

Dealing with

*Where have all the students gone?
Not to these districts, which face layoffs and school closings*

Peggy Jo Kennett is facing a dilemma no school board member wants: an adolescent boom and bust—at the same time.

The 74,000-student Jordan School District, located just outside Salt Lake City, is projected to add 16,000 schoolchildren over the next decade. But this month, Kennett and her fellow board members have to decide whether to close as many as 15 schools.

The reason? While Jordan is dealing with extremely rapid growth in its northwestern and southwestern regions, the opposite side of the district has seen its student population decline. Not rapidly, but steadily. Each year, as the area's population ages, neighborhood elementary schools have lower enrollment and higher overhead costs—a combination the district can't live with for long.

"It's an emotional issue," Kennett says. "People can understand that we as a board have fiscal responsibilities to all of our taxpayers, and not all of our taxpayers have kids in school. At the same time, the people who live in those areas are very much in favor of neighborhood schools. They don't want their local school to be closed."

Shifts in enrollment are subject to a host of factors—aging populations, changes in the job market, increased school choice options, neighborhood development and decay, and an increasingly fluid and mobile student population. None are mutually exclusive, and combinations can be found in districts where student numbers have dropped.

Two things are constant, however: Declining enrollment is costly to districts, which are faced with cutting staff and services and, increasingly, closing schools. And if you don't keep the community well informed before making those tough decisions, the backlash will be harsh.

Enrollment ups and downs

Urban districts felt the first wave of enrollment decline in the middle class "white flight" era of the 1970s, as baby boomers moved out of cities to raise their families. Rural districts, espe-

cially those where agriculture is the prime industry, started seeing population gaps during the farm crisis of the mid 1980s.

At the same time, as the children of the baby boom generation reached school age, enrollment in the nation's public schools rose 19 percent between 1988 and 2001, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. For the past three years, however, overall student growth has slowed; only 14 states experienced increases in the elementary school-age population between 2000 and 2003, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Suburban school districts, the primary beneficiary of the so-called echo boom, now have become vulnerable to enrollment declines. Especially in older suburbs, communities have matured and children have moved on, forcing hard choices about the fate of beloved neighborhood schools and rapidly changing demographics.

Harold Hodgkinson, director of the Center for Demographic Policy at the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Educational Leadership, notes that half of all U.S. residents live in only 10 states.* In addition, populations have grown in many urban areas, with immigrants and English-language learners replacing middle-class whites and African Americans.

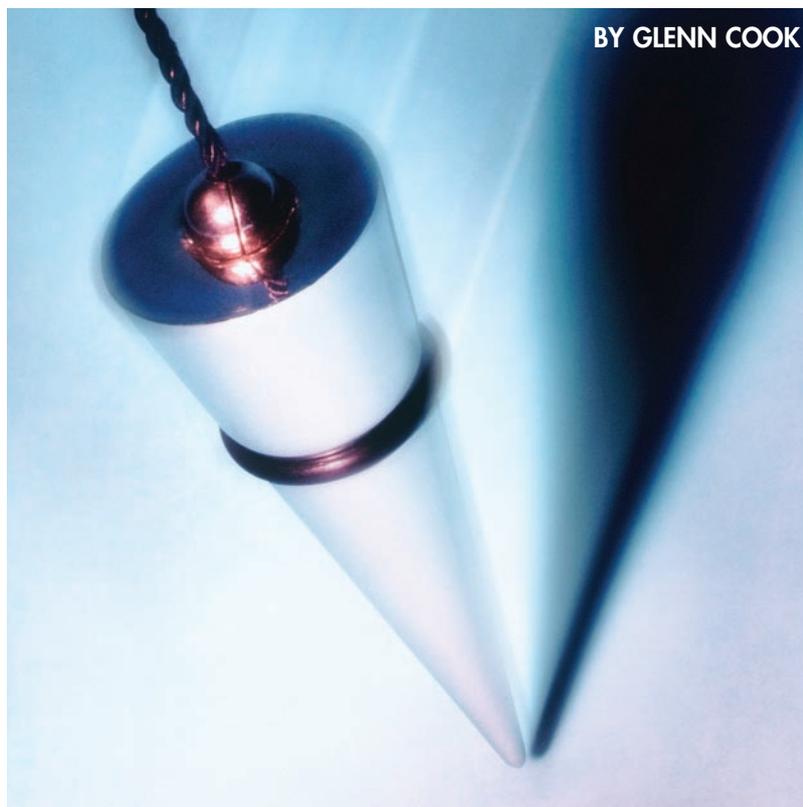
"What is interesting with [those 10] states is that the net is not getting any greater," Hodgkinson says. "It's just more diverse, and 40 million of us move every year. What's difficult for state people, the ones who allocate the funds, to realize is that we're going to have more complexity in all school districts. You're going to have huge increases in certain places and none, or declines, in others."

