

Frequently Asked Questions about School Closure

1. Why do we need to close a school to save \$300,000? It's only 1% of the operating budget, so can't we just cut it from somewhere else?

Over six years the district has lost nearly \$4.2 million due to declining enrollment and state budget cuts. During the past two years alone, the district has cut \$2.2 million from the operating budget. Very difficult cuts were necessary to maintain a balanced budget. Dozens of teaching, para-educator, custodial, secretary, bus driver, librarian, and administrative positions were eliminated. Field trip, outdoor education, school supply, curriculum material, athletics, and activities budgets were reduced. If a school is not closed, additional programs must be cut to maintain a balanced budget next year, and likely again and again for several more years.

2. Why can't we use some of our reserves to make the difference needed to keep both schools open?

District reserves have been used over the past several years to delay the need for deeper cuts, and the district's unrestricted reserves are currently at their lowest point in several years. Reserves can only be used once, and program expenses reoccur year after year after year.

3. What benefits come from closing a school?

Closing a school allows the district to maintain its current level of service and programs across all grade levels. It permits a balanced budget without much deeper program cuts. Class sizes will be more evenly balanced from school to school, creating greater fiscal efficiency.

4. Why do we need to close a school now? Can't it wait another year?

To maintain a balanced budget spending must be reduced by about \$300,000 for next year. Additional programs or services must be cut by that amount if a school is not closed. Enrollment has already declined by 640 full-time students over six years. Enrollment is projected to decline by 340 full-time students over the next six years. At today's funding rate per student, that's another \$1.7 million in cuts. As long as our enrollment continues to decline, the district must make spending cuts to match the reduction in enrollment.

5. Why can't the board wait longer to make a decision about closing a school?

If the decision is delayed, notifying parents of their child's new neighborhood school of attendance becomes much more difficult. The budget development process is also delayed, making it much harder to prepare a balanced budget by mid-July.

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6. If we have to close a school, why did we build Jefferson Elementary School? And why didn't we make it a bigger school?

When the bond for Jefferson Elementary School was presented, the community—including school district leaders—did not expect the continued dramatic decline in enrollment. Most people believed six elementary schools would be needed to accommodate our elementary student population. A Blue Ribbon Committee of community leaders wanted to maintain an elementary school in the heart of Port Angeles. The community rejected, twice, a larger bond that could have supported a three-unit school.

7. What do you mean by small schools? Our schools are small, so why do you want them to be bigger?

The research on small elementary schools, which is very limited, indicates that optimal size is between 300 and 400 full-time students. Our state's current funding formula supports independently sustainable schools of 320 or more, and districts across the state operate elementary schools at an average of 450 students. This year two district elementary schools enrolled only 218 full-time students. With five elementary schools in 2004-05, average enrollment would likely be 343 full-time students.

8. If we close a school, won't the class sizes be much larger in the remaining schools?

Some classes should be smaller, and some should be larger. When students from a closed school are integrated into other schools within the district, class-size will increase from 18 to about 22 students per class in some schools. This year there are 23 classes with 18 or fewer students, mostly at Monroe and Fairview Elementary Schools. Schools on the west side experience larger class sizes (16 over 22; four with 26). Closing a school will more equitably distribute teachers to keep class size lower everywhere.

9. What will happen to the special education students if Monroe Elementary School is closed?

All of the special education students now served at Monroe Elementary School will be moved to other schools prepared for them within the district. Each program, the students, and their teacher will move together to another school (except the infant and toddler program.)

10. Can space be properly prepared in time for the special needs students to move in September?

Necessary accommodations will be completed by facilities professionals in time for school to start in September.

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11. What will happen to the school that is closed? Will it become an eyesore?

The school that is closed will be “mothballed,” meaning not permanently closed. The grounds and exterior will be maintained to keep the school from deteriorating. Enough heat will be maintained to prevent moisture damage.

12. Why didn't you consider the good relationships that have been established at these schools?

The board of directors believes there are very good relationships at all of the district's schools and it would not be fair to pit one school against the other in terms of relationships, school improvement climate, or test scores. The board of directors used as much objective data as possible to weigh the positive and negative reasons to close a school.

