



Superintendent

Rex Wetz
324-2001

Business Manager

Janelle Mickelson
324-2040

Board of Trustees Special Board Meeting Public Hearing on Potential Closure of Hawthorne Elementary School

Lincoln Center
1325 Poplar St., Helena, MT 59601
And on TEAMS

Wednesday, April 9th, 2025
5:30 p.m.

MINUTES

ATTENDANCE – Present unless otherwise noted.

Siobhan Hathhorn, Chair
Jennifer McKee, Vice Chair
Jeff Hindoiien, Trustee
Linda Cleatus, Trustee
Jennifer Walsh, Trustee
Kay Satre, Trustee
Rachel Robison, Trustee
Janet Armstrong, Trustee
Rex Wetz, Superintendent
Josh McKay, Assistant Superintendent
Janelle Mickelson, Business Director
Todd Verrill, Facilities Director
Keri Mizell, Human Resources Director
Gary Myers, Director of Educational
Technology
Kaitlyn Hess, Data & Federal Programs
Director
Justine Alberts, Curriculum Director
Jane Shawn, HEA President
Karen Ogden, Communications Officer
Lisa Cordingley, HEF Executive Director
Elizabeth Kaleva, District Legal Counsel
Many guests of the public as well as Helena School District Staff

I. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Board Chair Siobhan Hathhorn called the meeting to order at 5:32 p.m. and the Board participated in the Pledge of Allegiance.

II. REVIEW AGENDA

The Board of Trustees reviewed the agenda and there were no suggested changes.

The Board of Trustees moved on to hear general public comment.

III. GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no general public comment and the Board of Trustees moved on to conduct the public hearing on the potential closure of Hawthorne Elementary School.

IV. NEW BUSINESS

A. ITEM FOR DISCUSSION

1. Public Hearing On Potential Closure of Hawthorne Elementary School

Superintendent Rex Weltz and his administrative team reviewed the following information with the Board of Trustees and the public, and addressed all questions raised by the Board of Trustees.

Helena Public Schools - Policy 9150 Factors for Consideration

Purpose:

1. Elementary District Budget Deficit Must be Addressed.
2. Support All Elementary Students.

Recommendation for consideration: Future of Hawthorne Elementary:

1. Closure for the 2025-2026 school year
2. Closure for the 2026-2027 school year
3. Remain Open – Status Quo

Decision to be made during the June full Board Meeting 2025

Key Considerations/Factors for Possible Hawthorne Elementary School Closure:

1. Enrollment Trends and Projections:

- **Declining Enrollment:** Both the Helena School District and the State of Montana have experienced enrollment declines over the past several

years. Enrollment at Hawthorne Elementary is projected to decline further, with a significant drop from 204 students in 2023-2024 to less than 171 in 2025-2026.

- The need to overflow students from our valley schools has decreased as our elementary district enrollment numbers decrease, resulting in a reduced need to bus students into town and in particular to Hawthorne Elementary.
- **Lewis and Clark Population Trends:** A decrease in the number of 5-year-olds in the county is also contributing to reduced enrollment, particularly in the next few years.
- **Impact of Declining Enrollment:** The declining trend suggests that the school district will not see a rebound in enrollment soon.
- **Projected or actual enrollment declines support the likelihood that these declines will remain permanent.**
 - Five-year Hawthorne School Spring historical enrollment (First week of March)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total School Population</u>
2019-2020	196
2020-2021	184
2021-2022	197
2022-2023	200
2023-2024	204
2024-2025	179*

*125 in attendance area and 54 students outside attendance area.
 - Smallest Elementary School in the District with 9 classrooms in use.
 - Hawthorne will continue to decrease in enrollment. In 2025-2026 there will be a smaller incoming Kindergarten class and one of the larger classes will be moving to the middle school.
- **2025 Spring HPS average elementary school enrollment**
 - 306.5 students per school

○ **Helena School District Student Fall Enrollment**

From Office of Public Instruction: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Student Count</u>
2019-2020	8,033
2020-2021	7,773
2021-2022	7,683
2022-2023	7,801
2023-2024	7,607
2024-2025	7,420

- **State Public School Fall Student Enrollment**

From Office of Public Instruction: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Student Count</u>
2019-2020	149,181
2020-2021	145,632
2021-2022	146,632
2022-2023	149,198
2023-2024	150,573
2024-2025	148,585

- **Lewis and Clark population trend for 5-year-olds**

From: <https://commerce.mt.gov/Data?Research/People-Housing?Population>

Year	Count of Children	Percent Change
2020	878	
2021	891	1.5%
2022	877	-1.6%
2023	790	-9.9%
2024	838	6.1%
2025	779	-7.0%
2026	768	-1.4%
2027	773	0.7%
2028	771	-0.3%
2029	778	-0.9%
2030	774	-0.5%

2. Effect of Closure on Other Facilities and Programs:

- **Classroom Consolidation:** Closing Hawthorne will reduce the number of combination classes across the district, which were not implemented as an educational strategy to improve outcomes. Instead, they were primarily created to reduce deficits. Reinstating single grade classrooms is seen as a positive outcome for students, parents, teachers, and staff. Additionally, services like CSCT would follow best practices by reallocating services to schools with populations that have higher rates of free and reduced lunch counts and currently do not have these services.

