



GOVERNING BOARD AGENDA ITEM AMPHITHEATER UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 10

DATE OF MEETING: December 9, 2025

TITLE: Review of Superintendent's Proposal for Consolidation of Schools Due to Declining Enrollments, to Be Effective for the 2026-2027 School Year:

- a. Closure of E.C. Nash Elementary School, with Students to Attend Walker Elementary and Keeling Elementary;
- b. Closure of Francis Owen Holaway Elementary School, with Students to Attend Rio Vista Elementary;
- c. Closure of Marion Donaldson Elementary School, with Students to Attend Mesa Verde Elementary and Walker Elementary; and
- d. Closure of Copper Creek Elementary School, with Students to Attend Harelson Elementary and Wilson K-8.

BACKGROUND:

AMPHI FUTURE-READY: A Comprehensive Report and Recommendation on School Consolidation, Demographic Realignment, and Fiscal Sustainability

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: HONORING OUR LEGACY BY SECURING OUR FUTURE

For 132 years, the Amphitheater Unified School District (AUSD) has stood as a beacon of educational excellence in Pima County. From our humble beginnings to our peak enrollment at the turn of the 21st century, we have evolved alongside our community. However, stewardship requires more than preservation; it requires the courage to adapt. We are currently navigating a historic inflection point—a convergence of structural demographic shifts, aggressive privatized competition, and fiscal constraints that demand decisive action.

This report serves as my formal recommendation to the Governing Board to authorize the consolidation of **Copper Creek, Marion Donaldson, Francis Owen Holaway, and E.C. Nash Elementary Schools** effective for the 2026-2027 school year. This recommendation is the product of exhaustive data analysis and reflects a necessary pivot from a district built for 19,000 students to one optimized for our current enrollment of approximately 10,500.

By rightsizing our physical footprint, we protect the "heart" of our mission: our students, our people and our programs. We choose to invest in students, teachers, and classrooms rather than in the maintenance of under-utilized facilities.

II. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: THE DATA BEHIND THE DECISION

The decision to consolidate is not a reaction to a temporary downturn but a response to permanent structural changes in the educational landscape. The following analysis details the three primary drivers of this recommendation: the "birth dearth," the impact of private school vouchers, and the fiscal inefficiency of our current utilization rates.

A. The Demographic Cliff: A National and State Crisis

Our enrollment challenges mirror a broader national trend, often described as a "demographic winter."

- **National Fertility Decline:** As detailed in my companion presentation to this item, as well as the attached detailed narrative on birth rate in Arizona, the U.S. fertility rate has fallen to a historic low of **1.6 births per woman**, well below the replacement rate of 2.1. This is not merely a dip; it is a sustained downward trajectory that began during the Great Recession and has accelerated post-pandemic.
- **Arizona's Birth Rate Collapse:** The decline is even more acute locally, as Chart 1 below illustrates. Data from the Arizona Department of Health Services indicates that **resident births in Arizona declined by 33% between 2007 and 2021**. Demographers with whom the District has consulted in this matter advise that the decline has reached a current level (2025) of **36 to 38%**.

