With enrollment declining, Bellingham Public Schools considers elementary closures

Declining birth rates driving smaller kindergarten classes

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Elementary school enrollment has been declining in Bellingham Public Schools for several years now. A new committee is tasked with developing recommendations to right-size the district's operations to its projected student population. *(Hailey Hoffman/Cascadia Daily News)*

By Charlotte Alden*General Assignment/Enterprise Reporter*

After years of steady enrollment declines, Bellingham Public Schools is handing a challenging question to a new committee: how does the district right-size its operations to serve a smaller student population?

Options on the table include adjusting attendance boundaries, consolidating programs and closing “one or more elementary schools.” The district is down about 600 students since 2019–20, Chief Financial Officer Kathryn Weilage said.

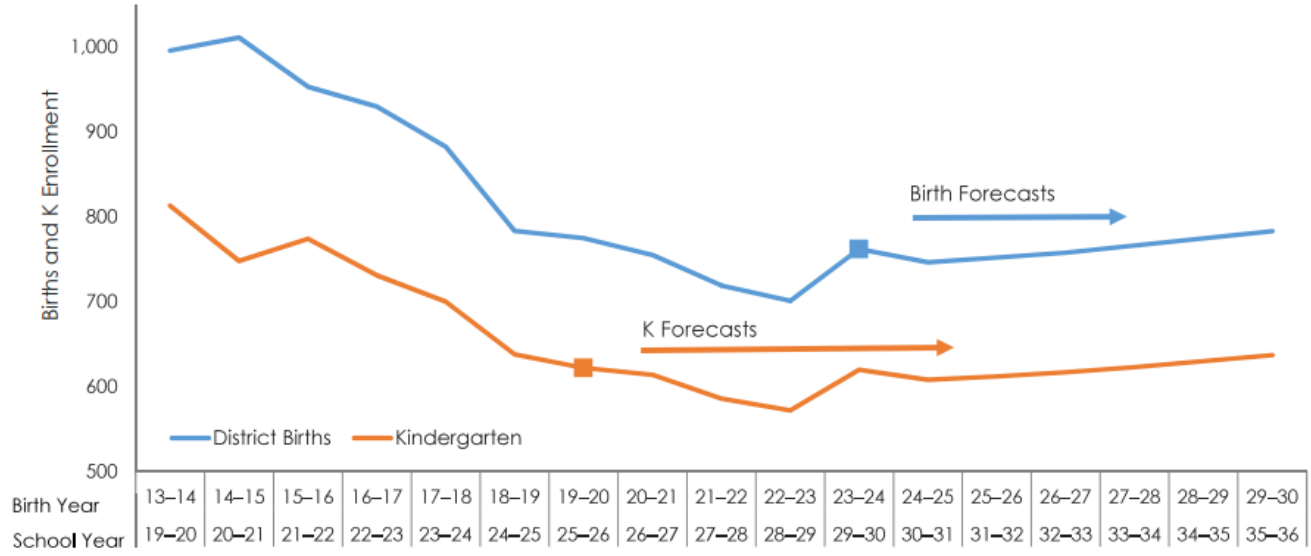
It's a drop the district attributes to declining birth rates. State data shows that Whatcom County's birth rate now sits at 8.48 births per 1,000, a decline from about 11 births per 1,000 people 20 years ago. There's long been a "consistent relationship" between birth rates and kindergarten enrollment in Bellingham, said Jessica Sankey, the district's chief operations officer. A demographer hired by the district estimated that enrollments could continue to decline through 2035.

The new committee, a facilities planning task force made up of district staff, parents and City of Bellingham representatives, will draft recommendations on elementary school use for the years 2026–36.

