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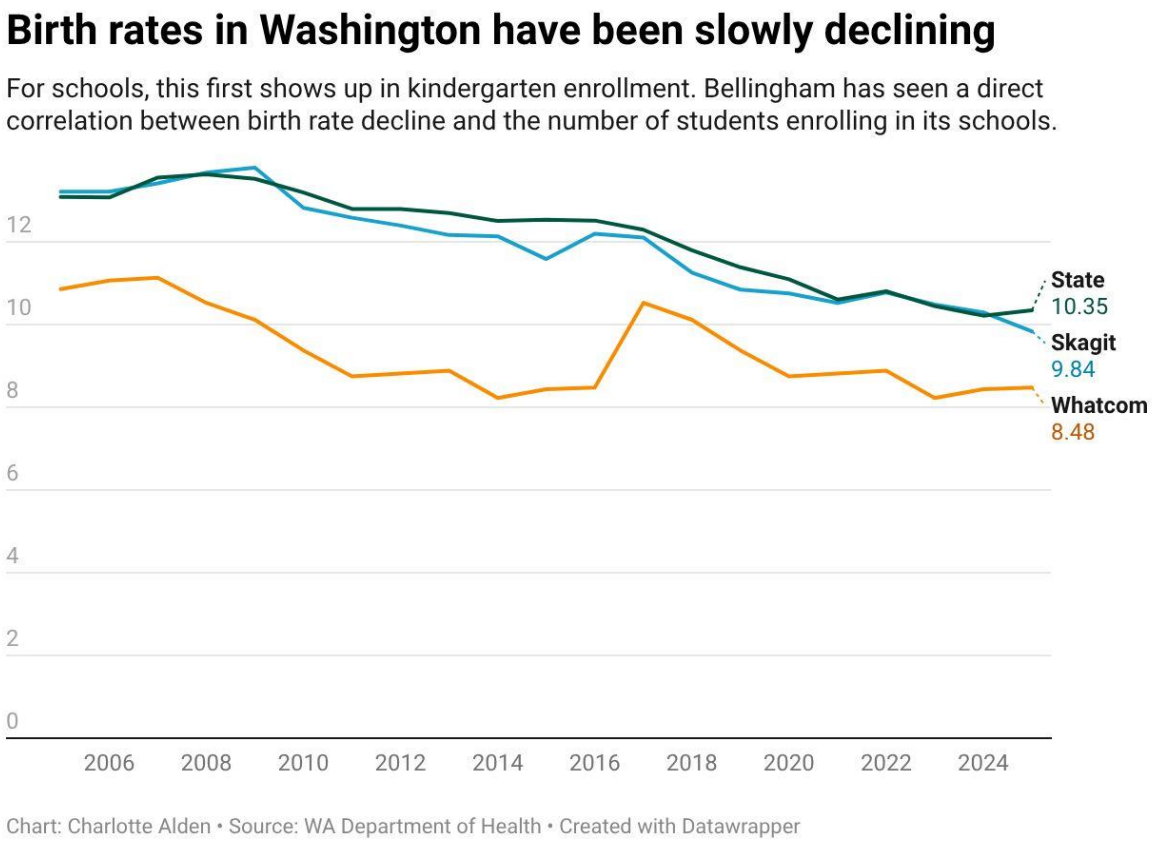
Charlotte Alden, education reporter



When there are simply fewer children: How do districts adjust?

It's a question I've been thinking about a lot as I've tracked school districts' financial problems and declining enrollment. When I heard Bellingham Public Schools was assembling a committee to tackle this question, I was eager to find out more.

In Bellingham's case, a drop of 600 students from 2019-20 to this year has meant some serious declines in elementary enrollment. It's something they attribute mostly to birth-rate declines. Data I got from the state shows this decline clearly.



Some of this decline could be offset by people moving into the area (although high costs could hinder some of that projected growth — see my colleague Julia Tellman's ongoing series Priced Out). I also often hear the claim that people are turning away from public school to homeschooling and private school. And while state data does show a slow increase in both, data for Bellingham doesn't back up that claim.

Are Bellingham elementary schools underutilized?

Since 2009, Bellingham Public Schools has been building elementary schools to hold around 450 students. The main reason for that is the district finds big benefits in having at least two classes in each grade, Facilities Manager Jessica Sankey told me last month.

With that number in hand, I did some quick math to see how full those schools — Wade King, Cordata, Birchwood, Happy Valley, Parkview, Alderwood and Sunnyland — are right now.

This exercise is modeled on an excellent Voice of San Diego story, which concluded that about half of San Diego Unified schools were underutilized, based on a definition from Chicago Public Schools that defines that as below 70% of a school's capacity.

My math shows that this year, Alderwood and Wade King are operating at below 70% capacity, both at about 63%, based on data from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. But it shows other schools that are nearly or completely full. Parkview is operating at 89% capacity this year, while Happy Valley has exactly 450 students (in theory, at 100% capacity).

Clearly, there's room to adjust. The facilities committee could recommend attendance boundary changes, school closures, the consolidation of programs — or all three. News out of the committee should be coming in May or June.

A brief history of recent (and almost) school closures

All of these conversations are inevitably tied up in budget challenges. Washington's school funding system works so that when a child leaves the school, the district loses funding for that student.

A couple of years ago, Seattle Public Schools went through an incredibly public process of debating school closures. Proposals ranged from closing four schools to 21 schools to address a budget deficit. It prompted massive pushback from the community. Those closures appear to be off the table for now.



A scene from the first day of school at Lucille Umbarger Middle School in the Burlington-Edison School District. Up until the fall, Lucille Umbarger operated as a K-8 elementary school. It now serves all 6-8 graders in the district. (Santiago Ochoa/Cascadia Daily News)

Locally, Burlington-Edison School District closed one elementary school and reorganized the rest to create a middle school. The consolidation saved the district about $2.7 million and helped it right-size to a 450 drop in students over the previous seven years.

Blaine School District almost went through with a merger of its primary and elementary schools. But interim superintendent Dan Chaplik paused the plan last July, questioning the numbers presented by the previous superintendent and the benefits of such a move.

These kinds of conversations are far from over. I suspect a number of local districts will face difficult decisions in the coming years.

Have you heard of something happening in your district related to proposed consolidation or enrollment? Reach out: charlottealden@cascadiadaily.com.



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