health clinic will assist in this area of critical need and will likely further hamper our ability to continue this care.

Additionally, if access to care is a concern, how will the hospital's "recruiting" one of our current providers away from the clinic help this situation? Why didn't the hospital recruit its two other new providers to help the need at the current clinic? We are still one organization.

The methods used by the hospital's board members and executive team to plan and recruit for this rural health clinic are also concerning. The "Essentia" members of the RLMC board have stated this new clinic was never discussed or voted on at a board meeting. That's odd considering the board is required to approve any contracts or expenditures of \$12,000 or more. It is disturbing that the hospital has hired one of its "hospital side" board members, and his significant other, to staff the new rural health clinic. This seems a clear conflict of interest considering the same board member was part of the unanimous vote against the offer by Essentia to build a new hospital in International Falls.

It appears we threw away a new hospital so we can have a new rural health clinic, which will be led by an administration inexperienced

in out-patient medicine and who will pay their medical staff much more than the local market dictates — all under the guise of providing improved access at a lower cost. It seems absurd to us.

The real motive is this: the hospital fears the current clinic's physicians, whom it has neglected for years, will not support the hospital's ancillary services once the current RLMC dissolves. By hiring its own physicians, the hospital is attempting to continue to feed itself as it separates from Essentia.

Dr. Douglas Johnson International Falls, MN
Editor's note: This letter was also signed by doctors Jeri Vergeldt and Samantha Crossley.

The Journal attempted to fact check some of the statements made in the above letter with Bob Haley, Rainy Lake Medical Center interim CEO.

Haley said the pay for the doctors is what the market will bare and said he is not sure the total cost of the providers. He said some of the information in the letter is included in a separation agreement now being negotiated by Essentia Health and Falls Memorial Hospital members of the board. Decisions to hire a board member and his significant other were discussed and made when neither was president to avoid the perception of a conflict.

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Bruce Sampson Ray, MN