

BEFORE THE NEBRASKA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

In the Matter of the Nebraska Public)
Service Commission, on its own)
motion, seeking to administer the)
Nebraska Universal Service Fund's)
Broadband Program: Application)
to the Nebraska Broadband)
Program Received from Cox)
Nebraska Telcom, LLC)

APPLICATION NO. NUSF-92.45

PREFILED TESTIMONY OF ROBERT DICKSON

Executive Director of Information Management Services at Omaha Public Schools

August 9, 2016



I. Intro/Background of Witness

1 **Q. PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS FOR THE RECORD.**

2 A. My name is Robert Dickson and my business address is Omaha Public Schools,
3 3215 Cuming Street, Omaha, NE 68131.

4 **Q. ON WHOSE BEHALF ARE YOU PROVIDING THIS TESTIMONY?**

5 A. I am testifying on behalf of the Omaha Public Schools, also known as “OPS” who
6 is involved as a partner in this application with Cox Nebraska Telcom, LLC.

7 **Q. WHAT ARE YOUR DUTIES WITH OPS AND HAVE YOU PREVIOUSLY**
8 **TESTIFIED BEFORE ANY GOVERNMENTAL BODIES?**

9 A. I am the Executive Director of Information Management Services for OPS. I
10 have served in that role since May 2014. My duties include oversight of all
11 Information Management Services activities for OPS including Instructional
12 Technology initiatives. I've testified before the Omaha Public School Board, the
13 Andover Public School Board, as well as other grant overseeing committees, such
14 as Federal School Improvement Grants and Gates Foundation Grants.

15 **Q. PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR RELEVANT EMPLOYMENT AND**
16 **BACKGROUND.**

17 A. Prior to my employment with OPS, I lived in Wichita, Kansas and worked for the
18 Andover Public Schools district in Andover, Kansas for 15 years. I started as a
19 Network Engineer for the school in 1999, and I was promoted to Chief
20 Technology Officer and Executive Director of Technology in 2004. During my
21 time at Andover, the school placed in the top ten of digital school districts in the
22 nation by the Center for Digital Education and the National School Boards
23 Association annually from 2010 to 2013. I was honored by the National School

1 Boards Association's Technology Leadership Network as a "20 to Watch"
2 technology leader in 2014. Prior to working at Andover Public Schools, I served
3 in the U.S. Air Force as a Network Specialist from 1994 to 1999. I have been the
4 Executive Director of Information Management Services for OPS since leaving
5 Andover, Kansas in 2014.

6 Since coming to Omaha, OPS has partnered with Microsoft in its Compass early
7 adopter program. OPS is the only K-12 school in the country working with
8 Microsoft in this venture. Further, in the past two years, OPS has collaborated
9 with Microsoft on two products, Microsoft Classroom and Professional Learning
10 Communities. This fall, OPS will embark on creating the first K-8 virtual school
11 in Nebraska's history, working with the Nebraska Department of Education to
12 provide a different type of learning opportunity, similar to the blended virtual
13 school I helped start in Andover, Kansas.

14 **Q. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR TESTIMONY?**

15 **A.** The purpose of my testimony is to provide information to the Commission that
16 supports granting Application NUSF-92.45, which is a request to receive NUSF
17 funds to support a broadband bus for use in Omaha, Nebraska by students and
18 families of students who attend schools in north Omaha neighborhoods.

19 **II. Background on OPS and the Wakonda and Kennedy Elementary Schools**

20 **Q. BRIEFLY DESCRIBE OPS AND THE KENNEDY AND WAKONDA**
21 **ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS.**

22 **A.** OPS is Nebraska's largest school district, serving over 52,000 students from
23 grades Pre-K to 12. OPS has more than 17,000 English Language Learners, and
24 our student population speaks more than 119 languages. We targeted the

1 Kennedy and Wakonda Elementary schools in this application, as both are schools
2 with extremely high poverty and low assessment scores compared to other
3 buildings within our district.