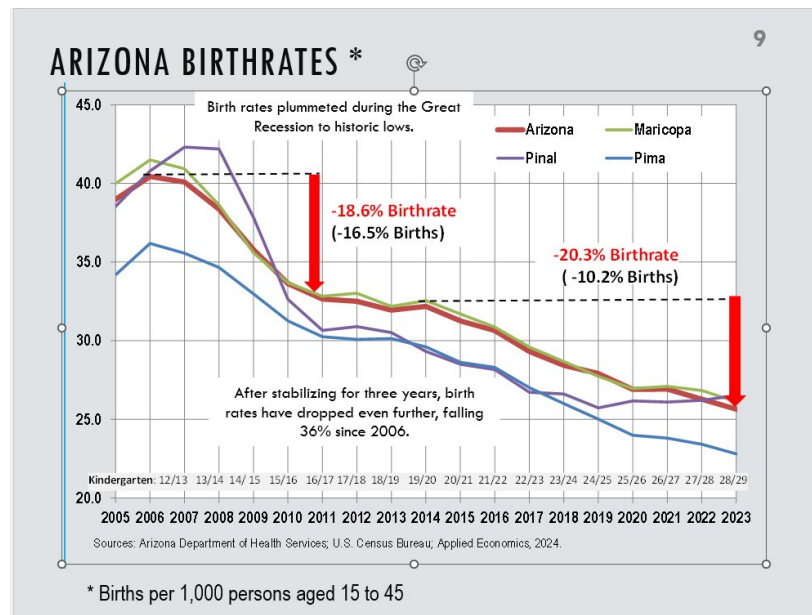
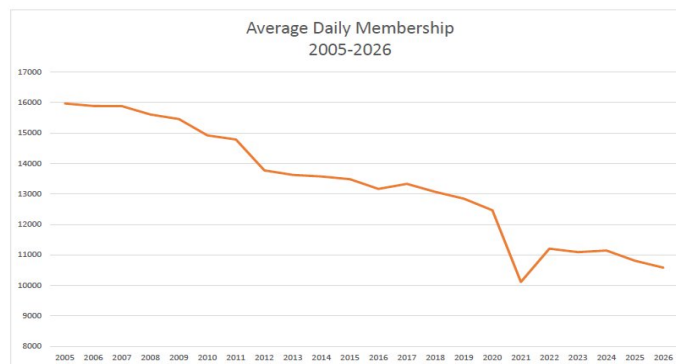


Chart 1

- **The Lagging Indicator:** This decline in birth rate creates a mathematical certainty for school districts. A drop in births in 2020 results in smaller Kindergarten cohorts in 2025. There are simply fewer school-aged children living within our zip codes today than there were a decade ago. Thus, you can observe a trajectory of enrollment which mirrors, almost exactly, that of birth rate. See Chart 2 below.



Projected Enrollment Drop for Fiscal Year 2026 – 323 Average Daily Membership

Chart 2

B. The "Voucher Effect": Subsidized Competition

The universal expansion of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) has also fundamentally altered the marketplace.

- **Direct Financial Impact:** Currently, **1,367 students** residing within AUDS boundaries utilize state-funded vouchers to attend private schools or homeschool. This represents **\$13.5 million** in state funding diverted away from the public system.
- **The "Switcher" Loss:** While some ESA users never attended AUDS, the students who *transferred* from our classrooms to private options account for a direct annual operational loss of approximately **\$1.7 million**.
- **Hyper-Competition:** We operate in a saturated market. With **21 charter and private schools** within or adjacent to our boundaries, the supply of classroom seats in our area vastly exceeds the demand from the shrinking population of children.

C. The Efficiency Gap: The Cost of Under-Utilization

Our infrastructure was built for a different era. Maintaining 14 elementary/K-8 sites with our current population is fiscally unsustainable.

- **Utilization Crisis:** Only **3 of our 14** elementary/K-8 schools are currently operating at or above 50% of their building capacity.
- **The Fixed-Cost Trap:** Fixed costs—utilities, insurance, administrative salaries, and maintenance—remain static regardless of enrollment. When a campus operates at 40% capacity, the per-pupil cost of *operations* spikes, cannibalizing funds that should be spent on *instruction*.
- **Protecting the Override:** Our community has generously supported Bond and Override measures to fund small class sizes, art, music, and PE. If we do not reduce our operational overhead, we risk depleting the general fund to the point where these voter-approved priorities are threatened.

III. SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & FEEDBACK

Following my Superintendent's letter on November 17, 2025, and the subsequent community forums held at Ironwood Ridge, Amphitheater, and Canyon del Oro High Schools (Nov 19–21), the District has received substantial input via email, surveys, and public comment. The following summary synthesizes the key themes, questions, and concerns raised by our stakeholders.

A. Recognition of Fiscal Reality and Support for Stewardship

While school closures are inherently difficult, a significant portion of the feedback reflects a pragmatic understanding of the District's challenges.

