

Planning for the Next 20 Years

The backbone of any community is its schools. Good schools bring families to the area, provide a platform for a stable economy, and help the next generation reach their highest potential, as well as cement more opportunities for residents to thrive in the valley. A successful school system that fits a community's needs contributes to the area's posterity. TSD 401 is fortunate to be a part of an incredible community with deep-seated heritage, strong agricultural ties, endless recreational opportunities, and passionate residents that care about their neighbors. It is no wonder people are drawn to call Teton Valley home and no wonder that it is growing. But with this growth comes the need to plan for the future.

Over the years, we have seen our valley flourish with expanding families and new opportunities. Our school facilities, however, are falling behind and failing to keep up with this growth. Inside Victor, Driggs, and Tetonia elementary schools and Rendezvous Upper Elementary School, we are at or nearing capacity. Hallways are storage. Gymnasiums are classrooms. Portable buildings take up valuable recess space. To meet our budding population, TSD 401 is proposing a bond for this November, with planning ahead in mind.

Over the [past few months](#) as the board finalizes the bond language and details, GPC Architects have been working to craft the blueprint that best-suits the district's needs, and they are planning for the future. The bond is slated to account for the next twenty years of growth, whereas many school districts plans only look toward the next decade, increasing the need for an additional bond in years to come.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that the Teton County population more than quadrupled from 1970 to 2010, going from 2,351 residents to 10,157, which *Teton Valley Almanac* reported was one of the nation's highest—twice the growth rate in Idaho as a whole. It is no wonder that our student population is on the rise.

According to the TSD 401 stats published in the *Teton Valley Almanac*, in 1982, the combined enrollment of all of Teton County's public schools was 781. One generation later in 2010, that number swelled to 1,698. In 2016, our student population is just over 1,800 and counting. The board is answering this growth with a potential bond to update our schools with bigger classrooms, more square footage per student, and modern facilities to meet today's educational needs.

But why is space a concern? Overcrowding is directly linked with lower achievement in students, difficulties with classroom attention, violence, and the spread of illness.

“Crowded classroom conditions not only make it difficult for students to concentrate on their lessons, but inevitably limit the amount of time teachers can spend on innovative teaching methods, such as cooperative learning and group work or teaching anything

beyond the barest minimum of required material,” according to the U.S. Department of Education.

It also effects teachers’ abilities to do their jobs and is shown to cause lower moral in staff. Reports show that teachers spend more time throughout the day managing excess noise than they would during a normal classroom setting.

“In addition, because teachers must constantly struggle simply to maintain order in an overcrowded classroom, the likelihood increases that they will suffer from burnout earlier than might otherwise be the case,” the Department of Education continued.

A 1993 study on four New York City schools found that overcrowding led to lower mathematics and reading exam scores compared to schools in similar areas that were operating below capacity. This is not a Teton Valley specific problem.

Beyond the overall space constrictions, operating in an abnormal classroom setting—such as a cafeteria converted into a classroom—can adversely affect learning, according to a study by Seattle-based education researcher Alyssa Sellors. Such classrooms were not designed for such usages. Her findings?

“Surveys of students and teachers in overcrowded schools revealed that students and teachers alike feel overwhelmed and even discouraged in these facilities. Schools are not just buildings, but environments for learning. If the environment is not conducive to learning due to overcrowding, student achievement and teacher planning are negatively affected,” she explained.

At Victor Elementary, you might find instruction happening in a hallway that is doubling as extra storage space. At Driggs Elementary, the auditorium has a haphazard library in the back. At Tetonia Elementary, the auditorium stage is now a cafeteria.

As the bond conversation continues, save the date for the July 17 Special Bond Meeting at 6 p.m. at the district office in Driggs. The board encourages residents to come, ask questions, and get involved.