- **Student Redistribution:** Central and Kessler Elementary Schools can safely accommodate Hawthorne students though class sizes will increase at these schools.

- Where the Hawthorne students would attend school for the 2025-2026 year should the decision be made to close.

- For the current 179 students at Hawthorne.
 - Twenty-eight 5th grade students would enter CRA 6th Grade or may apply for HMS next year.
 - Seventy-three K to 4 students would attend Central next year. They may choose to complete an in-district boundary request for other in-district schools.
 - Thirty-two K to 4 students would attend Kessler next year. They may choose to complete an in-district boundary request for other in-district schools.
 - Forty-six students K to 4 would attend their “home” in-district elementary school, this is undoing the overflow to Hawthorne students as there is space for them in their original elementary now. They may choose to complete an in-district boundary request for other in-district schools.
- Next year's Hawthorne (2025-2026) pre-registered Kindergarten students (completed in PowerSchool) total twenty.
 - Sixteen students reside in the Hawthorne attendance area.
 - Two students reside out of district.
 - Two are residents in another in-district school attendance area.
 - Thirteen of these students would attend Central next year.
 - Three students would attend Kessler.
 - Two students would be able to attend their neighborhood school.
 - Two students that are out of district could apply to an in-district school.
 - All students may choose to apply for in-district transfers.
- In-district transfer requests are decided on a first come first served basis, determined on availability, student needs, program availability, and other factors.
- Four (4) teaching positions would need to be reassigned between Central and Kessler to accommodate the shifting student enrollment. Three (3) para positions would need to be reassigned between Central and Kessler to accommodate students also.

- **Title, Special Ed, Library, and Counseling services**

- Eligible Hawthorne students would benefit from Title I resources that are not currently provided at Hawthorne but are present at Kessler and Central.
- Title I Instructional Interventionists exist at both Kessler and Central and provide direct instructional support for students.
- Title I Instructional Interventionists assist the school staff by providing professional development to improve student learning.
- Hawthorne students would benefit from having full-time library, full-time principal and full-time counseling staff available.

3. Potential for Alternative Use or Sale of Facility:

- The facility could potentially be leased or sold, with discussions already in place with real estate experts to explore these options. However, the focus should remain on the neighborhood and the community for future use.
- If leased, the revenue could support the elementary budget similar to the district's lease agreement at Ray Bjork Learning Center.

4. Financial Considerations:

- **Declining State Revenue:** Montana has been underfunding its public schools relative to inflation, leaving districts with financial gaps. The Helena School District has experienced budget shortfalls and will continue to face difficulties in maintaining operations as they have been.
- **Deferred Maintenance:** Hawthorne's aging infrastructure is another significant concern. The cost of maintaining the building has been relatively low in recent years, but the long-term deferred maintenance is significant.

Annual and Deferred Maintenance Costs for the last three years:

Data excluding three new elementary schools.

a. Annual Maintenance Costs at Hawthorne Elementary **2022-2025 SY**

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------|----------|
| i. | Total | \$44,116 |
| ii. | Average \$/Year | \$14,706 |

b. Elementary District Costs **2022-2025 SY**

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------|-------------|
| i. | Total | \$2,011,016 |
| ii. | Average \$/Year | \$83,793 |

- c. Hawthorne has been the least expensive school to maintain over the last three years due to its size.

d. Deferred Maintenance Costs at Hawthorne Elementary
(Adjusted for Inflation)

- | | | |
|------|--------------|-------------|
| i. | Total | \$4,606,608 |
| ii. | Cost/sq ft | \$168 |
| iii. | Cost/Student | \$25,735 |

e. Elementary District

- | | | |
|------|--------------|--------------|
| i. | Total | \$26,399,389 |
| ii. | Cost/sq ft | \$107 |
| iii. | Cost/Student | \$12,325 |