Figure 15: District Births and Kindergarten Enrollment

Birth Year	13–14	14–15	15–16	16–17	17–18	18–19	19–20	20–21	21–22	22–23	23–24	Forecasts → 24–25	25–26	26–27	27–28	28–29	29–30
Births	996	1,011	953	930	882	783	775	755	719	701	762	746	752	758	766	775	783

School Year	19–20	20–21	21–22	22–23	23–24	24–25	25–26	Forecasts → 26–27	27–28	28–29	29–30	30–31	31–32	32–33	33–34	34–35	35–36
Kindergarten	813	748	774	731	700	638	622	614	586	572	620	608	612	617	623	630	637
Ratio to Births	0.82	0.74	0.81	0.79	0.79	0.81	0.80	0.81	0.82	0.82	0.81	0.81	0.81	0.81	0.81	0.81	0.81



Notes

Enrollment includes students residing outside of the district boundary. Birth cohorts are aligned with K cohorts (e.g., the 19–20 birth year includes births from September 2019 to August 2020, which is the 25–26 K year). The ratio is calculated by dividing K enrollment by the births five years earlier (e.g., 25–26 K divided by 19–20 births). Births from 2025 to 2030, which inform K classes beginning with the 30–31 school year, were forecasted based on projections of women of childbearing age and estimated age-specific birth rates. Darker shading represents higher values and lighter shading represents lower values.

Sources

Washington Department of Health 2013 to 2024 births to mothers residing within the district boundary and FLO 2024–25 to 2029–30 birth forecasts. Bellingham School District October 2019–20 to 2025–26 enrollment and FLO October 2026–27 to 2035–36 enrollment forecasts (middle scenario).

A graph from the school district shows a correlation between birth rate declines and kindergarten enrollments. *(Photo courtesy of Bellingham Public Schools)*

The goal of the task force, Sankey said, is to see if the district is using its facilities "appropriately," and "to make sure we have great learning environments for everyone."

A review of state enrollment data at Bellingham's elementary schools shows some schools, specifically Columbia, Silver Beach and Wade King, have seen the most obvious declines in enrollment. Why

declines have been occurring in those schools is something the district doesn't know yet, Weilage said. The committee will examine that.

"We certainly don't want to close schools," Sankey said. But elementary enrollment is down, she said. If in the next five years, the district is down another 600 elementary students across the district, Sankey said, that's about two elementary schools' worth of students.

"So that is absolutely part of the conversation," Sankey said. "What's the right thing to do? How can we make sure that the schools that we have are full and vibrant and thriving?"

But what about the bond?

