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Olympia's Own Records Show a Smaller Gap, a Smaller Saving and Three Ways Forward

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On November 12 the board is set to vote on closing McKenny, Madison and LP Brown elementary schools. The district says the closures save $3.14 million a year and that falling enrollment and tight state money leave no better choice. It is right that it has more classrooms than students and a budget that runs short, but its own records also show a smaller shortfall, a smaller saving and more than one way forward.

The deficit is real but small. Last audited year, regular costs ran $1.8 million above regular income, about 1 percent of the budget. The gap opened because the state's main payment per student fell $909 after inflation, a loss the board does not control.

Closing three schools saves less than the district says. The district's own staffing rule cuts fewer teachers than its tables count, because children who move still fill classes at their new schools. Counted that way, the closures save about $2.2 million to $2.75 million a year, and less with every family that leaves.

McKenny and LP Brown are among the fuller buildings. Each used about 69 percent of its seats last fall. Only Madison is among the five emptiest, so closing the other two rests on their savings alone.

Most of the plan's cuts have no names. The budget plan counts on $5.15 million a year in cuts, and beyond the closures no public document names them, so the board cannot see what the plan asks of students.

Three Choices

Close all three. The board should plan on the smaller saving and still name the rest of its cuts.

Keep McKenny open. That means finding about $800,000 a year. Three cuts outside the classroom cover about half, and interest on the district's savings could cover the rest, but only if its bond papers let that interest move and the budget has not already counted it.

Keep all three open. That takes 8 to 10 cuts from the district's lists, including larger classes and no social workers in middle and high schools. Holding teacher raises to the state's inflation increase, added to other listed savings, would cover the whole plan, but only if the teachers' union agrees when its contract ends in August 2028, and nothing in the records shows it will.

Before November 12 the board should have four records the district already holds. They are last year's final figures, the cuts behind the budget plan, the bond papers on interest, and a plan for Garfield, which the district's own numbers say cannot hold the students sent there. Each choice can be defended, and once the board has those records, the decision is its own.

Want to dig further into this? Contact Joshua Penner at josh@pennerstrategy.com or visit pennerstrategy.com.