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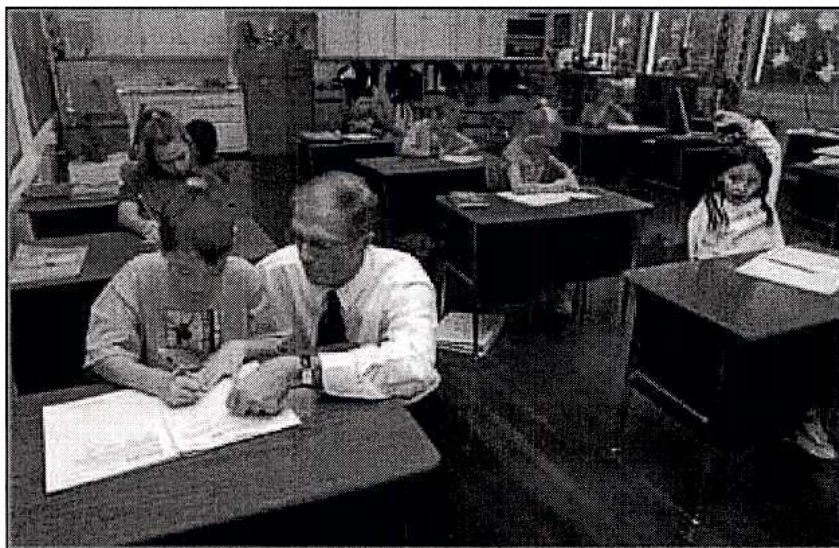
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Wednesday, December 10, 2003

More schools close as student numbers dwindle

By Jennifer Latson
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Gary J. Cichowski / The Chronicle

Glenoma School third-grader Taylor Payne receives help from teacher Terry Suplee on a grammar question during class Tuesday afternoon.

In September, Lewis County had five elementary schools east of Mossyrock. Next fall, only two will remain in use. Mineral Elementary closed its doors over Thanksgiving weekend; its students now ride the bus down state Route 7 to Morton. In the White Pass School District, both the Glenoma and Packwood

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Elementary Schools are shutting down at the end of the year, and the kindergartners through sixth-graders there will meet at Randle Elementary instead.

The closures are the result of a long, steady downturn in student enrollment at all the east county schools, especially in the lower classes.

"The issue of declining enrollment has been an issue for 10 years," said White Pass Superintendent Dave McKenna. The school board announced the decision to close the two schools at a special meeting, Nov. 20.

Since 1995, the head count at Packwood Elementary has dropped from 150 to 49, at Glenoma Elementary from 153 to 64, and at Randle Elementary from 252 to 104.

McKenna said the school board chose to close the schools partly because of financial concerns: With state funding based on enrollment, the grade schools can't support themselves with the numbers they have now.

Partly, too, they made the decision to ensure children are taught in single grades, he said.

"One of the problems we have is, as the schools continue to decline, we have combination grades," he said. "Packwood right now is at 49 students and we have seven grades there."

Packwood head teacher Jayne Turner leads the combined fifth- and sixth-grade class at the elementary school. Although she saw the writing on the wall when the school board started its enrollment study last spring, closing down the school where she has worked for the past 30 years will be difficult.

"I kind of suspected that's what might happen, but it's kind of a shock to hear it out loud," she said. "I'll have to start working on it now: (cleaning out) my 30-year stash."

Although Turner expressed sadness at seeing the school close, she saw it as an inevitability.

"I started out teaching 36 sixth-graders," she said, explaining she now teaches a mixed class of seven sixth-graders and 11 fifth-graders.

"There wasn't any alternative that I could see that would take care of having all these splits. We really need to be addressing individual class needs, especially in phonics and spelling."

The teacher plans to move with the students to Randle in the fall.

"I know I would do a better job teaching one grade," she said, although she stressed that she is comfortable with the split grade.

The elementary school students had some concerns about moving, but with the help of their teachers overcame most of them, Turner said.

"We talked about it last Friday, and after we talked about it they were OK," she said. "Their main concern was whether the teachers would be there, and we said, yeah, we'd all be there. Then it was, 'Are their rules the same? Are they going to like me?' For a lot of the kids who've only been here it'll be a different experience, but it's not like you're a total stranger going in there."

McKenna said he hopes to make the transition as smooth as possible for the students and the staff at all three grade schools.

"We would anticipate that if those kids come, then the teachers come as well," he said. "The only reason we'd reduce teaching staff is on a district-wide basis based on declining enrollment."

"There would be some reductions (in classified staff)," he went on.

"We know we'd need only one secretary; there would be some reductions there. We'd probably look to combining libraries."

Community members still have questions. The future of the buildings is one of them.

"They need to get a plan out, of what their intentions are regarding the Packwood grade school and the Glenoma grade school," said Carol Rose, the cook at the Glenoma school. "Are they going to just close them up and let them fall down?"

Rose said she did not have a problem with the decision to close the schools, but simply wanted more information made available.

"I understand they have to do what they have to do financially for the district," she said. "This wasn't a snap decision to close the schools. They did a lot of research into it. I'm not saying they have to be historically preserved, but the community needs to know what's going to happen because they've been there for a long time."

The Glenoma school was built in 1929, and Packwood in 1938. To many residents, the closing of the schools is a painful symbol of a dying community.

Some, like Packwood resident Rose Holmes, are deeply opposed to the closures.

"I have six grandchildren in Packwood and I am just devastated that they are closing it," she said. "I hate to see that small-town community feeling gone. ... (The Packwood school is) a part of history. We still have what we consider a number of students that keep at least three teachers quite busy. I don't think it's in big disrepair, as everyone says. It's just terrible."

That sentiment resonates in an unwillingness to vote for the school district's upcoming levy, as many residents have threatened.

"They're going to vote no," Holmes said. "There's a lot of people in Packwood that are very upset. This is not the end of the issue, to just close it and let it go."

But, she said, she will do whatever is in the best interests of the students.

"I'm going to try to do what I can to get it back open someday," she explained. "Otherwise, I will put my efforts into making my grandchildren comfortable at the new school."

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