- f. Hawthorne accounts for 9% of the elementary district square footage but represents 17% of the deferred maintenance costs.
 - **Additional Savings:** Specific savings identified include utility savings at Hawthorne, potential savings in employee costs, and reductions in operational expenses (e.g., maintenance, insurance, subscriptions).
 - Hawthorne Utility Savings
 - \$17,996.74 (2024/25 SY)
 - Property and Liability reduction if the building is sold
 - \$15,000-\$17,000
 - Curricular Subscription Cost Savings
 - \$10,715.94
 - **Transportation / Busing:** The closure would require changes in transportation arrangements.
 - One bus (27) currently serves Hawthorne – Annual cost: **\$71,293.95**
 - The cost (on existing routes) to bus Hawthorne students who would attend Kessler is estimated to be: \$2,304.80
 - The cost (on existing routes) to bus Hawthorne students who would attend Central is estimated to be: \$1,388.77
 - Transportation savings: \$67,600.38
 - Overflow students returning to their neighborhood schools would likely ride on existing routes but this is yet to be finalized.
5. **The effect the school closure will have on district staffing, and on the costs of instruction, administration, transportation, and other support services.**
- **Employee Impact:** While 13.6075 FTE positions would be reduced, some staff could be reassigned within the district, particularly in positions where vacancies exist due to retirements, resignations, or other staffing changes.
 - Hawthorne Staff 24/25 School Year
 - 27 Employees
 - 20.32 FTE (Full Time Equivalent)
 - 2024/25 School Year Elementary District Staff Encumbered Expenses
 - \$1,361,749.78
 - Reductions
 - 6.7125 FTE Positions Retained at a cost of \$443,850.97

- 4 Teachers at 1.0 FTE each
 - IEFA Tutor at .15 FTE
 - 3 Paras at 0.8125 FTE to 0.875 FTE each
- 13.6075 Positions reduced for the 2025/26 school year for a savings of \$917,898.81
 - Positions/employees reduced will have opportunities across the district to fill vacancies per negotiated agreements and availabilities such as resignations, retirements, leave of absence, and current open positions.

6. **Student Safety:**

Central and Kessler elementary schools can safely accommodate our Hawthorne students.

7. **Such other facts as the Board deems necessary and appropriate in light of the circumstances.**

The most significant factors impacting this recommendation are declining enrollment, a school funding model that does not support small schools, and an aging building that cannot reasonably be expanded.

Other possible considerations that would reduce costs:

Remove all certified P.E. and Music teachers and require classroom teachers to teach music and P.E. as allowed by accreditation.

- This would result in a shorter school day to allow time for teacher preparation.
- Estimated savings if remaining K-5 P.E. teachers are eliminated – Savings \$497,373.90
- Estimated savings if remaining K-5 Music teachers are eliminated – Savings \$439,403.24

Remove all K-5 nurses and require remaining staff to fulfill nursing duties. No accreditation requirement for Nurses

- Eliminate all K-5 nurses – Savings \$471,558.54

- **Continue to reduce teaching staff across the district in the K-5 by maximizing class sizes and potentially increasing combination classes.**

Single Grade Rooms:

- Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2: No more than 20 students.
- Grade 3 and Grade 4: No more than 28 students.
- Grade 5: No more than 30 students.

Multigrade Classrooms:

- Grades K, 1, 2, and 3: No more than 20 students.
- Grades 4, 5, and 6: No more than 24 students.

Note: State accreditation class size maximums allow for 4 students over the state standard with human resource support.

Enrollment: Over the years Hawthorne’s enrollment has been sustained by sending overflow students from the north valley. This is no longer the case and while there are still 50+ students attending Hawthorne from other school neighborhoods there are seats available for all students currently attending Hawthorne in two nearby schools - Central and Kessler.

Further, as noted, Department of Commerce demographics indicate this decline is not expected to change. High housing costs are impacting the ability of families with school-aged children to purchase homes in the city of Helena.

School Funding: Montana school funding is insufficient to sustain small elementary schools. Inflation has outpaced state allocations. The Montana School Boards Association estimates that inflation has left public schools short by \$141 million or 10% of their general fund budgets.

Montana's public schools are grappling with a combination of insufficient state funding, rising costs, and inequities stemming from reliance on local levies. This situation is prompting calls for reforms to the state's funding formula and increased investment in public education and the state legislature holds the keys to resolving the insufficient school funding formula. However, a solution to public school budget shortfalls is unlikely during the 2025 Legislative session.

The “writing on the wall” has been evident for some time.

- In 2022-2023 approximately \$1.7 million in reductions were made including the elimination of administrative, teaching, and support staff positions.
- In 2023-2024 approximately \$3.1 million in reductions included the closure of Ray Bjork Learning Center, a reduction in administrative, teaching and support staff positions, and a reduction in department and school budgets to name a few.
- In 2024-2025 approximately \$2.1 million in reductions included reducing teaching and administrative staff as well as cuts to multiple programs including music and P.E., PEAK gifted and talented, Access to Success and a reduction in department budgets.

Next Steps:

1. **Alternative Use or Sale:** Discussions on leasing or selling the property should continue, ensuring that any decisions align with the community's needs.

2. **Staffing Adjustments:** Communication with staff about potential reassignments or reductions will be crucial in the coming months.
3. **Transition Planning:** Communication with families and sites for transition planning during the remainder of the school year, this summer, and early fall.
 - a. Working with families to determine the best timing for them and their children
 - b. Providing flexibility in timing
4. **Final Decision:** The Board of Trustees can make a final decision during the regular June Board meeting.

In summary, the recommendation to close Hawthorne Elementary is based on a combination of factors to include declining enrollment, financial constraints, and the unsustainability of maintaining small schools under the current funding model.

