

Urbandale Community School District History

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Urbandale Community School District is a suburban district in the northwest metropolitan area of Des Moines, Iowa, proud of its past and planning for the challenges of the future. The City of Urbandale currently has a population in excess of 35,500. The school district covers about eight square miles within the city and has an enrollment of approximately 3,700 students in grades PK-12. Reflecting the community's increasing diversity, over 40 languages were represented by students entering Urbandale classrooms beginning with the 2009-2010 school year. This is only one of the many changes that have taken place since the school district was first established.

Introduction *The beginnings of the community*

In 1858 the first settlers came to the area northwest of Des Moines, now known as Urbandale. The land was agricultural with farming, orchards, pigs and chickens, and gardening the mainstays of the area. Three farm homes of note remain in Urbandale from the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century:

Flynn Mansion (1870) is the Italianate style brick home now part of the Living History Farms. Originally built by entrepreneur Martin Flynn, this property was a state prison farm prior to its purchase and restoration by Living History Farms.

The home located at the northwest corner of 72nd and Douglas (1871) was part of the farm purchased by John MacRae in 1910. This may have been the location of a horse stable in the 1880's.

Olmsted-Urban House (1904) is currently the home of the Urbandale Historical Society, which is located at 70th and Airline. This was the early home of prominent families helping in the establishment of the city and schools, the Olmsted's and the Urban's. The Urbandale Historical Society purchased the house in 1987. It has been restored and furnished as homes appeared in the 1920's and 1930's.

Though there is no known documentation of the origination of the name Urbandale, the accepted explanation for the name comes from the Inter-Urban rail line, which operated, between Des Moines and Boone at the turn of the century. In 1904 a trolley line was constructed connecting the area with Beaverville, then south to Des Moines. The line operated along what is now Urbandale Avenue and discontinued operation in 1951. This Urbandale Line was an important connection for travel from Des Moines to Urbandale. The Trolley Park at 70th and Roseland memorializes the trolley terminal and its turnaround at this site. The park includes placards explaining the history of the trolley line and other historical material about Urbandale.

Coal mining was also important to the area. Between 1920 and 1950, several coal mines were in the area including the Des Moines Ice and Fuel Company Mine, the Beck Mine, the Ryder Mine and the Urbandale Coal Company Mine. Operating mainly in winter-time when the coal was needed for heating, shafts were sunk vertically with a series of horizontal shafts radiating from the vertical shaft. Headhouses with power lifts

brought the coal to the surface. As later noted, Karen Acres School is built on land mined by the Des Moines Ice and Fuel Coal Company.

St. Gabriel Monastery was established west of Merle Hay Road and north of Douglas in 1921. In the late 1950's the site was purchased and the Merle Hay Shopping Plaza was built. This was an early open-air shopping center in metro Des Moines.

Pre-World War I *One-room schools*

Prior to the formation of the district, students in the area now known as Urbandale, attended one-room schools. Three schools served students in the vicinity: McDivitt Grove School was located near the McDivitt Cemetery north of Meredith Drive at 70th Street; Center School was originally constructed near 114th Street, prior to its move to 100th and Meredith; and Webster School was located at 128th Street and Aurora Avenue, the site of the current Webster Elementary School (i.e., This new facility, opened in 2006, was named for the one-room school originally on the site). Students attending school prior to World War I often completed their formal education at the eighth grade. High school attendance was not mandatory. Many of the students who did wish to continue their schooling, rode the trolley from Urbandale each day to attend a high school in Des Moines.