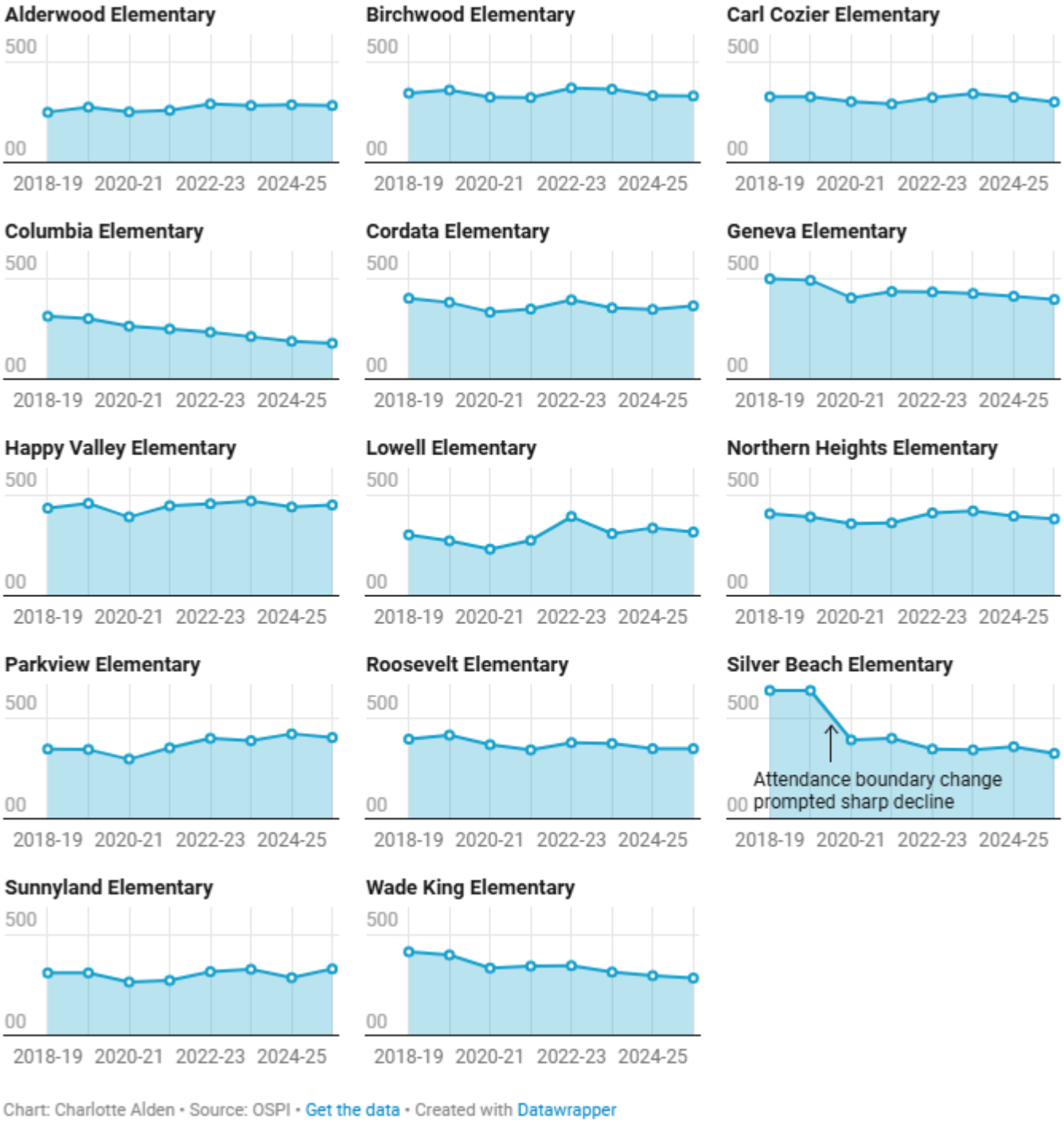
The district's 2022 bond measure provided money to start the design process for rebuilding Carl Cozier, Roosevelt and Columbia elementary schools. As of now, those processes are "on hold," Weilage said. The bond also included money to build a new, 15th elementary school, but that's also on pause.

Part of the committee's work could be suggesting an alternative use for those funds. If that happens, a public process and a hearing would be required before the district could spend the money on something else, Weilage said.

That happened about 15 years ago, spokesperson Dana Smith said, when money initially earmarked for a seismic retrofit at the old Roeder School was redirected into Birchwood Elementary.

Enrollments at Bellingham elementary schools from 2018 to 2026

Bellingham Public Schools enrollment has been slowly declining over the last few years, something that the district attributes to lower birth rates in the region.



A statewide issue

Public school enrollment declines are a statewide issue: enrollment dropped by just over 9,000 students from the 2024–25 school year to the 2025–26 school year. Other nearby districts have also seen enrollment declines, including Blaine, Mount Baker, Anacortes, La Conner and Mount Vernon.

State Superintendent Chris Reykdal said in a January press conference that there's a "narrative" that families are "bailing out of public school," but emphasized that that's not the whole truth.

He attributes about 30% of the enrollment declines to homeschool and private school enrollments. State data on homeschool numbers and private school enrollments does show a slow increase, which Reykdal attributed to a "national trend."

In Bellingham, available data doesn't support a serious turn away from public schools toward homeschooling. In 2025–26, 204 students were registered with the district as receiving home-based instruction. In 2019–20, 235 students were registered to homeschool.

Reykdal emphasized that the remaining 70% of the enrollment decline can be attributed to a "demographic challenge."

"We have roughly 85,000 kids who are in their junior year and senior year each year. We have far fewer five-year-olds coming into the system," he said in a January press conference.

Districts get less money from the state for every enrollment drop, causing "enormous" distress, Reykdal said. For a class that was 25 kids one year and 24 the next, a district's revenue drops, but the expenses largely don't.

"You still need a teacher," he explained. "You still have to run the bus."