While the closure would result in annual cost savings; the longer-term challenges lie in securing adequate funding to ensure a basic, free, quality public education for all students as required by the Montana State Constitution.

The Board of Trustees heard public comment regarding the information presented.

An individual wishing to remain anonymous submitted public comment to the Board of Trustees for tonight's meeting, addressing several key topics, including, but not limited to, the importance of education for all children. The individual, a former teacher, emphasized that Hawthorne is not the first school to face closure or transition, noting that in the past, overflow from schools such as Rossiter, Lincoln, and Broadwater was transferred to the newly established Four Georgians School. Additionally, Ray Bjork School and Lincoln School both closed in the past. While acknowledging that change is challenging, the individual remarked that it is sometimes a necessary process.

Ms. Chantel Schieffer emailed public comment to the Board of Trustees for tonight's meeting, addressing several key topics, including but not limited to, her concerns about the potential closure of Hawthorne School. Ms. Schieffer shared that her son, Dax, who has a rare genetic condition and autism, found a strong sense of community at Hawthorne. She requested that, if Hawthorne does close, families be given one year to process the change. Ms. Schieffer also emphasized the importance of considering the perspectives of neurodiverse students and involving Special Education teams in planning for the impacts across the district. She urged the board to slow down the decision-making process to allow for more thoughtful communication and support for affected families.

Ms. Shana Berry Brown, a parent and educator, emailed public comment to the Board of Trustees for tonight's meeting, addressing several key topics, including but not limited to, expressing support for Superintendent Weltz's proposal, including the closure of Hawthorne Elementary School. She explained that, due to the declining enrollment at Hawthorne, maintaining the school is not fiscally feasible. Ms. Berry Brown emphasized the importance of small class sizes, which enhance educational quality, and expressed that the closure would allow

resources to be better allocated to schools with larger student populations. She highlighted the broader impact on district services, such as P.E., music, and nursing, which could be reduced if Hawthorne remains open. She urged the community to support the district as a whole and to make decisions that ensure quality and equitable education for all students.

Ms. Amy Casne-Fetz, emailed public comment to the Board of Trustees for tonight's meeting, addressing several key topics, including but not limited to, her support for the closure of Hawthorne Elementary School. She shared her experience as a former teacher at Hawthorne (2003-2007), highlighting the school's unsafe conditions, such as structural damage from earthquakes. Ms. Casne-Fetz emphasized the importance of safety and, despite the emotional difficulty of closing a school, stressed that it is necessary given the district's financial struggles. She also noted that many teachers support the closure, believing it essential for the district's future. She concluded by expressing readiness to welcome Hawthorne's students to Central school in the fall.

Mr. Joe Donohoe, emailed public comment to the Board of Trustees for tonight's meeting, addressing several key topics, including but not limited to, concerns about a perceived disconnect between the community's core values and the district's financial decisions. He referenced a board member's statement implying that some groups, including Hawthorne, should share in the district's financial struggles. Drawing a parallel to ranchers who prioritize their land's sustainability over short-term financial solutions, Mr. Donohoe emphasized that the community values neighborhood schools and that closing them for budgetary reasons undermines this core belief. He expressed concern that the district may be prioritizing financial efficiency over these deeper values.

Mr. Chris Jones gave public comment. Mr. Jones is a Hawthorne parent. Mr. Jones' public comment addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the ongoing budget crisis in the district. He highlighted the anticipated increase in class sizes and fewer staff members due to budget cuts, which will affect the entire district. Mr. Jones also noted that the decision to close Hawthorne is largely driven by financial constraints, particularly the impact of inflation on both the district's budget and local taxpayers. He expressed concern that the district may face difficulty passing levies and bonds this year, suggesting that the choice between closing Hawthorne or passing bonds will likely be a challenging decision, as both may not be feasible in the same year.

Mr. Josh Jones gave public comment. Mr. Jones is a Hawthorne parent and a Special Education Educator at Hawthorne. Mr. Jones' public comment addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the positive impact of Hawthorne's close-knit community on student success. He highlighted that, unlike last year when there was one classroom clearance per week, this year there have been zero due to staff efforts. He also raised concerns about moving services from Hawthorne, noting the CSCT team's full caseload and waiting list. Mr. Jones stressed the importance of allowing adequate time for transitions, particularly if a closure decision is made at the end of the school year, as it would not provide enough time to prepare students and staff.

Mr. Gabriel Furshong gave public comment. Mr. Furshong is a former teacher in the district. Mr. Furshong's public comment addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the

importance of considering demographic and financial trends in decision-making. He acknowledged the significance of individual opinions but emphasized that these trends cannot be ignored. He applauded the Board and Superintendent Weltz for addressing the difficult issue of school closures. Mr. Furshong referenced his participation in the Budget Consensus Committee, where school closures were discussed as a potential cost-saving measure and ranked as a top ten item. Additionally, he pointed to the 2023 district survey, where school closure was the second most popular option among nearly 500 respondents. Mr. Furshong expressed his support for making the difficult decision to close schools in order to ensure the district's financial stability.

