



West Linn-Wilsonville School District, 22210 SW Stafford Road, Tualatin, OR 97062

To: Long Range Planning Committee and School Board Liaison Director Dan Schumaker  
From: Supt. Kathy Ludwig, COO Pat McGough, Capital Project Manager Mr. Remo Douglas  
Date: August 20, 2024  
Re: Consideration Factors of Small Schools

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On July 17, 2024 the West Linn-Wilsonville School District's Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) reviewed at their meeting a memorandum report from FLO Analytics summarizing enrollment forecasts for grades K-12 for the 2024-2025 to 2033-2034 school years. The LRPC members spent the meeting receiving an explanation of the report's analysis, methodology, maps, graphs and tables. There was opportunity for questions, comments and requests for clarification.

### **Small Schools Consideration Factors**

During the meeting, several members of the LRPC surfaced questions about the consideration factors for the District regarding operating "small schools", in particular, the question of Riverside High School and several of the schools in West Linn which are under capacity and will not have foreseeable enrollment growth in the next 10 years. Given that the District had just reduced the general budget for 2024-2025 by \$10 million, which included staff layoffs, and would likely make another sizable reduction in 2025-2026, at what point can the District continue to operate small primary schools with fiscal responsibility.

After discussion, members of the LRPC indicated that it would be of interest to them to learn more about the consideration factors in operating small schools and suggested that staff provide some additional information at the next meeting in August, indicating that this information would be helpful to members in their long range planning and future recommendations to the School Board.

This memo provides the LRPC members and School Board liaison Director Dan Schumaker with the following three (3) factors considered: (I.) Cost of Core Operations, (II.) Cost of Renovations, and (III.) Educational Program and Services Impact.

## **I. Cost of Core Operations**

Every school has a core cost to operate, such as school leadership and support staff, utilities, maintenance costs, etc. One main operating cost that is not included in the core costs are teachers salaries and compensation. As student counts fluctuate, teachers are assigned to

meet the student count: if a school has an increase of 22-25 students, that primary school may receive another teaching position. The reverse is also true: if a school sees a decline in students, the teaching position may be reallocated to another school to match any student count increase. Under certain circumstances, that position may be eliminated if necessary. For primary schools, those core costs include the following:

- Principal
- Instructional Coordinator
- 0.5 FTE Nurse
- Office Staff (minimum two administrative assistants)
- Engineer and Custodian
- Nutrition Services Staff
- Minimum 0.5 FTE Counselor
- 0.5 FTE Teacher-Librarian
- Minimum 0.5 FTE PE/Wellness and 0.5 FTE Music Specialists
- Paraeducators (minimum to cover arrival/dismissal/recesses/lunches)
- Minimum 0.5 FTE Learning Specialist (and minimum ELD Specialist services)
- Transportation (Buses)
- Utilities
- Maintenance costs

These core costs collectively total approximately \$1,450,000 annually.

## **II. Cost of Renovations**

Maintaining and improving facilities is a major factor when considering the fiscal responsibility of any school and requires material investment in the form of capital construction. These projects generally fall under three broad categories: stewardship, facilities equity and educational adequacy.

### **Stewardship**

At the most basic level is stewardship. Facilities stewardship speaks to the responsibility to care for the considerable investment in facilities already made by the community. Such improvements can range from a fresh coat of paint to replacement of core building systems and structural components. These projects extend the life and operation of facilities, but don't necessarily consider improving the educational opportunities provided to students.

### **Facilities Equity**

Facilities equity is the notion that every student should enjoy the same educational experience regardless of which school they attend. The District has generated a list of key components of school facilities that are part of equity. Examples include a library as the heart of the school, learning neighborhoods, health & wellness, athletics & recreation, student services, STEAM, CTE & career pathways, visual and performing arts, and safe & welcoming schools. The District has facilities that first opened as far back as the 1940's to as recently as 2023. While numerous equity projects have been implemented over the years, a number of the District's schools lack some of these components.