- **Acknowledgment of Necessity:** Many families recognize that closures may be financially necessary to ensure the District remains solvent. Some stakeholders have explicitly stated their agreement that closing schools is the right decision to protect long-term resources, provided the execution is handled equitably.
- **Appreciation for Transparency and Timing:** Community members have expressed gratitude for the District's communication efforts and the transparency regarding the challenges we face. There was also specific appreciation that the District chose not to close schools mid-year, allowing families time to plan and transition.

- **Support for Tackling Difficult Issues:** Several comments commended the District leadership for having the courage to tackle these difficult but necessary structural issues rather than deferring them.

B. Constructive Engagement and Proposed Alternatives

Rather than merely opposing the plan, our community has engaged as active partners, offering detailed and constructive alternative proposals. This level of engagement demonstrates a deep commitment to the District's success.

- **Programmatic Suggestions:** There is strong interest in expanding specialty programs, such as STEM or K-8 conversions (specifically mentioned for Cross/Harelson or Prince/Amphi Middle), to attract enrollment and improve efficiency.
- **Boundary and Feeder Pattern Ideas:** Families offered thoughtful suggestions regarding boundary adjustments, such as splitting the Copper Creek population between Harelson, Painted Sky, and Wilson to reduce the strain on any single receiving school.
- **Asset Utilization:** There is a strong preference for ensuring closed buildings are repurposed for District use (e.g., Early Childhood centers or District offices) rather than sitting vacant or being sold to competitors.
- **Feeder Alignment Consistency:** Almost immediately following my Superintendent Letter of November 17, we received feedback from Copper Creek constituents noting a disparity in the approach between current Copper Creek students who normally matriculate to Cross Middle School versus those who normally matriculate to Wilson K-8 for middle school. There was concern that there was not consideration of the opportunity for elementary students to attend school at Wilson (K-5) on the same campus they would ultimately attend for grades 6-8, as the original proposal had those students attending Painted Sky Elementary.

C. Areas of Concern and Focus

While understanding the necessity of the decision, stakeholders raised valid concerns regarding specific impacts that must be managed during implementation.

- **School Identity & Leadership:** Families spoke passionately about the "heart" and resilience of their neighborhood schools, particularly **Nash, Holaway, and Copper Creek**.
- **Specialized Student Needs:** Parents of students with special needs (including those with autism and apraxia) expressed concern about the disruption of routines and the potential loss of trusted providers who have built relationships with their children.
- **Equity and Fairness:** Some feedback noted the importance of ensuring that consolidations do not disproportionately affect Title I populations and that the "sacrifice" of losing a neighborhood school is felt to be equitable across the District.
- **Rationales & Metrics:** A prevailing question from the community is, *"Why these specific schools?"* Stakeholders have requested greater understanding of the criteria used (e.g., building condition vs. academic performance vs. enrollment). There is a perception among some that decisions were pre-determined.
- **The "Fairness" of Sacrifice:** Families in the Copper Creek area, who supported the recent Override Election (Prop 413), expressed a sense of "asymmetrical sacrifice." They argue that closing a high-performing, neighborhood-centric school feels like a violation of the trust placed in the District when they voted for increased funding.

- **Traffic & Safety:** Significant concerns were raised regarding traffic congestion at **Mesa Verde** and **Painted Sky** during drop-off/pick-up times. Families requested coordination with Pima County for improved signage, crosswalks, and traffic control.
- **Property Disposition:** Residents near **Donaldson** and **Holaway** are worried about "blight" from vacant buildings and strongly oppose selling properties to charter competitors.

This feedback has been instrumental. While the fiscal necessity of consolidation remains unchanged, we are actively refining our implementation plans—specifically regarding leadership assignments, special education transition teams, and traffic mitigation—to address these valid community concerns.

In addition, the very salient and pragmatic suggestions regarding the consolidation of half of current Copper Creek students to Wilson rather than Painted Sky was incorporated into the proposal presented to the Board by the item – a revision directly resulting from feedback.

IV. DETAILED CONSOLIDATION RECOMMENDATION

Based on the synthesis of demographic data, facility analysis, and community input, I recommend the following consolidations. These pairings were selected to maximize geographic proximity, optimize facility capacity, and preserve neighborhood cohorts.

