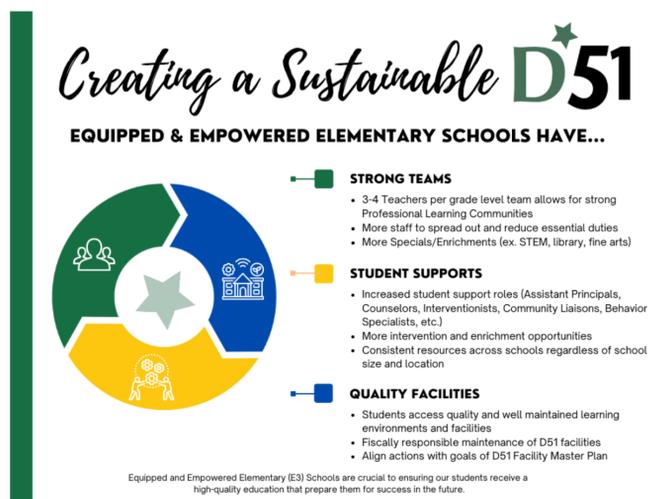


The Elementary Declining Enrollment Committee reconvened on Tuesday for the third time. Our discussions this week delved into topics such as the factors contributing to our decline in the number of school age children in D51, the constraints this decline puts on school resources, and our current fiscal outlook. These 4-hour meetings serve as a crucial component in charting a course that best meets the needs of our students and staff moving forward. Here are the key highlights from our latest meeting:

During the meeting, Elizabeth Garner, Colorado's State Demographer, and Shannon Bingham, District 51's contracted demographer, shared insights and data regarding the causes of declining enrollment and their predictions for future trends. Ms. Garner discussed historical population changes in Mesa County, emphasizing how economic estimates, migration patterns, and an aging population are impacting the number of families with school-age children in the county. For example, between 2010 and 2020, Mesa County saw slow population and job growth curves, with the largest number of individuals migrating to the Grand Valley in the 60+ age category. Mesa County has experienced a decline in population in the past due to the oil and gas industry's fluctuations, which have influenced job growth, "in-migration" of families, which is coupled with declining birth rates since 2007. Despite this, the state forecasts the decline in birthrates to bottom out in the near future and slow growth of families with school-aged children for Mesa County. Ms. Garner also highlighted the importance of attracting families for "in-migration" through job development, affordable housing, and other factors.

Shannon Bingham highlighted the declining birth rates and the above average housing market costs in Colorado and Mesa County which have contributed to declining school enrollment. Factors such as high costs of raising children and unaffordable traditional family housing contribute to this trend as more millennials and Gen Z families choose to have less children or to not have children at all. Post-pandemic online school competition further affects school enrollment, and high interest rates and higher housing prices impact "in-migration" of families. To address this, it is essential to support the housing needs of young families and create an environment conducive to attracting families with school-aged children if we are to get back to pre-pandemic student enrollment numbers, which have dropped by over 1,200 students since school year 2019-20.

After hearing about the reasons behind declining enrollment from both the state and local levels, the committee had the opportunity to hear from the elementary school principals who serve on the committee. These principals shared their perspectives on how the declining enrollment has impacted staffing in their buildings over the last few years. They shared the tough decisions they, and their colleagues, have to make when deciding where to cut staff when a school loses enrollment, and what it is like to work in a school with stronger enrollment and more staffing and resources. This committee has been exploring what type of staffing our elementary schools would need to be an "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School," and the principals shared the benefits that would have on student academic success, safety, and teacher planning and collaboration. The graphic below describes some of the essential elements of an "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School." Under our current staffing model, which assigns staff to buildings depending on their individual school enrollment, if an elementary school drops below about 380 students, it is very difficult to staff that building to be an "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School."



Based on enrollment projections for next school year, 18 of our 25 elementary schools are below that low-end enrollment number of 384 students. Our elementary school principals have indicated that a student enrollment population closer to 400 represents the ideal sized school. A school of this size allows educators to know and support each student while also providing sufficient resources and staffing. Our elementary school buildings were built to be able to educate student enrollments ranging from as small as 312 students to as large as 728 students with a current average elementary building capacity of 481 students. Our proposed "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School" model can be accommodated in 80% of our school buildings and is well below the average capacity of those buildings. Lastly, we clarified with the committee that just because a school cannot hold that capacity, as is the case for five campuses, this does not mean that they would automatically be considered a candidate if we move forward with school consolidation. However, we would have to staff those buildings differently in order to be an "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School."