Bruce Fuller, a public policy and education professor at UC Berkeley and codirector of Policy Analysis for California Education, is seeing "big blips, pluses, and minuses" in enrollment among school districts in the nation's most populous state.

"There is a growing inequality in family income in big

* The 10 states are California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

DECLINE



cities,” Fuller says. “The rich are getting richer. The poor are getting poorer. It’s just hard for the middle class to survive in cities like San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. That leads to more suburbanization, and because we have more diverse suburbs than we had 15 years ago, we have both enrollment shrinkage and enrollment gains in those areas.”

That’s what is happening in places like Jordan and Ohio’s Worthington Public Schools, which projects a 20 percent enrollment drop between now and 2007. The 9,750-student district already has merged two elementary schools and will decide whether to close another one in December. If enrollment does not rebound, a middle school might have to be closed in 2007-08.

Worthington, a second-ring suburb of Columbus, grew from seven schools to 18 in the mid 1980s and early 1990s as families moved farther away from the state capital, Assistant Su-

perintendent Paul Cynkar says. Now, with Worthington almost completely built out and limited land available, families with school-age children are moving into a third-ring suburb outside the district.

“We doubled in size in a 10-year period and built accordingly, but as the children left our schools, their parents stayed,” says Cynkar, who is leading a community-based committee studying the district’s enrollment patterns. “Young families are going where the swing sets are, and that’s not here right now.”

‘Fiscally devastating’

Across the nation, schools are funded on a per-pupil basis, with the money designed to cover more than the cost of individual teachers. For districts that already face financial challenges, steady or sudden declines in enrollment can be fiscally devastating.

“When your enrollment declines, you lose the revenue but you don’t necessarily lose the need for a teacher,” says Diane Scheerhorn, superintendent of the 4,800-student Lake Tahoe Unified School District in California. “You may lose 25 students, but it’s five or 10 at each level, so you have to keep the teacher and cut elsewhere or increase class size.”

David Polnick, superintendent of the Abilene (Texas) Independent School District, has watched enrollment fall from a peak of 20,000 students in 1995 to 16,500 today, due to an aging population and job losses. The district has closed four elementary schools and a middle school, and Polnick says closing a second middle school is not out of the question.

“It’s tough on the community itself, both the parents and the kids, to close a neighborhood school,” he says. “But from the operational side, you really don’t have a choice. When you have 16,500 kids, you can’t operate the same number of schools as you did when you had 20,000.”

Superintendent Jim Lee’s St. Cloud District 742 serves an inner-ring suburb of St. Cloud, Minn., about 60 miles northwest of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The 10,000-student district has lost about \$11 million in state aid due to fluctuating enrollment over the past 15 years. At its lowest point, two years ago, the district closed three smaller elementary schools, eliminated 11 teaching positions, and cut administrative and support staff.

PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE

The circumstances behind dips and shifts in student population are different for each district, but common themes emerge when it comes to responding to declining enrollment. One given is that funds will be tight because of lost per-pupil dollars; another is that you might need to spend money to get it back.

Here are some suggestions from school leaders on how to prepare for declines:

■ **Think long term.** Public schools have never had a monopoly on the student population, and the choice options provided by rising numbers of charter, parochial, and private schools make predicting future enrollment that much more difficult. Work with your city or county planning department to look at long-term demographic trends and, if necessary, work with those agencies to fund an extensive survey to see where shifts and declines will occur.

■ **Communicate early and often.** No one—board members, superintendents, school staff, or community members—likes surprises, especially ones that result in layoffs, transfers, or closures. If such trends emerge in your district, let everyone know as early as possible—preferably in community meetings that are not held at the administrative office, but in the areas where closing schools is an option.

■ **Engage the entire community.** You can’t afford to alienate parents, who have the most vested and often most vocal interest in your schools. But remember: Parents are generally in the minority. On average, anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of a district’s taxpayers do not have school-age children, and their tolerance for fiscal inefficiency is limited at best. Engaging this group early, and getting their views, will provide you with a balanced perspective on what’s best for the entire community.

■ **Learn from others.** Utah’s Jordan School District (www.jordandistrict.org) and Ohio’s Worthington Public Schools (www.worthington.k12.oh.us) have posted extensive information on their websites about enrollment declines. The information includes PowerPoint presentations for use with community groups, community engagement plans, and steps

each district is taking to meet enrollment challenges.

