

Enrollment decline impacts finances

In this week's column about the Brown County Schools Referendum that will be on the ballot on May 7, I want to shed light on the economic effects of declining enrollment in Brown County and how funding provided by the state is less than what almost every other school in the country receives per student.

If the school system is getting smaller, why does it need to ask taxpayers for more money?

Since 2018, we have had declining student enrollment in Brown County Schools. We have lost 321 students since 2018. There are many reasons for that decline. We have some families who choose to homeschool and some students who choose to attend school in neighboring districts. But the biggest factor is that those moving to Brown County are over age 50 and that fewer children are being born locally.

(SEE Enrollment **PAGE A5**)



Amy Huffman Oliver Guest columnist

Want to know more?

Our website is now live. Go to [//www.browncountyschools.com/referendum-2024/](http://www.browncountyschools.com/referendum-2024/) to learn more and use our tax calculator to determine the impact of the proposed referendum on your property taxes.

We are not alone in seeing declining enrollment. According to a January 2024 study by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce Foundation and Ball State University, 75 percent of small school districts — those with less than 2,000 students — experienced declining enrollment since 2014 and 60 percent of those districts had declines of 50 or more students. Most of these small districts are in the 208 rural school districts in Indiana as young people move away from rural areas and are drawn toward employment in suburban and urban areas.

We are not replacing the students at the same rate that we graduate them each year. For example, in 2023, Brown County Schools graduated 120 students in the spring, but we only enrolled 85 incoming kindergartners in the fall.

We all know young adults who may want to live in Brown County but are unable to start a family here because they cannot find affordable housing and childcare for children under the age of 3.

In 2016, our school system planned for this decline in local birth rates, and we have thoughtfully made changes that reduced our spending by several million dollars. But cuts only go so far before affecting quality

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7 would provide a reliable source of income that would attract and retain quality teachers for the next eight years.

How does the state funding to Brown County Schools compare to other schools?

To put Brown County Schools per pupil funding into perspective, here are some state and national comparisons. In 2024, according to the website www.worldpopulationreview.com:

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- New York state pays the most per pupil at an average of \$24,881.
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- The U.S. average per pupil spending is \$12,612.
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- Indiana's per pupil funding is \$10,256. As a state, Indiana's average per-pupil funding is in the bottom 12 states.

education. Many costs do not decrease when the number of students decreases.

In 2024, Brown County Schools will receive funding from the state at the rate of \$7,044.20 per pupil. The decline of 321 students is equivalent to a loss of \$2.2 million in state public education funding since 2018. Funding from this source is strictly limited in how it can be spent and can go only toward direct student instruction (teacher salaries) and cannot go to operational expenses (utility bills).

Another complicating factor is that schools in Indiana cannot control how much funding it receives from the state and it makes planning more than one year ahead difficult. The funding formula which determines the per pupil cost changes with the state budget every two years in addition to changes in school enrollment each year.

I want to assure residents that Brown County Schools lives within its means by spending less than it receives from the state and from property taxes. Our level of debt is considered very low by our financial advisors. However, the loss of \$2.2 million from declining enrollment since 2018 and the loss of \$1.2 million per year in referendum funding that we had for eight years has meant cuts to valuable programming.

We know that residents want and expect both worldclass opportunities and small school relationships for their children in Brown County Schools. Passing the referendum on May

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■ Utah pays the least per pupil, averaging \$7,951.

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■ Brown County Schools receives \$7,044 which is LESS than the lowest paying state.

The per-pupil funding Brown County currently receives from the State goes to pay teacher salaries, and referendum funds in the past and in the future will also go toward those salaries.

As a school board, we have no ability to affect the per-pupil amounts the state allocates to our schools. The only other mechanism the state offers school districts is to put a referendum on the ballot.

We consider it our solemn obligation to Brown County families and teachers to do everything we can to increase revenue to provide world-class opportunities through public education for the next generation.

Amy Huffman Oliver is a member of the board of trustees for the Brown County Schools. She plans to write updates for the community on the school system.