

EDUCATION

Akron Public Schools superintendent to detail plan to shift school boundaries



Doug Livingston

Akron Beacon Journal

Published 3:55 p.m. ET Dec. 5, 2023

Akron Public Schools is holding a series of community meetings about plans to shift the boundaries for some schools due to population changes and building closures.

Since 2003, when Akron residents passed a 0.25% income tax to reconstruct and improve schools districtwide, enrollment in Akron Public Schools has declined 30%, from about 30,000 to less than 20,000 today, not counting preschool students.

In that time, the district has closed 21 school buildings while matching state funds with local dollars to consolidate students into community learning centers (CLCs). The list of closures is littered with smaller elementary schools — Barrett, Bettes, Crosby, Erie Island, Essex, Heminger, Hotchkiss, Jackson, Lawndale, Lincoln, Margerat Park, Rankin, Reidinger, Smith and Stewart.

Some middle schools were folded into larger high schools as multiple school administrations have wrestled with tough decisions, including the closures of Central Hower High School, which was transferred to the University of Akron, and Kenmore High School, whose students now attend the new Garfield CLC.

“Due to shifts in student population and building closure, the administration will be proposing a redistricting plan to the APS Board of Education,” APS Superintendent Michael Robinson said Tuesday morning in a message to the community. “To ensure that you are well-informed and have an opportunity to ask questions, we invite you to attend one of our community informational meetings.”

The 6:30 p.m. public meetings in school auditoriums will be held Dec. 7 at North High School, Dec. 11 at Firestone Park Elementary and Dec. 14 at East CLC.

“My administrative team and I will be leading the presentation and addressing any questions you may have,” Robinson said. “Your insights are important, and we encourage you to actively participate in the Q&A session. Your attendance and participation are highly valued as we aim to keep our staff, families and community well-informed throughout this process.”

The superintendent and his staff were not available to discuss details of the "redistricting plan" Tuesday. To right-size its clusters to fit the existing school infrastructure and families in them, the district has previously shifted boundaries and closed schools.

After losing its high school, the Akron Board of Education recently approved a plan to build a new school in Kenmore for students at Pfeiffer Elementary and the Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts. Financing that \$61 million project further delays a decision on whether to rebuild North High School — the only in the district to post rising enrollment amid a surge of immigrant families in the past decade.

Student population has fallen everywhere else in Akron, with the sharpest declines in neighborhoods now served by the new Garfield CLC.

Akron Public Schools faces difficult enrollment trends

Beyond an overall declining population in Akron, where the current kindergarten class is smaller than the class that just started high school, factors tied to school choice are significantly impacting the number of students who live in Akron and attend an Akron Public Schools building.

The addition of unique career and college academies embedded in each of the district’s remaining high schools has increased open enrollment within the district. Students in West Akron, for example, might be learning the automotive trade at East CLC, while East Akron teens take up masonry at Buchtel CLC.

Then there are external school choice factors that impact enrollment: charter schools, private schools and open enrollment into neighboring districts.

Enrollment in brick-and-mortar or online charter schools, which were almost non-existent 20 years ago and now total 20 in Summit County, declined about 6% since 2016. That tracks the enrollment decline in Akron Public Schools. As of November, Summit County's brick-and-mortar charter schools enrolled about 3,000 students. Counting online charter schools, 3,241 students living in Akron attend a charter school.

That leaves 18,295 kids who live in Akron attend Akron Public Schools, according to a state-mandated headcount in October. Another 1,680 attend neighboring school districts through open enrollment, down from 1,980 eight years ago when Coventry Local Schools, the top importer of Akron students, curtailed its open enrollment program. (Open enrollment into Coventry is at 390 this year, down from 803 eight years ago.)

Nearly 300 Akron students are benefitting from the recent expansion of private school vouchers, or state aid to attend non-public schools. The EdChoice school voucher program was expanded this year to all students regardless of family income or whether their home school district performed low on state testing.

But interest in private schools was up in Akron before the expansion. Voucher students in the traditional income-based program grew from 1,235 in 2016 to 2,238 this year, according to ODE.

School choice options, on the whole, now enroll a larger share of Akron's shrinking K-12 population.

Reach reporter Doug Livingston at dlivingston@thebeaconjournal.com or 330-996-3792.