

Before We Talk About School Scenarios, We Need to Talk About Ashland's Future

By Joseph Hattrick, Superintendent, Ashland School District

Over the coming months, the Ashland community will hear a great deal about the future of our schools. Eventually, there will be public discussion of different scenarios involving programs, facilities, enrollment, finances, and how our district might be organized for the years ahead. Before any of those scenarios are presented, however, I believe our community deserves a clear understanding of why this conversation is happening in the first place.

No decisions have been made, and no school has been selected for closure. We are having this conversation now because I want our community to understand the facts and the forces shaping our future before decisions are made, not after.

The larger reality is that public education is entering a period of significant change, and many of the forces driving that change extend far beyond Ashland.

There are simply fewer children being born. Oregon's fertility rate is approximately 1.4 children per woman, compared with the 2.1 rate needed to maintain a stable population. Deaths have outnumbered births statewide every year since 2020 and in Jackson County since 2015. State projections anticipate approximately 80,000 fewer school-age children in Oregon by 2035.

That demographic shift is already affecting public schools across Oregon. Statewide enrollment has declined by approximately 43,000 students since 2019, representing six consecutive years of decline. Ashland is part of that same trend.

This past June, approximately 221 seniors graduated from Ashland High School. This fall, approximately 150 kindergartners entered our schools. The difference between those two classes is roughly 70 students, or the equivalent of three or four classrooms.

That matters because Oregon school funding is closely tied to enrollment. When enrollment declines, revenue declines with it. If the size and cost of a school system remain unchanged while the number of students it serves continues to decrease, the mathematics eventually stop working.

Housing is also part of this story. The data compiled for our transformation discussions show a median Ashland home value of approximately \$584,000, a median household income of roughly \$68,000, and a median age of 47.7. Those are not simply economic statistics. They are also education statistics because the long-term health of our schools depends on the long-term ability of families with children to live in our community.

A school district cannot solve housing affordability on its own, but we cannot ignore the connection between housing, family demographics, and enrollment. If we care about the future

of our schools, we also need to care about whether Ashland remains a place where young families can build a life.

There are other constraints as well. Oregon's school finance structure limits the district's ability to simply raise additional local operating revenue. Measures 5 and 50 constrain property tax rates, and the state's equalization formula limits how much additional local property wealth translates into additional general operating revenue for schools. We also no longer have open enrollment as a tool for broadly recruiting students from surrounding districts.

At the same time, the broader financial picture remains uncertain. State education funding, while historically high, remains below the level identified by the state's own educational funding benchmarks, and pension costs are expected to rise in the next biennium. Federal education funding has also become increasingly unpredictable, including the temporary withholding of approximately \$73 million in Oregon education funds last year.

These are significant headwinds, and most of them are outside the direct control of Ashland School District. What we can control is how we respond.

It is equally important to acknowledge that not all of Ashland's financial challenges came from outside forces. Local enrollment declined by more than 400 students from its 2017–18 peak of approximately 2,950 students. During the pandemic, temporary federal ESSER dollars allowed the district to increase staffing to meet extraordinary student needs. When those temporary funds expired, staffing did not decrease proportionally. Over time, expenditures exceeded sustainable revenue, contributing to a projected structural deficit approaching \$8 million. We confronted that problem directly.

During the 2024–25 school year, we froze hiring, reduced discretionary spending, implemented limited furlough days, relied on attrition where possible, and reduced administrative costs. Those decisions resulted in approximately \$2.229 million in savings, exceeding our stabilization target.

The following year, we continued aligning the district with current enrollment by reducing approximately 27 FTE, recalibrating staffing and course sections, and reducing administrative staffing districtwide.

Those were difficult decisions, but they changed our financial trajectory. We moved from reacting to instability toward planning for long-term sustainability.

Just as importantly, we protected the educational experience our community values. Core academics, arts, music, athletics, Career and Technical Education, electives, dual-credit opportunities, student services, and intervention supports remain central to an Ashland education.

That distinction matters because the conversation we are entering now is not simply another round of emergency budget reductions. We have stabilized enough to begin asking a more ambitious question: What should Ashland School District become?

This summer, 556 community members helped answer that question through our transformation survey. Nearly two-thirds indicated that they were open to significant change if it makes the district sustainable.

