

A lesson in ratios

Heather Rule
hrule@postbulletin.com

Walk down the hall at Ellis Middle School during passing time, and you'll see that extra space is hard to come by — students are not. There are even "street signs" and "pavement markings" to help guide the flow of traffic.

"It's a traffic jam," said Ellis Principal Katie Berglund.

Students all over the Austin Public Schools district are already feeling a space crunch in the school buildings, and with the projections of rising enrollments in the coming years, the crunch won't be getting better anytime soon.

That's why there's a \$28.9 million referendum on the ballot Nov. 8 for the district to build a fifth- and sixth-grade intermediate school and put an addition on to Woodson Kindergarten Center.

Ellis is not exempt from overcrowding. In a building with a capacity of 975, there are 998 students. Enrollment has grown from 897 in 2009-10 and 943 in 2010-11.

"It's tight," Berglund said. "The problem is, we're running out of room."

Enrollment projections from a demographic study of the district show that by the 2014-15 school year, between 1,185 and 1,218 will be in the building for grades six to eight. Those number increase to 1,245 and 1,337 by 2019-20.

The average class size for sixth-graders is 32, and some classes have as many as 35 students. Berglund said the ideal target for a class size is 27 or 28 kids, "but it's really a moot point" because of the rising number of students.

Cheryl Dunlap, sixth-grade social studies teacher, is one of the instructors with 35 kids in a class. She said it can interfere with activities.

"It's wall-to-wall desks," Dunlap said. "We have nowhere to put them. It's crazy.

"It's just hard to get to everybody. It's so much harder to get to know the kids on a personal level."

The larger enrollments show to Dunlap evidence of a growing community. Cities go through cycles, and right now, Austin is in a growing cycle, she said.

"It's a good problem to have," Dunlap said.

When it comes to the referendum, which would locate the proposed intermediate school just south of Ellis, Berglund thinks about it in three ways: through finances, programs and "most importantly, is in terms of curriculum and instruction."

Financially, the land is fairly cost-effective, and it would allow Ellis and the intermediate school to take advantage of the athletic space to increase programming, Berglund said. It also makes sense for families because students in grades five to eight will be at one location, although in different buildings.

"It puts kids with their age-like peers in an environment where they can socially and emotionally develop at an appropriate rate," Berglund said. "It would provide us with some really great opportunity for delivery of content to kids in an environment that is appropriate for that level of rigor."