



Board of Trustees
Special Board Meeting-
Public Hearing on
Potential Closure of
Hawthorne Elementary
School

Lincoln Center-Professional Development Center & TEAMS
1325 Poplar St., Helena, MT, 59601
April 9th, 2025 – 5:30 p.m.

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AGENDA

- I. CALL TO ORDER / PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
- II. REVIEW OF AGENDA
- III. GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT: *This is the time for comment on public matters that are not on the agenda. Public matters do not include any pending legal matters, private personnel issues or private student issues. Please do not attempt to address such issues at this time or you will be ruled out of order. The Board cannot enter into a discussion during General Public Comment.*
- IV. NEW BUSINESS
 - A. ITEM FOR DISCUSSION
 1. Public Hearing on Potential Closure of Hawthorne Elementary School
- V. BOARD/SUPERINTENDENT COMMENTS
- VI. ADJOURNMENT

Helena Public Schools - Policy 9150 Factors for Consideration

Purpose:

1. Elementary District Budget Deficit Must be Addressed.
2. Support All Elementary Students.

Recommendation for consideration: Future of Hawthorne Elementary:

1. Closure for the 2025-2026 school year
2. Closure for the 2026-2027 school year
3. Remain Open – Status Quo

Decision to be made during the June full Board Meeting 2025

Key Considerations/Factors for Possible Hawthorne Elementary School Closure:

1. Enrollment Trends and Projections:

- **Declining Enrollment:** Both the Helena School District and the State of Montana have experienced enrollment declines over the past several years. Enrollment at Hawthorne Elementary is projected to decline further, with a significant drop from 204 students in 2023-2024 to less than 171 in 2025-2026.
 - The need to overflow students from our valley schools has decreased as our elementary district enrollment numbers decrease, resulting in a reduced need to bus students into town and in particular to Hawthorne Elementary.
- **Lewis and Clark Population Trends:** A decrease in the number of 5-year-olds in the county is also contributing to reduced enrollment, particularly in the next few years.
- **Impact of Declining Enrollment:** The declining trend suggests that the school district will not see a rebound in enrollment soon.
- **Projected or actual enrollment declines support the likelihood that these declines will remain permanent.**

- Five-year Hawthorne School Spring historical enrollment (First week of March)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total School Population</u>
▪ 2019-2020	196
▪ 2020-2021	184
▪ 2021-2022	197
▪ 2022-2023	200
▪ 2023-2024	204
▪ 2024-2025	179 *125 in attendance area *54 students outside attendance area

- Smallest Elementary School in the District with 9 classrooms in use.

- Hawthorne will continue to decrease in enrollment. In 2025-2026 there will be a smaller incoming Kindergarten class and one of the larger classes will be moving to the middle school.
- **2025 Spring HPS average elementary school enrollment**
 - 306.5 students per school
- **Helena School District Student Fall Enrollment**
From Office of Public Instruction: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Student Count</u>
2019-2020	8,033
2020-2021	7,773
2021-2022	7,683
2022-2023	7,801
2023-2024	7,607
2024-2025	7,420

- **State Public School Fall Student Enrollment**
From Office of Public Instruction: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Student Count</u>
2019-2020	149,181
2020-2021	145,632
2021-2022	146,632
2022-2023	149,198
2023-2024	150,573
2024-2025	148,585

- **Lewis and Clark population trend for 5-year-olds**
From: <https://commerce.mt.gov/Data?Research/People-Housing?Population>

Year	Count of Children	Percent Change
2020	878	
2021	891	1.5%
2022	877	-1.6%
2023	790	-9.9%
2024	838	6.1%
2025	779	-7.0%
2026	768	-1.4%
2027	773	0.7%
2028	771	-0.3%
2029	778	-0.9%
2030	774	-0.5%

