

The Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District fall enrollment report indicates that declining enrollment will continue for at least the next five years. District officials say the problem may be reaching a tipping point rather than the turning point district they'd hoped would come years ago. Officials recently discussed the possibility of closing an elementary school and are also looking to the results of a new enrollment study they hope will slow and ultimately reverse the outflow of students.

Over the past twenty years, enrollment numbers have declined from approximately 11,500 students to 8,400 students, according to enrollment reports.

When students leave the district they take state funding with them, necessitating budget cuts that impact student programming and jobs. According to District Communications Director Aaron Tinklenberg, around 75 percent of the district's revenue is from state aid. For the current fiscal year, the district will receive roughly \$9,400 per pupil — an amount that changes each year based on the state aid formula.

Neighboring districts are on the other end of this exchange. The Prior Lake American recently reported that the Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools will receive over \$203,000 more than expected during the 2018-19 fiscal year as a result of more students being enrolled in the district.

Lisa Rider, the district's executive director of business, presented the fall enrollment report to district officials at the Nov. 15 Board of Education meeting.

"We often speak about how diverse our district is, what I find interesting here is the demographic that would be classified as diverse stay relatively the same throughout these," board member Eric Miller said. "It's really the decline of the white demographic that's driving the overall decline."

Enrollment trends by ethnicity show that that the outflow of white students is occurring at a faster rate than the district's overall enrollment decline. Between 2013-2014 and 2018-2019, the number of white students declined by 1,455 students. However, the district's overall decline was 941 students due to a growing number of biracial, hispanic and black students.

The report shows that elementary schools — particularly Hidden Valley and Sky Oaks — showed a sharp decline in students this fall when compared to last year's numbers.

Superintendent Cindy Amoroso said that a new charter school opening within district lines is likely the reason.

"There's these ongoing things that are drawing students out of our district," Board chair Jim Schmid said.

At the meeting, Amoroso — who will retire at the end of the school year — said that the district is at the "tipping point" where class sizes might lead closing one of the district's ten elementary schools.

Tinklenberg told the Savage Pacer that closing a school would be a long process and there isn't any formal consideration of the possibility happening at this time.

In 2006, the Savage Pacer reported that district officials were expecting enrollment numbers to stabilize around 9,500 students by 2011-2012. And while the headcount projection turned out to be spot on, the stabilization did not occur and the decline continued. The decline is noq expected to continue over the next five years and the report estimates 2023-24 enrollment numbers to be around 7,600 students.

## **Who is leaving and why**

The district's enrollment report shows that over 2,300 students living within district lines attended school elsewhere in 2017-2018. Nearly 1,000 of those students attended schools in the Rosemount-Apple Valley- Eagan District and nearly 500 attended schools in the Prior Lake-Savage District.

Adam Rosenzweig is one of the Burnsville parents who decided to enroll his kids elsewhere. Rosenzweig said that both his son and daughter had a phenomenal experience at Gideon Pond Elementary but he began considering switching districts while his son was enrolled in sixth grade at Nicollet Middle School.

Rosenzweig said that fights occurred "all the time" at the school and there was no due-process when his son was suspended following a fight in which Rosenzweig alleges his son was beat up by another student in the classroom. Rosenzweig also said that his son suffers from anxiety and wasn't able to receive adequate mental health support at the school.

"The general mood seemed more cohesive to what we were looking for," he said about their first tour at Falcon Ridge Middle School. "It seemed more mellow."

Rosenzweig's decision to enroll his son at Falcon Ridge for seventh grade was also impacted by last year's contract strife between the district and teacher's union.

"We didn't know if there was going to be a teacher strike in the fall at the time we decided to move them," he said.

Rosenzweig will also be transferring his daughter out of the district after she finishes school at Gideon Pond this spring. Rosenzweig said he believes the district is "trying to sweep everything under the rug" and "trying to make it go away" when it comes to issues that he said are leading to declining enrollment.

In the spring, the district dolled out \$12,000 on a survey conducted by Diedrich RPM to hear from parents about their decision to send their student to one of these neighboring districts. The results of the study were presented to district officials this fall.

When given the opportunity to provide written thoughts about the district, respondents expressed concern over the district's disciplinary policies, bullying and school violence. They also touched on over-crowded classrooms.

"High school is WAY TOO crowded!!" one respondent wrote. "Not enough discipline in schools and an underfunded school district that can't keep up with it's current student body."

Other responses commented on the district's diversity. "Treat all races the same and don't be afraid to deal with a child for fear of what a non-white parent may do," one response read. Another read, "I still believe the district doesn't have my child's interest and is still focused on more of our diverse community."

Tinklenberg said the reason for the study was to identify "key drivers" in the decision-making process when parents/guardians decide to look outside the district.

Over half of the respondents previously had their child enrolled in the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District. Sixty percent of respondents considered open enrollment before their child reached elementary school — in some cases, before birth.

Burnsville Education Association teacher's union President Wendy Drugge Wuensch told the Savage Pacer that teacher's in the district have not been engaged in discussions about declining enrollment. She said that a dialogue involving teachers would be "very beneficial for all" because many teachers live in the district, have children enrolled in the district and are alums of the district.

"The reasons for families to leave and/or open enroll into other districts are very complex and widely vary," she said in an email. "Our newly elected board members have all committed to a more collaborative relationship with the BEA. We are looking forward to working on student enrollment and other issues with them."

Tinklenberg said that some of the reasons for the decline might be "beyond our control" while some of which they can try to address. He said the way that the district lines stretch east to west, making residents feel less connected to Burnsville High School, might have an impact, as well as an aging community within the district.

"Reputation is certainly factors as well," he said.

The study included ways that the communications department can take action against the decline, including items such as "reduce negative chatter about ISD 191."

Tinkleberg said that helping community members share their positive stories about the district is a part of that plan. He also said they'd like to hear from the 566 students that are currently open-enrolled in the district from outside communities.

The district will face another round of budget cuts because of the enrollment declines this year.

As for Rosenzweig, he said he plans on his kids attending Eastview High School and said "a lot would have to change" for him to consider returning to Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District schools. He said he's been happy with his decision to leave the district and he's not alone — over 96 percent of survey respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the district they are currently open enrolling at.