Preliminary estimates for the projects needed for stewardship and equity of the four smaller West Linn schools that are significantly under capacity (CedarOak Park, Stafford, Willamette, and Bolton Primary Schools) have been developed by Arcadis Architects. These preliminary figures range from \$30 million to \$47 million for each school. Due to the nature of the existing sites and buildings some of the deficiencies are unable to be addressed, despite the level of funding estimated.

### **Educational Adequacy**

Educational adequacy addresses the ongoing development of the educational program, and the ability of District facilities to support it. As the educational program shifts, so too does the demand on the facilities. Arcadis Architects has developed a rating system to assess the extent to which school facilities support or hinder the implementation of the educational program. There are numerous elements included, which generally fall into four categories. Those categories include Educational Program Support; Health & Wellness; Safe, Secure & Welcoming; and The Physical Environment. Lower scores indicate the potential need for improvements to better serve the students and staff. The four smaller primary schools in West Linn that are significantly under capacity are also the four lowest scoring schools in terms of educational adequacy. A summary of all District facilities is currently in process.

## **III. Educational Program and Services Impact**

Decades of research shows that students thrive in small-group environments, where their teachers know them and have the resources to support their individual needs. This is a driving factor in why WLWV has built primary schools to enroll ideally between 400-550 students (capacity). This range results in about 16 - 22 classrooms across six grade levels, K-5. Enrollment can fluctuate, and some schools may have fewer than 400 while others can exceed 550. For example, the District built Boones Ferry Primary School with an intentional capacity of 775 students. Within years of operation, the school community (students, parents, staff) expressed concern that this size was “too big” for younger students to navigate the building, feel known or feel part of a relational community. In response, the District began plans for another primary school nearby that could help alleviate the large enrollment at Boones Ferry while also responding to new residential growth. To date, Boones Ferry’s enrollment has intentionally remained under its building capacity. It became clear to the District that *too large* of a primary school (e.g. 650+) was not preferred by our school community, even though fiscal and operational efficiency was achieved. Instead, feedback consistently suggested that the educational program and values were compromised. The District committed, thereafter, to keep primary schools within the 400-550 capacity range whenever possible.

The question that has surfaced for today is: “What is *too small* for a school?” What are the factors considered by the school district when operating schools *much smaller* than 400 students, particularly if enrollment projections indicate stagnant growth for the foreseeable future.

There are a number of educational program and services impacts that emerge when schools become smaller, not by design but by external influences.

**(a) Fewer classrooms with teachers for students.** With declining enrollment in a primary school, there are fewer classrooms/teachers for students. At a minimum, 12 teachers (K-5) would allow for two classroom options for students at each grade level and the flexibility to adjust to increasing or decreasing enrollment each year. This flexibility is helpful for two reasons: adjusting for class size and adjusting for student needs.

**Optimal Class Size:** If there are fewer class sections at each grade level, schools are more challenged to achieve optimal class sizes. For example, one second grade class of 15 students is not sustainable and results in an inequitable class size compared to other class sizes in the same school or across the district. When a school has two or more classes at one grade level, then increased enrollment can be absorbed across multiple classrooms or decreased enrollment can be achieved by reducing one classroom or creating a blend.

**Student Needs:** A minimum of two classrooms at each grade level (or two blended classrooms) allows parents, teachers and staff to consider students' learning needs, social-emotional needs and peer relationships when creating "balanced" classroom cohorts. When there is only one option in which to place a student at a grade level, it can create challenges for a family or the staff, particularly when a "conflict" may arise and a family may wish to request a different teacher for their child or different peers and cannot do so.

**(b) More part-time specialists and support staff.** With declining enrollment in a primary school, there are more part-time specialists and support staff to deliver required program services to students. This includes instruction like PE, Music, Library, Special Education, English Language Development and academic interventions. These part-time staff are shared across multiple schools and their instructional delivery is impacted by schedules that need to work. It can be challenging for a smaller school to feel that particular expertise is represented daily or available at meetings or professional learning time, when they might be needed or assigned elsewhere on a particular day.

