

## School survey to aid policy changes

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### Document Text

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The eight-page tabloid will gather input on school choice, small elementary schools and other district traditions

Some might find its length and content daunting, but Eugene School District officials hope a new survey on the future of the school system will yield bountiful responses from a broad cross-section of the community.

Included near the end of an eight-page tabloid chock-full of background and data, the survey will be the district's primary means for collecting public input on a long menu of options for policy changes - some of them likely to meet with resistance. It's the next step in a months-long process that included staff focus group discussions and an outside "think tank" that offered suggestions to Superintendent George Russell.

Driving the effort - dubbed Shaping 4J's Future - is a marked shift in demographics. Enrollment in the 17,500-student district has dropped every year since 1997, and if projections hold, it will fall by more than 1,000 over the next eight years before finally stabilizing. At the same time, percentages of low-income, disabled and non-English-proficient students are climbing.

The changes have amplified the achievement gap separating students by income level, English ability and race and ethnicity, prompting officials to examine the effects of open school choice, very small elementary schools and other long-held district traditions.

Anyone who takes the time to read the full tabloid should come away with an understanding of the impetus for change. Graphics illustrate many of the issues, including one on Page 2 that compares Eugene's elementary school size with similarly sized districts. The difference is glaring: In the North Clackamas, Bend-La Pine, Salem, Hillsboro and Beaverton districts, the percentage of elementary schools serving fewer than 300 students ranges from 13 percent to 21 percent; in Eugene, it's 65 percent.

That's a concern for the district, as small numbers hamper a school's ability to serve students of varying skill levels and to offer a full range of programs, including the arts, computer technology, counseling and special education.

Liberal transfer policies have contributed to the lopsided enrollment. Disparities also exist at the secondary level, where the size of middle schools and high schools varies by region.

Another graphic shows that, if all students attended their regional high school rather than transferring elsewhere, South Eugene High would have the fewest students - more than 1,400 - but all four high schools would hover between 1,400 and 1,600. As it is, South Eugene and Sheldon each have close to 1,700 students, while North Eugene and Churchill have about 1,100 and 1,300, respectively.

The tabloid also discusses the achievement gap, citing research that finds clear correlations between academic achievement and socioeconomic status. For example, achievement among poor students is lower at schools where more than half the students qualify for subsidized meals based on their family income.

The survey seeks input on several options meant to address those and other issues. Ideas include placing stricter limits on school choice; setting a minimum elementary enrollment size of 300, thereby closing some schools; allocating more dollars to small schools so they can offer a comparable range of programs; providing transportation to low-income students to attend schools beyond their neighborhood boundaries; redrawing attendance boundaries to boost economic diversity; and developing unique programs at high-poverty schools as a way of attracting more middle-class families.

Russell said the district has several strategies to reach a representative cross-section of the school community. He and other officials plan to meet with teachers at four regional meetings to emphasize why it's important to reach out to parents and encourage them to complete surveys. Staff at high-poverty schools will take extra steps, such as calling parents directly, he said.

"At the elementary level, especially, we think we'll be able to do a good job of communicating," he said.

Carmen Urbina, the district's parent, family and community coordinator, is leading outreach to Latinos, who constitute by far the district's largest and fastest-growing minority group. One in 10 students in the district is Latino, up from 7 percent two years ago.

"We have multiple strategies," she said, including printing surveys in Spanish, hosting four regional meetings and placing follow-up phone calls. Child care will be provided at the meetings, she said, and Spanish-speaking facilitators will work with parents in small groups and help walk them through the information.

It's an important group to reach, she said, as "some of the specific things we're looking at will directly impact the future of this community. Traditionally, also, it's a community whose voices are less likely to be heard."

Many Latino families already are familiar with the issues, she said, thanks in part to her concerted outreach efforts over the last couple of years, both directly to parents and to churches and community organizations serving Latinos.

The survey will go home with every elementary school student and be mailed to the parents and guardians of every middle and high school student. It's also available online and will be included as a paid pull-out section in Monday's Register-Guard.

To ensure a statistically valid sample, the University of Oregon's department of planning, public policy and management will do a separate mail survey to 800 residents who reflect Eugene's population, hoping for responses from at least half of them.

The survey deadline is Nov. 9. Russell and the school board will review results in December, but won't take action on any options until late winter or early spring.

Have your say

The survey, which must be completed by Nov. 9, is posted on the Eugene School District Web site at [www.4j.lane.edu](http://www.4j.lane.edu). Printed copies are also available at the district office at 200 N. Monroe St., at the Eugene Public Library or at any school in the district.

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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