

## Reshaping Sonoma County schools

**Funding cuts, changing demographics force districts to make do with less**

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When nearly 71,000 public school students return to classrooms across Sonoma County this week and next, the scene won't seem dramatically different than when they left in the spring.

But look back as few as four years ago and the reshaping of the public school system comes into focus.

Years of declining enrollment, recurring state funding crises, a growth of charter schools and decline of private schools have combined to alter the education landscape.

Districts are employing fewer teachers, custodians, librarians, front-office workers and other support staff. The school year is shorter for most of Sonoma County's 40 districts and classes are larger. Schools have cut back on sports, arts and other offerings that stray from federal and state budget-driven mandates.

And the changes have played out against the growing dominance of test scores in education and the evolving racial and ethnic composition of the classroom.

"You are going to see less intervention-type teachers, less counselors, less librarians, less school nurses," said Steve Herrington, Sonoma County Schools superintendent.

"California is 50th in almost all of those categories. To come back, any resource would help. Whether they will come back to where they were 10 years ago when we were in the 40s, I don't know."

Even the faces of schools and districts have changed — 12 new superintendents are in place for the school year and scores of principals are entering their first year amid financial and curricular uncertainty.

Only a temporary infusion of \$45.5 million in federal stimulus money over three years has prevented an even more dramatic impact, officials say.

### Enrollment

Kindergarten through 12th-grade enrollment peaked 10 years ago at 73,690 and then declined, with 70,870 students expected to attend class this year. In a decade in which Sonoma County's population grew by 5.5 percent, public school enrollment dropped by nearly 4 percent.

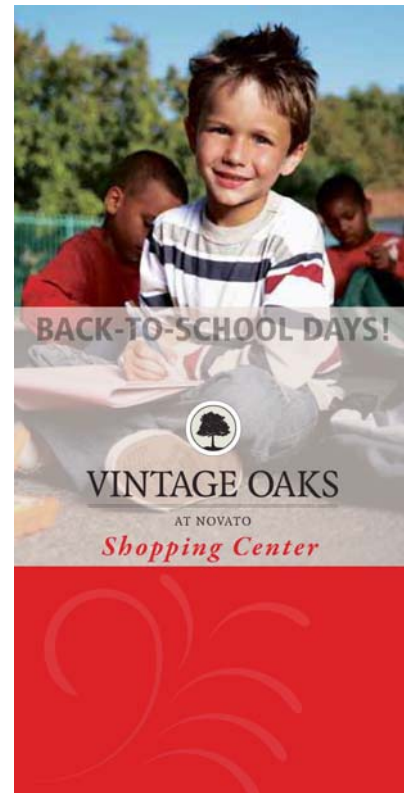
In some locales, the decline has been sharp.

In Healdsburg, a switch in state funding formulas prompted the district to stop allowing students who live outside the attendance area to attend its schools. That



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Amy Breninger points out one of the classrooms to her son Justin, a new seventh-grader at Rincon Valley Middle School during the student orientation.



contributed to an 18 percent drop in enrollment from 2005-06 to 2009-10, the most recent figures available.

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In Sebastopol, enrollment fell from 1,222 to 1,077 during the same period, forcing the closure of Pine Crest Elementary School last spring.

Cotati-Rohnert Park has experienced the most precipitous fall, dropping from a peak of 8,300 students in 1999 to 5,791 this year. The district has closed three elementary campuses and a middle school since 2002.

#### Student diversity

In Sonoma County, more than 37 percent of school-age children are Latino, up from 14.6 percent in 1992-93 and 31 percent in 2005-06.

Poverty among school-age kids continues to rise. In Santa Rosa City Schools, by far the county's largest school district, seven of 10 elementary students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Less than a decade ago, about half of the elementary students were eligible for the subsidized lunches based on family income.

#### Vanishing services

To keep class sizes as small as possible, many districts pulled funds from programs that once funded adult education, graduation exam counseling, art programs and libraries.

Santa Rosa City Schools cut its librarians, Cloverdale School District eliminated bus service, Guerneville reduced food service hours and dropped its reading specialist, and Geyserville stopped paying for a counselor for middle- and high-school students.

"We are hoping to get it back in some form or another," said Joe Carnation, Geyserville superintendent. "We have a group fundraising for that, to try to get about \$10,000 or \$15,000."

Boosters also are being asked to pick up 100 percent of the bill for Geyserville's sports teams, as well as the garden program, he said.

#### Public vs. private

Despite fewer students, there are more public schools today, a reflection of the emergence of charter schools.

In 1992-93, there were 132 public schools in Sonoma County. By 1999-2000, that number had increased to 154. In 2009-10, the total was 182.

However, the number of private schools in the county has fallen over a decade from 78 to 58. Ursuline, a 130-year-old all-girls Catholic school, closed in the spring, as did Santa Rosa Christian School.

