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Petition seeks enrollment balance at Iowa City high schools

Almost 800 people have signed a petition asking the Iowa City school board to draft by June boundary changes to bring the city's two high schools into better balance.

While those boundary changes are phased in over several years, the district should stabilize the faculty numbers at City High and assign all new-to-the-district students to City to help ease expected overcrowding at West High, petition supporters argue.

"If you've gotten to the point where one school is 27 percent larger than the other school and enrollment projections say eight years from now it will be 70 percent larger, what are people thinking?" parent Ed Stone said. "Why can't we keep both schools outstanding? We're just trying for balance."

Stone, part of a group called Citizens for Outstanding Public Education in Iowa, presented the petition with 742 signatures to the school board during a public forum Monday night. He collected more signatures Tuesday. The petition is at www.copeiowa.org.

It is not an east versus west issue pitting the two schools against each other, Stone said. Rather, petition supporters want the district to have a long-term plan for dealing with shifting enrollment patterns and expected West High overcrowding that keeps curriculum offerings equitable at both schools.

District leaders are grappling with those issues now, Superintendent Lane Plugge said. Monday night's forum focused on what to do with the two high schools as enrollment patterns shift.

The idea of funneling all new students to City High was used two years ago but had a larger impact than expected, Plugge said. For next year, all new 11th and 12th graders will go to City High.

How soon any boundary changes could help address enrollment disparities depends on how they are implemented, Plugge said.

West High likely will surpass its 1,800 capacity next year and could swell to more than 2,500 students in eight years. City High's enrollment is expected to increase slightly from 1,414 to about 1,490 in that time. **(Note: Due to a correspondent's error, Tuesday and Wednesday stories incorrectly reported City's enrollment would shrink to around 1,400, when in fact it grows slightly.)** The possibility of building a third high school in North Liberty was pushed by some speakers at Monday's forum.

The petition does not specifically call for that, but Stone said many parents see it as a logical plan down the road once the boundary issues at City and West are resolved and the economy improves.

Plugge said when the district's local-option sales tax was passed, officials planned to save \$3.2 million annually for 10 years to build the third high school. The first two years of that money has been set aside, he said, but now the district is looking at budget cuts due to the poor economy and cuts to state funding. Operating a new 800-student high school would cost \$1.9 million a year, money that would have to come from the existing budget.

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