From "Beth Ellis <beth.ellis@bvsd.org>" <beth.ellis@bvsd.org>
Subject **Thoughts on declining enrollment**
To Rob Anderson <rob.anderson@bvsd.org>, Lora De La Cruz <lora.delacruz@bvsd.org>, Rob Price <rob.price@bvsd.org>
Cc Tanner Dayhoff <tanner.dayhoff@bvsd.org>
Date March 23, 2026 3:40:22 PM MDT

Greetings,

I greatly appreciated Dr. Anderson's visit to Bear Creek in early March to discuss our thoughts on declining enrollment but I did not have the bandwidth to truly consider his questions until spring break. Because I take the opportunity to give feedback very seriously, I took some time to draft a spreadsheet to organize the data that was available to me and to think more deeply about this problem on a South Boulder level as well as a District-wide level. My thoughts are attached in a pdf.

As a former systems engineer, these are the kinds of problems I enjoy thinking about. I feel like I understand the challenges much better now but I have no expectations of continued involvement in the solution. However, I am available this summer if you need a thought partner who has a classroom perspective.

I wish you all the best as you begin the community engagement phase of this work!

Warmly,

Beth Ellis
5th grade teacher
Bear Creek Elementary

Attachments:

- Letter to District Leadership 2026.pdf

March 23, 2026

Dear Dr. Anderson,

Thank you again for visiting Bear Creek to listen to our ideas about school enrollment decline. As I mentioned that day, I am fairly slow at processing complex information and new ideas, but Spring Break has given me some bandwidth to write down my thoughts. You did ask for our feedback and hopefully some of these ideas from the perspective of an educator will spark further conversations at the District level.

Thoughts about splitting PK-2 and 3-5 into two different buildings

As I investigated this option more deeply, I came up with more questions than answers. While this option does create more rounds at each school, enabling distribution of the students across more classes, it opens up many additional questions:

- Is this seen as a short term solution (<5 years) or would it be permanent? I looked more deeply at the projected enrollment numbers and discovered that **with a few caveats**, we could fit Bear Creek and Mesa into the Bear Creek building in the 2027-28 school year. It will take a lot of work to make a pk-2 and 3-5 model into a viable short term solution.
- Would this be "one school" with a unified vision for the staff and utilize a unified leadership?
    - If so, it would seem important to organize common community events and find ways to create a shared community over the two spaces.
    - If not, the larger community loses cohesion and families are asked to participate in twice as many school events.
- Would parents with children at multiple ages feel discouraged about having to manage two schools during the elementary years (this came up at our SAC meeting) and choose to open enroll in a different school that is all in one building? According to today's Boulder Reporting Lab, the last time the District mandated a choice that was unpopular with parents, "The school board expected 300 to 400 parents to obediently march over and enroll their kids in Martin Park, but they've only gotten about 120 parents to do that. That should tell them something. It says the parents are pissed."
- How would the start times be adjusted to accommodate families with multi-age children?
- Since we are just moving kids around, how much money does this actually save? Does the benefit outweigh the costs? This would be worth a deeper discussion!
- In this scenario, students will miss out on much loved community and leadership opportunities (such as reading buddies or running fun and fitness day for the younger grades). Would there be a possibility for kids to walk between schools or hop on a quick (inexpensive) bus ride to continue these traditions?

Upon reflection, I am not in favor of splitting up the schools into smaller grade bands. I do not see a way that this would be more than a "short term fix" and it feels like a better long term solution to start now to build the school culture in South Boulder that we want to have in the future.

Ideas about combining schools to build three round schools in South Boulder

When you visited Bear Creek, I was firm in stating that Mesa and Bear Creek could not all be squeezed into one building. This is true if you consolidate all of the programs at both schools. However, I dug into the numbers that were available from the BVSD website and beginning in the 2027-28 school year, we could fit three (large) rounds of K-5 at Bear Creek if we did not also need to have space for Pre-K and the autism programs. We should also consider limiting open enrollment going forward. (Note: I chose to combine the students at Bear Creek since it has a larger capacity than Mesa and I could visualize the spaces in my head.)

Ideas to consider:

- Combine all of the South Boulder pre-K programs at Creekside, which might encourage more families to stay at that school as their children grow older. From slide 19 of the LRAC slideshow, it looks like about 225/500 students in the Creekside neighborhood choose to open-enroll into other schools.

- Consider moving the Community Montessori program to a building in the eastern part of the District to be more centrally located. This could reduce bussing costs and hopefully entice more students to join this program. (I noted that the actual enrollment from your March 2026 data was 43 students below the projected number. Perhaps this needs to be a deeper conversation about the long-term viability of public Montessori programs.)

- Build a dedicated autism (AIM) center at the Community Montessori building and centralize expertise so that these students receive the educational programming that they deserve. This program could also be housed at Mesa, but Community Montessori is already set up to handle buses. These articles (1, 2) explain that how students are educated (instruction) matters more than where. More thoughts on this idea below.

- Move Mesa's Rise program to Creekside to boost their numbers a bit. If you put Mesa and Bear Creek together they will have very large class sizes compared to Creekside. Students with strong behavioral challenges or sensory issues benefit from being in a smaller class where the adults have more bandwidth to address their particular needs.

- Allow Mesa families priority in open enrollment since there are some Mesa families who might not want to go to Bear Creek.

- Maintain Bear Creek's name since it ranks seventh for the state of Colorado on the US News and World Report list of top elementary schools. It seems a shame to rebrand a high performing school when we are collectively working so hard to recruit people to BVSD!

- Consider making Bear Creek a G/T focus school in the short term. That would still be manageable with very large class sizes and is reflective of the student population.

- Once the Bear Creek population has dropped to fewer than 25 students per class, add a Rise or iCan program back, depending on the need.