4 Wakonda has roughly 400 students and nearly 90% qualify for free or reduced
5 lunch. Kennedy's enrollment is a bit smaller, but 97% of the students qualify for
6 free or reduced lunch. In a report from the website Neighborhoodscout.com, these
7 areas have an average per capita income that is lower than 99.2% of the
8 neighborhoods in the United States, with 91.2% of the children living in poverty.
9 In addition to the low-income nature of these schools, students at both Wakonda
10 and Kennedy score well below the state and OPS average on standardized
11 assessments. Last year, approximately 37% of Wakonda students scored
12 proficient in math tests, and 46% scored proficient in reading. The test scores at
13 Kennedy are similar. While test scores are low, the scores at both schools have
14 shown improvement over the previous year.

15 OPS is making significant efforts to help students at both Kennedy and Wakonda.
16 Both schools are classified as "Turnaround" schools for OPS. That is a federal
17 designation that is given to the lowest-performing schools in the nation. It means
18 extra efforts are being made to support the schools, not only financially, but
19 through the hiring of new and additional staff members, implementing longer
20 school days, a longer school year and providing increased professional
21 development. An article was recently on the front page of the *Omaha World*
22 *Herald* detailing the efforts being made. I've attached a copy of that article to my
23 testimony.

1 Kennedy is part of a north Omaha neighborhood revival project called 75 North.
2 75 North is part of the Purpose Built Communities network, which was co-
3 founded by Warren Buffet. The goal of 75 North is to break the cycle of poverty
4 and community deterioration by building thriving schools, recreational facilities,
5 and other amenities to attract new public and private investment to the area. 75
6 North is a made up of board members, developers, ambassadors, and community
7 members. A key component to the success of 75 North is a strong school, which
8 includes Kennedy Elementary.
9 Wakonda Elementary has made significant community engagement efforts,
10 including revamping a parent room, which improves community interaction and
11 getting people from neighborhood organizations to volunteer at the school.
12 Both schools are placing a higher emphasis on using technology in the classroom.
13 Thus, for a variety of reasons, it made sense for the application to target the bus to
14 serve the students attending these schools, especially since these children are the
15 most likely to not have broadband at home, or the computer equipment needed to
16 go online outside school hours.

17 **III. Support for the Application**

18 **Q. WERE YOU INVOLVED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS**
19 **APPLICATION THAT WAS FILED WITH THE NEBRASKA PUBLIC**
20 **SERVICE COMMISSION ON FEBRUARY 23, 2016?**

21 **A.** Yes. I was involved in drafting the application, as well as preparing the
22 accompanying exhibits; those being the proposed budget and the sketches of the
23 bus design.

24

1 **Q. PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR APPLICATION.**

2 **A.** The application seeks support from the Nebraska Universal Service Fund
3 Broadband Program (“NEBP”) to bring free broadband service to Kennedy and
4 Wakonda students through the modification of a school bus. Preliminary
5 drawings were attached to the application that illustrate the bus design.
6 The bus will serve as a mobile learning center that brings broadband to
7 neighborhoods, similar to the operation of a traditional library ‘bookmobile’ that
8 brings books to neighborhoods. The technological equipment and devices on the
9 bus will be state-of-the-art, and faster and more innovative than what is available
10 in some OPS buildings and public libraries. Broadband speeds of 15 Mbps on the
11 downlink and 4 Mbps on the uplink will be provided, although higher speeds may
12 be possible.
13 Safe parking locations for the bus will be determined in consultation with the
14 Omaha Police Department (“OPD”). Some of the tentative locations where the
15 bus will be parked include the Turning Point Campus, the Omaha Home for Boys,
16 Salem Baptist Church, Mount View Presbyterian Church, New Vision Outreach
17 Ministries and Wakonda Elementary. Cox and OPS have met with OPD, and
18 OPD has committed to give the bus location a heightened police presence to
19 provide security. In addition, OPS commits to working with neighborhood
20 organizations, groups and churches, such as 75 North to ensure the safety of those
21 using the broadband bus.
22 Community outreach and parent education will be provided as a part of the
23 project to give community members not only a better understanding of the

1 technology that is provided on the bus, but also how they can have a dialogue
2 with their children regarding safe technology use.

3 **Q. WILL GRANTING THIS APPLICATION MAKE BROADBAND**
4 **SERVICES AVAILABLE TO CONSUMERS WHO MAY NOT**
5 **OTHERWISE HAVE ACCESS TO BROADBAND?**

6 **A.** Absolutely. An investigation by the Center for Public Integrity found that even
7 though Internet access has improved in recent years, families in low-income areas
8 are almost five times more likely *not* to have access to high-speed broadband than
9 affluent American households. The barrier to adoption is in part financial, with
10 these households unable to pay any amount towards monthly subscription fees or
11 purchasing or maintaining computer equipment when they struggle to put food on
12 the table and pay for necessary medication. But finances and the lack of
13 computer equipment aren't the sole problem.

