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OPERATING UNDER CAPACITY

Caddo schools: Many half empty, others need space

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ABOVE: Caddo Middle Career and Technology School is a school that is under capacity.
HENRIETTA WILDSMITH/THE TIMES

Caddo Parish Schools has a finite amount of resources, a large number of failing schools and many half-full buildings.

Superintendent Lamar Goree believes combining schools is both a logical way to address those issues and would benefit the students of the combined schools. But when he proposed the idea for two of the district's schools earlier this year, emotions flared from both the board and the community.

Community members questioned the Caddo Parish School Board's motives after the board voted to merge Fair Park and Booker T. Washington, two predominantly black high schools. Goree addressed community concerns in a January meeting. "If we look at the capacity and occupancy of Fair Park and BTW, they're both operating at about 65 percent occupancy," he said.

And those two schools are not the only ones that have lots of empty space. More than half of Caddo Parish schools have 100 or more students under the building's enrollment capacity.

Analyzing the data

Following Goree's proposal, the Times' began investigating just how many schools' student enrollment numbers were under the capacity the building was designed to serve. In some cases, re-purposing rooms in the building may have affected capacity.

According to the district's data, 31 out of 58 schools reported are under the capacity that the buildings were built for by more than 100 students. Local historians and school administrators say the trend is ongoing, partly

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Schools

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because of school choice options, changing neighborhood demographics, more suburbs being built in south Shreveport and families leaving the parish.

“When you create that capacity, you have more teachers and extra teachers so that you can do the AP classes or provide more opportunities to students,” he said. “Whereas the lower schools cover the basics, reading, writing, math and science. When you look at the current situation, it’s more of the high schools where we have the opportunities to right-size or consolidate schools.”

While Goree believes the logical answer is consolidation, he said he also understands the emotions that come when changes are proposed in a school district.

“We need to be very aware of the emotional capacity of our community,” he said during a February interview. “I do believe, just from this situation, before we continue to close schools, especially in the African-American community, that there is a dialogue or conversation.”

Many Fair Park and Booker T. Washington alumni and community members have spoken against merging two predominantly black high schools without the community’s input. Other community members believe the merger will have a positive impact on academic achievement and add more resources.

Fair Park Alumni Director Cathy Bonds said this is the sixth time in 10 years that the school board has tried merging both schools.

“We are very concerned about our students and teachers,” she said. “This is simply not in the best interest of them. We think there is room in Shreveport and in Caddo Parish for Booker T. Washington High School and Fair Park High School. We both have long rich histories and our histories are very valuable to this community. Fair Park is a community school that has served the community for 89 years and Fair Park has been very important to the Queensborough and Mooretown community for many many years.”

Many influences impact school populations

Declining enrollment and families relocating are two of the reasons that some of the district’s schools are only half full, while others are over capacity, according to Goree.

Data provided by Caddo Parish Schools indicate the district’s total student enrollment has declined by more than 3,000 students since 2006 when it served about 43,357 students. In 2011, the district had decreased to approximately 41,970 students. In 2016, there were about 40,337 students in the district.

“Population shift happens as people move from the inner city to the suburbs,” Goree said. “Shreveport is very small micro cut of a very large system. Many of the problems that you see in large places like Dallas are absolutely alive in our system, just on a smaller scale. In that respect, we’ve done all we can with this current setup.”

Goree said charter schools and private schools may play a factor in the enrollment shifts across the parish. He said having school choice options has benefited many families.

“Most of our new growth is in south Shreveport,” he said. “If you look inside the inner city, there’s not much turning of dirt there, whereas they are building houses in the south and northern part of the city. You also have a lot of growth in the Bossier community because there’s so much new construction there. New families like new houses.”



HENRIETTA WILDSMITH/THE TIMES

A computer room has several empty seats at Caddo Middle Career and Technology School.

LSUS professor Gary Joiner said Bossier Parish gets most of its population growth from people leaving Caddo Parish.

“If there is a perception that a school is dangerous, it’ll go down like a rock,” he said. “If there is a perception that a school is becoming the best and brightest — it’ll rise like a balloon. If it’s holding its own in a transition area due to population pressure, that is a good thing. In Caddo Parish, we either hold our own on population or we softly drift down, but we basically have a stable population.”

Joiner said Queensborough is one of many neighborhoods seeing a dynamic population shift. Joiner said neighborhoods are always in transition because people constantly move in and out, which can cause student demographics to change over time.

Queensborough is more than 200 students under capacity according to district data.

“When you have neighborhoods that are “urban doughnuts,” where there’s a blasted hole in the middle — people move away from it,” he said. “Queensborough, for example, is around the urbanization of the health complex around Willis-Knighton. There’s simply no housing stock there, so when people move, they move some place else.”

Segregated neighborhoods are another factor, Joiner said. He said city council districts A and F are predominantly black neighborhoods, while districts B, E and G are integrated and districts C and D are predominantly white.

“If the city council districts are that way, I guarantee you the schools’ attendance zones are that way,” he said. “You’re only going to have certain numbers that are truly integrated.”

Which school is the most under capacity?

Caddo Middle Career and Technology School, located in the Hollywood neighborhood, is under capacity by 430 students — the largest deficit in the district. The school serves sixth-through eighth-grade students. For the 2015-16 school year, the school received a school performance score of ‘D’ from the Louisiana Department of Education.

For years, the school has remained in failing status, receiving grades vacillating between D and F year after year, according to school’s report card.