13. Why did the decision have to be made so quickly? The board of directors hasn't had enough time to really think through all of the data and information.

Two years ago, the Budget Review Committee recommended the board of directors consider closing a small elementary school. Last year, the Fiscal Advisory Committee recommended the board consider closing a small elementary school. The board established the Facilities Efficiency Task Force as a result. The board of directors wants to make sure that all parents know where their child will be attending school in the fall.

14. Why did the board of directors abandon the Facilities Efficiency Task Force's number one recommendation?

The board of directors determined that the first recommendation from the Facilities Efficiency Task Force resulted in too many students (788) moving, and too many educational program continuity disruptions. You may read the board's formal response on the district's website or obtain a copy at the Central Services Building.

15. Are you considering the potential for growth near each school?

The housing density, under current zoning regulations, and number of building permits issued in each school attendance area was reviewed and included in the board of director's report. Current enrollment trends indicate growth on the west side of the school district.

16. When did the school board really hear about the offer to rent Fairview Elementary School?

The board heard about the offer to rent Fairview Elementary School on February 24, 2004, the day following the study session on February 23, 2004.

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17. If we have all-day kindergarten, do we have enough classrooms to accommodate the added students?

Most schools have adequate space to accommodate all-day kindergarten, even with consolidating to five elementary schools from six. It may be necessary to use existing portables for classroom space if all-day kindergarten is implemented.

18. How many portables do we have to move when we close Monroe Elementary School? And how much will it cost?

If Fairview Elementary School is a two-unit school, one portable classroom needs to be moved and two may be preferable. If Fairview Elementary School is a three-unit school, three portable classrooms need to be moved. The cost ranges from \$25,000 to \$35,000 per portable. No new portables will be purchased.

19. What happens to students who want to attend schools outside their neighborhood?

The current policies and procedures for attendance outside neighborhood boundaries will still apply. Consideration for students that have been attending schools outside their neighborhood will be handled on a case by case basis. Students attending the neighborhood school will be given first priority.

20. Won't you have to make a lot of boundary changes if you close Monroe Elementary School or Fairview Elementary School?

Some boundary changes will be required if either elementary school is closed.

21. Did the board consider safety issues with buses at both schools?

The board did consider safety issues regarding student pick-up and drop-off at each school. Busing and traffic safety issues were a critical component in the board's deliberations.

22. Why didn't you close Choice or move it to the high school instead of closing an elementary school?

The board had already decided to keep Choice Community School open in the last round of budget cuts. The program supports about 150 students.

23. Didn't the school district make a promise to keep Fairview Elementary School open forever after it was consolidated?

After review of board minutes from that era, and conversations with two school board members and two administrators involved in the 1975 consolidation, no record was found indicating a

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promise to keep Fairview Elementary School open forever. Nor did those former leaders recall any written promise, commitment, or property use or sale restriction.

24. Why doesn't the board ask for a higher levy before they close a school?

The next levy election likely will be in March 2005. The district won't receive these funds until April 2006. That is the end of the year following next year. The district must identify \$300,000 of budget reductions for next year, the 2004-05 school year.

25. Is there enough time for specialists to serve all the students in music and physical education if a school is closed?

The specialist will have one less school to travel to and from. The number of sections they teach will be reduced by about three. The number of specialists is not projected to be reduced, so there should be enough time to serve all of the students.

26. Didn't the board always plan to close Monroe Elementary School?

No. In 2001-02 and 2002-03 the board rejected suggestions that an elementary school, any elementary school, be closed. Monroe Elementary School was not identified for closure until the March 8, 2004 board meeting, after the facilities task force recommendation. There is now a proposal to close a school pending and the final decision is scheduled to be made on June 14, 2004 at the regular board meeting.

27. How many teachers will have to be fired if we close Monroe Elementary School?

No teachers will be fired. Hopefully, no one will lose employment as a result of the school closure. Several staff members are retiring or resigning to move out of the area. This should provide enough vacancies to accommodate the staff reductions created by a school closure.

28. Why have schools been allowed to get so run down that they need to be closed?

School closure is the result of enrollment decline and state budget cuts, not facility condition. The two schools identified for closure are not in a condition that requires closure. Scheduled maintenance and upgrades have been identified for all elementary schools.