

ENROLLMENT: Some families are home schooling

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to figures released last month. District Superintendent Curtiss Scholl said during an interview on Thursday, November 17 that the number of students now is 1,074 — just 16 fewer than the same time last year, although further behind earlier projections.

Enrollment is important because the State of Oregon allocates about \$7,000 annually to public school districts for each student they have.

Scholl said Jay Wilkins, a member of the District's Bond Facilities Oversight Committee, recently suggested the District do some detective work to see why enrollment has fallen each of the last five years. Wilkins, a consultant who previously worked for Nike and has children in the District, suggested checking with local real estate agents to get their perspective. Lack of affordable housing is an issue, as the Sisters City Council has recognized by authorizing funding to help address the situation.

Scholl added that home-schooling, online study, and Sisters children enrolling in other public districts or private schools are among other causes for the slide.

"There are quite a few who are home-schooled," he said. "There is the gamut of reasons why people home-school, and it's worth us asking why."

Black Butte School District and Redmond Proficiency Academy are other draws for local residents, Scholl said, and some private schools advertise heavily to recruit students. Scholl wants citizens to give input for the study.

"It's us trying to learn and get feedback from the community about why they made that choice," he said of students who opt-out of the District.

The study won't be formal, with a schedule of committee meeting dates, the superintendent said. But a tentative roadmap to accomplish some goals has been established.

It includes analyzing enrollment data, and interviewing Realtors in Bend and Sisters during November and December. Interviews with families willing to discuss why they home-school or choose other educational options also will be on the agenda during November and December, as will interviews with educators to get their ideas.

During January and February 2017, according to the tentative schedule, optimal enrollment levels by grade will be determined in looking toward the 2017-18 school year. District officials also will communicate what's happening with the plan, and their expectations, to the rest of the District during those months.

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By March, officials hope, they will be able to implement "key enrollment drivers" as determined by the study.

Those drivers might include such things as touting the District's unique curriculum and good test scores for families considering transferring to Sisters School District. It might also include outreach to the home-school population, and emphasizing "convenient bus options" to Bend and Redmond district families who might prefer Sisters.

Those aren't firm plans by the District, but an example of things that are open for discussions.

While Sisters is losing students, Bend-La Pine School District has grown steadily and Redmond School District has made incremental increases in recent years until hitting a relatively flat spot this year.

Enrollment numbers from the Oregon Department of Education show that Bend-La Pine has 18,034 students this year — almost 3 percent growth from 2015-16, when 17,534 students were enrolled. Previous years' enrollments at Bend-La Pine were 17,163 (2014-15); 16,863 (2013-14); 16,600 (2012-13); and 16,161 (2010-11).

Enrollment numbers at Redmond School District show 7,421 students this year, according to preliminary data. That compares with 7,363 in 2015-16. Earlier enrollments at Redmond were 7,329 (2014-15); 7,107 (2013-14); 7,055 (2012-13); and 6,962 (2011-12).

Sisters School District's enrollment was 1,118 in 2015-16; 1,099 in 2014-15; 1,148 in 2013-14; 1,155 in 2012-13; and 1,211 in 2011-12.

Scholl acknowledged that Sisters lacks the jobs and housing of Bend and Redmond. But emphasizing the District's good points could have positive results.

"We're a small district and we can't do everything for everybody," Scholl said. "However, what we do do very well. We want to promote ourselves as a district."

He explained that open



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Sisters faces a challenge keeping the schools filled with students.

enrollment has changed the landscape as far as school enrollment. There is a period of time during spring when students may enroll for the following year in a district away from where they live without having to pay tuition.

Many years ago, those students had to reapply for out-of-district enrollment each year. Now one application gives them permanent enrollment, and has driven up the number of transfers, Scholl said.

Sisters School Board Vice-Chairwoman Amanda Clark agrees that a marketing effort of the District's qualities is needed. She mentioned flight science, Chinese language and the high school's strong career technical education programs as examples

of things most small districts don't offer.

"It's just a matter of spreading the word," she said.

The District's website can be a valuable way to do that, Clark added. And the top-level sports facilities are another way to show potential new families that Sisters is invested in its schools, she said.

Clark called marketing "a cornerstone" of enrollment increase efforts.

At the same time, she recalled that community surveys have shown a strong desire here for low class sizes. That's expensive, Clark noted, especially as fewer children are showing up and state revenue declines.

"It is a hard thing to sustain," she said.

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