1916-1952 *The first school buildings at the 70th street and Douglas site*

As the population in the area grew, with the 1920 census indicating a population of 298, the citizens wanted to improve educational opportunities for their students. In 1916 Johnston Station, north of Urbandale on Merle Hay Road, was preparing to absorb the students in the Urbandale area into their schools. The Urbandale parents wanted their children to attend school closer to home. In 1916 Urbandale area citizens organized to raise money to build a wood frame, two-room school on the southwest corner of 70th Street and Douglas Avenue. Students in grades 1-4 were in one room and students in grades 5-8 in the other. The proposed Urbandale Community School District, bound on the north by Meredith Drive and on the south by Urbandale Avenue. The west boundary was 86th Street and the east was both sides of 64th Street from Urbandale Avenue to Aurora Avenue, and east to Merle Hay Road from Aurora Avenue to Meredith Drive, less than 4 square miles. The City of Urbandale was officially incorporated in 1917, so the school district could be established. And the Urbandale tradition of the utilizing our schools as community buildings began, as the two-room school also served as the meeting place for the city council until 1944.

A new brick, three-story school building was constructed in 1925, after the wood frame two-room building was moved nearer to Monroe Court. This was a typical brick school building with the first floor below grade to the windows, thus creating 2 ½ stories of the building above ground level. An addition was constructed south of the existing building in 1934-35. The first Urbandale High School graduating class in 1937 consisted of four students (i.e., prior to 1937, students wanting to attend high school took classes in Des Moines, Johnston or Grimes with Urbandale helping with the tuition). Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds and labor were used in the construction of the first gymnasium in 1940 west of the brick building. The gym included a stage for performances and community meetings. The original football/athletic field was west of the gym. Six-man football was a popular sport in the 1940's.

This 70th and Douglas site continued as a school facility until the new Urbandale Junior High was occupied in 1974. Beginning in the early 1960's, two two-room steel buildings and several one-room portable buildings were located on the 70th and Douglas site, housing various combinations of students in grades 7-12. In 1977, the facilities were demolished and the land was sold. This site is now a Walgreen's Drugstore and a nearby strip of small businesses.

The Urbandale High School Corner Commission established a memorial on the southwest corner of 70th and Douglas to commemorate the school site. The 1925 cornerstone from the original brick building and plaques commemorating the graduating class members from 1937-1966 are part of the memorial. A plaque also honors those who attended Urbandale High School and entered the armed services prior to their graduation. A sculpture obelisk depicts, among other items, the original 1916 two-room building, the brick building, and the Bluejay mascot.

1952-1975 *"The Baby Boomers"*

From 1916-1952 all the students in the district attended classes in the buildings located at 70th and Douglas, but after World War II the post war "Baby Boom" was underway. The Baby Boom was accompanied by accelerated growth in homebuilding in the suburbs. Growth was from the established neighborhoods in the east portion of the city to the west where acreages and farm fields lay. The 1950 census for Urbandale indicated a population of 1,777. Additional space was needed, especially for elementary students. In 1952, Olmsted Elementary School was opened, named for Millard A. Olmsted, landowner and former school board member. The east wing, currently used as a kindergarten center, is the original building. In 1953 and 1954 two additions were completed, the south wing, currently housing the offices and music room, and the north multipurpose room and four classrooms west of the original building in 1956. The district kitchen was built in 1965 adjacent to the multipurpose room, and the 1969 open space classroom addition was completed west of the multipurpose room and kitchen. In the 1950's the football field was moved from 70th and Douglas to the area south of the Olmsted building.

The buildings at the 70th and Douglas site became Urbandale Junior-Senior High. Adding the roof and walls between the brick building and the gym in 1955 created an industrial arts room. A few years later the space was converted into the Band room, with a little office and storage rooms to hold instruments and uniforms. The industrial arts room was moved to a space behind what eventually became the little bakery on the north side of Douglas. As the junior-senior high enrollment grew, additional space was leased at 7019 Douglas in 1961 for the industrial arts classes and the existing space converted to regular classrooms.

