

Declining Enrollment in California

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MISSION:

Create one or more legislative solutions to help mitigate the effects of declining enrollment in public school districts throughout California, particularly rural districts, in order to ensure equal opportunities to learn and achieve for every student.

SCOPE OF PROBLEM:

While California continues to experience unprecedented growth in many geographic areas of the state, other areas are experiencing serious and even shocking declining enrollment. As of 2002, over 400 districts are experiencing declining enrollment (see attached data from the California Basic Educational Data System). Further, out of 58 counties, 20 entire counties are declining in enrollment. This paper is focused on district declining enrollment and the resulting inequities.

Declining enrollment is a product of significant demographic shifts caused most frequently by economic conditions and/or welfare reform. The result? Some districts are unable to fully engage in the reforms and initiatives put forward by the Governor and the Legislature which are designed to enhance teaching capacity with the goal of increased student achievement.

This situation has been exacerbated by the state's weak budget situation, and specifically by mid-year budget cuts and lack of sufficient cost-of-living adjustments.

Further, the Department of Finance's K-12 enrollment growth projections are flattening out for the next several years.

DESCRIPTION OF PROBLEM:

Declining enrollment in public schools is a function of (and often the interaction of) economics and demographic shifts and patterns across the population of California. There are at least four categories of demographic shifts occurring.

(1) Land/resource use changes. Agricultural lands have dried up (as in Tulelake); land use is continuing to change; and resource management has evolved, resulting in forest-based business closures. Fishing has declined. The effect has been fewer jobs in many of the rural areas of the state. While some areas are experiencing a growth of recreation-related activity, the people moving toward these areas are generally not families. In general, rural areas of the state are currently experiencing characteristics of significant economic recession with corresponding declining enrollment in schools.

(2) Welfare reform. As Cal Works moves families toward gainful employment and childcare subsidies diminish, families needing assistance are encouraged to move to where the jobs are. Current demographic shifts are most noticeable in family migration from the rural to urban/suburban where jobs are more readily available.

(3) Housing costs. Most noticeable along the coast (Marin to Monterey), as housing prices rapidly escalate, families move inland to affordable housing markets. This phenomenon is also present in Riverside and San Diego counties.

(4) Age-based demographic shifts. High school enrollments are currently rising; however, this trend is followed by lower numbers of elementary students. In many areas of the state, though not in rural areas, the birth rate is increasing again such that Kindergarten enrollments can be expected to increase after a few years. Better demographic trend analyses are sorely needed. These types of trends are not evenly distributed around the state.

The following effects are noted in declining enrollment schools:

- Inability to recruit and retain qualified staff
- High rates of administrative turnover
- Inability to provide comprehensive assessment and curriculum development services
- Constraints on professional development of existing staff
- Diminished capacity to implement standards-based curriculum
- Challenges related to needed improvements in low performing schools and with low performing students
- In some cases high rates of governing board member turnover; lose of local control in the sense that community members don't want to serve on the board; there is a feeling of paralysis
- Elimination or reduction in Art, Music, or Drama programs
- Elimination or reduction in counseling, nursing, or psychological services
- Curtailment of transportation and/or food services
- High transportation costs (even with offsets), as students are transported ever-longer distances
- Reduction of classroom aides and other staff
- Inability to offer remedial programs or programs for high functioning students
- Inability to develop and maintain technology and Internet access
- High facility maintenance costs, as many facilities are quite old

The net effect is a degree of district paralysis with respect to long-term planning, standards-based quality control, and overall effectiveness.

Of note is a state policy concern regarding the appropriate use of ‘**necessary small school**’ formula, and potential misuses of such. If the legislature moves to restrict or eliminate the necessary small school funding, rural districts and counties could be dramatically and negatively impacted.

FOCUS

The focus of this task force is on the more rural and smaller districts suffering from the decline described mostly in the first two categories (under “description of problem”). While decline presents unique strains on any district, the impact on smaller and more geographically disperse schools can often be devastating. In addition, the more rural districts generally have access to fewer other resources and agencies to assist them. Some of the recent state initiatives have not been utilized because there are not personnel available to complete the paperwork and conduct other preparatory steps. In these instances, educational equity is clearly jeopardized, and the sense of 'local control' is diminished.

Local communities often oppose consolidation of districts because (1) they don't want their local school to close, and (2) the public school district may be the 'last' vehicle for democratic community identity.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

The question is, "how to ensure access and equity" for every student?

Other questions are:

- Can/should funding be moved to a program model rather than a student enrollment model?
- As a growing body of research highlights the value of small schools, what guarantees can the state offer to keep small schools open?
- What administrative efficiencies can be obtained by combining or blending portions of districts' administration?
- Can Joint Powers Agreements (JPAs) or other regional arrangements be designed to promote administrative efficiencies?
- How should the role of the County Office of Education change?
- Should charter schools be viewed any differently in rural declining enrollment areas of the state?
- Can the small district formula be re-examined?
- Should the state consider financial incentives to consolidate districts?
- Should the state consider incentives for larger union high school districts to unify with smaller elementary districts?
- Can financial incentives be developed for common or joint administration?
- How are the problems of suburban decline different from those of rural districts?
- How should the Education Code sections dealing with declining enrollment be revisited?
- Can a 'staged' model of financial 'hold harmless' be envisioned for K-12, similar to community colleges? Will this simply prolong the inevitable?
- How might the necessary small school mechanism be 'changed' and protected?

THOUGHTS:

- Try and determine what size district can effectively mitigate declining enrollment and still offer equity of access and opportunity
- Should the focus be narrowed to, say, districts with less than 750 ADA with declining enrollment of at least three years running?
- OR, look at trends within districts—size of district and percent of decline...
- RESEARCH may be needed:
 - 1) What happened during the 1960s? What incentives were offered for consolidation?
 - 2) How was declining enrollment dealt with during the 1980s?
 - 3) How are charters contributing to this situation?
- Can barriers be removed to consolidation? For example, if two districts consolidate but the total ADA goes over 2500 the small school allowance may be lost....
- Can incentives be put in place? (1) \$\$ for shared services (2) \$\$ for consolidating/ unifying

** With a poor economy and tight budgets, AND declining enrollment, IS IT TIME to help out certain districts?

** Goal restated: Students should never be denied equity of access and opportunity simply as a result of where they live.....