Board member Mary Trammel, who represents District 6 where CMCT is located, said many parents have told her they send one child to the neighborhood school and their other chil-

Top 5 schools under capacity

1. Caddo Middle Career and Technology School – 430 students
2. Fair Park High Schools – 393 students
3. Broadmoor Middle Laboratory – 392 students
4. Huntington High School – 371 students
5. Booker T. Washington High School – 361 students

Top 5 schools over capacity

1. University Elementary – 211 students
2. Southern Hills Elementary – 168 students
3. Fairfield Magnet School – 119 students
4. Eden Gardens Fundamental Elementary School – 119 students
5. South Highlands Elementary Magnet School – 113 students

dren across town because of grade level reconfigurations. If a student attended Atkins, which only serves kindergarten through third-graders then their sibling may attend another school for fourth or fifth grade, she said.

She said families that live in her district have children all over Caddo Parish.

“It’s probably an ongoing trend because we give (parents) choice and that’s one of the things that’s killing our population in this area,” she said. “Once we say they can go to another school because our schools are academically unacceptable, well they get the option not to go schools that are in this district.”

School choice allows a student to transfer from a failing school with a ‘F’ letter grade to a higher performing school within the school district, an initiative implemented by the No Child Left Behind Act. Choice notification letters and applications are mailed to students who qualify, according to the Caddo Parish Schools website.

“We’ve made all these things right for them, but it cuts the population down at the schools in your district,” Trammel said. “I had a couple of kids that are way over in the east, but their moms opt to take them to school every morning.”

Some schools are over capacity

Eight of Caddo Parish Schools are over capacity by at least 100 students.

University Elementary is over capacity by 211 students. Southern Hills Elementary, Fairfield Magnet, Eden Gardens Fundamental Elementary and South Highlands Elementary Magnet are over capacity

by the largest numbers.

University Principal Kasie Mainiero said her school’s growth has been a consistent increase. According to Mainiero, the school has the second largest attendance zone geographically.

“We reach all the way down to where DeSoto picks up,” she said. “It crosses demographic and socioeconomic status too. We have a hugely diverse population and a lot of different types of children that come from different walks of life. It’s kind of the melting pot of the whole city in one school. It’s like all the population has moved.”

She said more suburbs and neighborhoods are being built in south Shreveport, enabling more students to enroll at University. Though the school is over capacity, Mainiero said they have a great teacher-to-student ratio. She said most classes have a certified educator and a paraprofessional or volunteer daily.

“We have two teachers in many classrooms daily, which helps our student-to-teacher ratio,” she said. “Some of our classes are smaller because of our special education population. Some people might think that because we are a large school, our class size would be larger, but that is not the case. We have more para-professional resources and that helps us get students what they need.”

The school has approximately seven sections for each grade level. University Elementary is currently using 26 T-buildings, but the principal hopes the district will add more classrooms in the future.

Mainiero said she would like the district to consider building another school to accommodate the exponential growth in south Shreveport. While the school has lots of students, there are also downsides, she said.

“Our number one challenge is space,” she said. “You can’t fit more than one grade level at a time in the only space that we have as a general purpose space. We can’t put more than one grade in our auditorium at a time. It can’t sit more than 250 kids. Every time we have a performance, like a talent show, we have to go over to Shreve. We don’t have a space big enough to have a schoolwide event.”

Goree said changes have been made to attendance zones to address capacity issues. “As part of the district’s strategic plan, we have stated the need to address attendance zones as part of a larger view of demographic information in our community as we know we do not work in isolation from what is taking place in our neighborhoods,” he said. “As we review

the best means of addressing capacity for not only today but in the next five to 10 years, we do anticipate additional attendance zones coming before the Board for revision.”

Closing or consolidating schools has financial benefits to the district and helps make sure students are receiving a quality education, Goree emphasized. All facility cost savings goes back into the general fund, he said. In facility costs alone, the district saves between \$250,000 to \$500,000 each time they close an elementary campus, \$500,000 to \$750,000 each time a middle school closes and \$750,000 to \$2 million for each high school closure.

“This is an opportunity to do things like increase instructional resources in the classroom, provide an incentive pay for people to work in our more challenging situations, an opportunity to really do pay increases across the board for all of our employees,” Goree said.

Changes on the horizon?

Earlier this month Goree presented a comprehensive plan for closing and combining some of the schools and addressing the feeder patterns that would result. However, less than 24 hours later, he withdrew the plan from the board’s consideration saying that there needed to be more dialog in the community.

Several days later, State Superintendent John White presented another plan as part of an effort to resolve some of the district’s long-standing problems with failing schools. CMCT is now one of 14 Transformation Next Zone schools outlined in an agreement between the Caddo Parish School Board and the Louisiana Department of Education. The agreement created the Transformation Next Zone, a zone to transform Caddo’s chronically failing schools. The agreement was signed by State Superintendent of Education John White. Goree will sign the agreement if the school board votes to move forward with the plan.

According to the plan released by the LDOE, the schools covered and the state’s designated status for the schools are: Booker T. Washington, Woodlawn, Fair Park (closing), Caddo Middle Career and Technology, Midway, Mooretown, J.S. Clark, Caddo Heights, Oak Park, Werner Park, Westwood, Sunset Acres, Queensborough, Atkins and Lakeshore Middle (students moving to Fair Park campus).

The board will vote on the agreement between Caddo and the Department of Education on March 21.