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The superintendent of a suburban school district explains how his community plans for declining enrollments.

schools in a time of declining enrollments

By Arzell L. Ball



Arzell L. Ball has served as Superintendent of Shawnee Mission Public Schools since 1967. Prior service includes Deputy Superintendent, Lincoln, Nebraska Public Schools, and secondary principal in Wichita. He has a Bachelor of Science Degree with major in social studies from Southwest Missouri State College, a master's degree from the University of Arkansas, and a Ph.D. in school administration, George Peabody College.

As in most other school systems across the country, the enrollment graph for the Shawnee Mission School District has peaked and then fallen after decades of relentless upsurge. Our projection is for continued decline in student population at least through the mid-1980's, and this trend will contribute substantially to profound changes in how we run our schools and what we require of them.

In 1922 the first high school opened its doors in Johnson County, then a sparsely populated rural community on the western outskirts of Kansas City, Mo. It had an enrollment of 187 students in grades 9 through 12, and a published budget that first year of \$22,490. Since that time, however, and especially post-1940, the community has experienced rapid growth, sprawling suburbs, and increased demands for taxpayers' support of new community and educational services.

Today, Shawnee Mission is a modern suburban community, typical of many in the United States, expecting modern education and modern school facilities. It has traditionally supported its schools, and now is served by a "unified" school district providing a progressive educational program for almost 41,000 students in 64 schools. Those numbers have declined, however, from over 46,000 students in 1970 and 66 schools in the 1974-75 school year. It is, as the expression goes, "a new ball game."

For the 1970's and beyond we face, broadly speaking, three key areas of challenge—educational, demographic, and political. We need to give the students we have the most incisive and comprehensive education we can; to adjust our facilities and boundary lines for the most effective service of those students, and to combat public complacency and engender community support in the face of declining enrollments, shifting boundaries and evolving programs.

Educational Challenges

On the educational front, providing adequate school facilities to instruct *all* students in a comprehensive program is paramount. The term "comprehensive" is important, also, because it counters the assumption that a decline in student enrollment necessarily results in surplus space. The impact on school facilities of this transition from the "Three R's" into "comprehensive education" already can be seen, for example, in the following areas:

- The development of learning centers, providing space for special diagnostic teams to work individually with gifted students, underachievers, learning disabled, etc.

- The evolution of libraries into "multi-media centers" which require additional space for equipment and instruction.

- The arrival of sophisticated "instructional technology," again requiring additional space for such items as computer terminals, reading machines, video and audio recorders, etc.

Title IX mandates for "equal opportunity" between the sexes also will have their impact on school facilities, and will further consume space vacated by declining enrollments. We must make room for more girls in shop and more boys in home economics, and we must provide adequate facilities to accommodate the greater number of girls participating in competitive athletics. In the Shawnee Mission District, for example, we now have 19 senior high school competitive sports—10 for boys and 9 for girls—compared with a total of only 4 in 1969 (none for girls).

Girls and boys must be provided with equal access to such facilities as tracks, football/volleyball/soccer fields, and gymnasiums, and to such equipment as whirlpool baths and gymnastic devices—necessitating duplicate equipment where "coeducational" participation is prohibited. In the overall area of extracurricular activities, in fact, involvement by all Shawnee Mission students has increased from about 30 per cent in 1969 to about 68 per cent today. Again, more space is needed.

The integration of previously segregated special education programs into K-12 school systems also has required additional facilities. In one of our elementary schools, 10 classrooms serve between 12 and 20 multiply handicapped children, while special education resource rooms in other regular schools provide supplemental instruction for the deaf student and the blind student.

A pupil-teacher ratio of 10 to 1 is mandated by law for emotionally disturbed and severely mentally retarded students, and this entails more classroom space. Additionally, although integration of all students into the regular classroom is the ideal, our district has set aside one entire school building for youths who require an alternative education program.

Another impact area is in the expansion of career education, with career guidance centers in each high school, and more space needed for vocational programs such as agri-industries (construction of a greenhouse), food service (availability of adequate space for a restaurant setting), etc. Thus, as our conception of the function and scope of public education expands, and as our expectations increase, we will continue to need more space per child to fulfill enhanced expectations of performance.

In light of these and other developments, the educational leadership in a community will need to reassess the neighborhood school concept and answer some key questions. For instance, what is the minimum number of students who must reside in a given area before it becomes "affordable" for the community to construct a neighborhood school? Should the board of education have some firm expectations as to the length of time that a given area will be populated with school-age people? How important is the neighborhood school concept to the achievement and social growth of students?