Ideas for repurposing vacated buildings.

When you visited Bear Creek, you mentioned that a primary concern with closing a school was that a charter school would buy it and open a competing facility. Hence, I was thinking that you could start by looking at our most "saleable" properties and use that as a criteria to decide which buildings to close - if you could find a buyer who would use it for a non-school purpose. For example:

- Approach the City of Boulder to see if Mesa or Community Montessori would be a viable option to solve their issue with the South Boulder Rec Center.
- Approach CU to see if they would buy University Hill and move the Uni Hill program to a different location - such as Flatirons which is only a mile away.
- Open up the opportunity of purchasing an old school building to the wider community, such as the folks who are making the Senior living facility near Iris Fields, to see if any of your other properties might be of interest to them.
- Repurpose an "empty" building to create a world-class autism center. (More thoughts on this idea below.)

Ideas on "having the courage to imagine an even better school district"

What if we built a stand alone, state-of-the-art AIM/autism program at one of the vacated schools and created a facility that truly addresses the academic needs of these students? At Bear Creek, our building is not designed to accommodate students who often elope and our class sizes are so large that AIM students rarely (if ever) join in classroom activities in a meaningful way. By creating a world-class autism center, you might encourage out of District students to join BVSD by offering the following:

- Concentrated expertise in one (or two) buildings to provide better adult collaboration and support small groups to provide intensive instruction for students. One of your stated reasons for combining schools is to give teachers opportunities to collaborate so combining resource teachers would be in keeping with that philosophy.
- Optimized environment to match the sensory needs of these students. Large classes housed in open space are often overwhelming for students with strong sensory needs.
- Specialized indoor and outdoor equipment could be concentrated to improve equity. Currently, not all schools have the same resources available for their AIM students.
- Consistency of teachers, paras and service providers could lead to a better individualized outcome for each child over time.
- Once the center is working well at an elementary level, the district could evaluate expanding it to support middle school students as well.
- Mid-day transportation could be provided so that the more capable students could attend specials, lunch and/or recess at a nearby school with typical peers. Maybe the school could have a designated bus and staff at the school could be taught to drive it.
- Here are some examples of schools that focus on autism from the Denver Metro Area:
    - Joshua School in Boulder https://www.joshuaschool.org/
    - Havern School Littleton https://www.havernschool.org/about-havern

Ideas for school consolidation beyond South Boulder

I wanted to really understand the implications of combining Mesa and Bear Creek, so I dug into your published data fairly deeply. While I understand the issues that South Boulder faces fairly well, I do not claim to be an expert for the whole district. However, I couldn't resist playing with this spreadsheet and looking for other opportunities to combine schools across the District. If there is anything in here that feels useful, please reach out! I didn't want to put in the additional time to explain all of my thinking when I wasn't sure if anyone would ever read it. These are the criteria that I used in my planning, which resulted in the closure of 6-8 schools:

1. Keep the four new buildings that were built in the recent bond (Creekside, Emerald, Douglass, Meadowlark).
2. Maintain the charter, dual language and focus school programs, but consider whether some programs should be relocated to different buildings.
3. Give preference to buildings with a larger capacity.
4. Give a preference to the schools that keep students in their neighborhood and draw additional students from beyond their attendance area.
5. Sell buildings that could be repurposed by the larger community for non-school uses (e.g. rec center, senior center, CU office space, community maker space, CU housing).
6. Give a preference to schools that appear higher on the US News and World report ranking of BVSD schools.

I also tried to look at the special programs regionally (Pre-K, Multi ILC, ICAN, Autism RISE, Autism AIM) and balance the programs against cohort size. As a teacher, I can tell you that a class of 32 students is much more manageable when the teacher is not trying to simultaneously juggle students with intense needs. The additional meetings and parent communication become overwhelming! We could organize schools around a trade off between larger class size containing students with fewer needs vs. smaller class size with a handful of students who have intense needs. That could buy you some time on the school consolidation while the population continues to shrink.

While I feel confident in my understanding of South Boulder's challenges, I recognize that different parts of the district have different needs. It might be helpful for you to build smaller community groups from each school region to brainstorm solutions based on their knowledge of their community's needs. Present them with common data and constraints, then see what they propose. I couldn't do that at Dr. Anderson's visit because I didn't have enough information yet.

Thanks for taking the time to consider my ideas. This is a daunting task, but I can see the importance of tackling it now. I am happy to participate over the summer if you need a teacher's voice to weigh in on various options!

Warmly,

Beth Ellis

Resources used

Long Range Planning update from BVSD board worksession I have some questions from this document. The “capacity” numbers do not always match the listed “rounds.” **For the purposes of planning, it would be great to know the class size that the district considers to be one round.** Also, was the capacity determined when we only have half day Kindergarten? It might be healthy to review these numbers and spaces to make them consistent and to also highlight the availability of special resources for specific programs like pre-k, AIM, and Multi ILC. Rather than making everything available everywhere and diluting resources, this could allow more specialization by school.

Enrollment data from March 2026 I used this to look at the individual cohort sizes at each school today and to compare the projected enrollment for 2025-26 with the actual enrollment. The projected enrollment was high for this year by about 170 students, which has big implications for the projections that are two years out!

US News and World Report school rankings I used this to compare BVSD schools to the state so that I could correctly give preference to the schools that are ranked higher if there were no other factors to consider.

Intensive Learning Locations This chart may be out of date…

Preschool locations

School map for regional alignment

Ellis spreadsheet to organize data I combined the data from the BVSD resources listed above and used this to play around with different scenarios for combining schools in the 2027-28 school year. The areas beyond South Boulder are not as well thought out as South Boulder since I don’t understand all of their constraints, so consider that a very rough draft that needs some tweaking!