14 In December 2015, the Pew Research Center described a category of non-adopters
15 as "hard-to-reach". This population has never had broadband service at home and
16 has no interest in subscribing to it in the future. The Pew report found that this
17 category accounts for 46% of all non-adopters. The report labeled them as "hard-
18 to-reach" not only because of their stated preferences and past behavior, but also
19 because they are less educated with only 8% having a college degree and they are
20 less connected to using technology with a minority being internet users of any
21 kind. The other notable characteristic of the "hard-to-reach" is that they are *less*
22 likely to cite the monthly access fee as their most important reason for not having
23 service. The problem is a lack of overall digital literacy, as well as lack of
24 equipment and computer support.

1 As I stated earlier, the Wakonda and Kennedy students reside in some of the
2 lowest-income neighborhoods, not just in Nebraska, but in the United States.
3 Over 91% of the students live in poverty. Accordingly, broadband and the
4 possession of necessary computer devices in homes is highly unlikely. The
5 broadband bus will allow students and their parents/guardians to walk to obtain
6 broadband free of charge. Students can work on their homework online, while
7 getting assistance from OPS teachers. (OPS will cover the expense of staffing the
8 bus.) Family members of the students will be welcome as well. Our goal is for
9 the Kennedy and Wakonda students to be able to keep learning online once they
10 leave the school building, just like students living in more affluent neighborhoods
11 have the ability to do.

12 We believe the broadband bus is an exciting, innovative way to bring broadband
13 to low-income families in a supervised, cost-effective manner. The broadband bus
14 addresses the problem of the lack of broadband that these students experience,
15 and provides the digital literacy, equipment and support they need.

16 **Q. STUDENTS MAY NEED HELP USING THE TECHNOLOGY ON THE**
17 **BUS. DOES THE APPLICATION ADDRESS THAT?**

18 **A.** Yes. OPS recognizes that students, especially elementary aged children may need
19 help using the technology. Accordingly, OPS commits to employ teachers to
20 assist students on the broadband bus. OPS will fund this effort, as we believe
21 without assistance, students may become frustrated and stop coming to the bus,
22 regardless that it is free and readily available. OPS will provide learning
23 opportunities for students and their families, and will schedule after
24 school activities. Part of these educational efforts will include information for

1 parents and students on digital literacy and digital citizenship from Common
2 Sense Education. This will provide parents and students the tools they need to
3 have an open dialogue about safe, responsible technology use.

4 **Q. DO YOU HAVE AN ESTIMATE HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL UTILIZE**
5 **THE BUS?**

6 **A.** The bus will enable 15 users at a time. Initially, the bus will be open several
7 hours after school every day, Monday through Friday. It is our goal that the bus
8 will remain busy the entire time it is open. If interest exceeds capacity, we will
9 work on extending the hours and creating a usage schedule in concert with the
10 elementary schools. Our goal is to serve as many students as possible, and to
11 bring broadband to these children and their parents/guardians in a safe and
12 convenient manner near their homes. We will consider keeping the bus available
13 during the summer, and depending on usage, expand the route to include other
14 low-income neighborhoods.

15 **Q. WHAT IS THE CONSTRUCTION SCHEDULE FOR THE BUS?**

16 **A.** Construction would begin immediately after the application is approved. Barring
17 any unforeseen problems or delays, we estimate it will take 90 to 120 days to have
18 the bus ready for use. It will be deployed for use as soon as the construction is
19 complete.

20 **Q. WILL APPROVAL OF THIS APPLICATION FURTHER AND**
21 **PROMOTE THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND UNIVERSAL SERVICE IN**
22 **NEBRASKA?**

23 **A.** Yes. Research consistently shows broadband use is less prevalent for people who
24 have lower household incomes and lower educational attainment. Both factors
25 are evident within the Wakonda and Kennedy Elementary school district

1 boundaries. The broadband bus will help students further their education on a
2 high-speed Internet connection, free of charge. The bus will be parked in the
3 students' neighborhoods making it convenient and easily accessible for children
4 of all ages. OPD has committed to work with OPS to maintain safety. Finally,
5 critical to the success of this project is OPS's commitment to have an employee
6 on the bus to assist students using the technology. This application furthers the
7 goal of getting broadband service to consumers, particularly via this project to
8 low-income students and their families in north Omaha.