The elementary school age population continued growing rapidly. The 1950 K-12 student enrollment was 419, and in 1957 there were 1114 students, nearly tripling in seven years. By 1957, the district was utilizing spaces throughout the community to house elementary students. This continued well into the 1960's until enough buildings and classrooms were built to house all the students in grades K-6. These community spaces included:

- Urbandale Community Church, now the Urbandale United Church of Christ at 70th and Oliver Smith

- American Legion Hall – Dixon Hall-at 68th and Douglas
- Lions Park Shelter House at 72nd and Prairie
- Open Bible Church at 68th and Douglas, now Christian Photo
- Gloria Dei Lutheran Church – 8301 Aurora
- The mine facility and land at the former Des Moines Ice and Fuel Company Mine at 74th and Oliver Smith was purchased and the headhouse converted to a three-room school - currently the site of the brick Karen Acres Elementary School built in 1964.
- The old house at 7101 Airline on the Olmsted Elementary site, which was later used as the school administration office, has since been demolished
- St. Stephens Lutheran Church at 72nd and Oliver Smith and the house at 3201 74th owned by St. Stephens
- Aldersgate Methodist Church at 76th and Dennis Drive and prior to that the home on the corner of Beechwood and 74th.
- The employee training room at the Sears store in the Merle Hay Shopping Plaza (now Merle Hay Mall). The sixth grade students at this location used the employee dining room for lunch and a section of the asphalt lot for recess. Their teacher, Max Benshoof who later became one of the elementary principals, drove a school bus from Olmsted School to the Sears site

After World War II, students residing west of 86th Street could attend Urbandale Schools or Grimes Schools. In the late 1950's school district consolidations began. As a result the residents living in the area bounded by 86th Street on the east, 114th Street on the west, Urbandale Avenue (3000 block) on the south and Meredith Drive on the north wanted to be included in the Urbandale School District. The district boundaries were enlarged to incorporate this area into the district. This area was mainly agricultural and small acreages in nature with a small student population at the time.

The City of Urbandale was also growing at this time; however, the city boundaries stretched beyond the school boundaries. Cities and schools do not operate under the same set of state laws. Cities may annex unincorporated lands; school districts may not annex land. In 1957-58 construction began on Interstate 35/80 west and north of the city. The city boundaries eventually expanded south to Hickman, and north and west to Interstate 35/80. As a result, students living in the City of Urbandale, but north of Meredith attend Johnston Schools and students living south of Urbandale Avenue (3000 block) attend either Des Moines or West Des Moines Schools. Though the district had many discussions concerning expansion of the district boundaries, efforts were unsuccessful until 2001, which is noted later in this narrative.

The city and schools continued to grow rapidly, with the 1960 census for Urbandale standing at 5,821 residents, and in 1970 the population had more than doubled to 14,343. In 1959, the first wing of the "new" Urbandale High School was opened at 7111 Aurora, but was originally used by junior high students. After construction of the second wing classrooms, commons and industrial arts room in 1962--Urbandale High School moved permanently to the 36.5 acre site in 1963. The seventh and eighth grade students went back to the old building at 70th and Douglas. More building additions were quickly constructed to handle the increasing enrollment:

1964 "400 hall" classroom wing and the football field and track constructed at 70th and Aurora

- 1966 “500 hall” open space classroom wing
- 1967 North gymnasium
- 1970 The two-story classroom wing, addition to the commons, district kitchen and additional industrial arts space

As planning for future elementary school facilities began, the community decided that “neighborhood schools” were appropriate. Buildings throughout the community serve elementary students living in the different neighborhoods. In succession, these elementary schools were opened in the 1960’s:

- 1961 Blackhurst Elementary, named for Dr. Herbert Blackhurst, the landowner and a professor at Drake University, was located at 3305-70th on five acres. The building was closed as an Urbandale school in 1984 and sold. It is currently the Iowa School of Beauty.
- 1963 Valerius Elementary was named for Litta and Ellen Valerius. Ellen Valerius served on the school board, and her family were landowners and operated the Laddvale Dairy. Their home was located on the present site of HyVee at 86th and Douglas. The Valerius site occupies 11 acres at 92nd and Dewey Gibbs Road.
- 1963 Jensen Elementary was named for Isabell Jensen, a long-time mathematics teacher in the district, who had recently passed away. The west wing was added in 1967 on this five acre site at 64th and Aurora Avenue.
- 1964 Karen Acres Elementary is located in the Karen Acres neighborhood. Constructed on the former site of the Des Moines Ice and Fuel Company Mine, this seven acre site is at 74th and Oliver Smith.
- 1968 Rolling Green Elementary is in the Rolling Green neighborhood. The west open space classroom addition was completed in 1969 on this five acre site at 81st and Airline.

In 1974 Urbandale Junior High, now Urbandale Middle School, was occupied. Situated on over 32 acres in the 7700 block of Aurora, the seventh and eighth grade pods were constructed on the open space concept, on either side of the library. The northwest classroom wing was added in 1990 and the northeast wing in 2002.

The Grant family donated seven acres of land to the district in 1959 for an additional elementary site. This site was north of the current Urbandale Golf and Country Club. In the 1980’s the site was deemed too small to build an elementary school, and it was sold to a developer. About one dozen homes were built on this land formerly owned by the school.

In 1975 multipurpose rooms were constructed at Blackhurst, Jensen, Karen Acres and Valerius. These rooms had several functions: physical education instruction, lunchroom, music performances and community rooms during evenings and weekends.

1975-2006 *“The Echo Boom”*

Enrollment peaked in the 1973-74 school year at approximately 3,750 students in grades K-12 after the Baby Boom had ended. For the next several years, declining enrollment occurred. As large senior classes of nearly 300 students were graduating, kindergarten classes of less than 200 students were entering the elementary schools. Also, homebuilding slowed down with a weakened economy. K-12 enrollment in the early 1980's was less than 2,800 students. Because fewer elementary classrooms were needed, Blackhurst Elementary School was closed in 1984 and sold to the Iowa School of Beauty. Valerius was closed in 1985 and the classrooms were leased to the Iowa State Extension Service. The original east wing of Olmsted was also closed in 1985 and used for storage.

Urbandale High School, however, had additional space needs. In 1978 a physical education addition east of the north gym provided locker rooms and a wrestling room. In 1981 a bond issue for the Urbandale Performing Arts Center was approved by nearly 75% of the voters. Long needed by all students, this facility hosted performances by elementary, middle school and senior high students in drama, vocal music, instrumental music, and all kinds of community events. The grand opening of the center was celebrated in February 1983 with "Fine Arts Week," a celebration of the performing arts.

In the 1985-86 school year, the kindergarten enrollment began to swell. More than 60 additional kindergarten students were enrolled than in the fall of 1984. Kindergarten classes entering the district had nearly 300 students. The "Echo Boom" had begun; the sons and daughters of the Baby Boom generation were becoming school age. The "Echo Boom" children combined with a renewal of homebuilding in the district, especially north of Douglas and west of 86th Street, to begin a new period of enrollment growth in the district.

In order to accommodate the increasing elementary enrollment in the mid-to-late 1980's, a change in the grade structure was instituted. The original (east) wing of Olmsted was remodeled to serve as the kindergarten center for all those students entering the district. As the enrollment leveled off at grades seven and eight (junior high), the middle school was created to serve students in grades six, seven, and eight. And since the area west of Douglas was the fastest growth area of the district with increased homebuilding, Valerius was reopened, with an addition constructed to handle another section each of first through fifth grade. A 1989 bond referendum provided funds for construction at all the district buildings to provide additional instructional space and enhance programs, including updated media centers at all elementary schools and improved support spaces. With the planned construction, elementary boundaries were adjusted to fit the following grade structure:

<u>Kindergarten Center</u>	Olmsted
<u>Grades 1-5</u>	Jensen, Karen Acres, Olmsted, Rolling Green and Valerius
<u>Grades 6-8</u>	Urbandale Middle School
<u>Grades 9-12</u>	Urbandale High School

