

Future Changes in Educational Policy and the Impact on Facility Needs

As school districts plan for the future, Educational Policy change plays a role in what may be needed to meet the needs of their students. As districts plan for facility needs, the number of students that schools will service could be impacted by policies related to Schools of Choice, Charter Schools, Cyber Schools and On-line learning. Enrollment changes could impact the number of schools a district would need.

In Michigan, the opportunity for students to participate in Schools of Choice and Charter Schools has been in place since the mid 1990's. Because of enrollment trends, schools to our west have not had space in their schools and have not offered Choice. Schools to our east, north and south have at different times opened their doors to nonresident students in limited fashion. To date, our enrollment has not been impacted in any significant way by current district choice decisions.

Wayne County has been one of the largest regions for Charter Schools in the state. Many of these schools are located closer to major urban areas. There have been charter schools in Canton and south of our district. There is a Montessori Charter in our community that was established several years ago and a new charter school that just opened up in the southern end of our community that moved from Dearborn. To date, none of the charter school options have taken away numbers of LPS students that have impacted the number of facilities needed.

Looking forward to potential new schooling options for students that could impact enrollment, Michigan has just passed new law that allows for the expansion of Charter Schools in Michigan. The creation of Cyber Schools has not passed the legislature, but is on the horizon for consideration. These schools (cyber schools) do not typically serve the regular student population and have not proven to be very successful, but are still a consideration. And although surrounding districts have not made any change in plans for accepting new students through schools of choice policy, any change by surrounding districts in their decision could impact our enrollment. Playing out different scenarios, below is an estimated number of students that would have to attend a charter school, cyber school or schools of choice in order to impact our enrollment projections, and consequently the number of facilities we may need to serve our student population.

Below is one way to analyze the enrollment loss that would need to occur in order to even consider closing a school:

High School - Assuming a maximum average of 2,000 students in a school, our enrollment would have to drop below 4,000 students to reduce a school – Current enrollment: 5,628; Projection for 2016-17 5,049.

Middle School – Assuming a maximum average of 850 students in a school, our enrollment would have to drop below 1,700 students to reduce a school – Current enrollment 2,469; Projections for 2016-17 2,256.

Upper Elementary – Assuming a maximum average of 800 students in a school, our enrollment would have to drop below 1,600 students to reduce a school – Current enrollment 2,185; Projections for 2016-17 1,910.

Elementary – Since students are dispersed over 13 different schools, the analysis is a little different than the other schools. Enrollments currently fluctuate from 292-472 per school. The current average size is 380 and the median size is 373. Looking out to 2016-17 the average is projected to drop to 336. A charter school with 100 students concentrated in one area of the community could create a condition where you would be able to consider closing a school. Also, a charter school in any area of the district that took a significant number of students could allow a more ready opportunity to close a school, although significant redistricting may need to occur to fit in all remaining students. Schools of Choice typically impact those schools closest to borders, if you are looking at a large, concentrated number from one area of the community. Otherwise, numbers are typically spread as parents choose other districts for reasons such as close to work or different educational programs.

New on-line class options for students are another consideration that could impact facility use. If students are able to take at least some of their classes on-line and not on school property, less space would be required in school facilities. The chances of this happening are questionable, as new research on the success of students taking on-line courses is not positive. In addition, certain students may always want to be involved at a school facility to participate in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. While we may be able to envision these programs being offered in different venues (i.e. clubs or groups outside of school), this doesn't appear to be on the horizon in the foreseeable future. There are other reports that would suggest that a larger number of school aged students will be taking at least some courses on-line outside of the traditional school facility.

Alternate Scenario:

Another scenario for consideration from a policy perspective is enrollment stabilization or increase due to new state policy or change in district policy on schools of choice. The legislature proposed last year that school districts would be mandated to accept nonresident students if they had space. While it was not approved, if it did occur in the future, it change the scenarios above. Even with normal enrollment loss based on demographic projections, if such policy is enacted either locally or at the state level, our current existing schools would all be needed (assuming there was enough demand to offset any enrollment change from a new charter school or loss of students to other districts under choice). A scenario where we would actually be required to increase facilities based on nonresident student demand does not seem feasible. All proposed policies to date have only discussed available space if not currently used.

Last, forced mergers of districts could also impact facility use. This could create a scenario where existing sites would possibly add students where space is available, offsetting any enrollment loss. Of course, the opposite would be the case if our students attended schools outside of our district under some type of merger agreement.