■ **Provide options.** Would your community rather spend money to keep schools as they are, or face longer commuting times and increased class sizes due to budget reductions? One superintendent calls this the “pocketbook or planner analogy,” and it’s a question worth posing. When you are faced with closing or reconfiguring schools, develop a laundry list of options for the community to consider, and gather feedback. Even more important: Don’t make a decision until you’ve had a chance to review that feedback.

■ **Give the community time to accept change.** With early planning, school closings do not have to occur right away. In Worthington, Ohio, officials announced plans to merge two schools 15 months in advance. The school that is being closed at the end of 2004-05 has a full year to celebrate its past, and teachers who will be at the newly merged site have time to plan for the future.

■ **Plan for the buildings left behind.** Before you board up a school building, consider leasing it to a governmental agency or nonprofit organization with programs that support your school district’s mission. Another option, if your plans include renovations of other buildings, is to use the closed sites as staging schools until the improvements are complete. This is happening in Abilene, Texas, where officials have delayed a final decision on the older buildings until the 2008-09 school year.

■ **Be creative.** Crisis sometimes presents opportunities. Under-enrolled schools can be creatively restructured by moving from a K-5 to a K-8 grade configuration. Or consider multiage classrooms and sharing faculty across district boundaries. In Lake Tahoe, Calif., officials used school closings as an opportunity to improve cultural diversity by redistricting. Now, instead of one school with 90 percent English-language learners and others with around 30 percent, three schools have 50 to 65 percent ELL students. In Fennville, Mich., officials are using money from a bond issue to build a preschool cooperative program, hoping to increase kindergarten enrollment.—G.C.

"We're dealing, in round figures, with \$5,000 per pupil, so when you lose 20 students you lose approximately \$100,000," Lee says. "That's one classroom teacher in terms of the number of students, but the teacher is only half of the cost, so the rest has to be made up someplace."

Fiscal survival

So how do you make up those deficits? Increasingly, school officials say referendums to pay for operating expenses or building improvements have become key to fiscal survival.

In Fennville, Mich., corporate downsizing and a large increase in charter schools have contributed to a 200-student decline since 1999. State aid fell as well, forcing the 1,428-student district to make more than \$1 million in staffing and program cuts for each of the past three years. For 2004-05, the district has eliminated 15 instructional days from the school calendar to further reduce costs.

Increased choice options, which allow Michigan students to attend public schools in surrounding districts, made it critical to pass Fennville's \$25.8 million bond issue this spring, Superintendent Mark Dobias says. The bond, the first approved by voters since 1973, allows the district to upgrade its facilities, save on maintenance costs, and, the district hopes, draw families back to the schools.

"I think it was absolutely life and death for us," Dobias says of the referendum. "There are certain things we just can't maintain with a school district budget, particularly when we are dependent on enrollment. And trying look at where we're going long term, the voters had to do something to help us turn things around."

Superintendents Lee and Polnick have been sounding the same refrain. In November 2003, St. Cloud voters approved a \$5.4 million operating referendum to hire 35 teachers and restore some middle school athletics, transportation routes, and half-day kindergarten. The same month, Abilene voters passed a \$76.5 million bond issue to build one new school, close two others, and make major improvements throughout the district.

"It's difficult for people to understand the economics of it, and it's very emotional," Polnick says of his district's struggles. "I've told everyone that I'll be the happiest person in Texas when our enrollment stabilizes."

Scheerhorn, whose Lake Tahoe schools serve families who work in the tourism and service industry along the California-Nevada border, has seen the district become a haven for residents of the Bay Area and the San Fernando Valley who are building second homes. Enrollment has declined for five consecutive years, however.

District officials cut staff, closed schools, and kept their fingers crossed that a poll tax would pass earlier this year to avoid

further downsizing. When the tax didn't pass, the board cut \$2.7 million in operating expenses and closed two elementary schools just to remain solvent.

"We are really down to bare bones with staffing and support personnel," Scheerhorn says. "Now we are projecting that we will lose 90 or more students every year for the next five years, which will force us to reduce at least three additional teachers a year to remain financially stable. It's very hard and very depressing for everyone."

'A world of hurt'

Barry Newbold knows his district's situation is different from school districts in decline. But that doesn't make his job any easier.

"The thing that makes this palatable is that [this is] a growing district," the Jordan superintendent says. "If [it] were stable or declining across the district, then I would be in a world of hurt."

Newbold has seen neighborhoods throughout the district grow at different times during his tenure. Jordan, which serves nine municipalities, had large growth in its southeastern quadrant in the mid 1980s. In fact, growth in that now-declining area

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was so rapid that the district bused children to a neighboring school district to avoid the cost of building schools.