9 **IV. Conclusion**

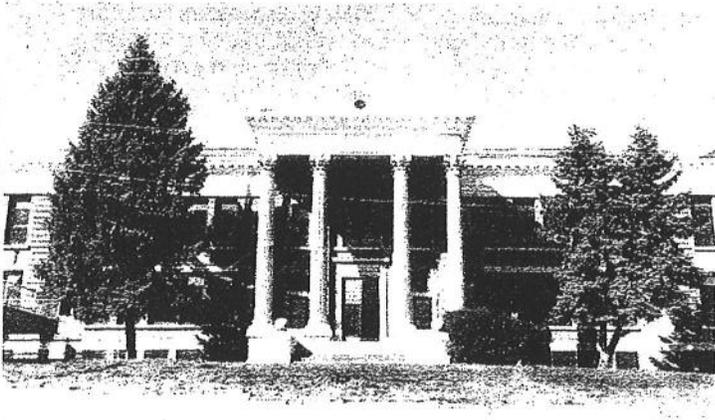
10 **Q. DOES THIS CONCLUDE YOUR TESTIMONY?**

11 **A. Yes.**

Omaha World-Herald

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 2016 • SUNRISE EDITION

MEGAN FARMER/THE WORLD-HERALD



OPS

Kennedy Elementary overhauls its focus, its curriculum, even its teaching staff



BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Their challenge: Turn around

Their challenge: Turn around school along with neighborhood

Kennedy Elementary overhauls its focus, its curriculum, even its teaching staff

 BY ERIN DUFFY

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

🕒 06.22.16

OPS

Howard Kennedy Elementary staff members grabbed partners and gave "salmon" high-fives, slapping their hands against each other's forearms like wriggling fish.

At the urging of a facilitator, staffers were told to share what they were most nervous about for the coming school year. In a week full of training and professional development, this day was devoted to a series of team-building exercises meant to establish trust and foster a spirit of collaboration.

"I'm most nervous about the unknown," one teacher confided to another during the training last week.

It's true that Kennedy Elementary, one of the Omaha Public Schools' perennially struggling schools, will look very different next year.

The school has a new principal, Tony Gunter. Three-quarters of the teaching staff is new. When school opens in August, there will be a new curriculum, heavy on project-based learning and science, technology, engineering, art and math, or STEAM. Students will spend 45 more minutes in class daily than most OPS elementary students and will report back to school a week earlier than most of their OPS classmates.

Students even voted to overhaul the school colors, from blue and yellow to black and gold.

It's a revival spurred by a neighborhood project, 75 North, that aims to lift up the north Omaha neighborhood that surrounds Kennedy, at 30th and Binney Streets. 75 North is part of the Purpose Built Communities network co-founded by Warren Buffett.

A key component of that effort, 75 North backers say, is a strong school. Kennedy has made progress on math and reading state test scores in recent years but is on a list of the state's lowest-achieving schools. Boosters pledge that the school will one day rank among the best in Nebraska.

That's an ambitious goal considering Kennedy's challenges.

It is one of OPS's highest-poverty schools, with 97 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch last year. The school typically has a large number of students who are refugees or learning English for the first time. Its mobility rate is high, meaning kids bounce around from school to school.

Kennedy isn't the only struggling OPS school getting extra attention.

Wakonda Elementary began a restructuring effort last school year, spurred by a federal grant meant to turn around low-performing schools.

In January, OPS formed a committee, called REACH, that works with 17 schools that have low state test scores or have more difficulty dealing with student behavior. Supervisors or consultants meet with the schools on a weekly basis to study school data, observe classrooms or coach teachers and principals. A full-time school-support liaison has been assigned to schools without an assistant principal.

Gunter and his staff hope to reverse the trajectory at Kennedy.

Kennedy will be modeled after other schools, such as Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta, that have benefited from similar neighborhood rebuilding efforts and seen test scores and enrollment climb.

