

Vance: Public schools are shrinking - how will that affect sports?

Lockdowns from the COVID-19 pandemic vastly accelerated existing enrollment trends.



PMG PHOTO: MILES VANCE - Oregon City High School (pictured here is incoming junior Mollie Miller) is one of several schools statewide that have lost significant enrollment over the past decade.

If you've lived in Oregon for more than five minutes, you may have noticed that the state has been growing — and growing quickly — over recent years.

Indeed, over the past decade, according to U.S. Census Bureau, [the state has added more than 300,000 residents](#). That's an increase of almost 8% in just a decade.

Now, as you all might have guessed — given my recent columns on high school sports (you can read those [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) and decades-long coverage of high school and youth sports — I am neither a demographer nor a sociologist. However, on my recent journeys to the Oregon School Activities Association website — the OSAA is the governing body for high school sports and activities in Oregon — I noticed something that spans all three areas (demography, sociology and high school sports).

While Oregon is growing, many of our public high schools are shrinking.

Here's a snapshot of what I'm talking about. Ten years ago, back in the 2011-12 school year, the OSAA's Average Daily Membership report listed these [10 schools as the largest in the state](#) (their ADM is listed in parentheses): David Douglas (3,104), Reynolds (2,594), Westview (2,467), Clackamas (2,257), Oregon City (2,131), Aloha (1,999), Sunset (1,969), McNary (1,948), South Salem (1,938) and Tigard (1,922).

For the 2021-22 school year, [those same schools looked like this](#), with last year's enrollment listed first, followed by their percentage loss/gain in attendance from 10 years earlier: David Douglas (2,332, -25%), Reynolds (2,122, -18%), Westview (2,274, -8%), Clackamas (2,370, +5%), Oregon City (1,859, -13%), Aloha (1,516, -24%), Sunset (1,963, -.003%), McNary (1,763, -9%), South Salem (1,812, -7%) and Tigard (1,637, -15%).

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PMG PHOTO: MILES VANCE - While some private schools (pictured here is Central Catholic's Cru Newman) have added enrollment over the past decade, many have also lost students like their public-school counterparts have.

Once you've noticed such a thing, the obvious question to ask is "why?"

Some of it, of course, is related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of locking down schools for more than a year. Some students migrated to online schools and stayed there. Some moved to private

schools that either remained open or re-opened sooner than public schools, with some parents citing increased academic rigor, smaller class sizes and more support for parents and students.

Many families chose to begin homeschooling their children, with the state [reporting a 73% increase](#) in just one year. And despite the growth in Oregon's population, [birth rates have been dropping statewide](#) and also likely play a role in the attendance decline.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm neither demographer nor sociologist, but I'm also not the only one who's noticed the decline in public school attendance. Here's what some people have surmised about our shrinking public schools, a trend evidenced most in Multnomah County schools.

In a story published by [Oregon Public Broadcasting back in February](#), Charles Rynerson (of Portland State University's Population Research Center, the team that works on school enrollment projections) said: " (Portland Public Schools) gained a lot of enrollment back earlier in this century when there was a lot of displacement from closer in, but they've been losing enrollment even before the pandemic."

In a story on the [KGW8 website published in March](#), Ami Vensel (president of Columbia Christian School) said: "Enrollment really has taken a boom increase if I'm being honest. In the last year, (I've had) hundreds of conversations with families. And that [...] that's realistic."

To be fair, falling enrollment in Oregon's public high schools began before the pandemic, but it accelerated wildly with the onset of COVID-19 restrictions. Here's what the attendance numbers at those 10 schools looked like pre-pandemic — [in 2018-19](#), the last complete year

unaffected by the pandemic or its aftereffects — followed by their percentage loss in attendance from 2011-12: David Douglas 2,979 (-5%), Reynolds 2,575 (-.007%), Westview 2,594 (+5%), Clackamas 2,480 (+10%), Oregon City 1,957 (-8%), Aloha 1,905 (-5%), Sunset 2,191 (+11%), McNary 1,937 (-.005%), South Salem 1,825 (-6%) and Tigard 1,899 (-1%).

While some private schools have shown attendance increases, many have seen their numbers fall, too. Among Class 6A and 5A private schools (St. Mary's Jesuit, Central Catholic and Marist), comparing year-end ADM numbers from 2011-12 to 2021-22, those four schools have managed a net increase of just 27 students. Highlights there included St. Mary's adding 66 students in a decade while Marist shrank by 85.

In the 3A classification — which has a greater percentage of private schools than the 6A, 5A or 4A classifications — the 10 biggest private schools from 2011-12 lost a total of 290 students by 2021-22.

So now, it's time to address the second "why" of the day — why should we as high school sports fans care? Easy. Because healthy, growing schools — both public and private — are the basis for great high school sports teams and all the positive experiences those teams engender.

If you love high school sports like I do, and if you think that the lessons sports teach — the benefit of hard work, the emphasis on meritocracy, learning to work with others, how to deal with both victories and losses, sportsmanship and more — are important, we must be aware of this trend and thoughtful in how to address it.



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