

A new school?

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The Austin Public Schools facilities task force has recommended adding a school for fifth- and sixth-graders to solve overcrowding problems and add better programming for those students.

Fifth-graders from all four of the district's elementary schools and sixth-graders from Ellis Middle School would go to the new intermediate school, whose location hasn't been determined but could be at the Ellis site.

The district's enrollment is expected to grow by 400-500 students in the next four to five years, a prediction based on births in the district, "so we're pretty confident in those numbers," said Mark Stotts, director of finance and operations. Looking further ahead, it could grow by 800-1,000 students over the next 10 years.

Stotts presented the task force's recommendations during Monday's meeting of the Austin School Board.

The 19-person committee had 23 options at one point during its seven meetings from Jan. 5 to March 30, Stotts said; members narrowed those down to four main points for the board to consider.

"It's been a long process up until this point, and we're only getting started I believe," Stotts said. "I think we ended up in a really good place."

To prepare for the increase, the task force recommends additional classrooms at Woodson Kindergarten Center. Also, the main office should be moved near the main entrance for safety reasons.

The new intermediate school would offer more space and programming opportunities for students, such as allowing fifth-graders access to science classrooms.

If the school were formed, the four elementary schools would have grades one to four, Ellis would have grades seven and eight and Austin High School would remain as is.

A wave of increased enrollment is expected as early as next year at Woodson, Stotts said, with registration already up from last year. Elementary schools are crowded, with eight non-classroom spaces being used as classrooms.

While Ellis might be at capacity next year or the year after, the high school is in good shape, Stotts said.

"But if we do nothing, we're going to be scrambling for space to house kids," Stotts said.

School board member David Ruzek said he recently visited Neveln Elementary School and called it an "eye-opener."

"It just seems to be bulging at the seams," Ruzek said.

Having visited Neveln last week, board member Diana Wangsness agreed with Ruzek.

The cost of any proposed facilities plan should also be less than \$30 million, the task force recommended.

The task force is made up of community members, including parents, senior citizens and business people.

The decision on any new facilities is up to the school board, which will look at the recommendations in more detail at its meeting at 4 p.m. April 25 at Ellis.