A key piece of preparing for the school's rebranding was finding the right staffers, Gunter said. Preparing them for the new school year — teachers spent last week immersed in training — will consume much of the summer.

Many of those staffers are new to Kennedy. Only 23 percent of the school's staff from last year will return this August — some opted against reapplying for their jobs, and some transferred to other schools. "I've got a group of people who don't know each other," Gunter said.

At the Omaha Outward Bound School, which fosters teamwork, staff members got to know one another through icebreaker activities. In groups, they worked together to complete different tasks, such as building a tower out of rods or making shapes with a knotted rope while blindfolded.

Throughout the week, the staff toured the neighborhood around Kennedy and dug into the school's new math, literacy and language development curriculums. Throughout the summer, focus groups will meet occasionally to explore teaching strategies in depth.

Ashley Hawthorne spent the past six years teaching first grade at Kennedy. She decided to stay and will take on a new role as a counselor and try to act as a bridge between Kennedy families and new staff. "I did create very close bonds with the previous staff," she said. "That was the hard part."

She, like many Kennedy teachers, was nervous when she first heard of the proposed changes. "I didn't know how it would affect me as a teacher, how it would affect my students. But I'm ecstatic about the new changes."

The influx of new staffers means that the average experience of Kennedy teachers has dropped from 11 years to eight, but slightly more teachers have master's degrees.

Several teaching positions — art and music, for example — have become full time, and three new deans will focus on each of three areas: STEAM curriculum, literacy and student behavior. The school will have a full-time psychologist and a part-time social worker.

"Finding the right fit with teachers and staff, that was a major piece of moving all this forward and planning for the new year," Gunter said. "One of the most important questions that I asked everyone is: 'Why do you want to work here?'"

Kylie Hudnall is fresh out of college at Wichita State and will teach third grade at Kennedy. At a career fair, she was drawn to the school's experimental, innovative attitude, something she found lacking in Kansas schools crippled by state budget cuts.

"I got online, did a little research on the school, and I really wanted to be a part of what's going on at Kennedy," she said.

Sarah Hoffman, one of Kennedy's new kindergarten teachers, previously taught at Wakonda Elementary. She left OPS for a year to lead a day care but missed the classroom.

She acknowledges that she'll have to learn a different style of teaching.

Kennedy is big on project-based learning and will zero in on kids who are falling behind in the core subjects with targeted interventions at the school's new math and literacy centers. The school will use OPS's Go Math! program, but also will incorporate parts of Singapore Math, a curriculum that focuses on number sense and is used at the Lozier Foundation-funded Nelson Mandela Elementary, which opened last year.

"It's good to know you're a part of something big," Hoffman said. "There's so much impact you can have at Kennedy."

There's room to grow. In the 2014-15 school year, just 35 percent of Kennedy's fourth-graders scored proficient in reading. Nineteen percent were proficient in math.

The student population will be smaller in the next school year, with about 180 kids enrolled, down from 220. OPS is moving sixth-graders from several elementary schools, including Kennedy, to middle schools.

One bright spot is the early childhood program, which is filled mostly with neighborhood kids who Gunter hopes will stay at Kennedy once they start kindergarten. Previously, only a handful of Head Start and pre-K students lived in the school's attendance area.