#### Charter schools

Thirty-seven charter schools, which are public institutions, will operate in Sonoma County this year. Seven years ago, there were 21.

The county is a hotbed for charter schools. In the Bay area, only Santa Clara and Alameda counties have more. Marin has three, Napa County five.

#### Teachers, administrators

The teacher-to-pupil ratio has remained basically unchanged in the past decade, while the ratio of administrators to pupils has decreased.

In 1999-2000, there was one administrator for every 237 pupils. It declined to 269-to-1 in 2009-10.

In that same time span, the ratio of pupils to teachers went from 19.6-to-1 in 1999-2000 to 19.8-to-1.

Keeping the teacher-pupil ratio stable is due in large part to using federal stimulus money to offset the nearly 20 percent drop in state funding for schools since 2008. Administrators also dismantled some programs to save teacher jobs and keep class sizes lower, said Judy Thompson, director of fiscal services for the Sonoma County Office of Education.

"The state is giving you 20 percent less, but thank goodness the feds came in," she said. "These are huge dollars. Think about how many teachers were saved."

#### School days

About 30 of Sonoma County's 40 school districts have shortened their school year to save money, Herrington said. And of the 10 that maintained 180 days of instruction, most are schools that benefit from high property tax valuations, which make them less vulnerable to cuts in state funding.

#### Teacher salaries

This may come as a surprise to some, but teacher salaries continue to rise, even with many districts forgoing cost-of-living increases. That's because the pay structure embedded in union contracts gives many teachers boosts in pay based on experience and education. But in Bellevue School District and in many others, those annual increases are nearly negated by the loss of income linked with the shortened school year.

"Our step and column (salary increase) is just under 3 percent a year and we reduced the year 2.8 percent, so teachers who got a step move received a few dollars more," said Bellevue Superintendent Tony Roehrick.

The average teacher salary in Bellevue in 2009-10 was \$57,200, up from \$52,800 four years earlier.

In Petaluma's Waugh District, the average teacher salary in 2009-10 was \$69,300, up from \$57,000 four years prior. That's a 21 percent increase.

In Cloverdale, the average salary went from \$55,600 in 2005-06 to \$58,900 in 2009-10. Teacher salaries in the Sebastopol School District went from an average of \$58,100 to \$64,000 from 2005-06 to 2009-10.

And in Cotati-Rohnert Park, salaries went from \$57,800 to \$62,700 in the same span.

The increase also can also be linked to layoffs. When teachers are let go, they are typically earning less than those instructors who remain on the payroll.

#### Support salaries

Classified, or nonteaching, employees typically are office and clerical staff, food service workers, operation and maintenance employees and transportation staff.

In Waugh, those salaries went rose 9 percent between 2005-06 and 2009-10. During the same time period, salaries went up 4 percent in Cloverdale, 13 percent in Cotati-Rohnert Park and 17 percent in Sebastopol.

Education officials said reason is largely the same as for teachers, that more senior employees remain on staff, while lesser-paid positions have been axed.

#### Spending per student

Here's another possible surprise. Despite the deep cuts in funding that reduced state revenue to Sonoma County schools by 18 percent from the 2007-08 school year through August 2010, the cost of doing business keeps going up because of increased salaries and benefits, as well as general inflation. So spending per student is on the rise.

In Cloverdale, where an average of 1,432 students attend class every day, expenditures per student were \$8,818, up from \$7,641 in 2005-06. That's a 15 percent jump.

In Waugh, spending per student went from \$6,720 in 2005-06 to \$7,680 in 2009-10.

During the same period, in Bellevue per-student spending rose from \$7,165 to \$8,354. In Healdsburg, it went up from \$7,500 to \$9,410 — a 25 percent hike. And in Sebastopol, it increased from \$7,570 to \$8,890.

#### Class size

So, if the teacher-pupil ratio is basically unchanged, why is class size increasing?

When the state began dramatically cutting back the funds it distributed for K-12 education, it also eased the rules on how districts could spend the money they did get. They were given permission to shorten the school year and increase class sizes, largely without financial penalty.

Some districts began altering how they used teachers. For example, a teacher might be a reading coach, instructing kids in small group settings throughout the day. Class sizes may have grown, but specialized education was being provided.

Some districts don't have that luxury. Last year in Cloverdale, kindergarten capacity reached 33 students per teacher in some cases. First- through third-grade classes went up to 32 kids per grade, with many students and teachers working in combined grade arrangements.

In Cotati-Rohnert Park, deep budget cuts and rapidly declining enrollment has pushed kindergarten through sixth-grade class sizes up to an average of 30 students. The teacher corps fell from 323 full-time positions in 2005-06 to 266 in 2009-10 — one of the most dramatic drops in Sonoma County.

Fewer teachers mean larger classes and less flexibility in how classes are configured, said Cotati-Rohnert Park Superintendent Robert Haley.

"We would love to be at 20-21 (students) at our primary grades, but it is probably fiscally impossible," he said.

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