The principals emphasized the importance of consistent staffing to ensure hiring and retention success and to best support our students. We also discussed the need to improve our level of staffing in our schools throughout the district. Effectively staffing schools is a challenge currently, and has been over the last few years, due to limited resources, with declining enrollment compounding that issue. In order to consistently staff all of our schools as an "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School," regardless of student enrollment size, something will need to change.

As the committee came to a better understanding of our proposed "Equipped and Empowered Elementary School" model, we explored potential paths to address declining enrollment in our district:

#### Path 1: School Consolidation

This path proposes consolidating schools to distribute resources more effectively. However, various factors, such as per-pupil funding formulas, level of local financial support, and the impact on instructional resources need to be carefully considered. While this model includes fiscal savings, one of its primary goals is the redistribution of students and teaching staff to other under enrolled schools. This approach allows remaining schools to be fully staffed in ways that support students' success. The group ended this session by considering how D51 compares to similar sized districts in Colorado, which tend to have higher annual revenue through state per-pupil funding and higher local contributions through mill levy overrides, and in many cases, fewer number of schools relative to student enrollment numbers. D51 is distributing less funding amongst more schools, many with underutilized buildings, which leads to less staffing in the building and the building being under-resourced.

#### Path 2: Utilizing Increased State Per Pupil Revenue

This path suggests using any increase in state per-pupil revenue to financially support our current 25 elementary schools and not consolidate/close schools. However, projections indicate that by 2027, all elementary schools would likely be categorized as not meeting our proposed "Equipped and Empowered Elementary Schools" target enrollment number of 384, leading to an even greater number of smaller & underutilized schools in our district. The group discussed remaining mindful of the uncertain nature of continued state funding increases and prioritizing appropriate funds for increasing staff salaries that are competitive with other districts across the Colorado teaching market. We have made strides over the last few years to be more competitive, but we still lag behind our comparable districts. This is especially important given the teacher pipeline shortage across the state as far fewer people are entering the teaching profession.

#### Path 3: Cutting Non-School Site Expenses

This path proposes reducing non-school site expenses from district support departments to subsidize unfunded school-based staffing due to enrollment loss. The committee looked at how these expenses are distributed across schools and operational and instructional support departments. Currently, 61.3% of our general fund dollars go towards teachers/counselors, 22.1% towards school-based support staff, 3.8% towards school administration, 2.4% towards special service providers for schools, 0.5% towards coordinators, 1.4% towards instructional support/teachers on special assignment, 7.2% towards centralized/itinerant support staff, and 1.2% towards centralized administration. The committee also explored the important roles each department plays in supporting school and district operations. The committee then considered if cutting these departments and roles is a viable response to addressing declining enrollment. Because the overwhelming majority of our general fund staffing dollars go towards school-based staff and supports, there are not a lot of areas to cut that wouldn't end up negatively impacting the schools and the district as a whole.

#### Path 4: Generation of Additional Strategies to Address Declining Enrollment

The committee also had an opportunity to propose additional strategies for addressing declining enrollment. Several suggestions which have not been vetted by the committee yet were put forward. Some of those suggestions included strategies such as additional Mill Levy overrides, modifications to the school week, and cutting unfunded costs such as transportation. These ideas, along with others, will be discussed at future meetings. This path also proposed the possibility of combining strategies to address declining enrollment.

This committee has done, and continues to do, a lot of very positive work to address a challenging and complex issue. Each member volunteers at least eight hours every month to ensure we are doing what is best for everyone involved: our students, staff, and district as a whole. We continue to center our work on reaching the goals set out in our D51 Strategic Plan, the D51 Graduate Profile, and the committee's problem statement that states, "Current declining student enrollment negatively impacts D51 resources and infrastructure. The impact limits D51's ability to assemble the critical resources and infrastructure to adequately support and implement the strategic plan. We desire to reallocate resources to create safe, successful classrooms for students and staff."

We appreciate your continued engagement and support as we work together to navigate these challenges and ensure a better future for our students. Your input is crucial in shaping the path forward. We will continue providing updates as we make progress and explore the best solutions for District 51.

### Mesa County Valley School District 51

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