Jack Tobin gave public comment. Jack Tobin is a sophomore at Capital High School. Jack's public comment addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the potential closure of Hawthorne Elementary and its impact on the district's financial situation. He emphasized that the passing of bonds should take precedence over school closures, particularly due to concerns about overcrowding at Capital High if Helena High students are relocated. Jack also raised concerns about the mental health impact on students, particularly those in crucial social development stages, if they are split from their peers and sent to different schools. He urged the board to consider the well-being of students, as well as the short-term notice given for the potential closure of Hawthorne, which would impact his younger brother and his peers.

Mr. Doug Dellwo gave public comment. Mr. Dellwo's public comment addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the failure to pass levies, resulting in financial strain, and questioned the cost of maintaining the Front Street property and busing, which he estimated at \$1,000,000 annually. He expressed his preference for Hawthorne to remain open, supporting neighborhood schools where children can walk and interact with local friends. He also criticized consolidating large student populations into one school, arguing it negatively impacts learning and student team dynamics.

Ms. Traci Swingley gave public comment. Ms. Swingley stated that she is here as a concerned citizen, parent, grandparent, and alumni. Ms. Swingley's public address addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the importance of trust in public decision-making and the lack of transparency and collaboration in the proposed closure of Hawthorne. She emphasized the historic significance of Hawthorne, calling it more than just a school, but a cornerstone of Helena's civic and cultural identity. Ms. Swingley also criticized the artificial decline in enrollment due to district policies and questioned the focus on speculative maintenance over community partnerships or preservation funding. She urged the board to consider the human cost of displacing students, the breakdown of walkable communities, and the erosion of trust in public institutions, ultimately calling for a pause to explore alternatives to closure.

Ms. Lisa Richidt gave public comment. Ms. Richidt is a parent of three Hawthorne students. Ms. Richidt's public address addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the increase in Hawthorne's enrollment since 2019, with the exception of the current year due to ongoing discussions about its closure. She questioned the projected \$900,000 savings from closing the school, asking how this would benefit the 3,200 other students, as it would not restore music, P.E., or extra programs. She highlighted the success of Hawthorne's special education program and split classrooms, arguing that larger schools are not always the solution. Ms. Richidt expressed concern that closing Hawthorne would not solve the district's financial issues and

would further erode trust in the public school district, urging the board to explore alternative solutions.

Ms. Camila Maloy gave public comment. Ms. Maloy is a parent of two children who previously attended Hawthorne Elementary School. Ms. Maloy's public address addressed several key topics, including but not limited to, the emotional impact of the school closure discussions on her children, particularly her child with special emotional needs, which led her family to pull their kids from Hawthorne. She emphasized the importance of transparency and clear communication from the board, as the uncertainty surrounding the closure deeply affected the children and community. Ms. Maloy also mentioned that other families had left the school due to similar emotional pressures and uncertainty.

Ms. Ann McCauley gave public comment. Ms. McCauley stated she is a Hawthorne parent and a proud public education supporter. Ms. McCauley's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the timing of the Hawthorne closure recommendation and its emotional impact on the community. She compared the abruptness of the closure decision to Superintendent Wertz's earlier statement about gradual boundary adjustments, emphasizing that the current proposal does not allow enough time for students, staff, and families to process and adjust. Ms. McCauley highlighted the emotional difficulty of ending the school year with uncertainty and urged the board to reconsider the timing, allowing for additional planning and support for the affected community.

Mr. Joe Carroll gave public comment. Mr. Carroll's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the potential long-term transportation costs associated with school closures. He expressed concern that while there may be short-term savings from closing a school, the ongoing transportation expenses for the district to transport students to distant schools would be a lasting financial burden. He also noted that some of these costs would be passed onto parents and the community but ultimately, the district would bear the majority of the new expenses.

Ms. Kyla Maki gave public comment. Ms. Maki is the parent of a 3rd grade Hawthorne student. Ms. Maki's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the timing of the school closure decision. She expressed concern that making the decision to close Hawthorne in June leaves parents and students with little time to process and adjust to the change. She shared that her son has already been impacted by the uncertainty and is worried about the potential closure. Ms. Maki emphasized the importance of allowing families more time to make informed decisions and to emotionally prepare for such a significant change, particularly given the limited time frame and the confusion surrounding the information presented.

Ms. Hanna Warhank gave public comment. Ms. Warhank is the parent of a Hawthorne student. Ms. Warhank's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, urging the board to think beyond the three options presented by Superintendent Wertz regarding the closure of Hawthorne School. She suggested exploring alternatives such as relocating the growing Kindergarten Sprouts program to Hawthorne to address concerns about enrollment numbers. Ms. Warhank also emphasized the importance of reducing pressure on teachers with large class sizes and insufficient support staff by adjusting boundaries and redistributing

students. She called for innovative solutions that would benefit all students, including those at Hawthorne.