1. Copper Creek Elementary

- **Action:** Consolidate student body into **Wilson K-8** and **Harelson Elementary**.
- **Rationale:** Despite high academic performance, Copper Creek’s enrollment has declined significantly in a region with excess capacity. The school is the most costly to operate with a centralized plant that does not lend itself to utilization adjusted to physical need. It is an “all or nothing” proposition when it comes to heating and cooling. Wilson and Harelson offer more plants and controls that are more responsive to changing need, and both schools can accommodate these students without overcrowding. These consolidations also allow cohorts the opportunity to have comprehensive experiences for the entirety of their K-8 education, providing an expanded relationship with their campuses and staffs that enhances the nurturing benefits.
- **Addressing Feedback:** We will work to preserve the "neighborhood feel" by keeping peer groups together and ensuring that the unique culture of excellence from Copper Creek is integrated—not erased—at the receiving sites.

2. Marion Donaldson Elementary

- **Action:** Consolidate the majority of students into **Mesa Verde Elementary**, with a small attendance zone adjustment to **Walker Elementary** for the very small “pocket boundaries” that would have normally attended from the Walker neighborhood but are currently assigned to Donaldson.
- **Rationale:** Proximity allows for a seamless merger. This consolidation creates a robust feeder pattern for Cross Middle School and CDO High School, ensuring that students have access to full-time specialists (Art, Music, PE) that smaller schools struggle to fill with qualified staff.

3. Francis Owen Holaway Elementary

- **Action:** Consolidate student body into **Rio Vista Elementary**.
- **Rationale:** Rio Vista has the physical capacity to welcome the Holaway community and is in close proximity to the Holaway neighborhood. This merger unifies resources in the southern portion of the

District, allowing for a more concentrated and effective delivery of Title I support services and special education interventions.

4. E.C. Nash Elementary

- **Action:** Consolidate student body into **Keeling Elementary** and **Walker Elementary**.
 - **Rationale:** Nash faces significant capital renewal costs. Keeling and Walker are centrally located and equipped to absorb this population. This move strengthens the central corridor by pooling resources to support academic interventions and enrichment programs.
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V. IMPLEMENTATION: A "PEOPLE-FIRST" TRANSITION

The closing of a building is a logistical event; the moving of a school community is a human one. Our transition plan is designed to mitigate trauma and maximize stability.

- **Staffing Guarantee:** We value our educators. Through natural attrition (historically 50-60 vacancies annually), we aim to place every displaced effective teacher into a role within the District, minimizing RIFs and retaining talent.
 - **"Merging Cultures" Initiative:** Transition teams comprised of parents and staff from *both* merging schools will co-design the integration process. This includes joint spring events, "buddy" systems for students, and the potential renaming of campus wings or libraries to honor the legacy of closed schools.
 - **Special Education Priority:** A dedicated task force will oversee the transfer of every IEP and 504 plan. We are committed to ensuring that service minutes and provider relationships are preserved to the greatest extent possible.
 - **Traffic & Safety Studies:** We have already initiated conversations with the Pima County Department of Transportation to conduct traffic studies at receiving schools and will implement necessary safety upgrades before August 2026.
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VI. CONCLUSION

We cannot cut our way to excellence, but we can *consolidate* our way to sustainability. By reducing our overhead, we preserve our override funds for their intended purpose: the classroom, and we ensure we maximize the resources otherwise available to enhance our educational programs and staff recruitment and retention. In undertaking this work, we follow in the steps of other school districts throughout the state, but we will lead other districts more locally – all of whom also face enrollment issues.

This plan is not a retreat; it is a strategic realignment designed to ensure that Amphitheater Public Schools remains a competitive, high-performing district for the next century.

I respectfully request the Governing Board's review of this proposal, with a final vote scheduled for January 13, 2026.

RECOMMENDATION:

No action can be taken at the December 9 meeting, as this item is only presented for study at this time. It is proposed that the Governing Board take action on this matter on Tuesday, January 13, 2026.

INITIATED BY:

Todd A. Jaeger, J.D.
Superintendent

Date: December 3, 2025