Along these same lines, it is proving financially unfeasible to continue the neighborhood concept on the junior and senior high school levels, and for this reason the notion already has been discarded in the S-M district. We also may need to expand the 1-mile radius now generally used to define the area served by a neighborhood school, perhaps to a mile and a half. Educationally, then, emphasis during the 1970's is shifting from providing more space for more children to making room for new programs, services and approaches.

Demographic Challenges

Despite this, however, there is no doubt that in some cases existing schools will have to be closed and that in others new ones will have to be built. But if an older school must be closed, at least three major considerations should be kept in mind. First, the closing must be accomplished without violating the neighborhood school concept. In other words, if at all possible area residents should not be deprived of a neighborhood elementary school unless very few children are involved.

Second, such a closing should be effected only when there is sufficient demographic evidence to show no projected return or influx of school-age children. For example, our district co-funded a demographic study by the Johnson County Community College which clearly projected an overall enrollment decline through the 1970's, although some areas within the district actually will grow in enrollment during that period. The study was designed to predict population characteristics within the county, taking into account possible future social, economic and political factors which could affect migration patterns as well as birth and death rates.

Finally, any new use of a school building closed as an enrollment center should enhance, and definitely must not detract from, the quality of life in the community. In one instance, after an old school building in our district was torn down, the vacated land was converted into a public park and recreational area. In the case of another elementary school, closed due to enrollment decline, the building was purchased by the University of Kansas Endowment Association and will be used for college extension classes.

Shifting of school boundary lines is another crucial issue, and any such changes must be done as part of a long-range plan for facility needs so as to achieve sufficient use of underpopulated schools and relieve problems in overcrowded areas. They also must be done equitably, with decisions made based on hard data, not personal bias. To this end, in November, 1973, the Shawnee Mission School Board appointed a joint committee of patrons and administrators to develop short-, mid- and long-range recommendations on boundaries and enrollment. After almost a year of deliberations, their proposals were filtered through a gamut of board meetings and public hearings before final acceptance in modified form.

The construction of a new school is an equally sensitive undertaking. It must be initiated only after gaining community consensus on the neighborhood school concept and the educational benefits to be derived therefrom; it must be shown to be "cost effective" to the school district and

community, and it must allow for increased community use of school facilities.

Political Challenges

This last notion is a vital "political" consideration as well. Increased availability of the schools for community use will become essential to prevent growing public complacency in the face of declining enrollments. In maturing neighborhoods, space for senior citizens to congregate and interact also must be provided. In addition, a compromise must be reached between student and community access to sports facilities such as tracks, baseball diamonds, gymnasiums, etc.

As usual, however, a central "political" factor will remain, very simply, dollars. Modernization of present facilities and construction of new schools eventually will require public support of a bond issue. But this bond issue can be requested only after the board of education demonstrates significant efforts in changing boundary lines, closing older schools and insuring budgetary efficiency. Such a bond issue also must support "comprehensive" facilities improvements throughout the district, and not simply relieve short-range or provincial needs.

Increasingly, board members, educators and the community alike will be called upon to operate the schools more like "community centers" rather than as simply educational facilities.

The Future

The challenges of the next thirty years will spawn problems no less imposing than those which faced educators from 1940 to 1975. More and more, both new legislation and greater community pressure will require schools to provide broader services than in the past. Extracurricular activities among students will expand and the schools will be made more available to the general public for educational, recreational, and cultural purposes. Construction of new schools will not be permitted without first providing for these expanded services and clearly establishing a long-range need for the building as primarily an educational center for students.

With the prospects of continued economic hard times, watchdogs in the general public and teacher organizations alike will place more pressure on boards of education to make efficient use of community schools. Administrators will need to bolster themselves against extremes advocated by special interest groups who would seek to expand extracurricular activities at the expense of community access to school facilities, or to curtail community use and extracurricular activities to create more dollars for employees' salaries. Such a formula, in the long run, would be severely detrimental to educational opportunity for students and community support.

Finally, the Board of Education will need to constantly remind school district residents that good school programs and good school facilities contribute to the educational, cultural, recreational and social vitality of the community.

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In a research survey of the learning preferences and experiences of adults conducted for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, sponsored by the College Board and Educational Testing Service, we found that 77 percent of the people between 18 and 60 in this country would like to learn more about something.

The New Learners. K. Patricia Cross.
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1972. pp. 71-72.