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Report: Student drop could level off in Eureka district

Study sheds light on Eureka district attendance patterns

By Nathan Donato-Weinstein The Press-Tribune

Enrollment in the steadily shrinking Eureka Union School District should begin to level out over the next several years, according to a new demographic study presented at this week's meeting of the Board of Trustees.

The survey of population trends is good news for officials grappling with fewer students in the Granite Bay-based district, a trend that has had a major impact on Eureka's budget.

"It looks like we're reaching the valley of enrollment here," said Ken Reynolds of Fair Oaks-based SchoolWorks Inc., the study's authors.

The report analyzed area birth records for the past 10 years, projected housing development and existing student records to come up with the attendance patterns.

According to the report, the number of kindergartners enrolling in the district would roughly hold steady at about 300 per year through at least 2012. That's down from a peak of around 400 a year in the early 2000s. The enrollment of the district's youngest attendees is considered the most accurate predictor of attendance down the line.

After an overall 90-student decrease next year, the district will slowly decline to reach about 3,389 students in six years, the report states.

But officials hastened to note that the report was preliminary and is likely to change as demographers refine the data used to arrive at the figures. They're especially interested to look at why the new report gives a less pessimistic outlook than the district's own internal projections.

Board members noted, for instance, that the current real estate market means many existing residents don't seem to be moving away – and with new development at a standstill, that means fewer opportunities for replacement with new, younger families. They questioned whether the new report takes that dynamic into account.

"People aren't retiring and moving away," trustee Debbie Holt said.

Declining enrollment is a major issue for the district because it saps state per-pupil funding. The trend has already forced the closure next year of several Eureka schools and major changes to the district's grade configuration.

"The number of kids we have has huge impact on staff and budget," Superintendent Tim McCarty said. "We need to be on point on our long-term demographic projections."

The report will be put to use by school planners as well as members of a new long-range planning task force, which holds its first meeting later this month.

The task force, based on the same concept as the group that made major district reconfiguration recommendations last year, will consist of four sub-committees tasked with looking at the downsizing process, budget, alternative education and academic intervention and special education.

"We'll be continuing to look at items from last year and maybe go a little bit deeper," McCarty said.

In addition, trustees on Tuesday approved a contract with Sacramento-based School Innovations and Advocacy to analyze district administration. Officials say they want a third party's opinion on whether the district office is operating at its most efficient.