Ms. Beagan Wilcox Volz gave public comment. Ms. Wilcox Volz's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, her opposition to the closure of Hawthorne School, and the petition she co-drafted with Liz Grant, which has gathered 518 signatures. The petition highlights the importance of small schools in supporting children with learning disabilities, behavioral challenges, and unsupportive home environments, a need that has increased since the pandemic. Ms. Wilcox Bolz urged the board to explore alternative solutions, as closing Hawthorne would be a short-term fix without resolving the underlying, ongoing issues. She encouraged the board to collaborate in finding a more sustainable long-term solution.

Ms. Shana Berry-Brown gave public comment. Ms. Berry-Brown stated that she is here as a parent and an educator. Ms. Berry-Brown's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, her support for the proposed closure of Hawthorne Elementary School based on enrollment numbers, the financial practicality of keeping a school with a small student body, and the importance of making decisions for the broader benefit of the school district. She expressed her belief that while small schools like Hawthorne are valuable, the reality of maintaining a school with only 125 students cannot be ignored. Ms. Berry-Brown also emphasized her support for public education and the need for the district to focus on long-term sustainability, highlighting the differences between private and public schools in terms of class size and resources. She concluded by urging the community to unite behind the district's decisions and continue supporting the schools as a whole.

Ms. Erin Gallagher gave public comment. Ms. Gallagher's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the importance of considering the timing of decisions related to the potential closure of Hawthorne Elementary and the need to address the root cause of the issue: funding from the state. She acknowledged the passion of Hawthorne parents and other members of the school district but emphasized the necessity of directing that energy toward advocating for better funding, which could potentially prevent school closures in the future. Ms. Gallagher also stressed the importance of balancing the district's budget while exploring alternative solutions, and she encouraged the community to think outside the box to address the broader challenges facing the school system.

Ms. Amanda Evans gave public comment. Ms. Evans is a Hawthorne parent and alumni. Ms. Evans' public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the potential academic and social consequences of school closures driven by financial pressures. She stressed the importance of data-driven decision-making, noting that savings from closures are often overstated due to additional costs like transportation and renovations. Ms. Evans highlighted the impact on staff morale and the uncertainty of financial benefits from selling or leasing facilities. She urged the board to explore creative, cost-effective alternatives to closing neighborhood schools, particularly given current economic instability and potential federal funding cuts.

Mr. Dan Sullivan gave public comment. Mr. Sullivan attended Hawthorne Elementary School and has owned many houses in the Hawthorne neighborhood. Mr. Sullivan's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the historical significance of

Hawthorne School to the community, its deep-rooted connection to local families, and the impact of the school's condition on the neighborhood's appeal. He shared a personal story illustrating the emotional attachment many people have to the school and expressed frustration over its current state. Mr. Sullivan also discussed how the condition of the school influences families' decisions to move into the area and the broader consequences of closing a school that has been a part of the community for generations.

Ms. Jennifer Bauer gave public comment. Ms. Bauer's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to the cost of transportation for Hawthorne students. She stated that the reported annual cost of \$71,293.95 for the bus serving Hawthorne is misleading. The bus in question picks up children from multiple areas, including Broadwater, 4G's, and Kessler, before reaching Hawthorne, where it only drops off eight students. Ms. Bauer emphasized that eliminating the bus would not result in significant savings, as the other students would still need transportation to school. She expressed concern about misinformation being spread through social media and the news regarding transportation costs.

Mr. Adam Clinch gave public comment. Mr. Clinch is a graduate of Hawthorne Elementary School. Mr. Clinch's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, his deep emotional connection to Hawthorne School. He expressed sadness and frustration over the potential closure of the school, emphasizing that Hawthorne represents more than just a school—it's a symbol of public education, community, and local roots. Mr. Clinch highlighted the broader issue of the national threat to public education, citing underfunding and the dismantling of schools piece by piece. He urged the community to channel their passion into advocating for public education, supporting local levies, and pushing for better funding and policies. Despite the possibility of Hawthorne's closure, he expressed hope that the fight for public education will continue and that the values represented by the school will live on.

Ms. Kristie Klein gave public comment. Ms. Klein is a Hawthorne parent and a Hawthorne employee. Ms. Klein's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, her support for Hawthorne Elementary, her positive experience as both a parent and employee, and her vision for the school's future. She expressed hope for Hawthorne's continued operation, suggesting it could become a community hub with programs like adult education. Ms. Klein urged the district to focus on investing in the school instead of prioritizing financial gains through land leases. She also stressed the urgent need for attention to Helena High, advocating for it to be a district priority. In conclusion, Ms. Klein urged the board to keep Hawthorne open and address the needs of Helena High.