2. Effect of Closure on Other Facilities and Programs:

- **Classroom Consolidation:** Closing Hawthorne will reduce the number of combination classes across the district, which were not implemented as an educational strategy to improve outcomes. Instead, they were primarily created to reduce deficits. Reinstating single grade classrooms is seen as a positive outcome for students, parents, teachers, and staff. Additionally, services like CSCT would follow best practices by being reallocating services to schools with populations that have higher rates of free and reduced lunch counts and currently do not have these services.
- **Student Redistribution:** Central and Kessler Elementary Schools can safely accommodate Hawthorne students though class sizes will increase at these schools.
 - Where the Hawthorne students would attend school for the 2025-2026 year should the decision be made to close.
 - For the current 179 students at Hawthorne.
 - Twenty-eight 5th grade students would enter CRA 6th Grade or may apply for HMS next year.
 - Seventy-three K to 4 students would attend Central next year. They may choose to complete an in-district boundary request for other in-district schools.
 - Thirty-two K to 4 students would attend Kessler next year. They may choose to complete an in-district boundary request for other in-district schools.
 - Forty-six students K to 4 would attend their “home” in-district elementary school, this is undoing the overflow to Hawthorne students as there is space for them in their original elementary now. They may choose to complete an in-district boundary request for other in-district schools.
 - Next year's Hawthorne (2025-2026) pre-registered Kindergarten students (completed in PowerSchool) total twenty.
 - Sixteen students reside in the Hawthorne attendance area.
 - Two students reside out of district.
 - Two are residents in another in-district school attendance area.
 - Thirteen of these students would attend Central next year.
 - Three students would attend Kessler.
 - Two students would be able to attend their neighborhood school.
 - Two students that are out of district could apply to an in-district school.
 - All students may choose to apply for in-district transfers.
 - In-district transfer requests are decided on a first come first served basis, determined on availability, student needs, program availability, and other factors.

- Four (4) teaching positions would need to be reassigned between Central and Kessler to accommodate the shifting student enrollment. Three (3) para positions would need to be reassigned between Central and Kessler to accommodate students also.

- **Title, Special Ed, Library, and Counseling services**

- Eligible Hawthorne students would benefit from Title I resources that are not currently provided at Hawthorne but are present at Kessler and Central.
- Title I Instructional Interventionists exist at both Kessler and Central and provide direct instructional support for students.
- Title I Instructional Interventionists assist the school staff by providing professional development to improve student learning.
- Hawthorne students would benefit from having full-time Library, full-time principal and full-time counseling staff available.

3. Potential for Alternative Use or Sale of Facility:

- The facility could potentially be leased or sold, with discussions already in place with real estate experts to explore these options. However, the focus should remain on the neighborhood and the community for future use.
- If leased, the revenue could support the Elementary budget similar to the district's lease agreement at Ray Bjork Learning Center.

4. Financial Considerations:

- **Declining State Revenue:** Montana has been underfunding its public schools relative to inflation, leaving districts with financial gaps. The Helena School District has experienced budget shortfalls and will continue to face difficulties in maintaining operations as they have been.
- **Deferred Maintenance:** Hawthorne's aging infrastructure is another significant concern. The cost of maintaining the building has been relatively low in recent years, but the long-term deferred maintenance is significant.

Annual and Deferred Maintenance Costs for the last three years:

Data excluding three new elementary schools.

- a. Annual Maintenance Costs at Hawthorne Elementary **2022-2025 SY**
 - i.Total \$44,116
 - ii.Average \$/Year \$14,706
- b. Elementary District Costs **2022-2025 SY**
 - i.Total \$2,011,016
 - ii.Average \$/Year \$83,793

c. Hawthorne has been the least expensive school to maintain over the last three years due to its size.

d. Deferred Maintenance Costs at Hawthorne Elementary
(Adjusted for Inflation)

i.Total	\$4,606,608
ii.Cost/sq ft	\$168
iii.Cost/Student	\$25,735

e. Elementary District

i.Total	\$26,399,389
ii.Cost/sq ft	\$107
iii.Cost/Student	\$12,325

f. Hawthorne accounts for 9% of the elementary district square footage but represents 17% of the deferred maintenance costs.

- **Additional Savings:** Specific savings identified include utility savings at Hawthorne, potential savings in employee costs, and reductions in operational expenses (e.g., maintenance, insurance, subscriptions).

- Hawthorne Utility Savings
 - \$17,996.74 (2024/25 SY)
- Property and Liability reduction if the building is sold
 - \$15,000-\$17,000
- Curricular Subscription Cost Savings
 - \$10,715.94

- **Transportation / Busing:** The closure would require changes in transportation arrangements.

- One bus (27) currently serves Hawthorne – Annual cost: **\$71,293.95**
 - The cost (on existing routes) to bus Hawthorne students who would attend Kessler is estimated to be: \$2,304.80
 - The cost (on existing routes) to bus Hawthorne students who would attend Central is estimated to be: \$1,388.77
- Transportation savings: \$67,600.38
- Overflow students returning to their neighborhood schools would likely ride on existing routes but this is yet to be finalized.

5. The effect the school closure will have on district staffing, and on the costs of instruction, administration, transportation, and other support services.

- **Employee Impact:** While 13.6075 FTE positions would be reduced, some staff could be reassigned within the district, particularly in positions where vacancies exist due to retirements, resignations, or other staffing changes.