More instructional space was also needed to provide programs mandated by the state and federal governments. These included programs for talented and gifted students and many services for those students with special needs and disabilities. In addition the 1990's saw an influx of students from other countries, requiring instruction for Eng-

lish language learners. As a result the following construction projects were completed during the 1990's:

<u>Jensen</u>	Media Center and remodeling in 1991, total square footage – 25,020
<u>Karen Acres</u>	Media Center, southwest classrooms and remodeling in 1992, total square footage – 31,050
<u>Olmsted</u>	Media Center and remodeling in 1991, total square footage – 47,260
<u>Rolling Green</u>	Media Center and remodeling in 1991, total square footage – 32,700
<u>Valerius</u>	Media Center and second section of classrooms in 1991, total square footage – 31,050
<u>Middle School</u>	North classroom addition in 1991- this allowed for grades six, seven, and eight, to each occupy its own pod of classrooms around a remodeled media center
<u>Urbandale High School</u>	Music instruction spaces and south gymnasium in 1991 and additional space for the Commons, district kitchen and industrial technology in 1997

To accommodate increased enrollment in music education and special types of programs, an addition was constructed at the Middle School in 2002 to serve these needs. Total square footage at the middle school is now 92,425.

Beginning in 1993 the K-12 enrollment maintained approximately 3,500-3,600 students. This steadiness in enrollment is partially explained by the open enrollment laws in Iowa. Beginning in 1989 parents could request that their student(s) attend a school district other than their school district of residence. Since that time, the number of students enrolling into the Urbandale Schools has far outnumbered those residing in the district requesting to attend classes in another school district. The Urbandale Community School District has long been one of the leaders in Iowa in having more students wanting to open enroll into the district.

As more of the property in the district was developed, fewer home sites were available for new home construction. The aging population meant fewer school age children. In the late 1990's, discussions began with school board members in the Dallas Center-Grimes Community School District, located west of the Urbandale Community School District. Eventually the districts agreed to a land swap, Dallas Center-Grimes needing an improved commercial tax base and Urbandale wanting more vacant land for homebuilding. In 2001, the land swap was completed, Dallas Center-Grimes obtaining developed commercial land east of Interstate 35/80 and Urbandale Schools receiving undeveloped land west of the Interstate to the Polk/Dallas county line in the City of Urbandale. This increased the size of the Urbandale Community School District to nearly 8 square miles. But the city has grown much farther west including a portion of the Waukee School District. Urbandale Schools is approximately 8 square miles within the city limits, while the city boundaries include nearly 21 square miles. Thus in the City of Urbandale a student, depending on the location of their residence, may attend one of six public school districts (Urbandale, Johnston, Des Moines, West Des Moines, Dallas Center-Grimes or Waukee) or two private schools (St. Pius X, Des Moines Christian).

In the late 1990's the state legislature approved a law allowing each county to request voter approval to increase the sales tax by one cent for ten years to fund school building construction and improvements. Each district was required to prepare a list of projects proposed for completion and the funds in each county were to be apportioned on a per pupil basis. Polk County residents approved the voter referendum for this one-cent sales tax in 2000. As required by law, Urbandale Schools established a citizen committee to monitor the fund expenditures in the district on facilities. A state law in 2008 codified the one-cent sales tax statewide, in effect until 2025.

