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PHOTO BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER

Sioux Trail Elementary is one of eight Burnsville-Eagan-Savage district schools operating significantly under capacity, according to a recent report by the district's financial consultant that recommended closing several schools.

DISTRICT SHOULD CLOSE SEVERAL SCHOOLS, REVIEW FINDS

BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER
cschuster@swpub.com

Burnsville-Eagan-Savage district officials should close three schools at the end of next school year to save money as enrollment declines, according to an expert evaluation completed this month.

The district saw its lowest enrollment figure in a decade with 8,334 students last year, and the district projects the student count will drop to around 7,600 by 2023.

The review, completed by the district's fi-

ancial consultant, recommends closing two elementary schools and one middle school and also selling off the 140,000-square-foot Diamondhead Education Center.

A specific action plan regarding the next steps for closing one or more facilities is expected to go before the Board of Education next month.

"This is a matter of financial need and not academic decline or any kind of decline in our schools as far as quality," Board of Education Chairwoman Abigail Alt said in an interview Tuesday.

The Educational Programming and Fa-

cility Review, provided by the Baker Tilly consulting firm, found underutilized facilities significantly contribute to the district's financial strain.

The district's unassigned general fund balance, which acts like a savings account for day-to-day expenses, shrunk by 42 percent from \$17.5 million in 2012-13 to \$10 million at the end of 2017-18 and is expected to keep falling this school year, according to the district.

District officials have cut the budget

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WEATHER

County tornado

Small twister hits farm

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HEALTH

Lake Minnetonka outbreak

Cause unclear but wasn't E. coli

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Lakefront Music Fest

Thousands descend on Prior Lake

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EDITOR: 952-345-6376 OR
EDITOR@SAVAGEPACER.COM
ONLINE: SAVAGEPACER.COM

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Burnsville to build accessible playground

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BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER
 cschuster@swpub.com

Burnsville plans to transform part of Red Oak Park into a state-of-the-art playground accessible for children with disabilities.

Northland Recreation will build the playground after their designs were selected by a committee reviewing the public's feedback. Burnsville Parks, Recreation and Facilities Department Director Garrett Beck said the construction timeline will depend on weather, but he hopes to open the playground sometime this fall.



DESIGNS BY NORTHLAND RECREATION

Plans are moving ahead to build an accessible playground at the 36-acre Red Oak Park in Burnsville. The playground is estimated to cost \$240,000 to build.

An inclusive playground topped the wish-list from residents while gathering feedback for the department's master plan in 2017, Beck said.

This year, the Burnsville Lions Club committed \$140,000 to the project, which they raised through pull tabs. The city plans to spend \$100,000 from a fund set aside specially for equipment replacement, Beck said.

The Burnsville Lions Club has been behind multiple parks and recreation projects in Burnsville and Savage in recent years, said club member Bill Johnson. The organiza-

tion donated to the Hidden Valley Elementary playground and Burnsville's Cliff Fen Park, to name a couple.

Possibilities for Red Oak Park's new playground designs include various features such as an accessible teeter-totter and multi-person disc swing.

The park will also include a Bankshot court, which puts a less aggressive spin on basketball.

Tara Nelson, a local early childhood special education

specialist, said the playground would give her a place to take her son and one of his best friends, who uses a wheelchair.

She also said separate play structures benefit children with autism, who are sometimes overwhelmed by a single, large structure where all the children are together.

"It's nice for everybody to have separate pieces," she said.

Burnsville resident Marcy Swanson said she wishes something like this had been

available when her daughter, Emily Grace, was younger, but it's nice to see more effort for accessibility.

She said many playgrounds are inaccessible for children using wheelchairs or walkers because wood chips and pebbles are commonly used as a surface. Accessible playgrounds give more children freedom to do things on their own, she added.

"It's the independence to hang out at the park with a friend."

SCHOOLS

► continued from 1

annually over the last several years to compensate. The 2019-2020 budget locked in \$6.6 million in cuts and reductions, including teacher layoffs and cuts to sports before ninth grade and other programming.

Facing an estimated \$5.5 million in cuts in 2020-2021, district officials are considering a referendum to ask voters to approve a new operating property levy that would generate around \$1.6 million a year for general expenses.

"I know that this will be a difficult process," said Superintendent Theresa Battle in a statement. "I'm committed to being open throughout and staying true to our values as a district, and I know that together, we can come out of this stronger and better able to serve the One91 community."

Districtwide, the review found Marion Savage, Sioux Trail, Rahn, Vista View, Hidden Valley and Sky Oaks elementary schools and Nicollet and Metcalf middle schools "operate significantly under capacity" when compared to state standards of students per square foot.

The Minnesota Department of Education doesn't collect any data on how often school districts close schools. However, Wendy Hatch, the department's strategic communications advisor, said it's not an unusual practice.

Last year, the Rockford Area Schools district sold land intended for a new elementary school to the city of Corcoran for \$1.4 million as a last-ditch solution to their budget shortfall, according to a report by MinnPost, for instance.

When it comes to education, the review described the range of student opportunities at Burnsville High

School as "highly impressive" and shared other praise for district programs.

Alt said the report confirmed the district offers broad and sophisticated programming, and the recommendation to "rightsize" facilities didn't come as a surprise.

In conjunction with school closures, the review recommends officials create a plan to reconfigure grades at the elementary level and redraw attendance boundaries.

"Community engagement will be a critical part of our process and student success will be the guiding factor," Alt said.



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