- Hawthorne Staff 24/25 School Year
 - 27 Employees
 - 20.32 FTE (Full Time Equivalent)
 - 2024/25 School Year Elementary District Staff Encumbered Expenses
 - \$1,361,749.78
- Reductions
 - 6.7125 FTE Positions Retained at a cost of \$443,850.97
 - 4 Teachers at 1.0 FTE each
 - IEFA Tutor at .15 FTE
 - 3 Paras at 0.8125 FTE to 0.875 FTE each
 - 13.6075 Positions reduced for the 2025/26 school year for a savings of \$917,898.81
 - Positions/employees reduced will have opportunities across the district to fill vacancies per negotiated agreements and availabilities such as resignations, retirements, leave of absence, and current open positions.

6. Student Safety:

Central and Kessler elementary schools can safely accommodate our Hawthorne students.

7. Such other facts as the Board deems necessary and appropriate in light of the circumstances.

The most significant factors impacting this recommendation are declining enrollment, a school funding model that does not support small schools, and an aging building that cannot reasonably be expanded.

Other possible considerations that would reduce costs:

Remove all certified P.E. and Music teachers and require classroom teachers to teach music and P.E. as allowed by accreditation.

- This would result in a shorter school day to allow time for teacher preparation.
- Estimated savings if remaining K-5 P.E. teachers are eliminated – Savings \$497,373.90
- Estimated savings if remaining K-5 Music teachers are eliminated – Savings \$439,403.24

Remove all K-5 nurses and require remaining staff to fulfill nursing duties. No accreditation requirement for Nurses

- Eliminate all K-5 nurses – Savings \$471,558.54

- **Continue to reduce teaching staff across the district in the K-5 by maximizing class sizes and potentially increasing combination classes.**

Single Grade Rooms:

- Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2: No more than 20 students.
- Grade 3 and Grade 4: No more than 28 students.
- Grade 5: No more than 30 students.

Multigrade Classrooms:

- Grades K, 1, 2, and 3: No more than 20 students.
- Grades 4, 5, and 6: No more than 24 students.

Note: State accreditation class size maximums allow for 4 students over the state standard with human resource support.

Enrollment: Over the years Hawthorne’s enrollment has been sustained by sending overflow students from the north valley. This is no longer the case and while there are still 50+ students attending Hawthorne from other school neighborhoods there are seats available for all students currently attending Hawthorne in two nearby schools - Central and Kessler.

Further, as noted, Department of Commerce demographics indicate this decline is not expected to change. High housing costs are impacting the ability of families with school-aged children to purchase homes in the city of Helena.

School Funding: Montana school funding is insufficient to sustain small elementary schools. Inflation has outpaced state allocations. The Montana School Boards Association estimates that inflation has left public schools short by \$141 million or 10% of their general fund budgets.

Montana's public schools are grappling with a combination of insufficient state funding, rising costs, and inequities stemming from reliance on local levies. This situation is prompting calls for reforms to the state's funding formula and increased investment in public education and the state legislature holds the keys to resolving the insufficient school funding formula. However, a solution to public school budget shortfalls is unlikely during the 2025 Legislative session.

The “writing on the wall” has been evident for some time.

- In 2022-2023 approximately \$1.7 million in reductions were made including the elimination of administrative, teaching, and support staff positions.
- In 2023-2024 approximately \$3.1 million in reductions included the closure of Ray Bjork Learning Center, a reduction in administrative,

teaching and support staff positions, and a reduction in department and school budgets to name a few.

- In 2024-2025 approximately \$2.1 million in reductions included reducing teaching and administrative staff as well as cuts to multiple programs including music and P.E., PEAK gifted and talented, Access to Success and a reduction in department budgets.

Next Steps:

1. **Alternative Use or Sale:** Discussions on leasing or selling the property should continue, ensuring that any decisions align with the community's needs.
2. **Staffing Adjustments:** Communication with staff about potential reassignments or reductions will be crucial in the coming months.
3. **Transition Planning:** Communication with families and sites for transition planning during the remainder of the school year, this summer, and early fall.
 - a. Working with families to determine the best timing for them and their children
 - b. Providing flexibility in timing
4. **Final Decision:** The Board of Trustees can make a final decision during the regular June Board meeting.

In summary, the recommendation to close Hawthorne Elementary is based on a combination of factors to include declining enrollment, financial constraints, and the unsustainability of maintaining small schools under the current funding model.

While the closure would result in annual cost savings; the longer-term challenges lie in securing adequate funding to ensure a basic, free, quality public education for all students as required by the Montana State Constitution.