Ms. Kathryn Dunkelberger gave public comment. Ms. Dunkelberger stated she is a parent, community member, taxpayer, and employee of Hawthorne. Ms. Dunkelberger's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the impact of uncertainty surrounding Hawthorne's potential closure on enrollment. She shared her experience as a parent of twins at the school, noting that many families are leaving due to the ongoing threat of closure, while others are choosing not to enroll their children at all. Ms. Dunkelberger also highlighted the district's stifled growth and urged the board to consider the number of students in the school's boundaries who are attending other schools, particularly private institutions. She pointed out community developments like Westside and Kessler and the potential strain on

existing schools, stressing the need for planning to accommodate future growth.

Mr. Joe Naiman-Sessions gave public comment. Mr. Naiman-Sessions stated he is a parent of two Hawthorne students, one of whom receives special education services. Mr. Naiman-Sessions' public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, concerns regarding the potential impact of Hawthorne's closure on special education students. He emphasized the lack of clarity on special education resources at destination schools, particularly for students like his child who receives over nine hours of special education services per week. Mr. Naiman-Sessions questioned whether there would be adequate staffing and support for the increased caseload of special education students from Hawthorne if it were to close. He also raised concerns about the loss of trusted adults at Hawthorne and the negative effects of rushing the closure decision for the 2025-26 school year, suggesting that more time should be given to properly plan for the transition and avoid legal risks.

Mr. Jack Evans gave public comment. Mr. Evans' public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the importance of neighborhood schools and his personal experience with Hawthorne. He emphasized how the school played a pivotal role in his life and the impact closing such schools could have on the community. While acknowledging the district's budget crisis, Mr. Evans questioned the reasoning behind closing Hawthorne or any neighborhood school. Drawing from his background in banking, he urged the trustees to critically evaluate the data and make decisions that ensure a sustainable future for the district, rather than focusing on short-term solutions.

Mr. Kellen Sullivan gave public comment. Mr. Sullivan stated that he was born and raised in Helena, and that he and his wife have a child starting kindergarten at Hawthorne in the fall. Mr. Sullivan's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, concerns about trust in the community regarding the Superintendent's recommendations, the prioritization of sports facilities over education, and the lack of transparency in the decision-making process. He expressed disappointment over the proposed closure of Hawthorne Elementary, noting that new subdivisions south of Kessler will add students, further straining the system. He also suggested that Hawthorne Elementary's enrollment would have increased if not for the constant threat of closure and advocated for alternative solutions instead of school closures.

Ms. Nikki Honzel gave public comment. Ms. Honzel is a Hawthorne alumna, and her daughter currently attends Hawthorne. Ms. Honzel's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, her disappointment with the proposed closure of Hawthorne and the unique benefits of small schools. As a Hawthorne alumna with a daughter currently attending, she expressed that the closure may not solve the budget issues and instead risks losing the strong community and individualized attention the school provides. She highlighted the protective factors and bonds formed at smaller schools, which contribute to fewer behavioral problems and a deeper connection between students and staff. Ms. Honzel urged the board to consider the long-term impact of closing Hawthorne and the loss to the community, stressing the importance of maintaining small schools to preserve those benefits.

Ms. Laura Holien gave public comment. Ms. Holien's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the emotional impact of the proposed Hawthorne closure on

students and their friendships, as well as potential solutions to the district's budget concerns. She expressed concern about the emotional toll on the 130 Hawthorne students, highlighting the importance of keeping friendships intact. Ms. Holien urged the district to explore creative ways to reduce costs, such as increasing class sizes or renting out classrooms, and suggested surveying the community for ideas. She also pointed out that the community has already made sacrifices, like losing half a principal and a classroom, and emphasized the need for trust and involvement in finding a sustainable solution.

Ms. Rachael Howard gave public comment. Ms. Howard is the parent of three children in the district. Ms. Howard's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, concerns about the misleading implications of closing Hawthorne. She criticized the suggestion that the closure would reduce combination classes, sharing that her own children had negative experiences with them. Ms. Howard also pointed out the contradiction in claiming that closing the school would free up funds for programs, only to lose critical services like P.E., music, and other school resources. She highlighted the broader impact on the community, including disruptions for parents and the potential loss of enrollment in Helena Public Schools.

Ms. Hannah Cail gave public comment. Ms. Cail's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, concerns about the lack of transparency and long-term planning. She expressed frustration with the short notice of the decision to close Hawthorne, especially after parents had already signed their children up for kindergarten. Ms. Cail emphasized the difficulty of making an informed decision with incomplete and potentially inaccurate information. She called for a clearer, long-term financial plan and more creative solutions, urging the district to build trust by planning ahead and presenting options beyond the closure of Hawthorne.

Ms. Brenda Nordlund gave public comment. Ms. Nordlund is a former Helena Public Schools Trustee. Ms. Nordlund's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the challenges of consolidation and the impact of ongoing funding issues. As a former trustee with experience overseeing school closures, she shared insights from her time on the board, noting that declining enrollment and consolidation were unavoidable due to long-term political and financial challenges. Ms. Nordlund acknowledged the difficult nature of these decisions but emphasized the necessity of finding savings, particularly in the face of stagnant funding. She urged the board to be thoughtful in their approach, ensure accurate numbers, and consider the improvements needed at Kessler.

