

A School District Report for the Community: Being Proactive v. Reactive

Last week, I met with our school staff providing them information about our student enrollment, staffing and programs, and district financials. I also provided an update on our school facility planning and shared information about possibly beginning a pre-kindergarten program in 2025-2026. Below you will see a highlight of this information along with a few of my thoughts about the future of our school district and community.

Projections on Student Enrollment

Next fall, we are projecting a kindergarten class of 55 students. This will reduce our overall district enrollment by 27 students. We are continuing to graduate more students than we have enrolling in kindergarten. Below is a chart showing the negative impact that declining enrollment is having on our district finances over six years.

School Year	Student Enrollment	Declining Enrollment	Compounding Loss (Per School Year)
2020 - 2021	1056	-	-
2021 - 2022	1044	12	\$132,000
2022 - 2023	1027	17	\$187,000
2023 - 2024	967	60	\$660,000
2024 - 2025	946	21	\$231,000
2025 - 2026	919	27	\$297,000

Staffing and Programs

Last spring, we had to make several difficult staffing and program reductions due to budget deficits. While we managed to balance our budget this school year, we will continue to face budget deficits until we stop declining student enrollment. This spring our school board will once again evaluate our staffing and programs for next school year.

District Financials (General Fund)

A majority of our district revenues come from state aid foundation payments. For every k-12 student enrolled at VCPS, we receive about \$11,000 from the state of North Dakota. Next year, with a reduction of 27 students, we estimate around \$300,000 less in state aid payments. If you consider our student enrollment five years ago compared to next year (2025-2026), we will have 137 fewer students equaling around \$1.5 million less in annual state aid payments. These are real numbers that have been and will continue to negatively impact our school district and community.

We know that we are not alone in these financial challenges and each day we hear about other school districts, governmental entities, and organizations who have had to downsize or make significant changes due to financial reasons. For the last couple of years, our school district has

been reactionary to these challenges and as we know, seldom is reacting a positive action for an organization. Since the end of last school year, our school district, led by our school board members, has been actively involved in finding ways to positively influence change in our community. This has included hosting meetings and discussions with community leaders focused on ways to not only increase student enrollment but grow our community through affordable housing and increasing quality jobs. We have strongly believed that our role in public education has been and will continue to be a critical part of the future of our community. In the past year, we have repeatedly asked ourselves if we continue to do things the way we've always done them, can we expect any different to happen? We believe the short and simple answer to this question is no; therefore, we will continue to proactively seek strategies to increase our student enrollment and thus positively grow our school district and community. Below, I've highlighted two specific actions that the school district believes could increase student enrollment and provide positive growth to our community.

School Facility Planning

"Build it and they will come". This is a famous quote referencing the idea that if you build something of value, people will be naturally drawn to it. In our own community, we can connect this theory to the HAC, Wellness Center, VCSU Bubble and Fine Arts Buildings, Hanna Field, Winter Show, Charlie Brown, Sam's Field, etc. Every school year, thousands of visitors attend events at these facilities and provide an economic boost to our community. These facilities are a source of pride for our organizations and our community.

As you all likely know, for the past several years, we have been asking ourselves what to do with the 1919, 1940, 1950, and 1972 portions of our current high school. These facilities are in much need of major renovations or replacement in the next few years. A School Facility Advisory Committee has been meeting for the past several months and will soon be making a recommendation to the school board. This recommendation will likely include the school district hosting public forums and meetings to engage with our community sharing information and answering questions about the potential solutions for addressing our oldest school facilities at VCHS. If we build it, will they come? While we don't have the answer yet for this question, data provided by other school districts suggests this could also happen in Valley City.

Pre-Kindergarten Programming

I was really surprised recently to hear that we have several pre-kindergarten students living in Valley City who attend free pre-kindergarten programs in our neighboring school districts. Besides buses from Maple Valley, Barnes County North, and Litchville-Marion picking up k-12 students living in Valley City, we are now also competing with them for pre-k students. A couple of years ago, the state of North Dakota created a new pre-kindergarten grant program for four-year olds. Do we know if these neighboring pre-kindergarten programs are contributing to our recent decline in kindergarten enrollment? While I cannot definitively say yes or no, I can speculate that it isn't helping us to have at least five future Hi-Liners riding a school bus to Maple Valley to attend their free pre-kindergarten program. The school district recently made the decision to apply for these state grant funds and consider a free four-year old pre-kindergarten program at Jefferson Elementary for the 2025-2026 school year. Before any final decisions are made on these programs, we will be exploring the feasibility of this new program,

along with waiting to see if we are awarded the state grant funds. Will beginning a new free four-year old pre-kindergarten program in Valley City lead to an increase student enrollment? We would like to believe so and will continue to ask this question and research this option over the next few weeks.

In conclusion, we have some important questions to answer and critical decisions to make in the very near future in our school district and community. What does the future hold if we continue to face declining student enrollment, budget deficits, lack of affordable housing, and individuals moving to other communities for good paying jobs. Almost nine years ago, my family and I moved to Valley City. We moved here excited to be part of a growing, vibrant, and wonderful community. While I still believe we have a wonderful community with wonderful people, we know that the challenges and struggles we are facing in Valley City are real for all of us. Over the next few months, I look forward to being part of any conversation and discussion that will focus on us being positive, proactive, and solution minded. Valley City has a proud past and exciting future. Let's all work together to find ways to move our community forward.

Go Valley City!

Josh Johnson
Superintendent
Valley City Public Schools