

After 20 years of declining enrollment, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District prepares for the trend to continue

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The declining enrollment trend plaguing the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District isn't nearing a turning point, according to this year's projections. District officials recently raised the possibility of closing an elementary school and continued an ongoing discussion on how to stem the loss.

Over the past 20 years, enrollment numbers have declined from approximately 11,500 students to 8,400 students, according to district enrollment reports. The projections in this year's fall enrollment report show the trend will likely continue, with a decline of 800 more students expected to occur over the next five years.

When students leave the district, they take state funding with them, necessitating budget cuts that impact student programming and jobs. Last year, the district made \$4.4 million in cuts that included layoffs and cuts to athletics, and another round will come this year.

According to district spokesman 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.

Teachers, parents and district leaders point to safety issues, competition from neighboring districts, conflict within the district and inadequate services when discussing why families are choosing to leave the district, according to interviews and a recent district survey of local parents.

Neighboring districts are on the other end of this exchange. 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, for example.

Burnsville-Eagan-Savage data show 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.

At a Board of Education meeting last month, Superintendent Cindy Amoroso — who will retire at the end of the school year — said the district is at the “tipping point” where class sizes might lead to closing one of the district’s 10 elementary schools. Tinklenberg later said closing a school would be a long process that hasn’t begun for now.

The district’s parent survey included ways that the communications department can take action against the decline, including items such as “reduce negative chatter about ISD 191.”

Tinklenberg said 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.

Safety concerns

Adam Rosenzweig is a Burnsville parent who has 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 fights occurred “all the time” at the school and there was no due-process when his son was suspended following a fight. He said his son was beat up by another student in the classroom, has anxiety and wasn’t able to receive adequate mental health support at the school. This led him and his son to tour Falcon Ridge Middle School in Apple Valley.

“The general mood seemed more cohesive to what we were looking for,” he said of the other school. “It seemed more mellow.”

Rosenzweig said his 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, the Burnsville Education Association.

“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 transfer 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 doled out \$12,000 on a survey conducted by Diedrich RPM to hear from parents about their decision to send their students to one of these neighboring districts; the district released the results this fall. Around 150 respondents completed the survey, and some expressed concerns about the district’s disciplinary policies and bullying.

In September, district officials and Burnsville Education Association leadership gathered at a work session aimed at repairing their relationship and discussing how they can tackle district issues together.

Patricia Herkenhoff, a teacher at Edward Neill Elementary, told the group families are leaving the district because of safety issues that exist even with young students.

“I don’t know if you’re aware of situations that happen in elementary schools,” Herkenhoff said. “I received stitches last year in my face from an incident. We have had multiple staff injuries with kindergarten and first grade students. We have had students tear up our rooms, and there is not support for us.”

She said she doesn’t believe that declining enrollment is related to the teachers or lack of curriculum or services.

“I’m appalled at the behaviors that we are letting happen — hurting our staff and hurting other students,” she continued. “And there’s no consequence.”

Tara Nelson, also a teacher in the district, replied there needed to be data to really study why people are leaving. Amoroso mentioned the survey results, which were going to be analyzed the following month.

Tinklenberg in an email Thursday said providing a safe learning environment is ongoing, multi-faceted and systemic work. The work comes in a lot of different forms, ranging from physical security improvements to building strong communities within the school, he said. “The work our counselors, deans and other staff members do to build

relationships with students and address their unique needs on a daily basis is also an essential part of providing a safe learning environment,” Tinklenberg wrote.

Intertwining issues

District survey respondents also touched on other concerns, such as overcrowded 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.”

Enrollment trends by ethnicity show the outflow of white students is powering the trend, 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 mixed-race, Hispanic and black students.

At an Oct. 25 board work session, chairman Jim Schmid called race “the elephant in the room,” according to Sun This Week Newspapers. He called some racial complaints “hearsay” based-on preconceived notions.

“That’s unfortunate, because that’s probably the least viable reason to leave,” he said.

District officials also pointed to other factors behind the decline. The report shows elementary schools — particularly Hidden Valley and Sky Oaks — showed a sharp decline in students this fall when compared to last year’s numbers. Amoroso said a new charter school opening within district lines is likely the reason.

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

The association teacher’s union President Wendy Drugge Wuensch said teachers 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 wrote 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.” 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 certainly factors as well,” he said.

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.