Additionally, small schools are challenged to provide representation for school committees and district leadership opportunities. Over the course of a school year, a small school is tapping the same few teachers to participate or attend the variety of committees or meetings such as equity committee, curriculum adoption committee, student support team meetings, union meetings, special education meetings, etc. This is in addition to the required all-staff meetings, grade level meetings and planning meetings.

**(c) Transfers out.** With declining enrollment in a primary school, there are likely to be more student transfers out to other nearby schools. In these cases, parents indicate that they are seeking more classroom and peer-based options (more peer relationship options, separating problematic peer relationships, fewer isolated or blended classrooms).

To be clear, smaller schools can exist and students/parents/staff can come to terms with adjusting to the implications. When smaller schools are a necessity (e.g. rural schools) or by design (charter, private), the students/parents/staff enter into the understanding that this is the only option or the preferred option despite the drawbacks. However, when smaller schools

occur due to enrollment decline, with surrounding schools that are larger, students/parents/staff may seek preferred options elsewhere which further impacts the educational programs and services of the already small school.

#### **IV. Riverside High School**

At the July 17, 2024 LRPC meeting, questions surfaced about the inception of Riverside High School and how the district determined to open a small high school and what role it played for students and families in the district.

Riverside High School opened in the fall of the 2023-2024 school year as a result of an extended process that was based on components of the [2019 Long Range Plan](#) and the [2018 Superintendent's High School Study](#).

During the update process for the [2019 Long Range Plan](#), the district underwent an evaluation of its existing high schools and contemplated the future of its high school programming to best prepare students for college and career. [Through a year-long study](#), the district interviewed then-current high school students, surveyed recent high school alumni, toured cutting-edge high school facilities, reviewed relevant research, and surveyed both WLWV teachers and the community. Study findings, coupled with Long Range Planning Committee recommendations and community input, created the vision for a third option high school in the district as part of the 2019 Long Range Plan and 2019 Capital Bond. The new high school, situated in a more central location of the school district, would provide the following:

- (a) A small high school option for students in the school district;
- (b) Enrollment relief to West Linn High School which has been over capacity for several years as well as to Wilsonville High School over the coming years;
- (c) A CTE program unique to the school that would provide learning options for students not available at the other high schools; and
- (d) In the long term, a location for a potential larger high school should the urban growth boundary expand and the school district need to add to the facility and the program.

Riverside is an International Baccalaureate World School (the only IB World School in the district) and offers Business/Marketing, Health Occupations, and Architecture/Construction Career and Technical Education pathways that aren't offered at either West Linn or Wilsonville High Schools. The district has found that students who have chosen to attend Riverside are drawn to the smaller high school size, unique CTE pathways, IB program, and opportunities in athletics and arts that they might not be able to participate in due to larger enrollment at the district's other high schools. It is the intention of the district to keep Riverside's enrollment under 600 students to maintain the smaller school setting that many WLWV high school students desire for their high school experience and success.

With no boundary, Riverside serves as an option for interested students, drawing from both West Linn and Wilsonville High School to relieve overcrowding and provide a unique high school experience that can't be found in a larger high school setting. Taking over the previous Athey Creek Middle School building, the school building has a capacity for 624 students. It opened for the 2023-24 school year with just 9th and 10th grade students and a total enrollment of 112 students. For the 2024-2025 school year, 11th grade has been added and the projected G. 9-11

enrollment is approximately 170 students. Grade 12 will be added for the 2025-26 school year. It is expected that over the years as the school and programs become more established and known to the communities, more students will enroll.

The recent Flo Analytics 10-year enrollment projection shows Riverside growing to approximately 350 students in the next 5-10 years. This projection is an estimate as Riverside is uniquely an “option” school and has no neighborhood, residential boundary to establish a predictable enrollment over time.