From "Randy Barber <randy.barber@bvsd.org>" <randy.barber@bvsd.org>
Subject **AASA Main Article for School Administrator magazine**
To "Griffin, Liz" <lgriffin@aasa.org>
Date June 5, 2025 4:18:05 PM MDT

Here is the sidebar article!

A different direction: School district 'co-designs' choice programming with parents to avoid school closure

By Dr. Rob Anderson, Boulder Valley School District Superintendent

With enrollment and birth rate graphs showing rollercoaster-like plunges, many school districts across the nation have responded with the decision to close schools.

Here in the Boulder Valley School District we have gone a different direction.

While enrollment has dropped an average rate of 2.3 percent a year since the 2020-21 school year, we decided that we did not want to repeat history.

School closures tend to be cyclical and the last time BVSD faced them was 20 years ago. During that situation, district administrators followed the traditional playbook which moved directly to closing a subset of schools with limited community engagement. To this day people still talk about how horrible that process made them feel, so we decided to do something different.

We launched a multi-phased approach that includes:

- Creating a Long Range AdvisoryCommittee to provide community voice and participate in planning
- Changing board policies, including adding an enrollment preference for families who commute to work in the district
- Organizing a large choice fair so prospective families can learn more about all of our schools
- Better tracking declining enrollment, so that we can support schools most in need

While a number of schools are on our radar, we recognized that one school, Heatherwood Elementary in Boulder could use some help immediately. Families in the area were choosing to enroll their kids in other nearby schools – in our school district, a neighboring school district and private schools.

While the district could have dropped in and proposed solutions, we decided to listen to our community instead.

We met with parents and teachers, did some polling of the community to understand why they haven't been sending their kids to Heatherwood and what might change that.

It wasn't easy. The first community engagement meeting started off a little rocky. Parents and staff were understandably worried about the worst case scenario – school closure. After assuring them that we were there to do everything possible to keep Heatherwood open, I asked, "how many of you know somebody who doesn't go to the school?" The whole group of around 100 parents and community members raised their hands. My response was – "well, so that's the first problem we've got to fix. Right? If we're here wanting to keep the school open, yet nobody here is willing to talk to their neighbor about how great the school is and encouraging them to come, then how in the world is school going to stay open?"

Out of that meeting we recruited a core group of representatives from the school community. Together we co-designed a solution.

They shared that Heatherwood was an amazing place to learn with great teachers, a great community and a beautiful campus, surrounded by nature. They felt that they could attract more students by promoting and enhancing their existing instruction, while also leaning into the community's interest in the environment.

Ultimately, they proposed creating an Environmental STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) focus. The district is supporting that effort with some seed money, district help in developing a new curriculum and marketing support.

While we are early in the process, the early signs are promising. In our first open enrollment period, Heatherwood's enrollment has stabilized. Families are choosing the school again. Plus, this fall the school will begin rolling out its new E-STEAM programming and we will help to promote their efforts.

There is no question, immediately turning to school closures as our response to declining enrollment would have divided our community. Instead we are piloting a community-focused process that allows the school community to co-design the solution. While that may look different from school-to-school, my firm belief is that by pulling together good, smart, hard working people, we together can find solutions that will keep our schools thriving.

We hope that it is a model that we can replicate throughout our school district moving forward.

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Possible pull quote:

"Do you care enough to listen and give people a chance to make something great that their community can rally around?"
–Dr. Rob Anderson, BVSD Superintendent

On Tue, Jun 3, 2025 at 12:18 PM Griffin, Liz <lgriffin@aasa.org> wrote:

Hi Randy,

That sounds ok. If you need Thursday, let's go with that.

I know I hardly gave you any time.

Liz

From: Randy Barber <randy.barber@bvsd.org>
Sent: Tuesday, June 3, 2025 2:13 PM
To: Griffin, Liz <lgriffin@aasa.org>
Subject: Re: AASA Main Article for School Administrator magazine

I have been tied up on a few other projects this week, but intend to write this today -- and should be able to get Rob's sign off no later than tomorrow. I'll keep you posted.

On Fri, May 30, 2025 at 10:17 AM Griffin, Liz <lgriffin@aasa.org> wrote:

> Dear Randy,
>
> I'm sorry it's taken me all week to respond. Thank you for your willingness to compose a short sidebar for the September *School Administrator*.
>
> Please review my thoughts on the content of the short sidebar and let me know if you have additional questions (703-875-0753, lgriffin@aasa.org)>
>
> The draft of the Main article by Educational Resource Strategies is attached. You'll see I added a paragraph that references Heatherwood Elementary School's (to give it a connection to your sidebar.)
>
> When it comes to your story (sidebar), I hope you will give some thought to incorporating an interesting anecdote to liven up the article and give it a positive spin, as well as advice for other superintendents.
>
> Could districts without the marketing resources that you have be able to apply your methods? Did you market to families in other neighboring districts?
>
> I'd like the sidebar to cover key aspects of Heatherwood ES's new vision to illustrate that challenges can trigger rethinking and have positive results.
>
> I'm suggesting it cover the basics in a way that focuses on the Superintendent's role in the process. When Heatherwood was flagged for declining enrollment, how did the district present the narrative? Was this the opportunity for community and staff input?
>
> The Environmental STEAM felt like a natural fit in your community, and that you mentioned there was some excitement. Superintendents would need to hear the outcomes of your efforts, and whether Heatherwood's success has drawn the interest of other district schools? Did you share any feedback generally to other principals/administrators?
>
> If space permits, readers welcome a few bullet points on lessons learned.
>
> **FYI**: I checked the website for Heatherwood, and it has not been updated to reflect the new curriculum. The link to enrollment is showing a "404 error."
>
> **Length:** 500-650 words maximum (layout will be 1 full page, and a shorter version
>
> 600-650 allows the photo to be a little bigger
>
> **Article due:** Tues. **June 3** (is this possible?)

Delivery: Liz Griffin (lgriffin@aasa.org)

Photo guideline: (helpful to have some choices (roughly 6)

Candid Photo: Rob at Heatherwood Elementary School (outside or inside – a choice is nice)

Rob's close up that's on the website
Other ideas?

Tidbits to include:
Suggest: Headline and subheads

Bio note: Rob Anderson is superintendent of Boulder Valley School District in xxx, Colo.

E-mail: xxxxxxx.

Byline: **Would Rob like to include a middle initial in his byline?**

Add general photo caption to your sidebar document:

Photo credit:

Next steps:

We will edit the copy and return it to you and Rob for review. The edited version should be returned to Jay and me.

Thanks,

Liz

Liz Griffin

Managing Editor, *School Administrator* magazine

AASA, The School Superintendents Association

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