2006 to 2009 *"The new Urbandale High School"*

The Citizen's Facilities Committee began meeting in 2000 to monitor district spending. One outgrowth of this work was the establishment of a committee to study program and educational needs to determine facility needs and make recommendations to the school board. In 2003 two recommendations were received by the board, the first to build an elementary school west of the Interstate to serve those students in the undeveloped area received in the land swap with Dallas Center-Grimes. The second recommendation concerned the viability of Urbandale High School in its current condition and configuration. With an original construction date of 1959 for the first wing, nine additions and numerous remodeling projects having been completed in the 44 years since the building was first opened, the committee recommended that a new high school facility was needed. The school board agreed with these recommendations to build a sixth elementary school west of the Interstate and to build a new Urbandale High School, to replace the existing one, on the same site. In 2004, the bond referendum was approved by the voters for the elementary building and the first major phase of construction at Urbandale High School. As planning began for Urbandale High School, construction was started on the elementary building at 128th and Aurora Avenue. Webster Elementary School was opened in Fall, 2006. This building is named for the one-room school formerly at this site. This 74,092 square foot elementary school sits on a 17-acre site.

In preparation for opening Webster for the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, several changes were made district-wide at the elementary level. First, elementary attendance boundaries were adjusted to accommodate the opening of the new school. Second, the school year calendar at Rolling Green was changed to the "flex calendar" concept. Though still conducting 180 school days for the students, shorter breaks are spread throughout the year. The school year at Rolling Green begins in July with "intersessions" (breaks) in the fall and spring. Kindergarten classrooms were located at Rolling Green, Valerius and Webster in addition to the kindergarten center at Olmsted.

Construction of Urbandale High School began in 2006, with students occupying the completed first phase of classrooms in early 2007. A second bond referendum was approved in 2007 to complete the second phase of construction and renovation of the stadium at 70th and Aurora Avenue. This second phase included new classrooms, a media center, support areas and a new performing arts center. The only original buildings remaining are the two gymnasiums. Students began to occupy the new facilities at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year.

2009 to the present *"What's new at Urbandale Middle School"*

With the passage of the state version of the one cent sales tax in 2008, the decision was made to sell bonds against future receipts of sales tax revenue to finance the renovation of Urbandale Middle School and an expansion out at Webster Elementary School. Site preparation began in April, 2010 for the middle school project. When completed in the early part of 2012, the remodeled site will consist of new additions and renovations of older sections of the school for use by students, families, and community members for years to come. Staff who have been part of the current school will also be pleased with the changes . . . including more walls to make rooms more self contained as opposed to the current open environment!

The additions made at Webster Elementary, starting in 2009, totaled of 15,910 square feet, that included 12 classrooms (four in each wing), two conference room/workroom, and a 40' x 40' addition to the commons/lunchroom. In the North and South wing, there are movable partition walls, allowing the center classrooms some flexibility by allowing the rooms to be "opened up." Additionally, two bathroom suites, and two store-rooms were added to the kindergarten/first grade wing, whose rooms were constructed the same as the first phase classrooms in this area. The additions are seamless, and in time, it will be impossible to see that the areas were constructed four years after the original building.

Urbandale Schools in the 21st Century

Much of this history concerns facilities, boundaries, land, grade structure and topics easy to quantify. But all schools are about the students, parents, staff and the district patrons supporting those schools. Urbandale has a strong history of community support. In addition to supporting the bond referendums to build facilities, the people of Urbandale have devoted countless hours volunteering their time supporting the students. From reading in the elementary classrooms to mowing ball fields or patrons teaching evening community education classes, the benefits impact the entire community. Another strength of the schools is the accessibility of the facilities. Urbandale Schools' facilities are community facilities available evenings and weekends for community activities. Schools will face many challenges in the 21st century but with the emphasis on academics and student leadership, the performing arts and athletics and teamwork will serve Urbandale students and the community well into the future.

Established in 1916, the community looks forward to celebrating the 100th anniversary of Urbandale Schools in 2016.

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City of Urbandale website

Urbandale Chamber of Commerce website

Newspapers – some archived copies available at the city library

- Urbanews

- Urbandale News

- Urbandale Press Citizen

Urbandale Community School District archives and documents, including:

- Facilities

- Enrollment

- Website

Urbandale High School Corner Commission – memorial at 70th and Douglas
Trolley Park – historical placards – 70th and Roseland