

Just as kids outgrow shoes, they outgrow schools, too.

Population projections from the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research show that elementary enrollment in Grand Island Public Schools could grow by 1,613 students in the next 25 years.

Middle school enrollment could grow by 803.

"That's another middle school," Superintendent Matt Fisher said. "Right now, our capacity ... is right around 800 in each of the middle schools."

The district's high school enrollment — which now stands at nearly 2,700 students at Grand Island Senior High — could grow another 1,007 students.

Senior High is already the third-largest high school in the state.

"Now, 3,700 students is probably bigger than we would ever want in a single high school," Fisher said. "We need to figure out where we're going there."

The GIPS school board and administration want your help finding the answer.

"Our agenda right now is to get input, to get the thought process started," Fisher said, "because we need to get a plan put together, and we need that input."

The district has a facilities plan that tracks current needs, but it doesn't look too far into the future.

"Probably the last year, we've really been starting to have some conversations around where are we going to go," he said. "What does this look like from the preschool level, through the elementary level, through the middle schools and into the high school? What should the next 50 years look like?"

The school board had a "deeper discussion" about the future of GIPS facilities at a retreat on Oct. 10.

Grand Island has a population of about 53,000. Over the next 25 years, that could grow as little as 7,000 or as much as 20,000, projections show.

On the high end, 1,613 more elementary students would mean four new buildings. Building a new elementary school today would cost about \$30 million, Fisher said. But at the low end of population growth, 552 more kids would be easier to handle.

"With what was done with the bonds in 2014, we're in a good place with our elementary buildings," Fisher said. "We've got the ability to grow some in terms of the number of elementary students that we serve."

"I think our most pressing need is really expanding capacity at our middle school level," he said. "We're pretty much at capacity with our middle schools right now."

Walnut is already the district's biggest middle school, and Barr has no room to add on, so expansion would most likely happen at Westridge.

"It was built with the idea that it would be expanded at some point in time," Fisher said. "That's where the growth in the community is happening."

He estimated that expanding Westridge would cost \$22 million and would probably require a bond issue.

While new elementary schools are likely sometime in the future, Fisher said, "the Westridge expansion is

going to have to happen well before the 25 years. That's probably something that's in the next five to 10 years."

While elementary numbers are projected to grow, GIPS just closed an elementary school in May.

"The reality is two things. Number one, there's no growth going on in the Seedling Mile area," he said. "Number two is the building itself. ... We were utilizing way more staff to use that building than we're using for a bigger building."

GIPS still owns Seedling Mile Elementary should the district need it in the future.

What should be done about Grand Island Senior High is a big question mark, Fisher said.

"Figuring out what we're doing with the high school, I think, is one of the really pressing things because that drives so much else," Fisher said.

Everything is on the table — including a second high school.

"Should we be a two-high-school city? Yeah, probably at some point in time we're going to be," he said, "but when is the right time going to be, and what are the drawbacks to doing that?"

Grand Island already has four high schools, but two are parochial, and Northwest High School is in a separate district.

"Right now, if you divided Senior High in half, you probably could have two Class A high schools," Fisher said.

Or that potential growth of 1,000 students could fill a new Class B high school, but building it would cost \$100 million, Fisher estimated.

A new, built-from-scratch high school isn't the only potential solution, however.

"With the Career Pathways Institute building, there are plans that would expand that building and allow us to move a couple more pathways out there," he said. "One of the other possibilities ... would be to take that building and do a bigger expansion of it and maybe make it a full technical high school where you had kids there the full day."

The Island Annex — the former Principal Financial Group building — could be another area for growth.

Success Academy, the district's alternative high school, and some other programs fill the annex's first floor.

"There's a whole upper floor that isn't really being used," Fisher said. "So, maybe we move a couple of our academies into that building."

When GIPS purchased the building in 2020, converting it into high school space was estimated to cost \$20 million. That estimate has since risen to \$40 million.

"There's not a great answer," Fisher said.

For now, GIPS officials are looking for public places where they can share information about the district's facility needs.

"We want to get the message out there that we're looking for input," he said.

If the public wants to share information at this point, Fisher said, they should contact him or their school board members.

"The board basically committed at the retreat that they were going to come together around this topic again in February or March," he said. "Then we would probably start thinking about, OK, let's have some public meetings to really get some direct feedback."

