



Some Dunlap schools nearing capacity

Growth in popular district shows no signs of slowing

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DUNLAP — The growth trend in the Dunlap schools continues for the 2010-11 school year with the district registering its second biggest student increase in its history. Dunlap Valley Middle School Principal Jason Holmes described the growth in his school in two words:

"We're full."

The student population in the district's seven schools grew by 185 this school year, or 5 percent, to 3,615 students.

The increase is the 14th consecutive annual increase dating back to the 1997-98 school year. The biggest increase occurred in the 2008-09 school year when 242 new students entered the school district.

"We subscribe to something called the Cohort Survival Ratio that projects district increases with sophisticated measures that usually comes up with a solid, if fairly conservative, number," said school Superintendent Jay Marino. "It projected an increase of 150, and we're showing 185."

Valley Middle School, the district's second middle school, which opened in 2007 for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders, was designed with three wings - one for each grade. The capacity for each wing is 150 students. There are 134 students in the eighth grade at the beginning of this school year. But there are 146 in the sixth and 148 in the seventh, both grades pushing close to the maximum. There are 150 lockers in each wing.

"The building was designed to expand when needed," Marino said. "When the time comes, we can expand each wing and basically double the size. The core of the school, the cafeteria and gymnasium and that sort of thing was built for 900 students."

That doesn't mean the need for a new middle school is imminent. Dunlap Middle School can absorb the Valley overflow as its population was cut in half when the Valley school opened.

Holmes said faculty and staff are accustomed to dealing with growth.

"We're just used to it," he said. "And we think the growth validates what we are accomplishing here and we're proud of it. It's a compliment to the community and to the faculty and to the staff. We rise to the challenge. We find desks, we find text books, we make it work."

There are 40 more students at the high school, increasing the number to 1,110 students. Two new classrooms opened at the start of school in the renovated space that used to house administrative offices. Eight more in a new wing located adjacent to the old tennis courts open after Labor Day.

"We're looking forward to moving into the new space," said Principal Tom Welsh. "But it has been a super smooth start to the school year so far."

Only Dunlap and Wilder-Waite grade schools showed declines, though slight, in student population. It's a breather for Wilder-Waite, which has no extra classroom space available. Class sizes are big across the district with many classes from kindergarten to second grade at the maximum size of 25 students and from third grade through 12 at the maximum of 30 students.

"There are students being sent to schools and received at schools that aren't in their (geographical district) at all four elementary schools," Marino said. "We need another school."

District voters will get a chance to determine that soon. A referendum for a 600-student elementary school will be on the ballot in November.

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From my understanding the proposed site for this new school is at the corner of Allen Rd and Hickory Grove Rd. Therefore it will be in between Banner Elementary and Wilder-Waite Elementary.

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