The written comments told an even more important story. Across hundreds of responses and three open-ended questions, there was remarkable consistency about what people value, even when they disagreed about specific solutions.

People want us to protect educational excellence while living within our means. They want stronger literacy and mathematics, greater academic rigor, high expectations, college and career preparation, career and technical education, dual credit, critical thinking, and real-world skills.

At the same time, people do not want Ashland to become a generic school district. They want us to preserve the arts, music, theater, outdoor education, environmental learning, innovation, relationships, and whole-child education that make this community distinctive. Importantly, respondents did not generally describe those priorities as alternatives to academic excellence. They want both.

There was also a clear desire to reimagine rather than simply reduce. Community members suggested career pathways, apprenticeships, project-based learning, bilingual programs, dual credit, early childhood education, stronger career and technical education, flexible learning, and partnerships with local employers.

They also challenged us to think beyond the walls of our schools. Respondents repeatedly named Southern Oregon University, Rogue Community College, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, healthcare organizations, local businesses, the City of Ashland, Parks and Recreation, nonprofits, farms, arts organizations, and outdoor organizations as potential partners in creating a richer learning ecosystem for students.

Perhaps most importantly, people asked us to lead transparently. They asked for clear financial information, long-term planning, consistency, fewer surprises, and thoughtful decision-making. The feedback suggests that people are willing to consider difficult choices when they understand the rationale and trust the process.

I hear that as both permission and responsibility—permission to consider meaningful change, and responsibility to make sure that change produces something better.

Our vision for 2026–27 is that every student is known, engaged, growing, and prepared for what comes next. That vision is supported by four commitments: Every Student Grows, Every Student Belongs, Every Student Is Prepared, and Our System Sustains the Mission.

Those commitments give us an important standard for evaluating any future scenario. We cannot judge an idea only by how much money it saves. We also have to ask whether it improves opportunities for students, strengthens academic excellence, preserves what is distinctive about Ashland, advances equity and access, helps attract and retain families, and remains financially sustainable over time.

Our 37-member Transformation Steering Committee, which includes parent representatives from each ASD campus, has developed a similar set of decision-making principles. Any recommendation should put students first, provide excellence and meaningful opportunity, advance equity and access, be financially responsible, remain adaptable and future-ready, and strengthen relationships and community pride.

On September 14, the Transformation Steering Committee will begin developing broad scenarios for the future of Ashland School District. In October and November, we will hold a community session at every school to share the scenarios, the criteria that will be used to evaluate them, and transparent estimates of the financial impact of each option. We will listen carefully to our community and publish both what we heard and how that feedback influenced the process before any recommendation is presented to the School Board.

The Board is tentatively scheduled to make a decision in January, and no changes resulting from this process would take effect before the 2027–28 school year.

It is understandable that conversations about change create anxiety and can generate rumors about closure decisions that haven't been made. Schools represent more than facilities. They represent neighborhoods, memories, relationships, and generations of children. We should honor that. At the same time, I hope we are willing to ask not only what we might lose, but also what we might gain.

Could a smaller facilities footprint allow us to direct more resources into classrooms and programs? Could deeper community partnerships expand opportunities for students without dramatically increasing costs? Could every Ashland student graduate having explored a meaningful pathway toward college, career, trade, or apprenticeship? Could our schools become even more connected to Southern Oregon University, Rogue Community College, the arts, healthcare, local businesses, and the extraordinary natural environment that surrounds us?

And could Ashland once again become a district that families deliberately seek out because of the quality and distinctiveness of the educational experience available here?

Those are the questions that should define transformation.

Our community feedback can be summarized in a powerful way: Ashland appears ready to support meaningful structural change if the result is a financially sustainable district that provides outstanding academics while preserving the arts, community partnerships, and distinctive educational character that make Ashland unique.

We are not pursuing transformation because Ashland School District is failing. We are pursuing transformation because we have stabilized enough to choose our future before circumstances choose it for us.

Nothing has been decided, but doing nothing is also a decision. If demographic and financial trends continue while our system remains unchanged, circumstances will eventually make choices for us.

I would rather make those choices deliberately, transparently, and with our community.

The question before Ashland is not simply what we can preserve from the school district we have today. It is what we are willing to build for the students who come next.

We have an opportunity to choose our future. We should use it.

Joseph Hattrick is superintendent of the Ashland School District.