

Guest column: What kind of schools should Bend-La Pine have?

By Steven Cook, Superintendent

For many in our community, this spring's budget conversations in Bend-La Pine Schools have felt personal, because they are.

Behind every school or district program reduction due to lower enrollment are real people and real impacts about what our schools will look like for students in the years ahead. And while Bend-La Pine Schools is not alone in making these difficult decisions, that fact offers little comfort. Across Oregon, school districts are reducing staff and scaling back services as costs continue to outpace state revenue.

This moment requires honesty about both our immediate reality and the long-term future facing public education – especially when the call for transparency and accountability is at an all-time high.

Recently, our district commissioned a long-range enrollment forecast from FLO Analytics to better understand the next decade ahead. That document can be found on our website at bls.fyi/future. The findings confirm what many districts across the state are experiencing: enrollment growth has reversed, the proportion of school-aged children in our communities is declining, and the financial pressures facing schools are unlikely to ease on their own.

The report shows that Bend-La Pine Schools has lost nearly 1,000 students over the past five years in overall enrollment – and this enrollment is expected to continue gradually declining through 2035. This decline in enrollment can be simply diagnosed: graduating 1,400 seniors in June and then enrolling 1,000 kindergartners in September year over year creates a significant decrease in overall enrollment over time.

One major contributor to this declining enrollment is the lack of affordable housing, preventing families with younger students access to housing within the boundaries of our district. In the report, the analysis demonstrates that the type of housing developments in our community matter significantly in attracting families with young children. New income-restricted, affordable housing developments, such as Verdes Pines in southeast Bend, produce 15 times more elementary students per unit than condominium developments.

At first glance, some may conclude this simply means we should have fewer schools and smaller student populations in those that remain. But the reality is more complicated.

School systems are not designed to shrink easily. Costs tied to transportation, utilities, special education services, student mental health supports, technology, safety requirements, insurance, and employee benefits continue to rise regardless of modest enrollment changes. In Oregon, where roughly 85 percent of school district budgets are tied to staff, districts eventually face difficult staffing decisions when revenue fails to keep pace with inflation and operational costs.

At the same time, our community continues to grow. Deschutes County is projected to add tens of thousands of new residents over the next two decades. But like many communities across the country, that growth increasingly consists of adults without school-aged children. The challenge is not simply population growth; it is the changing composition of our population.

The report also contains an important point that should not be overlooked: Births in Bend-La Pine have remained relatively stable compared to many Oregon districts. Unlike some parts of the state experiencing dramatic declines in young families, our future remains more stable than many communities around us. Bend and Central Oregon continue to be places where families want to live, even if those families with young children struggle to find affordable housing.

That matters. Because this conversation is ultimately not just about affordable housing or enrollment in schools. It is about values.

What kind of community do we want for our children and grandchildren? What opportunities do we believe every child should have access to, regardless of family income, neighborhood, or ability? It is true that affordable housing creates a pathway to home ownership for young families with children. These children enroll in our schools. Schools are funded by enrollment. If we value strong neighborhood schools, career technical education pathways, advanced coursework such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, fine arts programs, athletics, counseling support, and safe learning environments, then we must have sustainable resources for these programs.

Public schools belong to all of us, not just families raising children. They shape the future workforce, strengthen property values, support local economies, and help define the character of a community. Solving our budget reduction this year required trimming in areas that challenge the student experience in our schools. Continued budget reductions may seem like a short-term problem to individuals not directly associated with Bend-La Pine Schools. These same reductions likely will be perceived more acutely for families directly impacted by choices that we must make to balance the budget.

The larger question before us is long term as we look to balance higher state accountability, declining enrollment, unfunded mandates and other financial challenges, and the overall student experience: What kind of community do we want to become?

The answer will depend on what we are willing to prioritize together.

Dr. Steven Cook has been Superintendent of Bend-La Pine Schools since 2021.