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Minneapolis school board faces daunting decisions on enrollment, budget. Can it find a fix?

Predictions about the district's future have grown increasingly dire as the number of students shrinks and annual budget talks begin with gaps in the tens of millions of dollars.

By Mara Klecker Star Tribune FEBRUARY 10, 2024 — 7:42AM

The members of the Minneapolis school board heard an alarming warning from finance staff again in November: the city's public school district is sliding toward a precipitous fiscal cliff.

Enrollment is still down. Schools in some city neighborhoods have entire floors sitting empty. Stubborn achievement gaps persist. Big budget cuts are looming.

It's the same warning board members have been receiving for several years.

"It feels like we haven't moved at all," Board Member Ira Jourdain said. "We got ourselves stuck in a holding pattern and it's really frustrating."

A reckoning may be at hand for both the board and Lisa Sayles-Adams, the new superintendent who started work last week. The nearly \$265 million in one-time pandemic relief that allowed the district to put off some tough decisions is drying up, and additional relief from the state seems unlikely. Hard decisions, including potential school closures, are looming.

The cuts needed to address a projected \$90 million budget gap threaten to continue a cycle of turbulence across Minneapolis schools. First came the sweeping and unpopular district redesign, followed by the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Two years later, the city's teachers walked out on strike. A school board member quit, citing broken trust. Then the superintendent left. In fall 2022, district leaders amplified their alarm about an impending financial crisis — just weeks after voters elected five new school board members.

"If I had to grade ourselves for the last year, I'd give us a passing grade," said [Board Member Collin Beachy](#), the new board chair. "But it wouldn't be a grade that any parent would be too happy about."

Tests for urban school boards

Urban school districts across the country have grappled for years with many of the same problems Minneapolis is facing. Plummeting enrollment adds to mounting fiscal pressures that have challenged boards from San Antonio to Denver to Los Angeles. Most schools get at least some of their funding based on their student numbers.

The last few years have been especially rocky for the seven-member school board in San Francisco, where the school district also faces a [massive budget deficit](#) and is looking to cut hundreds of jobs. Voters ousted three board members there in 2022 after waves of infighting, violations of open meeting law and criticism from community members who accused members of focusing more on renaming schools than reopening them during the pandemic. The split board failed to elect a president in its first meeting of 2023.

For help, the board turned to governance training from the [Council of the Great City Schools](#), which includes 78 of the country's largest urban school districts, including Minneapolis Public Schools.

AJ Crabill, the director of governance for the council, said he's often in two to five board meetings a week to offer coaching. Boards typically stall when members misunderstand their charge, which is to represent the vision and values of the community, Crabill said, noting that they need to listen to more than just the loudest voices and the groups that helped elect them.

"Boards have to be crystal clear about decision-making, and it has to be grounded in community listening," he said.

In Minneapolis, school board meetings have often stretched past three hours as members struggled to understand meeting procedures, stay on topic, and reach consensus — something that some board members themselves have expressed irritation over.

"This district is only as strong as its board, which means we have to know our roles," said Board Member Sharon El-Amin, who served as chair in 2023.

Beachy said he's learned in the last year that the board is meant to set the direction of the district, not to manage its day-to-day work. As chair, he said he wants to establish

a sense of focus and efficiency during the meetings, using an analogy of contractors all working from the same blueprint when building a house.

"It's about the time in our meetings that we spend looking at our priorities," he said. "And our number one priority is student outcomes."

In her year as chair, El-Amin also worked to establish expectations for board members. She called the board together for a retreat and arranged a series of special meetings, all led by an outside consultant, to set operating norms and board priorities based on the district's strategic plan.

But that role-defining work took time and [delayed the selection of a new superintendent](#).

"Deciding to suspend the hiring of a permanent superintendent wasn't popular, but it was a part of a bigger picture I had of needing to stabilize the district," she said.

Reaching a consensus for the nine-member Minneapolis school board can also be harder than most.

Only a handful of districts in the state have more than six or seven members, and each had to receive special legislative permission to expand. Minneapolis voters opted to expand the school board and move toward districted seats in 2008. The shift was implemented over the next two election cycles, and members serve four-year terms.

The next potential shakeup is just around the corner: Four of the nine Minneapolis board seats will be on the ballot in November.

That turnover can present its own challenges to addressing long-term problems, Crabill said. It usually takes a full two years for a school board member to understand the workings of a district, he said, and newcomers are often elected on promises to lead differently than their predecessors.

"What you get are folks squandering a lot of time trying to find the shiny new thing when the unfortunate reality is that there are not a lot of shiny new things in public education," Crabill said.

Paula Luxenberg, the parent of three Minneapolis Public School students and regular attendee of board meetings, wants board members to know that no single plan is going to solve all of the district's problems.

"We shouldn't be pretending we're trying to revamp the whole system every time, because that actually just keeps the status quo going," she said.

'Really big job' ahead

The controversial "comprehensive district design," [approved in 2020](#), aimed to be one of those sweeping solutions. It shuffled thousands of students to different schools with the aim of reducing transportation costs without requiring school closures or consolidations. It did lower some costs, but it also exacerbated an [enrollment slide](#) already underway as families left for other districts.

Several current board members campaigned against the disruptions caused by the boundary shifts, which were meant to help redistribute district resources more equitably.

But disparities still exist. Small schools, defined as serving fewer than 250 students, are largely clustered on the North Side and struggle to provide elective programs offered in larger, wealthier schools.

As the board sets its nearly \$1 billion budget for the 2024-25 school year, it's staring down a \$90 million projected budget deficit and a [list of under-capacity school buildings](#).

"We said it was going to lead to school closures in a few years and a decline in enrollment," said Greta Callahan, teacher chapter president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, explaining some of the opposition to the district redesign.

Mention of the redesign has all but disappeared from boardroom presentations. Instead, district leaders cite goals outlined in a strategic plan, which was developed nearly two years ago without initially listing the costs of implementation or specifying ways to measure progress. Most recently, board discussion has revolved around "district transformation."

But progress on even the beginning of that task has taken nearly a year: Last March, El-Amin asked then-interim Superintendent Rochelle Cox and her team to prepare information about such a transformation. A [resolution](#) to initiate the "district

transformation process," which could include closing, consolidating, or expanding schools, didn't come before the board until December.

Luxenberg said she wishes the board moved more decisively, adding that she felt that the board was waiting for guidance from the superintendent and cabinet, who were waiting for action from the board.

"Sometimes it feels like a big game of chicken," she said, adding that she hopes that the board will break that cycle and that the trainings and retreats will pay off. "Now it's time for them to step into their power and figure out how to work together to take on the really big job that all of them wanted."

Beachy said families and community members flooded his phone with emails and calls after he became board chair, each of them wanting to talk about their own desires for the district. Yet he's optimistic the board will find a way to stabilize Minneapolis Public Schools.

"Yes, the numbers are bad. The work is daunting," Beachy said. "I know that. But I'm hopeful. I believe that we can find a way to make this all work — but we have to deal with the hard stuff first."