Ms. Nancy Roth gave public comment. Ms. Roth is a long-time resident of the Hawthorne neighborhood. Ms. Roth's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the potential impact of closing Hawthorne School on property values and the community. She highlighted a study she shared with the board that found closing schools typically leads to a decrease in property values by at least 10%. Ms. Roth calculated that this could result in a loss of approximately \$600 per home in the Hawthorne area, which could further exacerbate the district's financial challenges by reducing the local tax base. Additionally, she advocated for the excellent teachers at Hawthorne and emphasized the school's importance to the community, noting its walkability and the sense of connection it fosters among families.

Ms. Cheri Thornton gave public comment. Ms. Thornton is the parent of four children, two who are currently in Jefferson, and two who are slated to be kindergarteners. Ms. Thornton's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, her frustration with the district's messaging around the failed levy, which she felt misrepresented the vote's intent. She criticized the pitting of Hawthorne against other programs, calling it damaging to the community. Ms. Thornton highlighted the importance of Hawthorne to the neighborhood, describing it as the "heartbeat" of the community, and expressed concern over the impact of its closure and questioned the district's focus on low enrollment.

Ms. Sarah Christopherson gave public comment. Ms. Christopherson's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, her concerns about the closure of Hawthorne not being a solution to the district's budget problems. She criticized the message that closing Hawthorne would save music and P.E., as she believes those programs may still be cut. Ms. Christopherson also shared her perspective as a hopeful parent, eager to enroll her children at Hawthorne, and noted the difficulty of finding daycare in the area, suggesting that larger classes may be expected in the future. She emphasized that the value of Hawthorne extends beyond education, serving as the heart of the neighborhood and an important community asset.

Ms. Kathy Macefield gave public comment. Ms. Macefield's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the financial challenges faced by the district, the potential for future school closures, and the impact of closing neighborhood schools. She acknowledged the district's budget issues but expressed concern that the closure of Hawthorne could set a precedent for additional closures, ultimately leading to the loss of community and neighborhood cohesion.

Ms. Jennifer Schaefer gave public comment. Ms. Schaefer is an educator in the district. Ms. Schaefer's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the ongoing financial challenges faced by the district, the need for honest conversations about potential solutions, and the district's struggle to balance its budget. As a long-time teacher, Ms. Schaefer expressed appreciation for the superintendent, the school board, and the trustees' willingness to engage in difficult discussions, while acknowledging the necessity of making hard decisions to ensure the district's financial health and future growth.

Mr. Matt Volz gave public comment. Mr. Volz's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, the potential negative consequences of closing Hawthorne School, such as the loss of community trust and the acceleration of student enrollment decline district-wide. He emphasized the unique appeal of Helena's walkable neighborhood schools and warned that closing Hawthorne could make Helena less desirable. Mr. Volz urged the school board to explore alternative options and take more time to carefully consider all possibilities before making a decision.

Ms. Melissa Hornbein gave public comment. Ms. Hornbein's daughter previously attended Hawthorne and now is enrolled in the Montessori program at Central. Ms. Hornbein's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, concerns regarding the timing of Hawthorne's potential closure at the end of the school year. She emphasized that this decision leaves parents and the community in a difficult position with limited time to adjust. Ms.

Hornbein also noted that the budget issues at the district level reflect a larger statewide problem, highlighting the constitutional right of Montana children to a quality public education. She urged the board to explore all possible options for holding the legislature accountable to its constitutional obligations before making permanent closure decisions that serve as temporary solutions to recurring budget shortfalls.

Ms. Jesika Fisher gave public comment. Ms. Fisher is the principal at Hawthorne. Ms. Fisher's public comment addressed several key topics, including, but not limited to, expressing gratitude to the families and staff for their dedication to the students. She acknowledged the difficult and emotional nature of the situation, stating that no one is enjoying this process. She shared her deep connection to the Hawthorne community, highlighting the privilege of knowing each student by name and her commitment to ensuring a positive and supportive end to the school year, regardless of the outcome. Principal Fisher assured the community that, should the closure move forward, the Central and Kessler communities would offer their support, and she pledged to work throughout the summer to ensure a smooth transition for all involved.

V. BOARD/SUPERINTENDENT COMMENTS

The trustees and superintendent discussed the timing and process for a final decision on the potential closure of Hawthorne Elementary. They also addressed the district's financial challenges, and the broader funding issues affecting both the district and the state's education system. The trustees reaffirmed their commitment to public education and their ongoing advocacy for better state funding. They acknowledged the emotional impact of the situation on the community while expressing their dedication to supporting public education despite the difficult decisions ahead.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Board Chair Siobhan Hathhorn adjourned the meeting at 9:22 p.m.

Candice Delvaux, Recording Secretary

Date