Today, as developers work on an eight-square mile development near a former copper mine, parts of Jordan are booming while others are in decline. Charter schools have become popular; in recent years, four charters have pulled 2,500 students out of the district. And at least 1,000 students are being schooled at home.

Last year, as voters were being asked to approve a \$281 million bond referendum for new construction and improvements, Newbold and board president Kennett say discussions intensified about what to do with under-enrolled schools. For seven months, a 55-member committee consisting of parents, residents without schoolchildren, and district employees looked at options. Finally, the public was asked to weigh in on five, and board members have used the summer months to review almost 1,500 pages of comments.

"The majority of the people in our district do not have chil-

dren in school, and they don't have the same vested interest as those who do," Newbold says, pointing to a common dilemma posed by school districts. "During the bond campaign, we spent a large amount of time continually reassuring the tax-paying public that we would use their dollars wisely. We think we owe it to the community to pose that question about closing schools."

Kennett would not say which way she is leaning, but Newbold believes the district ultimately will close two to four schools. Other options, such as busing students across the district, were considered but dropped.

"If we had done that, it would bring about all kinds of alternatives that no one wants—cross-district busing, more year-round schools at the secondary level, double sessions," he says. "All of those things that in today's society are not conducive to the schedules and lifestyles that people want to live."

Opposition to closing schools has not been extreme, New-

bold says, pointing to the support the district received on the bond issue. But as the vote nears, he knows that can change.

"There obviously are individuals who don't want anything done because they know the school is probably a candidate for closure," he says. "And right now, people are firmly convinced that it will be someone else's school that will be closed, not theirs."

"Everybody is relatively myopic in perspective, and I hope that changes. We're trying to manage the dynamics of an ever-changing enrollment pattern and shifting demographics at rates that we can't predict with reliability any more than four to six months out."

"But," Newbold says, reflecting on the problems other districts are having, "I know things could be much worse."

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JOINING FORCES TO SURVIVE

They call themselves the Six Neighbors—a half-dozen tiny school districts working together to survive.

Spread across three counties in far eastern Colorado, the six districts—Arickaree, Bethune, Hi-Plains, Idalia, Liberty, and Woodlin—have fewer than 120 students each. They also share many of the same issues: declining enrollment, a dwindling farming economy, and rising costs. The districts use four-day school weeks to keep costs down

"We're just extreme rural areas out here," says Tim Gribben, superintendent of the Idalia School District. "The small family farms are being eaten up by corporations and big farmers. Our kids are graduating and going away to college and not coming back to run the family farms. There's really nothing to bring people here and no way to create jobs for them."

Since last year, when Gribben and Liberty Superintendent Milton Roeder met at a track meet with half-empty buses, they've been sharing ideas and resources.

"We went to a junior high track meet, and we had a 60 passenger bus that probably had 20 kids in it," says Gribben, who also is Idalia's principal, athletic director, and head football coach. "We drove by Liberty, and its bus was about the same way. We followed each other to the track meet."

At the meet, Gribben and Roeder talked about the problems both districts were having. "We said, 'Something's not right here,' and tried to talk about what we could do, and we kind of made a gentleman's agreement," Gribben says. "You drive this time, and we'll drive next time."

That informal arrangement evolved into monthly meetings among the six districts at rotating locations. Since October 2003, Woodlin and Hi-Plains have agreed to share a superintendent, and there have been talks about sharing enhance-

ment teachers and other resources as well.

Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural Schools and Community Trust, says the efforts of groups such as the Six Neighbors show that small districts can work even in the tightest of times. But, he notes, those efforts often are the exception rather than the rule.

"The concentration of poor and working poor people in these declining communities makes them an educational imperative for our society," Strange says. "In most cases, they're not treated that way. They're treated as garbage, as refuse, as someone who ought to be given up on. And the children of those people are the children who are most likely to be left behind."

Ron Conrad, who has been working as superintendent of both Woodlin and Hi-Plains since July 1, says he's been pleasantly surprised by the open communication between the two school boards. Because the districts are 70 miles apart, Conrad is spending two days at one school and three at the other each week.

"It's been very enlightening to see how they're working together, and it confirms that they are very concerned about the education of children first," Conrad says. "The board presidents visit back and forth quite frequently, and they have said they are willing to change their meeting dates if need be. You don't see that happen too often."

Such creative measures, Conrad and Gribben believe, are necessary for the districts to survive.

"We're not saving a whole lot by sharing transportation, but we're being a little proactive," Gribben says. "If we don't do something, several years down the road the state could shut us down because we're so small. If we can share some services and save some money in the process, then we can continue to operate."—G.C.