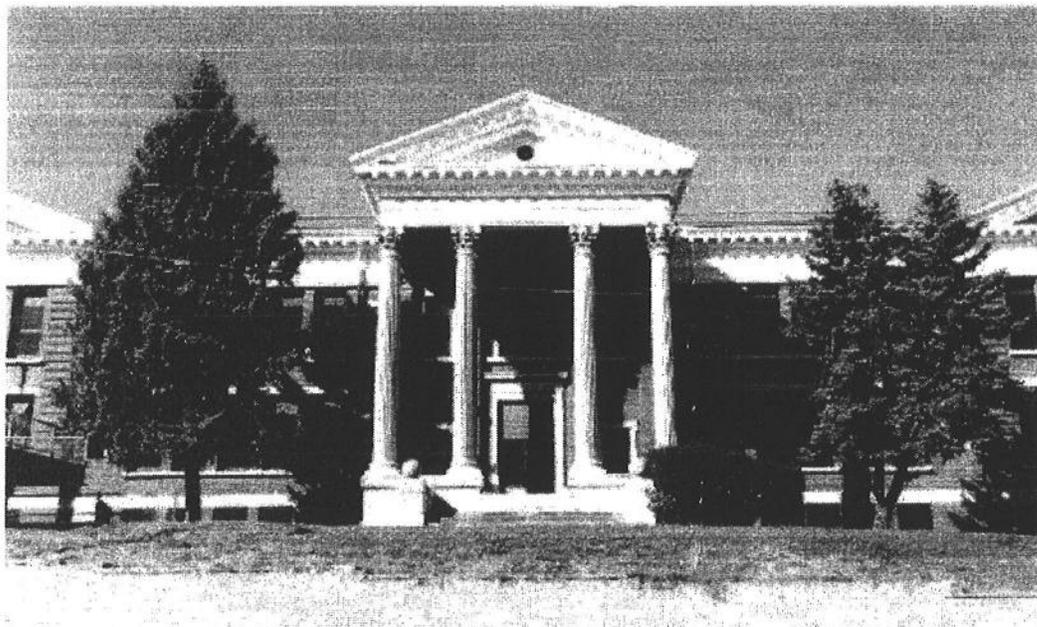
As the first housing phase of the 75 North project wraps up next summer, Gunter and 75 North's executive director, Othello Meadows, predict that more families will want to be a part of Kennedy's reinvention.

Gunter was recently shooting hoops with some neighborhood kids when a 9-year-old rode up on his bike. "He said, 'Hey, I'm coming to your school. My mom says you're going to be a magnet school, you'll have all the science.' "

Kennedy isn't a magnet school, but that didn't bother Gunter. He knows that it will take time for parents and neighbors to absorb all the changes.

"It's nice to know they're talking about it," he said. "To hear that excitement from a 9-year-old who rides up on his bike and has that much excitement about coming to school, that's just a great feeling."

Contact the writer: 402-444-1210, erin.duffy@owh.com



New approaches for reaching struggling or low-income students

🕒 06.22.16

KENNEDY ELEMENTARY, OPS

Launch date: August 2016; school was chosen due to its proximity to the Highlander neighborhood, the site of the 75 North redevelopment project

Curriculum: Emphasis on hands-on, project-based learning and STEAM curriculum; strong early childhood education program

More time: Five more days in the school year and 45 more minutes in the school day, which will run from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Staff: New principal, large percentage of new staff

Community partnership: The 75 North revitalization effort, where mixed-income housing and a community center will be built on the grounds of the former Pleasant-view Homes housing project

Funding: A mix of grants, additional OPS dollars and a \$1.7 million contribution from 75 North for 2016, which is funded by several organizations, including the Sherwood, Lozier, and William and Ruth Scott Foundations. OPS will increasingly take over costs of additional programming from 75 North

NELSON MANDELA ELEMENTARY

Launch date: New school opened in August 2015

Curriculum: Singapore math, Spalding reading, daily violin lessons and recess every 90 minutes

More time: Extended calendar that adds up to about seven more weeks of school than OPS, and an extended day that runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Staff: Principal Susan Toohey, formerly the head of school at Marian High School

Family involvement: Free tuition, though parents are expected to volunteer on a regular basis

Funding: Privately funded by the Lozier Foundation

WAKONDA ELEMENTARY, OPS

Launch date: August 2015

Curriculum: More technology in the classroom, more intervention and enrichment time for students, three coaches hired to work on technology, student data and student behavior

More time: School days run from 8:20 a.m. to 4 p.m., 25 minutes longer than most OPS elementary school days

Staff: New principal, 19 new teachers and coaches

Community involvement: Community engagement efforts, including a revamped parent room, volunteers from neighboring organizations such as Clair Memorial United Methodist Church and a welcome-back barbecue

Funding: A five-year, \$1.6 million federal school improvement grant tied to No Child Left Behind

— Erin Duffy



BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Howard Kennedy Elementary staff members, from left, Sarah Rose, Angie Brezina, Sarah Hoffman, Keri Norton and Alise Hoffman, do a trust-building exercise during a week of training and professional development. The coming school year will be the first at the north Omaha school, at top, for about three-fourths of the staff.



BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Kennedy Elementary's dean of culture, Joëy Eckerman, center, and new principal, Tony Gunter, right, at Outward Bound. Gunter said finding the right teachers and staff was a "major piece" of the school's overhaul.